WHY DO YOU STAND SO FAR AWAY?
A QUALITATIVE LOOK AT THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF
ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL STUDENTS

Building Bridges SpANS Grant – West Valley Schools, Spokane Washington
Research Overview for Qualitative Study of Spokane Valley Alternative Students' Lived Experiences with School Drop-Out Risk and Protective Factors

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Abstract

In recent years, research has begun to focus on identifying and understanding those factors that contribute to the likelihood of a student's not completing high school (risk factors) and those factors that contribute to keeping a student in school (protective factors). This paper details the qualitative findings from a survey study of 145 students and in-depth interviews with 12 alternative high school students. Data was analyzed using a Rapid Assessment team analysis approach (Beebe, 2001). This paper provides a description of the qualitative interview data, with support from the survey data. The study also identifies strategic approaches that students claim

are effective in keeping them engaged in school and the factors that hinder their abilities to complete high school.

In any comprehensive high school in the United States, you will find students who stand on the fringes. They are in the school courtyards, at bus stops, in parking lots, and in the backs of classrooms. The fringe students carry tattered backpacks that are always less full than those of other students, but their unseen burdens more than make up for the reduced load. The euphemism "at-risk" is often used to describe these students who stand far from the others. But what exactly are these students at risk of? The statistics tell us that they are at risk of drug use, incarceration, abuse and neglect, suicide, depression, failure, and dropping out of school (Community Indicators Project, 2008; National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). This study is about those students standing on the fringes of school and society, and how the risk of their dropping out of school can be addressed.

Every student standing on the fringes has a unique story, but the approach to uncovering those stories is not magic; as one student who participated in this study stated, "*I've heard a lot about this drop-out crisis in the last couple weeks, and a lot of it's a lot of stupid adults not realizing that all they need to do is take the time to hear a kid's voice*" (Study Participant 04). This study attempts to hear those voices. In it, we ask of alternative school students, "Why do you stand so far away?"

Building Bridges and This Study

In 2008, a regional consortium of schools in the Spokane Valley was awarded a Building Bridges grant from the Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction. The intention of the Spokane Area Networked Services (SpANS) grant was to provide funding for dropout prevention, intervention, and retrieval in four school districts in Washington State's Spokane Valley. As part of the grant proposal led by West Valley Contract Based Education (CBE), a qualitative study of alternative school students was conducted. The intent of the study was to better understand the alternative school student in the West Valley School District, and to identify risk factors and protective factors as they play out in the lives of students.

Overview of the Study Design

This study design was naturalistic and ethnographic (Beebe, 2001; Creswell, 1998, 2003). The focus of study is on the lived school experience of alternative school students in the Spokane Valley, with emphasis on the factors surrounding disengagement and re-engagement with school. The study team chose a Qualitative Rapid Assessment Process (RAP) (Beebe, 2001) method. RAP is a team-based approach to ethnographic research designed to streamline data collection and analysis through a process that is intensive and team-oriented.

Questions for Research

The following questions guided this research study:

1) What is the lived experience profile of an alternative school student in the Spokane Valley?

2) What is the experience of disengagement from schools for Spokane Valley alternative school students?

3) What risk or protective factors are particularly important to the lived experience of alternative school students in the Spokane Valley?

    4) What factors are likely to have a great impact on the re-engagement of students or the retrieval of credits toward high school graduation in alternative school students in the Spokane Valley?

Rationale for Methodology and Method.

This study was intended to capture a perspective of the lived experience of students in an alternative school context. Van Manen (1990) defined lived experience as "the world as we immediately experience it" (p. 9). Chiefly this study was interested in the student's experience of risk and protective factors that caused them to disengage or reengage with school. It was initially recognized that in order to understand the dynamics of engagement and disengagement in school a holistic and contextually sensitive approach would be required. Further, because of the dynamic complexity of the phenomenon in question, particular attention must be paid to the holistic nature of the lives of the participants. An ethnographic approach was chosen as the best method to enable this kind of holistic inquiry.

