Determinants of school completion:
Student perceptions of success at an experiential learning high school

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Abstract

Although high schools in the United States use a wide range of interventions to increase school completion, a large number of students still drop out each year. Research has shown that, to be effective, interventions must facilitate engagement in learning and connectedness to school. The scale of the dropout crisis suggests that there is a significant population of students who may benefit from interventions that are more comprehensive than supplemental supports in a traditional school environment. The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to develop an understanding of the experience of successful students at an experiential high school in order to examine experiential education as a whole school approach to facilitating school completion. The fourteen participants were students who enrolled at an experiential high school after becoming disengaged at other schools. According to these students, the structures of an experiential high school—notably, projects, expeditions, advising, and a close-knit community—created a school experience of meaningful academic learning and strong relationships that made them feel valued as individuals. Projects and expeditions provided the context for relevant and meaningful learning experiences and created opportunities for relationships to emerge and strengthen. Students associated feelings of being accepted, challenged, and supported with the format of the school, including membership in a close-knit community and the centrality of the advisory relationship. For participants in this study, these experiences were part of a progression that began when students recognized they wanted to leave previous schools and ended when students reflected back on successes as they approached graduation.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In 1941, at the height of World War II, educator Kurt Hahn founded Outward Bound at the request of Lawrence Holt, owner of a British shipping company (Outward Bound, 2015). Holt had observed that although younger sailors often were better trained in modern naval technologies than their older counterparts, they seemed to be dying in greater numbers. He believed that reason for this was that many young seamen lacked "the tenacity and fortitude needed to survive war and shipwreck" (Richards, 2002, p.4). Hahn was tasked with creating opportunities for young sailors to develop attributes that had previously required decades of hardship and danger at sea. He created a 28-day residential program focused on "physical fitness; an expedition that provides challenge and adventure; a project that develops self-reliance and self-discipline; and finally a sense of compassion through service" (Richards, 2010, para. 11).

Today, 70,000 people participate in Outward Bound programs every year, and thousands more participate in other experiential education programs with similar models (Outward Bound, 2015). While no longer aimed at preparing individuals for the hardships of war, these programs still strive to foster personal growth and development through challenge and adventure. Most of these programs occur in non-school settings, but the pedagogy of experiential education also has been implemented by a growing number of schools; the Expeditionary Learning network has 161 member schools serving 53,000 students in 33 states (Expeditionary Learning, 2014).

Experiential education uses diverse methods of 'learning by doing' (Warren, Mitten, & Loeffler, 2009). Many experiential education programs contain an

expeditionary element, in which learning occurs outside of a traditional classroom as students travel away from the school, often for extended periods of time. Experiential programs also frequently incorporate project-based learning, where content from different disciplines is woven together and students develop projects to meet learning objectives. Just as learning by doing helped inexperienced sailors survive the rigors of World War II, a growing number of educators believe a similar education model can help students who are struggling to stay afloat in the contemporary education system. However, a significant amount of research is still needed to determine whether experiential education is an effective means to help students reach the goals of graduation and postsecondary readiness.

Statement of the Problem: The Dropout Crisis

Approximately one of every five high school freshmen will not graduate with his or her classmates, according to the most recent comprehensive report on high school dropout and graduation rates from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; Stetser & Stillwell, 2014). Odds that a student will drop out are worse for low-income students, students in urban areas, students of color, males, and students who qualify for special education (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014).

Some students who drop out go on to graduate in later years or pursue an equivalency credential such as a General Educational Development (GED) certificate, but many do not. The *status dropout rate*, as defined by the NCES, refers to the percentage of 16- through 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school and who have not earned a high school diploma or GED (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014). The NCES reports that as of 2014,

the status dropout rate was around 7%. For individuals in the lowest quartile socioeconomically, the status dropout rate was 12% (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014). These individuals enter adulthood without a diploma, a credential that has been shown to greatly increase the number of jobs for which an individual is qualified to perform, as well as the income one can expect to earn (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The U.S. Census Bureau reported that in 2009, 26% of currently held jobs did not require a high school diploma (2012). This percentage is expected to remain fairly constant over the next decade. These jobs yield an annual income of just $20,241, compared to a high school graduates' average earnings of $30,627 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

While the reasons for dropping out are diverse, it is clear that for many students, the goal of graduation is not compelling enough to outweigh the daily challenges associated with progressing through traditional coursework. Do a fifth of all students simply lack some characteristic necessary to persevere and graduate on schedule? Or are standard approaches to education consistently deficient in making graduation attainable and worthwhile for a large number of students?

Accountability and School Completion

In 2002, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation was passed with the ultimate aim of improving student academic outcomes. This legislation and subsequent state-implemented high-stakes assessments were based on the premise that holding schools accountable for high academic standards and measurable annual progress would improve achievement levels and graduation rates. Unfortunately, an unintended consequence of this emphasis on accountability has often meant that schools focus instruction almost

exclusively on academic content that will be tested. When student and school success is measured by a handful of assessment scores, teachers are often compelled to narrow their curricula and focus instruction on preparing students for tests (Ives & Obenchain, 2006). This singular focus on testing for academic improvement may fail to engage students in learning or make them feel connected to a nurturing community. Rumberger and Palardy argue that accountability systems that solely prioritize academic achievement may actually hurt school performance in other areas, noting that this is particularly true at the high school level, where "ensuring that students graduate may be at least as important as ensuring that students improve their test scores (2005, p.24).

The current system under NCLB measures the effectiveness of schools primarily based on academic achievement of students. But such numbers can be misleading. Rumberger and Palardy (2005) cite evidence that large schools often improve their measured academic outcomes by discharging the lowest performing students, whether through implementing structured hurdles such as rigorous high school exit examinations or other less salient practices that make students feel like school is not a place they belong or can succeed. Based on their analysis of various characteristics and outcomes of schools, Rumberger and Palardy (2005) argue that an alternative view of school effectiveness should be enacted in which factors such as dropout and transfer rates are given more weight. Under the standards of the current system, many schools are rated as effective for facilitating academic growth amongst students who remain enrolled, even as large percentages of their students drop out or transfer to alternative schools from which they are unlikely ever to graduate (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005).

Students who graduate from high school tend to be more engaged in learning and feel a stronger sense of connectedness to their school than their peers who drop out (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Godber, 2001; McNeely & Nonnemaker, 2002). Empirical research and practice from the fields of education and adolescent health confirm that engagement and connectedness are crucial for adolescents at risk of dropping out. A lack of engagement in learning is at the core of issues associated with dropping out (Christenson et al., 2001). When dropout is looked at as a phenomenon that occurs over time rather than as an instantaneous event, engagement then provides a means of understanding and intervening as soon as signs of disengagement with learning are noted (Appleton, Christenson & Furlong, 2008; Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006). Connectedness to school also serves as a strong protective factor to decrease a wide range of adolescent risk-taking behaviors, including dropping out of high school (Resnick et al., 1997). When students feel that school is a safe place and that adults in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals, they are more likely to complete school (Blum & Libbey, 2004). When a student is not engaged in learning and feels little connectedness to school, graduation can seem unattainable and dropout becomes a more attractive option (Smyth & Fasoli, 2007).

To help students graduate, schools must strive to be welcoming communities that offer engaging learning experiences. Interventions are most effective when they not only aim to reduce dropout, but to promote *school completion* by addressing factors like engagement and connectedness. When school completion is the objective instead of dropout prevention, the aim is to promote graduation and postsecondary readiness rather

than to just help students accrue the seat time and credits needed to reach graduation (Christenson et al., 2001). Unlike dropout reduction programs, Christenson and colleagues (2001) conceptualize efforts to increase school completion as having a strength-based orientation with a comprehensive interface of systems implemented over time that are tailored to meet the needs of the students they serve. Interventions are more effective if they not only reduce the number of dropouts, but also prepare more individuals for the challenges they will face after high school.

The young sailors in World War II were just as technically proficient as their older colleagues, but they needed something more, not just knowledge that could be assessed on a test, but the "tenacity and fortitude" to cope with challenge and endure setbacks until they reached their goal (Richards, 2010, para. 14). The majority of students can succeed and thrive in a traditional public school environment, but the high number of students dropping out of high school indicates a need for effective, replicable, and scalable educational approaches that meet the diverse needs of this significant minority. Researchers and educators have deployed a host of in-school interventions aimed at individual students or specific populations at risk of dropping out (Lehr, Johnson, Bremer, Cosio, & Thompson, 2004). But the scale of the dropout crisis suggests that there is a significant population of students who may benefit from interventions that are more comprehensive than supplemental supports in a traditional school environment. Such an approach may also be more efficient for districts with large numbers of students failing to complete school.

Study Purpose

My interest in conducting this study was provoked by the following proposition:

1. We know that student engagement and school connectedness facilitate school completion.
2. The theoretical underpinnings and extant research base suggest that experiential education may facilitate engagement and connectedness.
3. Experiential education could be a means of facilitating school completion.

Given the limited research on this field, a qualitative study of the experience of succeeding at a high school employing experiential education as a whole school approach could contribute to our understanding of whether experiential education provides a means of facilitating school completion.