Stewart (1998) defines ethnographic research has having four specific characteristics that are "widely accepted" (p. 5) as defining ethnographic research. These are (a) Participant Observation, (b) Holism, (c) Context Sensitivity, and (d) Sociocultural description (pp. 6-8). In the context of this study the research team sought to engage each of these characteristics in order to provide a deep and rich understanding of the alternative student's lived experience in one arguably successful engagement program and school.

Study Significance

Research has begun to focus on identifying and understanding those factors that contribute to the likelihood of a student's completing or not completing high school. Students in Spokane County face a high school dropout rate of 33% (Community Indicators Project 2008,

EWU; "Communities in Schools"), while the national dropout rate is approximately 25% (Laird, DeBell, & Kienzl, 2007). The impact on the schools and communities here can be devastating, as one school administrator interviewed for this study stated, "we are losing 1/3 of our future and no one seems to care". Croninger and Lee (2001) point out that "because dropping out is the ultimate form of educational withdrawal, correlates of dropping out often serve as risk factors . . . risk indicates the probability of future difficulties and not an explanation for why difficulties occur" (p. 552). This study found this to be true of almost all of the study participants. Many participants noted that the lack of protective factors in their lives was a primary cause of their leaving school to begin with.

Protective factors operate in three ways: They may buffer risk factors, providing a cushion against negative effects; they may interrupt the processes through which risk factors operate; and they may prevent the initial occurrence of a risk factor ("The Community Guide," p. 14). This study qualitatively investigated each of these ways of protective factor engagement by looking holistically at the lived experiences of students. By approaching the topic through a variety of lenses, researchers have identified general domains in which these factors cluster: the individual, the family, the school, peers, and the community at large (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2007) has compiled the risk factors that contribute to students' leaving high school before completion and the protective factors that keep at-risk students from dropping out.

NCES 2007 Risk and Protective Factors.

Risk and protective factor data has been collected largely through quantitative measures of on-time graduation and school attendance (NCES, 2007). In 2005, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) compiled the demographic characteristics of high school completers

and high school dropouts for the previous three decades (Laird, DeBell, & Chapman, 2007). These statistics lead to an understanding of which students are more at-risk for high school dropout. Rates differ by taking demographics into account; for instance, males are 2.8% more likely than females to be in the dropout category (individuals in a given age range, used to study general population). Additionally, ethnicity accounts for significant variation in status rates: Asian/Pacific Islanders had a dropout rate of 2.9%, Whites were at 6.0%, African Americans at 10.4%, and Hispanics at 22.4% (Laird et al., 2007).

A meta-analysis conducted by Suh and Suh (2007) found 16 significant predictor variables that contributed to high school dropout. Suh and Suh used data from The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and had an N of 6,192. They tested 180 predictor variables. Of the 16 identified factors, the three most significant factors were academic failure, low socioeconomic status, and behavioral problems. Suh and Suh concluded that having more than one risk factor in the list of 16 is particularly concerning because the rate of dropping out for is 17% for one factor, 33% for two factors, and 48% for three factors.

Protective factors operate in the three ways cited above ("The Community Guide," p. 15). They fall largely into one of two categories: environmental or individual. Furlong and Morrison pointed out that environmental factors are often centered around schools, where, for example, students might find a positive and safe learning environment, high but achievable academic standards, and teacher access and support (as cited in Christle et al., 2005). Teacher access provides students with social capital; while this capital is "generally beneficial for all students, those who benefit most are students most at risk for dropping out" (Croninger & Lee, 2001, p. 568). Individual factors include students' having access to academic and relational support, either through parents or peers (Lagana, 2004), and students' having an optimistic

outlook regarding their education (Suh, Suh, & Houston, 2007).

In reviewing existing studies, we found that they rarely took into account the complex interplay of social, economic, and family factors that are involved in a student's decision to leave school. The student's own voice is often underrepresented in the study of high school dropouts. Frequently we see studies that cite "illegal drug involvement" or "family issues" as being significant risk factors that cause students to leave high school (Alexander, Entwisle & Kabbani, 2001). However, when we asked the students to cite the reasons they chose to leave school, their answers often evoke a more complex and interrelated picture that defies one-dimensional explanations and solutions. This study aimed to rectify this deficit by providing a look at factors that contributed to decisions to drop out from the students' perspectives.

With further attention given to the risk and protective factors that either expose or minimize a student's struggles to graduate, the ability of schools to provide support will likely increase. The research points to a holistic and personalized way of approaching student success, with factors such as environment, family life, personal attributes, and social structures being of primary importance (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). A systems approach to prevention, intervention, and re-engagement seems appropriate, due to the compounded risk students experience when they fall into more than one risk category (Suh & Suh, 2007). Such an approach requires cooperation on the part of the government, schools, families, and students in order to increase the likelihood of educational success for all students. (Note: It is important to recognize that success will look different for every student. For the purposes of this article "success" is defined as meeting the student's educational and social-emotional development needs in order that the student can meet their educational goals).

Study Participants

Participants for this study were limited to alternative school students enrolled in one of the West Valley alternative school programs known as Contract Based Education (CBE). CBE is the largest of the alternative school programs in the region, serving approximately 400 students at any given time. Participants for the survey portion of the study were selected by the staff of CBE. The staff hoped to survey all currently enrolled students; 145 surveys were completed at the time the study moved to data analysis. Participants for the interviews were chosen selectively through a snowball sampling method (Patton, 2002), using staff and faculty informants in the schools to help identify willing participants.

The Qualitative Interview Participants

The participants for the interviews consisted of 12 students enrolled at CBE at the time of the study. All the participants had dropped out of at least one comprehensive high school; several had dropped out of more than one. The participant pool consisted of 6 young men and 6 young women, all between the ages of 15 and 20. None of the students interviewed had completed high school at the time of the interviews. All of the interview participants qualified with the school district for free or reduced-cost meals. In addition, 4 of the participants reported being "homeless" at the time of the interviews. Eight of the interview participants reported being of either "White" or "Caucasian" ethnicity; two reported being "Latino" or "Latina," and two reported being of "mixed" ethnic background.

Data Collection, Analysis, and Reporting

Data was collected using two core methods. The first was a written survey with an N of 145 participants. The survey provided baseline data for participant demographics and life experiences, as well as some detailed information on participant lifestyle, behaviors, and dropout risk factors. For the purposes of this paper, the qualitative data gathered through survey open

response questions was utilized in addition to the in-depth interview data. Data from both the open-response sections of the survey as well as the interviews were used in the analysis.

The Survey.

The survey consisted of between 110 and 150 items, depending upon whether students followed the "parenting" thread of questions (see Appendix D for the entire survey). The items included a mixture of yes and no bubbles; Likert-style responses; and open-ended questions, grouped in nine sections: (a) Living Situations, (b) Health (Physical), (c) Cultural Background, (d) Legal Involvement, (e) School Life, (f) Substance Abuse and Addictive Behaviors, (g) Mental Health and Emotional Issues, (h) Skills, Interests, and Hobbies, and (i) Future Plans.

After CBE faculty and staff used the data to assess student need for appropriate services and support by advisors, the data was entered into a computer data analysis program (SPSS) to facilitate frequency and descriptive analysis. Further correlation analysis was conducted for specific responses. The results of the survey data will be published in subsequent papers; this paper deals primarily with the qualitative interview data collected.

RAP Methodology and Data-Gathering Teams

The Qualitative Interviews

The second method of data collection (which is the primary focus of this paper) was interviews of a selected number of the study population. The interviews were semi-structured (Beebe, 2001) and focused on gaining a deeper understanding of the student experience. The N for the interview section of the data gathering was 12. All data were collected using a team approach (see RAP; Beebe, 2001).

In the RAP methodology, all qualitative data gathering and analysis takes place in teams. This approach creates the opportunity for both *etic* (categories and meaning structures used by

outsiders or researchers) and *emic (*categories and meaning structures used by participants;

Beebe, 2001, pp. 33-34; Patton, 2002) perspectives to be generated through the interviews and

the data analysis. This approach provided essential interviews that elicited data both rich and

deep. The RAP process was practiced in five steps. These steps were: (a) assembling the

research team, (b) conducting the interviews, (c) allowing member checking of data, (d)

conducting the analysis, and (e) writing the analysis.