Twenty-five years ago, Kraft wrote that educational systems "have begun to learn that the insights gained from adventure programs and other experiential learning environments have great potential for use in the mainstream of our educational settings" (1990, p .182). However, experiential education remains on the fringe of most school systems' pedagogy. The National Research Council (2004), in reviewing what high schools need to do in order to improve student outcomes, asserts:

> The fundamental challenge is to create a set of circumstances in which students take pleasure in learning and come to believe that the information and skills they are being asked to learn are important or meaningful for them and worth their effort, and that they can reasonably expect to be able to learn the material. (p.14)

A review of the research literature indicates that many of the factors that increase student engagement and school connectedness parallel characteristics of experiential education

program design. Experiential education is not a new or untested type of school intervention, but it is one that could be implemented more broadly if research supports its usefulness as a whole school intervention to help students complete high school.

Previous research has shown that experiential education methods can be implemented as a whole school intervention (e.g., Campbell, Farrell, Kamii, Lam, Rugen, & Udall, 1996) and that, compared to many other inventions of a similar scale, it can be a cost-effective means of increasing achievement (Yeh, 2008). The inclusion of experiential education methods, such as expeditions and project-based learning, may be one means of keeping adolescents in school, engaged in learning, and feeling like school is a place they belong. But there is still little research on factors like engagement and connectedness in experiential education settings, topics that are essential to understanding some of the most fundamental and vexing challenges of school reform. There is also a lack of research examining what impact specific components of experiential education programs may have on various outcomes of interest.

Experiential education schools have the potential to fill an important niche in many school districts. Students who struggle in traditional school settings may benefit from a whole school approach explicitly designed to impact cognitive and emotional factors that are not measured on standardized academic tests. This study seeks to understand the experiences of students who found success at a school using experiential education as a whole school approach. In addition to capturing the essence of that experience, this study provides insight into what students identify as most strongly contributing to their success at an experiential high school.

Organization of the Dissertation

This paper examines a specific pedagogy—*experiential education*—as a whole school approach to facilitating school completion. Chapter 2 examines the research on the determinants known to facilitate and impede school completion. This chapter also reviews theory and research related to experiential education, a pedagogy that informs the practices of many models of school reform, to explore whether this method holds promise as a means of offering high school students the opportunities and supports that facilitate success in high school.

Chapters 3 and 4 present the methods and results of a phenomenological case study of the experience of being a successful student at an experiential high school. This study focuses on graduating students' perceptions of their school experience to identify the specific methods and aspects of the whole school experiential approach that are experienced as most significant to successful students. Chapter 5 discusses the findings of this study and relates them to the broader literatures on school completion and experiential education, and offers recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

A large percentage of high school students in the United States are failing to complete high school. Recognizing that successful progression to graduation is affected by external factors as well as the ways in which students perceive of their learning environments, this chapter will summarize research on how schools can facilitate school completion by impacting psychological (both cognitive and emotional) variables related to learning. Factors that facilitate school completion will be reviewed and examined via the closely related factors of school connectedness and student engagement.

Then, experiential education will be defined and contextualized within the current high school educational climate. Studies related to the processes and outcomes of experiential education will be examined in order to better understand whether implementing this pedagogy may impact the psychological variables that facilitate school completion, especially for adolescents who are at risk of not completing school. Special attention will be paid to studies in which experiential education has been implemented as a whole school intervention.

School Connectedness and Student Engagement

School connectedness and student engagement are two factors that have been identified as important facilitators of school completion. Similarities in definitions, related interventions, and outcomes indicate that these two factors are closely related. In this section, descriptions of these two factors will be provided based on generally accepted definitions from the fields in which they are most commonly researched. The most salient similarities and distinctions will be noted. Later in this paper, the terms will

be used together (i.e., "engagement and connectedness") when referring to the broad set of psychological variables included in these two overlapping factors. They will be used separately when summarizing research that explicitly discusses one or the other.

School Connectedness. The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, which examined the impact of protective factors on adolescent health and well-being among more than 36,000 middle and high school students, concluded that school connectedness is one of the strongest protective factor to decrease a wide range of adolescent risk-taking behaviors, including dropout (Resnick et al., 1997). School connectedness has been defined as "the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals" (Blum & Libbey, 2004). To feel connected to school, a student needs to experience high academic expectations and support for learning, positive relationships with adults, and physical and emotional safety (Blum & Libbey, 2004). Resnick and colleagues describe three components of school connectedness: students feel that teachers treat them fairly, feel close to people at school, and feel that they are part of their school (1997). A student who feels connected to school is less likely to be absent or to participate in incidents of fighting, bullying, or vandalism (Resnick et al., 1997). When paired with a sense of connectedness to family, school connectedness is also protective against health and behavior risks such as emotional distress, suicidality, violence, substance abuse, sex, and pregnancy (Resnick et al., 1997).

School connectedness does more than reduce risky behaviors among youth; it is also associated with a range of positive short- and long-term outcomes, such as high school academic performance and school completion, postsecondary aspirations, and

above-average grades, including for youth with other risk factors in their lives (Blum & Libbey, 2004). Indeed, positive, pro-social connections at school are beneficial for all adolescents, across gender, racial, ethnic, and social class groups (Bernat & Resnick, 2006). In a longitudinal study examining the social connectedness and school connectedness of 2,678 adolescents, Bond and colleagues (2007) found that strong school connectedness, irrelevant of other variables, seemed to be a protective factor for dropout and substance abuse. Although many interventions target specific adolescent subgroups, broad, adolescent development-focused strategies that promote universal, crosscutting protective factors like school connectedness are the most effective (Bernat & Resnick, 2006).

Blum and Libbey (2004) offered the following recommendations regarding increasing connectedness: Create trusting relationships among students, teachers, staff, administrators, and families; and, ensure that every student feels close to at least one supportive adult at school. Connectedness can be promoted by allowing students to provide meaningful input into school policies and by prioritizing opportunities for interaction between youth and adults both inside and outside the classroom (Whitlock, 2006). Teachers are the strongest candidates to serve as supportive adults for students. Unfortunately, the typical structure of high schools can make it difficult for all students to feel connected. Large class sizes and the didactic nature of instruction can make building relationships with disengaged students especially difficult. In turn, some students feel more disconnected and are more likely to dropout (McNeely & Nonnemaker, 2002).

Supportive relationships with teachers and other students promote connectedness

to school (Blum & Libbey, 2004). In a longitudinal study of 248 middle school students, Wentzel (1997) concluded that students who view their teachers as caring about them are more likely to succeed academically. Wentzel also coded student descriptions of teachers who "care" or do not "care." This study found that students believe teachers demonstrate caring by modeling the behaviors they ask students to display, offering democratic communication and fair treatment, displaying concern for the student as an individual and recognizing their unique strengths and needs, and evaluating work in a nurturing, supportive way.

As the National Research Council (NRC) pointed out,

> although learning involves cognitive processes that take place within each individual, motivation to learn also depends on the student' s involvement in a web of social relationships that supports learning. The likelihood that students will be motivated and engaged is increased to the extent that their teachers, family, and friends effectively support their purposeful involvement in learning and in school. (2004, p. 3)

Student Engagement. A consensus is building among educational researchers, policymakers, and teachers that student engagement is the primary theoretical framework for understanding and confronting the dropout crisis (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Lamborn, Newmann, & Wehlage, 1992; Reschly & Christenson, 2006). According to Christenson and colleagues (2008),

> the importance of engagement at school and with learning is undisputed by educators, as is the conclusion that too many of our students may be characterized

> as bored, unmotivated, and uninvolved; in other words, as disengaged from the academic and social aspects of school life. (p. 1099)

The construct of *student engagement* first entered the education lexicon a quarter century ago. Early studies measured engagement by simply examining academic engaged time (Fisher & Berliner, 1985). A more nuanced understanding of the construct has led to the identification of specific subtypes of engagement. Although various researchers have used different names and definitions for the subtypes, engagement is commonly broken into affective, cognitive, and behavioral subtypes (Fredricks et al., 2011). A fourth subtype—academic engagement—is sometimes included, but often considered to be part of behavioral engagement. School connectedness aligns closely with affective engagement.

Affective engagement refers to how students feel about their experiences as learners, sense of belonging at school, and the support for learning received from teachers and peers. Affective engagement is a robust predictor of academic achievement (Klem & Connell, 2004), and theoretical models suggest a causal relationship (Fredricks et al., 2011). Cognitive engagement captures students' thoughts about learning, and indicators of this subtype include motivation to learn and perceptions of learning as relevant and worthwhile. Student engagement research indicates that students are most engaged in learning when they believe the work they do is relevant, that they have some control over what is required of them, and that tasks are useful to achieving their future goals (Christenson et al., 2006). Behavioral engagement is more observable, and indicators of this type of engagement include attendance, time on task, and accurate work completion.

Behavioral engagement is crucial for achieving positive academic outcomes and preventing dropout (Fredricks et al., 2011). Participation and involvement in academic, social, and extracurricular activities are central to behavioral engagement. Motivation is a highly related construct and has been described as antecedent or precursor to engagement (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012). Engagement requires turning motivation into action.

While attention to student engagement has grown exponentially, definitional clarity has remained elusive (Appleton et al., 2008). Recognizing the necessity of a common definition for consistent research and intervention, Christenson and colleagues (2012) synthesized previous definitions of engagement into the following:

> Student engagement refers to the student's active participation in academic and co-curricular or school-related activities, and commitment to educational goals and learning. Engaged students find learning meaningful, and are invested in their learning and future…Student engagement drives learning; requires energy and effort; is affected by multiple contextual influences; and can be achieved for all learners. (p. 816)

It is important to note that while engagement is *possible* for all learners, it is certainly not universal amongst high school students. Based on data obtained from administering the High School Survey of Student Engagement to 81,499 students in grades 9 to 12 from 110 schools in 26 states, Yazzie-Mintz (2007) found that 72% of students reported being engaged. That leaves 28% of students disengaged—a statistic that does not include those students who have already dropped out. Disengaged learners have lower achievement,

feel more bored and alienated, and are less likely to graduate than their peers (Fredricks et al., 2004). Disengagement negatively impacts achievement and "initiates a downward spiral that may lead to dysfunctional school behavior and, ultimately, culminate in some students leaving school entirely" (Marks, 2000, p.155).