Assembling the Teams

The data-gathering teams were made up of two principal researchers, both from outside

the CBE community; one faculty member from CBE; and one current CBE student-researcher.

The team members from the CBE community were chosen for their understanding of the CBE

community and their role in that community. The faculty members were chosen because of their

relationships with specific research participants. The student- researchers were chosen because

of their interest in the project combined with their understanding of the CBE program, culture,

and community.

Conducting the Interviews

The interviews were conducted with participants at the CBE school building and were

audio-recorded for transcription. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. The team

approach to data gathering was used, with both team members (one faculty member and one

student-researcher) being CBE insiders. The interviews followed a semi-structured format

(Patton, 2002), and interview guides were constructed with input from the entire research team.

The semi-structured interview guide started with questions concerning how the student perceived

the educational experience that had brought her or him to CBE. Most participants responded to

the opening questions with a narrative story format. Then questions were asked about risk and

protective factors pertinent to the student's life. These questions generally were asked in reference to key events described in the participant's opening narratives. Then participants were asked to describe their current educational experiences in the context of CBE. The interviews generally finished with questions about future life plans. A discussion period with the entire research team immediately followed each interview to provide clarification and to generate initial impressions from the team.

Member Checking of the Data

Once interviews were completed and transcripts generated, the transcripts were given to the relevant study participants. Each participant was asked to review the transcript for accuracy and content validity. If a participant asked to change the content of the transcript before analysis, the changes were made. This form of member checking allowed for a data set that was as valid as possible before analysis began.

Data Analysis Meetings

The data analysis meetings generally occurred two to three weeks after the interview. Each team member was given a copy of the transcript for the relevant interview and was asked to review and code the data. Each team was given a simple overview of the open coding process (Patton, 2002) and asked to generate themes, questions, observations, and understandings from the transcript. The transcripts were then discussed at length among the team, and core thematic ideas were generated, discussed, and agreed upon through a process of consensus.

Data Treatment by Principal Investigators

The thematic understandings generated by the teams were collected, summarized, and then revisited by the authors of the study. The thematic understandings were then categorized through an axial coding process (Strauss, 1987) that was both emic and etic in nature. The data

collected in the interviews, along with the thematic and axial coding schemas, were compared with the survey data to look for points of internal validity. Additionally, some limited theoretical coding was done through comparing the theoretical data provided by a literature review on dropout behavior and prevention. This literature-based conceptual framework was grounded particularly in Trauma-Sensitive Schools theory and practice (Cole, O'Brien, Gadd, Ristuccia, Wallace, & Gregory, 2005; Gil & Briere, 2006).

Study Limitations and Ethics

The study was limited to 145 students for general sampling and 12 for in-depth interviewing. Thus, the N may not be statistically large enough to make larger reliable predictions regarding the entire alternative school population in the Spokane Valley (about 1000 students), or regarding the CBE program (about 400 students) specifically.

This study took care to reduce the possibility of harm to participants. All participant names associated with this study have been kept in confidence and were available only to the principal researchers and to the research transcriptionists. All participants were given code numbers to be used in reporting. All participants were required to provide parental permission (if they were minors) through an informed consent form. All participants were given permission to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason and to see all published results of the study.

Findings

Core findings can be grouped into three categories: 1) Key Protective Factors for CBE students; 2) Key Risk Factors for CBE students; and 3) Key Points for CBE's success. These three categories were generated by thematic coding of the data utilizing the risk and protective

factor framework (Cole, O'Brien, Gadd, Ristuccia, Wallace, & Gregory, 2005; Gil & Briere, 2006, NCES, 2007). This data was then theoretically coded to check for validity.

Key Points Regarding Protective Factors

The protective factors that help students to either stay engaged or re-engage with school also were complexly interrelated in the data for this study. Rarely could students point to a single factor that kept them in school or brought them back to school. Rather, several factors working in tandem best supported school engagement for most students. Close analysis, however, suggests that there is a protective meta-factor at play. This is: students in this study who could identify a strong personal connection with adults who care about the students and their lives. Often a caring relationship with an adult exists within the family, but some students found a connection with specific teachers or mentors, while others established supportive relationships with peers at school or in the community. Key to this meta-protective factor, however, is a stable relationship with someone, especially an adult, who is perceived by the student as caring about the student and his or her life. Beyond this relationship, there were a number of specific factors identified in the data as important protective factors. These factors are summarized below:

1. Social support networks (adults and peers who care and are given the space to care). The web of social support networks is the most important factor in engagement/re-engagement in school.

2. Presumption of success. This was defined as a commitment to the individual student's success as defined by the student and a foundational presumption that all students can succeed.

3. Safety. This was defined broadly as including physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual safety. This included specific risk management systems and interventions as applied by school systems, administrators and teachers, as well as a general commitment to the safety of the entire community as defined by the community.

4. Accountability rather than judgment. This was defined by a sense that what students are able (or not able) to accomplish has nothing to do with their worth as humans. This was cited by students as critical for their success.

5. Respect.

6. Individualized attention based on who and where you are.

7. Family support. This was defined as the commitment of the school community to supporting not just the student, but the student's family as well and to encouraging active engagement of family in all school activity.

Key Points Regarding Risk Factors

The risk factors found in the data all demonstrate interrelatedness. Each risk factor is related through a complex dynamic to all other risk factors and to the student's protective factors. One specific risk factor was never the dominant reason for a student's leaving school; rather, it was found that the following risk factors build on each other. These factors were:

1. Family dynamics. These were defined broadly as the interpersonal and social dynamics that student navigated each day within their own families.

2. Drug abuse, either their own or that of family members or boyfriends/girlfriends.

3. Relationships, in terms of boyfriends/girlfriends who did not attend school.

4. Schools that used a rigid framework, rather than adapting to individual needs. Such schools were less likely to retain students. This factor was manifested for these students in several ways:

> (a) Being labeled and forced to engage in services they did not need or want.
>
> (b) Changing schools multiple times, resulting in losing credits and connections.
>
> (c) Getting the feeling that the schools and individual faculty did not care.
>
> (d) Being forced into remediation programs and structures that limited students' abilities to make up credits.

5. The size of the schools in relation to individualized care. This was defined as the ability or inability of schools and systems to be responsive to student's individualized needs as impacted by the size of the school or system in question.

6. Seemingly apathetic adults who do not motivate students to stay in school.

Key Points Regarding CBE Success

From the data collected, it is clear that the Contract Based Education (CBE) program in the West Valley School District is working for some students. Enrollment and completion rates for the students at CBE have increased in 2007, 2008, and 2009 (CBE internal school data). Below are the most salient specific steps taken by CBE:

1. Adopting a "whatever it takes for every kid" ethos and having that ethos modeled from the highest level in the school throughout the culture.

2. Creating a deep understanding of safe spaces for kids, on all levels.

3. Articulating a "readiness to learn" understanding – "Students will not care about learning from you, until they know you care about them."

4. Creating a culture of unconditional positive regard.

5. Creating opportunities for students to develop leadership skills. This step contributed to a feeling of ownership and empowerment on the part of the students.

6. Offering multiple structures and entry points to being part of the community.

7. Recognizing when school structure, rules, or procedures get in the way of serving the student, and empowering faculty and staff to remove those structures.

8. Creating flexible schedules that eliminate the "catch-up" game. This step was cited by almost all the students as significant.

9. Building a "family" culture. (Students described experiencing an idealized vision of family at CBE—it was how a family "ought to be.")

10. Promoting student-centered school leadership. The school leadership at CBE was considered helpful by the students in that it was accessible and responsive to individual student needs.

Discussion, Implications, and Strategic Approaches

With the epidemic rates of high school students dropping out, a better understanding of the factors that influence students' choices about finishing high school is needed. This study sought to provide this understanding through the perspective of the students themselves in one alternative high school setting. The lessons learned from this study point to specific steps that schools and districts can take to help reduce the number of students who disengage from high school and to increase the number of those who choose to re-engage and earn their diplomas. The key protective factors, as grounded in a connection with at least one adult who cares and the corollary key risk factors (lack of social support, in flexible school systems, and lack of individualized care) all have common implications for an approach to better serving students.