Factors associated with disengagement and dropout. There are a number of status and alterable variables associated with disengagement and dropout. Status determinants of dropout include being of an older age; being male; being low-income; being black, Hispanic, or Native American; speaking a primary language other than English; living in an urban environment; and having a cognitive disability (Lehr et al., 2004). Marks (2000) noted that the relationship between minority status and student engagement differs by grade level and socioeconomic standing. Finn and Cox (1992) found that elementary school students of color were less engaged academically than their white peers, but middle school students of color did not differ from their white peers on academic engagement (Lee & Smith, 1993). Lee and Smith (1993) found that in high school, when controlling for engagement levels in 8th grade, minority high school students were more likely to be engaged in academic work than white students. Minority students who come from low-income homes, however, tend to be more disengaged (Steele, 1992). Alterable determinants related to disengagement and dropout include poor grades, disciplinary problems, feeling alienated from school, and attending a school that has a negative climate (Lehr et al, 2004). Marcus and Sanders-Reio (2001) reported that transferring to a new school increased the odds of dropping out by between 17% and 30%. Interestingly, transfer rates are less linked to student and family background

characteristics including residential mobility than dropout rates (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005).

The process of disengagement is not consistent. Janosz, Archambault, Morizot, and Pagani (2008) analyzed the engagement trajectories of 13,300 Canadian 12- to 16-year-old students using growth mixture modeling and identified 7 distinct patterns. 90 percent of students fell into three stable trajectories that were characterized as having moderate to very high levels of engagement. The four non-normative categories accounted for the vast majority of dropouts, and included various patterns of inconsistent engagement (consistently decreasing, consistently increasing, transitory decreasing, and transitory increasing). Students who eventually dropped out were most likely to have lower levels of school engagement at high school entry. These students present worthy targets for interventions to prevent dropout and facilitate school completion.

In discussing best practices for fostering student engagement, Reschly and Christenson (2006), emphasized that this construct "is NOT conceptualized as an attribute of the student but rather an *alterable* state of being that is highly influenced by contextual factors, such as policies and practices of the school or family influences" (p. 4). This malleability is an important characteristic of student engagement, as it suggests that intentional changes in a students' educational environment may lead to increases in engagement, as well as improvements in indicators of student success such as academic achievement and future aspirations. Tables 1 and 2 summarize status and alterable variables associated with dropout.

How Schools Can Facilitate School Completion

Recommendations from the NRC. Recognizing the widespread failure of many high schools, especially in urban areas, to graduate large percentages of their students, the NRC gathered a committee of scholars and other experts who were charged to "review, synthesize, and analyze research on academic engagement and motivation that might apply to urban high schools" (NRC, 2004, p. 2). Their findings provide guidelines regarding how schools can better serve urban high school students.

Table 1

Overview of status variables associated with dropout

Age	Students who drop out tend to be older compared to their grade-level peers.
Gender	Students who drop out are more likely to be male. Females who drop out often do so due to reasons associated with pregnancy
Socioeconomic background	Dropouts are more likely to come from low-income families.
Ethnicity	The rate of dropout is higher on average for Black, Hispanic, and Native American youth.
Native language	Students who come from non-English speaking backgrounds are more likely to have higher rates of dropout.
Region	Students are more likely to drop out if they live in urban settings as compared to suburban or nonmetropolitan areas. Dropout rates are higher in the South and West than in the Northeast region of the U.S.
Mobility	High levels of household mobility contribute to increased likelihood of dropping out.
Ability	Lower scores on measures of cognitive ability are associated with higher rates of dropout.
Disability	Students with disabilities (especially those with emotional/behavioral disabilities) are at greater risk of dropout.
Parental employment	Dropouts are more likely to come from families in which the parents are unemployed.
School size and type	School factors that have been linked to dropout include school type and large school size.
Family structure	Students who come from single-parent families are at greater risk of dropout.

Note. These statements apply to groups of students on average.

Table adapted from Lehr, C. A., Johnson, D. R., Bremer, C. D., Cosio, A., & Thompson, M. (2004). *Essential tools: Increasing rates of school completion: Moving from policy and research to practice*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, Institute on Community Integration, National Center on Secondary Education and Transition.

Table 2

Overview of alterable variables associated with dropout

Grades	Students with poor grades are at greater risk of dropout.
Disruptive behavior	Students who drop out are more likely to have exhibited behavioral and disciplinary problems in school.
Absenteeism	Rate of attendance is a strong predictor of dropout.
School policies	Alterable school policies associated with dropout include raising academic standards without providing supports, tracking, and frequent use of suspension.
School climate	Positive school climate is associated with lower rates of dropout.
Parenting	Homes characterized by permissive parenting styles have been linked with higher rates of dropout.
Sense of belonging	Alienation and decreased levels of participation in school have been associated with increased likelihood of dropout.
Attitudes toward school	The beliefs and attitudes (e.g., locus of control, motivation to achieve) that students hold toward school are important predictors of dropout.
Educational support in the home	Students whose families provide higher levels of educational support for learning are less likely to drop out.
Retention	Students who drop out are more likely to have been retained than students who graduate. Using National Education Longitudinal Study data, being held back was identified as the single biggest predictor of dropping out.
Stressful life events	Increased levels of stress and the presence of stressors (e.g., financial difficulty, health problems, early parenthood) are associated with increased rates of dropout).

Note. These statements apply to groups of students on average.

Table adapted from Lehr, C. A., Johnson, D. R., Bremer, C. D., Cosio, A., & Thompson, M. (2004). *Essential tools: Increasing rates of school completion: Moving from policy and research to practice.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, Institute on Community Integration, National Center on Secondary Education and Transition.

The NRC conceptualized dropping out of school as the visible sign of pervasive disengagement, while noting that many students who remain enrolled have irregular attendance, put forth minimal effort, and learn very little (2004). Characteristics of the schools these students attend significantly affect engagement and other factors related to school completion. Of course, factors outside of school also impact student's motivation to learn, including social and economical marginalization of families and communities. The NRC, however, points to research showing that disconnection from family can be offset by participation in an engaging school community with high academic standards, skillful instruction, and support to achieve educational and career goals (p. 212).

The NRC argued that high schools can be designed and run in ways that provide challenging and rigorous instruction to students of all backgrounds, and that reform can lead to enhanced engagement in learning and school completion in any setting, including urban cities with long histories of educational failure (2004). The practices they identified as facilitating school completion share a common theme of addressing underlying psychological variables related to motivation, including competence, beliefs about the importance of education, and a sense of belonging. The NRC summarized the research on what factors help students in urban high schools complete school:

> Engaging schools and teachers promote students' confidence in their ability to learn and succeed in school by providing challenging instruction and support for meeting high standards, and they clearly convey their own high expectations for their students' success. They provide choices for students and they make the curriculum and instruction relevant to adolescents' experiences, cultures, and

long-term goals, so that students see some value in the high school curriculum. (p. 3)

Based on their review of the extant literature, the NRC put forth ten comprehensive recommendations for increasing motivation to learn and school completion amongst disengaged learners in urban high schools. These include: redesigning courses and instructional methods; using ongoing assessments to gauge student understanding; assessing high-level skills like critical thinking, fluency, and conceptual understanding; creating smaller learning communities for more personalized relationships between teachers and students; distributing guidance and counseling responsibilities among school staff including teachers; and coordinating with social and health services in students' communities. A complete list of the NRC's recommendations is provided in Table 3.

These recommendations are ambitious and comprehensive, and implementation may require reform beyond what many traditional public schools see as possible. However, the NRC noted many examples of comprehensive high school reform models that incorporate many of these recommendations. These models are often implemented in charter schools, which have greater flexibility in their approach to address the needs of students who have not found success in traditional schools. The NRC pointed out that there are no silver bullets for educational reform, but that "for many students, their engagement and motivation to learn depend on a confluence of supports" that positively impact students when implemented cohesively in schools (2004, p. 14).