This study points to one approach as being effective above all others; that approach can be summarized as "one kid at a time."

One Kid at a Time

The idea of approaching students who struggle with school contextually and "one-kid-at-a time" is not new. Levine (2002) wrote extensively about the efficacy of developing a holistic understanding and a deep connection with each student. This type of connection with school is precisely what the students in this study found to be lacking in their education, and what they cited as being one of the most important factors in successful re-engagement with school. They articulated that when they feel individually known and understood by adults in schools, they are more likely to stay in school, or to return to school if they have left.

The individualized approach to student engagement must be grounded in an ethos of care (Noddings, 2003, 2005), compassion, and empowerment. This study demonstrates that each of these components is essential for effective engagement of this population. In order for these students to be engaged with school, they must believe that there are adults in their schools who care about them. They must believe that the adults in the schools have compassion regarding their individual lives and, foremost, that the adults are empowered to help them through the schools and systems in which they work. These three components provided the foundation for all specific intervention and success strategies considered successful by these students.

Specific Strategies or Approaches for Success

Creating Safety.

The students in this study clearly connected a feeling of being safe in the school environment with an attitude of caring. While physical safety was essential to the student conception of safety, there was also a deeper, more pervasive concern regarding emotional and

psychological safety. Many of the participants noted that the psychological threats at school were much more difficult to confront than the physical ones. At CBE, the study participants referred to psychological threats as "drama."

Drama pertains to emotional or psychological stress that can be caused by both adults and students in the social context of school. One student noted that at most schools, drama is ignored by school administration as irrelevant, while for the students themselves it can be all-encompassing and is a significant safety issue. This study indicates that drama is perhaps the most important safety-related risk factor contributing to disengagement with school. Administrators or other adults in school who took steps to ameliorate drama in school settings were often seen as the most caring adults in the schools.

The safety that was critical to these students was articulated as being a complex interplay of physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual dynamics that needed to be addressed by the entire school community to allow for the engagement and re-engagement of these students with school. The participants in this study clearly understood that school safety is a school community issue, not merely an administrative one.

Creating Community.

Several of the participants in this study spoke of their re-engagement with school as "finding a family." The ability to feel "at home" in a school environment—that is, cared for and empowered—was critical to school success for many of the participants. These students noted that this feeling of being in a safe and caring environment was a significant factor in their re-engagement with school and, conversely, a significant factor in their having left schools that were less hospitable.

This sense of school as a family was aligned closely with the quality of the relationships, with both adults and peers, that the students reported experiencing. There was a clear sense in the data that everyone in the school environment shared a responsibility for making the school a safe, caring, and productive community. Numerous participants stated that the lack of these qualities in their previous school experiences was a primary reason for their having dropped out, and in their subsequent realization that a nurturing school environment was critical to their re-engagement. While other factors play a role, for these students, if a supportive community is not present, no progress can be made on any of the more technical aspects of their education. For these students, finding a "home" where success was possible was critical to their re-engagement.

Creating Hope.

The hopeful belief that success is possible was pervasive in the data. This hope showed up as a real and meaningful factor for many of these students. Beyond mere optimism, there was a deeper sense that hope is critical to student success and that hope can be learned. These students articulated a hope that was grounded not only in care and compassion, but also in empowerment, here manifest as the sense that success was possible and that the school community would do "whatever it takes" to ensure the success of its members.

The "whatever it takes" approach to educational success was articulated as a primary motivation for these participants to engage or re-engage with school. This ethos was reflected in the data through stories of adults (and in some cases of peers) going above and beyond the call of duty to make sure that each student was given the opportunities he or she needed. These opportunities came in many forms, ranging from an encouraging word to well-thought-out intervention strategies that went beyond the academic lives of students. It is important to note that the approach here is not to treat everyone equally, but rather to ensure that everyone gets

what he or she needs to be successful. This insight proved to be very important to students who reported often feeling "disengaged," "discounted," or "unconnected" with school because they felt their individual situations were either not understood or not cared about by people at their schools. Further, many students reported feeling as if the school system itself often curtailed the ability of adults in schools to be responsive to their individual situations. The need these students expressed was one of being willing to do whatever was necessary to ensure their success, as long as the adults and the school systems were equally willing.

The feeling of being part of a school community that is willing to do whatever it takes to ensure individual success proved to be a significant protective factor in this study. Participants noted that when the community demonstrated a hope for their success, the students themselves were much more likely to feel hopeful about themselves and their situations.

It is possible to discount the educational commonsense wisdom implied by this study: that if people feel cared about, they are more likely to succeed. However, the data suggest that most of the study participants have had very few practical experiences with this caring in their school tenures. This study implies that it is not the rhetoric of this wisdom that is lacking, but the practical application of this wisdom through relationships. While all of the study participants had experienced difficulties with academic achievement, the data clearly show that these students recognize that academic success is predicated on connection in the school community.

The participants in this study articulated the idea that individualized care, compassion, and empowerment are necessary components of their being engaged with school. In order to allow these qualities to be present, the complex tapestry of each of their lives and situations must be understood, not just in terms of individual risk and protective factors, but as an interrelated

whole. These students are living examples of the notion that, to borrow from Palmer (1993), we come to know as we come to be known.

Facilitating Community Engagement.

For the students in this study, school engagement requires personal engagement with the school community. Facilitating these connections then becomes a paramount concern for those who want to see students graduate. Practical concerns of assessment, advising, counseling, and mentoring are critical. The facilitation of these connections cannot be focused merely on technical aspects, but must be focused on building relationships with these students individually. Practically, this requires a greater emphasis on advising and mentoring students, particularly those who have the risk factors discussed.

Time in School.

Another practical implication of this study data is that the orientation to time in schools must change. The work implied by building relationships with a one-kid-at-a-time approach requires time for students and adults in schools to get to know one another. This need for time to learn is intensified by the complex task of getting students ready to learn—of doing the work before the work that is required to ensure the success of each student. This necessity not only implies that advisors and administrators must have smaller caseloads, but also that we must re-think the relationship between time and success. Many of the students in this study cited the "catch-up" phenomenon as a key factor in their disengagement with school.

The catch-up phenomenon is created when students fall behind academically to a point where catching up to their peers becomes impossible. They generally fall behind due to interconnected social and academic factors that include truancy, family crisis, drug and alcohol use, learning disabilities, mobility, and homelessness. The issue of time in school then becomes

one of how to mitigate these circumstances. The students in this study often cited the difficulties of this "catching up" dynamic as being central to their loss of hope. Conversely, when the issue of time is removed from the dynamic, these students reported that hope often is created. When the school system, a school administrator, or another adult is able to take the attitude that learning and student success are individual processes and that they will take as long as they take, these students become enormously empowered and motivated. The implications are that structures such as "on-time graduation" must be seen as merely guidelines at best, and that if student learning is to be the focus, time must be taken as an individualized construct.

Safety in Community.

For many of these students, school has not been a safe place, and to find a school environment that is safe becomes critical to engagement with school. However, safety is a complex idea in schools and must encompass physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual dimensions. While physical safety at schools is paramount, it is only the beginning. The data collected for this study indicate that these students found emotional and psychological safety issues more disturbing than physical safety issues. In order to better address the drop-out phenomenon, equal attention must be paid to the emotional and the psychological safety of our students. Making this shift will require a better understanding of safe learning environments, as well as a more complete picture of the school community. To gain this larger perspective, schools will have to commit to knowing their students on a deeply relational basis as part of a community ethos.

Whatever It Takes.

There are many more implications from this study, and further recommendations can be found in the conclusion section of the final report (Poutiatine & Veeder, 2009). There is one

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implication that cannot go unarticulated here: the importance of dedication to student success and to an ethos of doing whatever it takes to ensure that success. This is not to say that the vast majority of adults in Spokane regional schools are not dedicated to student success; we believe most are. However, this study shows that a whatever-it-takes ethos represents an approach that is beyond the common definition of dedication. These data show that the one student out of three who will drop out of the Spokane school is the student who needs *whatever-it-takes* to be successful. If hope is to be generated in our disengaged students, then more than caring and compassion will be required; it will take a concerted will to meet the needs of students collectively *and* individually.