Recommendations from Students who have Considered Dropping Out

Successful reforms to promote school completion require students' input and perspective, since it is their perceptions of the learning environment that ultimately

Table 3

National Research Council recommendations for increasing school completion and Expeditionary Learning core practices and design principles

NRC recommendations for increasing school completion	*Expeditionary Learning core practices*
The committee recommends:	
1. that high school courses and instructional methods be redesigned in ways that will increase adolescent engagement and learning.	1. Curriculum with learning "expeditions" that offer multidisciplinary, long-term explorations of issues or topics involving a combination of projects, fieldwork, and culminating performances. The EL curriculum includes several elements that are closely aligned with the Common Core standards for English-language arts and literacy.
2. ongoing classroom- based assessment of students' understanding and skills.	2. Instructional methods that emphasize student interaction, critical thinking, and collaboration.
3. that preservice teacher preparation programs provide high school teachers deep content knowledge and a range of pedagogical strategies and understandings about adolescents and how they learn, and that schools and districts provide practicing teachers with opportunities to work with colleagues and to continue to develop their skills.	3. A focus on building a school culture that emphasizes quality work, student character, and citizenship.
4. that schools provide the support and resources necessary to help all high school students to meet challenging standards.	4. Frequent student assessment against learning targets using achievement data.
5. that tests used to evaluate schools, teachers, and students assess high-level, critical thinking and tha they incorporate a broad and multidimensional conception of subject matter that includes fluency, conceptual understanding, analysis, and application.	5. Supports for focusing school leadership on student achievement, the use of assessment and other data, and shaping school structures to student needs.
6. districts should restructure comprehensive urban high schools to create smaller learning communities that foster personalized and continuous relationships between teachers and students.	*Expeditionary Learning design principles*
7. that both formal and informal tracking by ability be eliminated. Alternative strategies should be used to ensure appropriately challenging instruction for students who vary widely in their skill levels.	1. Learning happens best with emotion, challenge, and the requisite support.
8. that school guidance and counseling responsibilities be diffused among school staff, including teachers, who are supported by professionals.	2. Teaching in Expeditionary Learning schools fosters curiosity about the world.
9. that efforts be made to improve communication, coordination, and trust among the adults in the various settings where adolescents spend their time.	3. Learning is both a personal process of discovery and a social activity.
10. that schools make greater efforts to identify and coordinate with social and health services in the community, and that policy makers revise policies to facilitate students' access to the services they need.	4. Learning is fostered best in communities where students' and teachers' ideas are respected and where there is mutual trust.
	5. All students need to be successful if they are to build the confidence and capacity to take risks and meet increasingly difficult challenges.
	6. Individual development and group development are integrated so that the value of friendship, trust, and group action is clear.
	7. Both diversity and inclusion increase the richness of ideas, creative power, problem-solving ability, and respect for others.
	8. A direct and respectful relationship with the natural world refreshes the human spirit and teaches the important ideas of recurring cycles and cause and effect.
	9. Students and teachers need time alone to explore their own thoughts, make their own connections, and create their own ideas.
	10. Students and teachers are strengthened by acts of consequential service to others.

Note. Recommendations for increasing school completion are adapted from National Research Council (U.S.) & Institute of Medicine (U.S.). (2004). *Engaging schools: Fostering high school students' motivation to learn*. Washington, D.C: National Academies Press. Expeditionary Learning core practices are adapted from Mathematica Policy Research (2013). *Impacts of five expeditionary learning middle schools on academic achievement.* Cambridge, MA: I. Nichols-Barrer & J. Haimson. Expeditionary Learning design principles in column 2 are adapted from Campbell, M., Farrell, G., Kamii, M., Lam, D., Rugen, L., & Udall, D. (1996). The Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound design. In S. Stringfield, S. Ross, & L. Smith (Eds.), *Bold Plans for School Restructuring: The New American Schools Designs*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

influence whether they remain engaged in learning and connected to school. As part of a qualitative study of protective and risk factors related to school completion, the Konopka Institute for Best Practices in Adolescent Medicine ([Konopka], 2009) interviewed adolescents who had either dropped out or contemplated dropping out of high school. Students repeatedly mentioned the power of the relationships between teachers and students as a factor that motivated them to stay in school when considering dropout. The desire for more active learning opportunities in high school was also mentioned repeatedly (Konopka, 2009):

> Several students called for more interesting classes, with hands-on experiences that bring learning concepts to life and better engage student curiosity. Many of the young people said that they would be more motivated to attend if teachers would try to make learning more fun. Some said that the loss of electives, especially those that teach practical skills, makes it more difficult to enjoy school and be excited about learning. (p. 8)

In addition, many students expressed a desire for teachers to find new ways to integrate more physical activity into the school day.

Interventions to Increase School Completion

Not surprisingly given the scale of the dropout crisis, there are numerous interventions—both within traditional schools and as alternative, whole school approaches—to increase school completion. Such interventions can be broadly or narrowly targeted to certain student populations, and focus on a diverse array of factors contributing to school completion. As demonstrated by the 11 examples in Table 4, there currently exists a diverse range of evidence-based interventions to increase school

completion: from Check & Connect, which employs adult mentors to increase student engagement, to the Coca-Cola Value Youth Program, which builds responsibility and self-confidence in youth by training them to tutor students in lower grades (Lehr et al., 2004). A summary of research examining the effectiveness of these interventions for addressing specific outcomes is available in Lehr et al. (2004).

Comprehensive whole school reform poses another means of increasing school completion. A whole school approach involves cohesive implementation of strategies intended to improve learning, behavior, well being, or other student outcomes. Marks (2000) evaluated the effect on engagement of school reform initiatives that were consistent with various theories of engagement. Such reforms focused on "providing authentic instructional work, providing a socially supportive environment for learning and involving parents with their children's schooling" in order to counter the influence of status and alterable variables linked to disengagement and dropout (Marks, 2000, p. 160). Using survey data to capture perceptions of students attending schools that had gone through comprehensive reform, this study found that student perceptions of instructional work as authentic (based on questions regarding the use of higher order thinking, depth of knowledge, substantive conversation, and connectedness to the world beyond the classroom) corresponded with greater engagement. The perceived presence of social supports also affected the engagement of all students. Marks (2000) concluded that while generalized restructuring focused on making schools less bureaucratic positively affected engagement, within such broader efforts specific objectives such as providing authentic instruction work and structures of support for learning proved to be important factors in increasing student engagement.

Table 4

Evidence-based interventions to increase school completion

Intervention program/strategy	Intervention description & outcome variables
Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success (ALAS)	A collaborative approach involving the student, family, school, and community. Strategies include problem-solving training, counseling, attendance monitoring, increased feedback to parents, parent training in school participation, and increased awareness and use of community resources. Outcomes: dropout, absenteeism, on track to graduate, credit accumulation, achievement.
Career Academies	Employs a combination of career and academic training for students considered at-risk. The focus of career academies varies (e.g., health, technology). Outcomes: grade point average, attendance, credits, retention, courses passed.
Check & Connect	Promotes student engagement via a monitor/mentor who maintains regular contact with the student, family, and teachers. Students receive basic or intensive interventions based on monitoring risk factors. Outcomes: student engagement, credit load, enrollment status, assignment completion, on track to graduate.
Coca Cola Valued Youth Program	Helps to build the self-esteem and self-concept of at-risk youth by giving them the responsibility of being tutors to younger children. Outcomes: reading grades, self-esteem, attitude/school, self-concept, dropout
Interpersonal Relations/ Personal Growth Class	Focuses on both drug use and dropout. Emphasizes study- and decision-making skills training as well as utilizing peer tutors and experiential learning. Outcomes: drug use, grade point average, self-esteem, peer relations, school bonding, achievement, dropout, credits earned, attendance
Ninth Grade Dropout Prevention Program (NGP)	Schools design interventions to meet academic needs, create a caring atmosphere, and provide relevant and challenging curriculum. Utilizes strategies such as an orientation program, peer tutoring, and small class size and builds relationships between home and school. Outcomes: dropout, attendance
Preventing School Dropout Beginning in Elementary Grades	Seeks to reduce student disruptiveness through social and problem-skills training to prevent later dropout. Incorporates a parent training component as well. Outcomes: level of disruptiveness, grade retention, dropout.
Project COFFEE	Offers individualized instruction through an alternative occupational education program. Addresses the academic, social, emotional, and occupational needs of students at high risk for dropout. Outcomes: attendance, grade point average, dropout.
School Transitional Environment Project (STEP)	Intended to help students during the transition period from one school to another. Alters the environment of the school, modifies the role of the homeroom teacher, and works to enhance communication between home and school. Outcomes: dropout, grade point average, absenteeism, academic environment.
Support Center for Adolescent Mothers (Family Growth Center)	Created for first-time mothers to decrease dropout and discourage repeat teen pregnancies. Incorporates a significant community component. Outcomes: dropout, pregnancy
Teen Outreach Program (TOP)	Designed to prevent dropout and teen pregnancy through volunteer and educational experiences and discussion of life-skills topics using the Teen Outreach Curriculum. Outcomes: suspension, dropout, pregnancy, problem behaviors, course failure

Note. Table adapted from Lehr, C. A., Johnson, D. R., Bremer, C. D., Cosio, A., & Thompson, M. (2004). Essential tools: Increasing rates of school completion: Moving from policy and research to practice. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, Institute on Community Integration, National Center on Secondary Education and Transition. See report for review of the effectiveness of these programs for listed outcomes.

support for learning, both in the classroom and at home, also positively and significantly

Experiential Education

Experiential education creates learning opportunities through activities that enable participants to construct knowledge, skills, and values (Warren, Mitten, & Loeffler, 2009). Experiential learning involves progression through four steps (Kolb & Fry, 1975; Miller, Tung, & Ward, 2008):

1. Participation in concrete experiences
2. Observation and reflection on the experiences
3. Formation of concepts and generalizations based on experiences
4. Application of new understandings to other situations

Throughout the four steps, “the learner is actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative and constructing meaning" (Association for Experiential Education, n.d., para 11).

Experiential education often employs outdoor settings but can take place anywhere individuals learn by doing. Experiential learning frequently occurs in locations away from the school campus and sometimes involves overnight travel. Experiential education can include expeditionary learning (where expeditions to new locales provide the context and content for learning) and project-based learning (where content from different disciplines is woven together to accomplish interdisciplinary objectives, often chosen by students). Experiential education models frequently employ both of these strategies. When expeditions or projects include a component of volunteering in the community in ways related to educational objectives, they are also referred to as service learning.

Educational theorist John Dewey first described the concept of experiential education in school systems. Long before terms like 'student engagement' and 'school connectedness' had entered the educational lexicon, Dewey wrote about what types of experiences help students succeed. He believed learning occurs through participation in experiences that are meaningful and relevant to accomplishing goals, and that *continuity* and *interaction* were central attributes of experiences that promote learning (Dewey, 1938/1997). The principle of continuity of experience states that "every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after" (Dewey, 1938/1997, p. 13). Dewey described continuity of experiences as existing on a spectrum, and wrote that experiences that lead to opportunities for additional learning and growth in the future are most desirable. For example, the experience of learning to read has immense continuity because of the potential it creates for future learning.

Dewey's principle of interaction refers to how situational influences impact an individual's experiences. External and internal conditions inevitably impact what is learned from experience, so the learner's environment as well as the learner's inner psychological state both determine what is learned. "Continuity and interaction," according to Dewey, "in their active union with each other provide the measure of the educative significance and value of an experience. The immediate and direct concern of an educator is then with the situations in which interaction takes place" (1938/1997, p. 18).

Dewey's writings provide a theoretical foundation that has been embraced by experiential education programs and a growing number of schools and school reform

models. Kurt Hahn is widely recognized for creating some of the first programs that embraced Dewey's philosophy of learning by doing. Hahn is best known for founding Outward Bound, an experiential outdoor leadership program, and he also opened several schools in Europe in the early 1900s that incorporated experiential education principals (James, 1980/2000). Hahn believed that the foremost task of education was "ensuring the survival of the qualities of an enterprising curiosity, an indefatigable spirit, tenacity in pursuit, readiness for sensible self-denial, and above all, compassion" (Hahn, 1941, as quoted in McKenzie, 2003).

For Hahn, expeditions were central to learning because they provide opportunities for experiences in which people develop perseverance, self-efficacy and empathy and become more prepared for future challenges (Shirilla, Gass, & Anderson, 2009). While expeditions have long played a prominent role in some residential treatment and out-of-school programs for adolescents, they have only recently started to gain traction in public and charter schools in the United States (Campbell et al., 1996).

School-based experiential education programs. Experiential learning in schools explicitly merges academic and personal development. An organization named Expeditionary Learning has become a leader in integrating experiential education principles into school design (Campbell et al., 1996). Expeditionary Learning developed a list of ten design principles that address students' academic, social, cognitive, and emotional needs, as well as five school structures commonly employed to achieve these outcomes. Design principles emphasize the importance of a challenging curriculum that fosters curiosity about the world and provides students with opportunities to develop skills and relationships with others. In Table 3, Expeditionary Learning's design

principles and core practices are presented beside the National Research Council's recommendations for facilitating school completion in order to highlight similarities in the ideas promoted by these two organizations.

Expeditionary learning. In school-based experiential programs, expeditions include classroom preparation and follow-up work as well as the expedition itself, which can occur locally or involve travel outside of the region or state. Some expeditions occur over the course of a day, whereas others last over a month (including preparation and follow-up). Expeditions are interdisciplinary and focus on two or more academic subjects (Campbell et al., 1996; Rugen & Hartl, 1994). Each expedition is organized around an open-ended theme or question.

In contrast to the traditional model of field trips, in which students "follow a guide through a museum or business," students on expedition "interview passers-by, sketch buildings, measure shadows, and make observations. They venture out to answer questions and follow leads that cannot be looked up in textbooks" (Rugen & Hartl, 1994, p. 22). Students help plan and sometimes lead the expeditions. They then create portfolios that showcase the skills they have developed and address problems or situations they have identified as relevant and meaningful. Teachers assess final projects to determine whether students are meeting learning standards.

Student-teacher relationships. In experiential education schools, students interact with their teacher for a minimum of a semester, and ideally for at least two consecutive years according to guidelines developed for these schools (Campbell et al., 1996). These schools can capitalize on the ongoing relationships between students and teachers that exist before and after expeditions.

Itin (1999), in discussing experiential education as a means of re-engaging learners, stressed the importance of the "transactive component between teacher and learner" in experiential education, in which students share more responsibility with teachers for learning (p. 929). The shared responsibilities for learning in experiential education align with recommendations for increasing student engagement put forth by Klem and Connell (2004):

> First, students need to feel teachers are involved with them—that adults in school know and care about them. Students also need to feel they can make important decisions for themselves, and the work they are assigned has relevance to their present or future lives…Finally, while youth desire respect and the opportunity to make decisions, they also need a clear sense of structure within which to make those decisions. (p. 262).

This sense of shared responsibility and emphasis on support for personal growth is characteristic of experiential education.

In traditional high schools, students typically see each of their teachers for less than an hour each day, during which there may be very little interaction. The nature of experiential education practices, which often occur outside the typical classroom environment and with a smaller teacher-to-student ratio (Warren et al., 2009), may increase the likelihood that teachers and students will develop stronger relationships. Examples from the experiential education literature show how the supportive relationships between students and their teachers often emerge naturally when students are actively engaged in learning.

Peer relationships. Experiential education can also create opportunities for students to participate in fun, socially stimulating activities with peers. A school environment in which peers support each other as learners contributes to engagement and a sense of connectedness to school. Furthermore, when working collaboratively, students are more inclined to "seek the approval of well-adjusted peers and teachers rather than strengthening their relationships with poorly adjusted peers" (Johnson, 2009, p. 101). Collaborative learning methods employed in expeditionary and project-based learning may facilitate the development of this type of learning atmosphere.

In traditional school models, disengaged learners have lower participation rates in extracurricular activities, like sports and school clubs (Fredricks, 2004; O'Brien and Rollefson, 1995). Sibthorp and Morgan (2011), in a paper describing the developmental appropriateness of adolescent participation in expeditions, emphasized the unique social experience that unfolds during experiential learning. Expedition groups usually consist of fewer individuals than other peer groups to which a student may belong, and also typically include multiple adult leaders. This structure affords unique supports and opportunities for relationship building that are often lacking for students who have become disengaged from school. When expeditions are included as core components of a school's curriculum, then *all* students are more likely to become more behaviorally engaged in school.

Adkins and Simmons (2002) noted that recreational activities can be infused into experiential education curricula to help learners adjust to new environments and classmates and to make the learning environment more engaging. Unlike traditional schools' curricula, expeditions also provide opportunities for exercise and creativity

without the need for separate physical education or arts classes, which are often discontinued when schools face budgets shortfalls and are also infrequently required for high school students (Gonzalez, 2001).

Outcomes of experiential education as a whole school approach. The school reform movement gained substantial momentum in 1997 when Congress designated $150 million to support implementation of comprehensive school designs that involve whole school restructuring across the United States (Sherwood, 1999). Congress has continued to allocate money towards school reform, and major foundations have also contributed substantially. The diversity of the education ecosystem has also been abetted by the emergence of charter schools. First created in Minnesota in 1991, legislation establishing charter schools had been passed by 42 states and the District of Columbia as of 2013 (NCES, 2013). From 1999 to 2013, the percentage of public schools that were charters increased from 1.7% to 6.2%, for a total of 6,100 charter schools. One hundred sixty schools are members of the Expeditionary Learning (EL) network and many others have implemented elements of experiential education as a whole school approach (Expeditionary Learning, 2011). The term ‘experiential schools’ will be used to describe such schools.

Cost-effectiveness is one reason for the growth of experiential schools as a school completion intervention. After an initial period of transition, experiential education as a whole school approach does not require significant additional funding beyond that of traditional public schools (Rugen & Hartl, 1994). Experiential education becomes financially and logistically feasible for schools through the reorganization of standard resources (Rugen & Hartl, 1994). Money and other resources often are conserved through

the elimination of tracking, reduced use of textbooks, changes in scheduling, and community partnerships (Campbell et al, 1996). Compared to other whole school approaches, experiential approaches can be a cost-effective means of increasing achievement (Yeh, 2008).

Academic outcomes for experiential schools. The Expeditionary Learning (EL) network's school reform model is based on Kurt Hahn's ideas and was developed in affiliation with Outward Bound (Gonzalez, 2001; see Table 3). EL received funding from the New American Schools Development Corporation in 1992 as part of their 'break the mold' schools initiative (Rugen & Hartl, 1994). It offers professional development, curriculum support, and other resources for Expeditionary Learning schools. In 2013, EL commissioned an independent report that used quasi-experimental methods to answer the question: "Do EL services have an impact on student achievement outcomes? Specifically, do students attending EL schools perform better in reading and math than they would have performed in other public schools?" (Mathematic Policy Research, p.2).

The authors matched students at five EL schools to a comparison demographically similar sample of students attending local district schools who also had similar baseline test scores measured while students were in non-EL elementary schools (Mathematic Policy Research, 2013). They then compared achievement, using regressions to control for any remaining differences in demographics and baseline test scores. They found that in reading, EL schools had an average estimated impact equivalent to moving a student from the 50th percentile to the 54th percentile after two years and to the 56th percentile after three years. In math, they estimated EL schools had cumulative math impacts equivalent to moving a student from the 50th percentile to the

54th percentile after two years or to the 61st percentile after three years. At the conclusion of this study, the researchers noted the need to "identify which components of [Expeditionary Learning's] multifaceted approach are most strongly associated with achievement impacts" in future studies (Mathematic Policy Research, 2013, p.13).