Recommendations for Further Study

This study is far from comprehensive when it comes to cataloging risk and protective factors for dropping out. While a great deal can be learned from this study about the individual contexts, situations, and stories of disengagement and re-engagement with school at CBE, many questions remain regarding the prevalence of stories like those of CBE students in other alternative schools in Spokane, in local comprehensive high schools, and in alternative or traditional schools statewide and nationwide. One of the surprises found in the data collected for this study was the clarity with which student participants connected the culture of the school to the identity and integrity of the school administration. This observation is not trivial, as school leaders across the nation struggle with the challenges of creating a culture of engagement in their schools. Questions that should be asked are: How have these CBE administrators been so successful? What lessons do their successes hold for similar schools and for dissimilar schools? One preliminary answer can be found in the analysis of protective factors; but in the same way

that a discussion of individual factors does not tell the story of complex individual student lives, that discussion is inadequate to an analysis of effective school leadership.

Also surprising were the factors–both risk and protective–that were identified in the national literature as meaningful, but that were absent from the data collected in this study. Issues such as race, ethnicity, disability, and, to some extent, socioeconomic status did not surface. The kids never mentioned their race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status as factors in their experience, even though the national data suggest that these factors play a huge role. This discrepancy among identified factors may also suggest an important direction for further investigation. One reason for the absence of expected factors in this data could be that CBE primarily serves students who have already dropped out. In a heterogeneous population of students at more and less risk of dropping out, the ethnic, racial, economic, and disability status of the at-risk students might manifest differently. We recommend that if the West Valley School District wants to be clear about the role of specific risk and protective factors beyond CBE, a broader study be conducted.

Finally, this study has cited alarming statistics concerning the dropout rates both nationally and in Spokane County (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006; Kennedy & Morton, 1999; Community Indicators Project; National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). This study focused on the risk and protective factors for CBE students, which means that it observed those students who had already disengaged from school. This means that we learn a lot from these data about students who have already dropped out, but not a lot about students who are *considering* dropping out. In other words, from this data set we can learn a great deal about re-engagement with school once students have dropped out, but less about preventing dropout.

Conclusion

"One in three students in Spokane County will drop out of school before completing High School" (Community Indictors Report, 2008). This simple statistic has the face of many kids behind it; it demands attention. But how do we understand the factors that make a difference in these students' lives? How can we pay the right kind of attention to the students on the fringes? The interviews here tell us that we can understand only by listening to the students. For that reason, we advocate asking students, again and again, "Why do you stand so far away?"

The answer to this question will be different for every student, but we can begin to understand what causes kids to be left behind if we pay attention. This study shows clearly that, for these students, individualized programs, administered by educators who care *and* who are empowered to make a difference, can change their worlds. Educators who focus on one kid at a time can engage and re-engage students with school, as was highlighted in the interviews conducted for this study. However, this study also shows that the approach must be holistic, comprehensive, and integrated–with the focus on the student rather than on the factors–if change is to be achieved.

If there is a single meta-idea that arises from this study, it is that these students' lives are messy, complex, inter-relational, highly contextual, and holistic. The stories they tell show how life is, not how we would like it to be. To be effective, any intervention or systems transformation must also be messy, complex, inter-relational, contextual, and holistic. Addressing one risk factor in isolation, or worse, ignoring a risk factor because it is outside a formal responsibility, violates the essential nature of these students' lived experience of school and life. This study indicates that if we are to engage these students who are at-risk in our schools today, we must offer them solutions that are holistic and individualized. Many students

stand so far away from engagement in school because they cannot see a space for themselves, given the complexity of their lives, within the context of their schools.

This study has taught us that the systems, structures, procedures, standards, and protocols that schools use to engage students cannot be "one-size-fits-all" (Oki, 2009, p. 44), but instead must be flexible enough to meet each student's needs. When those systems or structures do not serve individual kids, they need to be replaced. The story of CBE supports this contention in order that the promise of a quality education for _all_ children can be realized. We owe this to these students–all those standing on the fringes who are waiting for a chance to engage with school and realize the potential of their futures.

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