Another examination of the relationship between experiential learning and academic outcomes was conducted by Amoruso, Bontempo, and Wilson (2010). This study examined the achievement outcomes for students at EL schools using two years of standardized test results in math, reading, and language as the dependent outcomes. This study was also conducted by a private evaluation company, but used publicly available data. Using a quasi-experimental approach, Amoruso and colleagues compared EL students to a virtual matched comparison group of students in traditional schools through a series of mixed-methods ANOVAs. The researchers compared the achievement of students along a variety of demographics and school characteristics, for a total of 6 comparisons per demographic and school characteristic. Most ANOVAs led to non-significant findings, so limited conclusions can be drawn about the academic impact of experiential schools. However, students at EL schools that had been implementing experiential education for a longer duration had greater rates of academic growth in four of the six comparisons than the control schools. In EL schools with large populations of students receiving free or reduced lunch, analyses indicated a non-significant but positive trend for students' math scores at EL schools compared to their matched controls. A positive trend was also found for the academic growth of students at EL schools in rural settings compared to the control group. Only elementary and middle school students were included in analysis, so these patterns may not extend to EL high schools or schools that

incorporate experiential education but are not part of the EL network. However, the results suggest that experiential education practices may increase achievement for some students and in some settings, especially when a school has been operating for several years. Other research literature directly comparing academic outcomes of students in experiential and traditional school settings is relatively scant (Ives & Obenchain, 2006). No studies were found that compare dropout and school completion rates for experiential and traditional schools.

The impact of experiential schools on other outcomes. Evaluations of the Pilot Schools Experiential Education Demonstration (PSEED; Miller, Tung, & Ward, 2008) and the Project Adventure RESPECT Program (Shirilla et al., 2009) offer evidence based on qualitative data that experiential schools may have an impact on non-academic outcomes. The PSEED project aimed to assess the feasibility and impact of embedding experiential education practices, including frequent expeditions, into the curriculum of seven pilot schools in the Boston Public Schools district through a three-year program. Professional development related to experiential education was provided to participating administrators and teachers throughout the three years. In addition, each school was partnered with another school that already used experiential education as well as community partners that provided guidance and settings for expeditionary learning.

The evaluation of the PSEED project consisted primarily of interviews with teachers and administrators in the pilot schools to gather their perceptions, as well as observations conducted at the schools. According to staff, difficulties of incorporating experiential education included challenges related to balancing the schools' accountability framework (based on high-stakes testing in math and language arts skills)

with the experiential emphasis on making learning relevant and hands-on. The evaluators found that only the teachers and schools with more extensive backgrounds in experiential education were able to consistently incorporate learning standards into interdisciplinary, engaging projects and expeditions. However, learning to embed experiential education consistently impacted teacher practice, and teachers became more adept at facilitating active learning over the course of the three-year pilot project.

Teachers and administrators at each of the seven schools described noticing positive changes in student engagement, as indicated by their observations of increased student productivity and excitement about learning and evidence that students were becoming more cooperative in their work. Teachers also reported that they noticed increases in student productivity, responsibility, and critical thinking skills. Overall, evaluators concluded that more learning occurred outside of the classroom, more responsibility for learning was given to students, and that higher order thinking processes were used more frequently in the classroom as a result of implementing experiential education. However these conclusions were based solely on qualitative data; the findings would be more robust if paired with measures of change in students that could be assessed for statistical significance.

Project Adventure RESPECT provides another example of experiential education as a theoretical and practical basis for a whole school reform effort (Shirilla et al., 2009). This study examined whether implementing an experiential whole school intervention could improve social and cognitive skills such as communication with peers and self-efficacy. Using a quasi-experimental design with three middle schools which had recently adopted experiential education as a whole school approach and two other schools serving

as controls, Shirilla and colleagues examined changes in students' interpersonal skills using the Social Skills Rating Inventory (SSRI) and changes in self-efficacy using the Perceived Competence of Functioning Inventory (PCFI).

Generally, middle school students show declines in social skill abilities, and this was the case for students in both experiential and control schools. Scores on the SSRI for students in the experiential schools showed smaller declines than the control group, but the difference in effect sizes was not significant. The researchers surmised that since the decline was smallest for students who had been in the experiential setting longer, attendance of a longer duration could lead to significant results, although additional data would be needed to determine whether this hypothesis holds true. On the PCFI, students at the experiential school showed significant growth in self-efficacy, whereas their peers at the control schools showed a significant decline. These results indicate that attending experiential schools may have some positive effects on factors related to student success.

Shirilla and colleagues (2009) also commented on the challenges of implementing whole school reform, especially when much of the change requires extensive training that is difficult to fit into teachers' schedules. For these reasons, it may be informative to examine the processes and outcomes of experiential education in schools that have utilized experiential education for a longer period, rather than looking at outcomes during the process of implementation, if the aim is to understand its effects on student outcomes.

These studies provide some evidence that experiential education may hold promise as a strategy for engaging students in learning and helping them develop the skills they need to succeed academically. Experiential education may also provide a context in which students can more easily develop the relationships and sense of

belonging that contribute to connectedness to school. However, not enough research has been done to determine if experiential education is effective as a whole school intervention to increase school completion, and if so, what processes contribute to this outcome.

Related experiential education research. This section reviews and synthesizes related research in order to develop a better sense of whether experiential education fosters engagement in learning and connectedness to school. These studies include research on experiential education in schools that are using it as an occasional supplement to a traditional curriculum, and in experiential education programs that occur in non-school settings but have components relevant to school-based programs. Studies were reviewed if they included outcomes related to engagement or connectedness, and excluded if they focused on teacher or instructor outcomes or perceptions. Studies were also excluded if they were exclusively theoretical in nature, if their focus was solely on student outcomes related to learning a specific topic (e.g., nature conservancy), or if the sample consisted of adjudicated youth or youth in residential treatment.

Mechanisms of learning through expedition experiences. Participation in expeditions through programs like Outward Bound and National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) usually last at least three weeks, the duration of which students are 'in the field.' Using grounded theory analysis to gain understanding of the process of student learning on expeditions, Paisley and colleagues (2008) developed a taxonomy of what and how students learn during participation in NOLS courses based on responses to end-of-expedition surveys. Students were asked about learning in relation to NOLS' six pre-identified learning objectives. Five mechanisms of learning were identified from student

responses: structure-oriented mechanisms; instructor-oriented mechanisms; student-oriented mechanisms; student-and instructor-oriented mechanisms; and mechanisms that are a result of environmental qualities. For five of the six learning objectives, instructor- or student-and instructor-oriented mechanisms were cited most frequently as being central to learning. Instructor-oriented mechanisms included coaching, debriefing, and formal classes. Coaching, which occurs one-on-one, and debriefing, which includes reflection on completed events, seem especially conducive to building relationships. This study relied on self-report data capturing perceptions of learning, so it is possible that the students were not accurate judges of *how* they learned on expedition. However, the value they placed on their interactions with instructors speaks to the importance of teacher-student relationships in engaging students in expeditionary learning.

Using an interpretivist case study approach, McKenzie (2003) conducted research examining what course components contribute to positive outcomes for participants in multi-week Outward Bound wilderness expeditions. Participants included adolescents and adults. Twenty-eight course components were found to influence student outcomes, including aspects of course activities, the physical environment, instructors, and the group. McKenzie administered questionnaires, conducted interviews, and observed segments of expeditions to understand students' perceptions of how course components impacted self-concept, motivation, and interpersonal skills.

The quantitative and qualitative data indicated that students perceived several aspects of their relationships with instructors as playing a role in determining positive course outcomes: instructors' expectations, instructors as role models, instructors' feedback, instructors' competence, and the formal curriculum presented by instructors

(McKenzie, 2003). Students found the following aspects of the group to contribute to positive to course outcomes: working as a group, interacting with other group members, relying on other group members, taking care of others, and trying new behaviors. No students indicated negative impacts in connection to course components related to the instructor. Of the sample of 81 students, no more than 5 students indicated negative impacts on specific course outcomes in regards to components related to the peer group. This study indicates that in general, relationships with peers and instructors contribute positively to students' self-concept, motivation, and interpersonal skills during long expeditions.

Dymond, Renzaglia, and Chun (2008) reviewed 62 studies of high school experiential programs with a service learning emphasis to identify key characteristics of these programs. The importance of interaction between teachers and students was mentioned in 56% of studies. The researchers summarized this important element of service-learning programs as follows:

> teachers and adults share leadership with students, provide guidance in setting goals, give students responsibility, serve as facilitators to student learning, supervise and monitor students, provide support to students during service activities, give advice, serve as role models, mentor students, and listen to, offer ideas to, and demonstrate respect for students. (Dymond et al., 2008, p. 41)

This sense of shared responsibility and emphasis on relationships is characteristic of experiential education and shares many similarities to the descriptors of a "caring" teacher as described by students in Wenzel's (1997) study based in a traditional school.

Outcomes of stand-alone expeditions. Experiential education includes a broad

variety of learning strategies, activities, and settings that pose diverse means of engaging students in learning. Stern, Powell, and Ardoin (2008) explored the influences of 3- and 5-day residential environmental education programs on participants' interest in learning and discovery, as well as perceptions and knowledge of environmental themes. Using a pre-/post-test design and paired-sample *t*-tests, they found that late elementary and middle school students became significantly more interested in instructional content after spending time engaged in learning activities at an environmental education center. However, the sample was one of convenience rather than selected at random, so the results must be interpreted with caution. Furthermore, these changes dissolved when follow-up data was collected three months later. This suggests that the active nature of learning during this experience may have engaged students, but that such experiences may need to be embedded into the curriculum more frequently in order to create lasting change in these young students' interest in learning. This type of extended expedition rarely occurs in traditional high schools, so no studies were found that examine similar expeditions for older adolescents.

Using the Experience Sampling Method in which students completed a questionnaire pertaining to two randomly assigned hour-long blocks each day over four separate weeklong periods, Sibthorp and Arthur-Banning compared college students' level of optimal engagement prior to, during (early and late in the semester) and after a semester-long National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) wilderness expedition (2004). Of the four time points, the number of hours categorized by participants as most engaging was highest late in the experiential education semester, and lowest prior to and after this experience. This suggests that expeditionary learning fostered engagement, and

the students perceived the experience as more goal relevant and enjoyable than their traditional college experiences. If expeditions serve to increase perceptions of goal relevance, then their inclusion in a high school curriculum could increase cognitive engagement and make school completion more likely. Additional research is needed to understand how younger adolescents perceive such expeditions in terms of their goal relevance and enjoyableness.

To better understand how task relevance affects, 'life effectiveness,' an outcome that is often valued in experiential education programs, Sibthorp and Arthur-Banning (2004) tested the fit of two models for predicting what they broadly defined as "the extent to which a person believes that they are effective in various major tasks of life" (p. 33). Their sample consisted of 145 adolescents participating in international adventure expeditions focused on developing individual and interpersonal competencies, as well as environmental stewardship. Analysis of matched pre- and post-expedition survey data (yielded from the Life Effectiveness Questionnaire and the Characteristics of the Experience Scale) showed that while personal empowerment contributed significantly to life effectiveness, the hypothesized importance of perceived learning relevance was not supported. Students' perceptions of their own effectiveness increased, but this was not mediated by perceptions of task relevance.

Outcomes of embedding experiential education into a single class. Experiential education aims to advance the development of higher-order thinking skills. Ives and Obenchain (2006) compared the development of higher- and lower-order thinking skills in high school students taught with experiential education instructional practices and students receiving traditional instruction in American Government classes. The

experiential classes embraced student involvement in selecting course content, emphasized real-world connections of learning content, and prioritized critical reflection. Higher order thinking skills (HOTS) include comparison, inference, prioritizing, logical reasoning question posing, and going beyond the given information into discovery, reasoning, organizing, and argumentation. Lower-order thinking skills (LOTS) include the memorization and recall of factual information. The researchers hypothesized that high school seniors in the experiential classes would have higher scores in HOTS from pre-test to post-test compared to students experiencing more traditional instruction in the same subject matter, and that there would be no difference between the groups in LOTS.

Results aligned with these hypotheses, indicating that integrating experiential education practices into the curriculum led to superior effects related to the development of more complex cognitive skills, and that it did not interfere with learning the subject matter or developing more elementary cognitive skills. However, both groups actually showed declines in HOTS—the decline was just less pronounced for the students in the experiential class. Ives and Obenchain (2006) surmised that the post-test may have been substantially more difficult than the pretest. Interpretation of their results must also be qualified with the limitations of a small sample size and little description of what the experiential instruction actually involved. Nevertheless, this study shows that implementing experiential education practices is possible even within a single high school class without greater school-wide changes, and that such a change may contribute to the development of important cognitive skills.

Helms (1998) conducted a qualitative case study of a high school science class that implemented service-learning expeditions into its curriculum so that science was

presented as a discipline that involves "purposeful doing" (p. 644). The students were tasked with completing expeditions to assess the biodiversity of restored wetland areas near their school. Through analysis of interview transcriptions and student journal entries, Helms determined that the service learning expeditions led students to see greater connections between what they were learning in science and what was occurring in the community, making the science curriculum more relevant to them. Helms commented that students might have felt even more control over their learning if they had been given more input in determining the initial project design and the questions that would be answered through fieldwork. However, while it is generally assumed that student perceptions of task relevance increase when they participate in deciding what and how to learn, few studies have examined the importance of these perceptions in regards to learning outside of a classroom setting (Sibthorp & Arthur-Banning, 2004).

Limitations of short-term experiential interventions. Conley and colleagues (2007) examined the impact of a 4-hour ropes course expedition on student involvement, affiliation and perceptions of classmates, and whether any changes resulting from skills learned on the ropes course would translate back to the classroom. The sample consisted of middle school students identified as at risk of developing an internalizing or externalizing disorder. These ropes course activities included 'low ropes' activities, which focus on group communication and trust, and 'high ropes,' that are more individualistic and include physical challenge but also provide opportunities for students to support and encourage one another. Students completed the Classroom Environment Scale (CES) within a few days before and after participation in the ropes course. This survey includes questions about relationships, personal growth, and system maintenance

or change. Matched-pair *t*-tests were used to compare the pretest and posttest scores. The students with internalizing behaviors showed the largest improvements in involvement from pretest to posttest (d = .56), and analysis of the full student sample also indicated significant improvement in involvement *(*d = .35). Results were mixed on analysis of affiliation; some students felt closer to their peers after participation, whereas others felt less trustful about working with their classmates. In a follow up questionnaire administered with the posttest of the CES, students were asked whether they felt they could take anything they learned on the ropes course back to the classroom. Only 39% of students answered positively, suggesting that the brevity of their participation was not conducive to changes to classroom behavior or achievement. The authors suggest that additional preparation and debriefing may increase the effectiveness of such activities, but they do not offer a clear means of achieving meaningful and persistent change from a single 4-hour expedition.

Conclusion

Summarizing research conducted in the 1980s, when the problem of disengagement first warranted much attention, Marks noted that the culture of most high school classrooms was characterized by "dispirited teachers and disengaged students 'putting in their time' while negotiating a sprawling and fragmented curriculum. In most of the classrooms, instruction followed the transmission model and induced passivity and boredom among students" (2000, p. 155-156). Unfortunately, persistent disengagement continues in U.S. high schools (Marks, 2000; NRC, 2004). The National Research Council (2004), concludes:

> The instruction typical of most urban high schools nevertheless fails to engage students cognitively, emotionally, or behaviorally. As typically taught in urban high schools, most subject matter appears disconnected and unrelated to students' lives outside of school. Students spend much of their time passively listening to lectures or doing repetitive, formulaic tasks. Instruction and tasks are commonly very easy or impossibly difficult for many students, and getting right answers is stressed over understanding. (p. 213)

Since its inception in Dewey's writings and Hahn's programs, experiential education has emphasized the importance of addressing subjects that are relevant to students through engaging learning activities in a challenging and supportive environment. In transferring these characteristics to academic environments, experiential education as a whole school approach holds promise as an alternative for learners who have become disengaged in more traditional school settings. If experiential education can enhance variables known to facilitate school completion, then perhaps experiential education can help confront the dropout crisis.

Most research on experiential education has studied its use in non-school settings or as a brief supplement to traditional school practices. These studies offer insight into how incorporating experiential education into schools' curricula may positively impact students through opportunities for active learning and supportive relationships with teachers and peers. Short experiential opportunities embedded into classes are easily implemented, but the inclusion of these engaging but brief one-shot experiences seems unlikely to cause significant or lasting change in students' engagement in learning or connectedness to school. An isolated teacher striving to embed experiential education

into his or her classroom or after-school club is also less likely to have as much impact as a teacher working in a school that is structured to include experiential practices throughout the curriculum. The outcomes of intensive non-school based experiential programs may also be limited, since after completing these programs students return to their normal routine, limiting the continuity of these experiences. Expectations, instruction, and feedback that a student receives in relationships developed while on expedition may be enhanced if they continued into the day-to-day interactions within the school between the students and teacher.

Implementing experiential education as a whole school intervention may enhance and prolong its positive impacts. The limited literature examining experiential education as a whole school intervention suggests that it may contribute to positive student outcomes, particularly after a school works through its first few years of implementation. Experiential education as a whole school approach has been linked to improved academic achievement for some groups of students, and it may also enhance non-academic variables such as engagement and connectedness. For students at traditional schools who have become disengaged from learning and no longer feel like school is a place they belong, experiential schools may serve as an alternative pathway to school completion. A better understanding of students' experiences at experiential schools is an important step towards determining the usefulness of experiential education as a whole school approach to increase school completion.

Chapter 3: Methods

The current project is a phenomenological case study of the experience of being a successful student at an experiential high school. It examines students' perceptions of their experiences attending a school that uses experiential education techniques as a whole school approach to promoting school completion. Because this project is concerned with ways to increase school completion, "success" is defined as graduating from high school with a diploma. This study focuses on graduating students' perceptions of their school experience to identify the specific components of the whole school experiential approach that are experienced as most impactful to successful students. It seeks to answer the following research question:

> *What aspects of attending an experiential high school were most significant to successful students?*

Phenomenological research primarily seeks to describe rather than explain, and starts from a perspective free from hypotheses or preconceptions regarding what answers to the research question will emerge (Creswell, 2007). Given the nascent state of the research examining experiential education in relation to school completion, this approach offers a useful starting point.

Overview of Phenomenology

The phenomenological approach was chosen for this study because of its appropriateness for developing a deeper understanding of how a group of individuals (in this case, successful students) experiences a specific phenomenon (completing school at an experiential high school). Understanding how individuals' ascribe meaning to their human experience is at the core of phenomenological studies (Patton, 2002).

Phenomenological inquiry assumes that there is an essence or essences to shared experience (Patton, 2002), and that phenomenological inquiry can allow the researcher to identify the essence of the participants' processing of a common experience (Creswell, 2007). An understanding of the phenomenon through the eyes of those who have experienced it comprises the primary aim of this type of study. In developing a description of the essence of the composite experience of the identified group, the researcher describes both "what" was experienced and "how" participants experienced it (Moustakas, 1994).

Creswell (2007) identifies two approaches to phenomenology: Van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenology and Moustakas' (1994) transcendental or psychological phenomenology. The current study used Moustakas' approach, which focuses on describing the experiences of the participants, rather than the interpretations of the researcher, as is the case in the hermeneutic approach. Transcendental, as defined by Moustakas (1994, p. 34) means, "in which everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time." Because the aim of phenomenological research is to identify the universal essence of the *participants'* shared experience, it is crucial that the researcher approaches the data with awareness of his or her own personal assumptions and experiences related to the phenomenon of interest. Although the researcher cannot fully set aside prior knowledge and experiences, transcendental phenomenologists typically preface their work with descriptions of their own experiences and preconceptions regarding the phenomenon of interest. This process is referred to as bracketing and helps both the researcher and the reader more clearly determine how the researchers' preconceptions may impact the research process and findings. This process of bracketing out one's own

experiences should be revisited throughout the research process.

Moustakas (1994) provides an overview of the procedures involved in transcendental phenomenology data collection and analysis. Data collection typically involves interviews with a number of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of interest. A sample size between 5 and 25 individuals has been recommended (Polkinghorne, 1989). The interview protocol uses open-ended questions to probe participants regarding what they have experienced in terms of the phenomenon and what contexts or situations have influenced these experiences.

Interviews are transcribed verbatim, and then statements from the data that pertain to participants' experience of the phenomenon are identified in a process Moustakas (1994) refers to as horizontalization. This involves cutting extraneous content such as the small talk preceding and following the interview questions or side comments unrelated to the interview protocol. After the transcript has been cleaned, the researcher methodically codes the remaining text in an iterative process of identifying themes as they emerge, then re-organizing them to reflect the frequency and intensity of the statements as expressed by the interview subjects. The final iteration captures themes that are part of participants' shared experience, meaning that all—or nearly all—participants articulated or implied the idea.

The researcher then examines the themes and develops a textural description of the participants' experiences (*what* they experienced), a structural description (the conditions and situations of *how* they experienced the phenomenon), and a description of how the textural and structural descriptions combine to convey the underlying essence of the experience (Creswell, 2007). This composite description is referred to as the essential,

invariant structure, or essence. This descriptive passage typically consists of one or two paragraphs and aims to leave readers to conclude, "I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 46).

Setting

This study was conducted at a school that will be referred to in this paper by the pseudonym Explorers Academy. This school is located in a suburb of a large Midwestern city. Explorers Academy was selected as the setting for this study because of its use of experiential education as a whole school approach. As a charter school, it has greater flexibility in its curriculum and has thoroughly adapted an experiential framework for learning. According to the school's website, "the cornerstone of [Explorers Academy] is experiential learning based on the teachings of John Dewey." Explorers Academy uses project-based learning throughout the curriculum and requires participation in multi-day expeditions away from campus. For purposes of this study, the bounded unit was defined as the high school experiences of students at Explorers Academy who graduated in May 2014. These experiences included instruction and learning that occurred on campus and during urban and wilderness expeditions away from the school. Explorers Academy employs 9 teachers, all of whom serve as advisors, course instructors, and expedition leaders.

As a public charter school, Explorers Academy is free and open to any students who wish to enroll. The school is operating at below capacity so it does not utilize a lottery system to select students, as is the case with some charter schools. According to the Department of Education (2015), for the 2013-2014 school year Explorers Academy enrolled 133 students in grades 9 through 12. Students of color comprised 20% of the

student body. Forty-seven percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunch, a status often used in educational research as a proxy for low socioeconomic status. Thirty-two percent of students receive special education services, a rate more than double that of the nearest public high school. See Table 5 for more information about the demographics of Explorers Academy and Glenbrook High School, the pseudonym that will be used to refer to the nearest public high school. Enrollment at Glenbrook High School is based on geographic residence of students' families.

Table 5

Explorers Academy and Glenbrook High School demographics for 2013-2014 academic year

	Explorers Academy	Glenbrook High School
Total enrollment	133	2173
Licensed teacher-to-student ratio	18	22
Students of color	19.5%	26.0%
Receiving special education services	32.3%	13.6%
Qualifying for free/reduced lunch	46.6%	39.6%
Limited English proficiency	n/a	3.8%
Graduation rate	37.8%	82.9%
Continuing rate	33.3%	12.2%

Note. Graduation rates are 4-year graduation rates, as defined by the Minnesota Department of Education. 'Continuing rate' refers to students who have been in high school for four years, but have not graduated or dropped out. Data retrieved from Minnesota Department of Education Data Center (http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/Data/index.html).

According to the director of the school, many recent enrollees or their parents have noted that they sought out Explorers Academy because of its reputation as a "safe school" for LGBTQ students as well as students on the autism spectrum. These factors are notable because they suggest that the group of participants may include students who would face additional obstacles that impact their likelihood to successfully complete high school.

Many students who transfer to Explorers Academy do so having not earned the number of credits needed to be on track to graduate in four years. They are behind academically when they arrive. This may partially explain why in 2014—the graduation year of the participants in this study—the 4-year graduation rate for Explorers Academy was only 37.8%. The continuing rate of 33.3% indicates that many students at Explorers Academy remain enrolled after four years and may graduate later. As previously mentioned in this paper, under NCLB it has become increasingly common for struggling students to transfer from their large public high schools after they have fallen so far behind that it has become effectively impossible for them to graduate in four years (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). Such students often are routed to within-district alternative schools from which a very low percentage of students ultimately graduate. Although many Explorers Academy students seem to fit this profile, their proactive choice to enroll at this charter school suggests they still have motivation to succeed, despite previous struggles.

The group of individuals involved in this study all graduated from Explorers Academy, so this phenomenological study can also be classified as a case study. The case study approach is useful for developing a deeper understanding of an under-researched area of study, such as the relationship between experiential education and school completion. According to Nee (2004), "The great advantage of the case study method is that it does not deal with isolated, but with interconnected facts" (p. 101).

Sample

I partnered with the director of Explorers Academy to identify students expected to graduate in May 2014. This group was identified based on having accrued sufficient

credits to be eligible for graduation, resulting in a group of 21 potential participants. Fourteen students chose to participate and each of them completed the survey and interview during the month prior to their graduation. All of these students were 18 or 19 years of age, so all had reached the age of majority and were able to provide their own consent to participate. Based on school enrollment records, 11 of these students identified as white, 1 student as African American and white, 1 student as Asian, and 1 student as Hispanic and African American. Three students qualified for free or reduced lunch. Three students received special education services (two students have diagnoses of autism spectrum disorder and one of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) and one student received accommodations though a 504 Plan related to a mood disorder.

Based on conversations with school staff and students prior to the commencement of this research project, I knew that many of the students in this sample had unique backgrounds and had overcome significant challenges earlier in their schooling. Unlike attending a public school based on geographic enrollment guidelines, students who enroll in charter schools or other alternative placements do so either as an active choice to seek out a school that is a better fit for them, or because they have been forced to leave for behavioral reasons. To capture this information about the sample, I conducted interviews with the director of the school and a special education teacher. This information provided important context to the information I was likely to obtain through student surveys and interviews. These interviews were transcribed and descriptions of each student were summarized, with direct quotations incorporated in order to enable the reader to get a better sense of these individuals' unique traits. These descriptions of the participants, as described by the staff, are provided in the beginning of the results section to provide

contextual information that aids in understanding the experiences of these individuals.

Procedure

Participation in this study involved the completion of a brief survey and an interview. Participants were offered verbal and written descriptions of the study and provided the opportunity to ask questions before consent was requested. After consent was obtained, participants completed a brief survey and participated in a one-on-one interview. See Appendix A for the consent information sheet provided to participants.

Survey. All students in the sample first completed a brief survey that asked them to rate the importance of different variables shown by previous research (NRC, 2004) to correlate with school completion. Students had the option to indicate that a variable was not characteristic of their school, and therefore not related to their success. The survey also asked students about the importance of participation in overnight expeditions and trips away from campus during the school day, variables that have not been linked to school completion but are central to the structure of Explorers Academy. The purpose of this survey was to identify which attributes of students' school experience were perceived as being most impactful to successful completion of school. Each participant's survey responses were then used as an advanced organizer to help guide the interview. Attributes identified in each student's survey were further probed in the subsequent interview. This survey also allowed for exploration of possible connections between successful students' experience at an experiential school and the broader literature on school completion. See Appendix B for survey items.

Interviews. Interviews were conducted with each student in the sample. These interviews focused on gaining an understanding of the structural and textural aspects of

students' experience at Explorers Academy. Students were specifically queried regarding their choice to enroll at Explorers Academy and their participation in expeditions and project-based learning. Students were also asked to further describe the characteristics of school that they had identified on the survey as most important to their success in completing school. In order to examine potential connections between the experience of successful students at an experiential education school and the literature on experiential education, the interview protocol also included questions intended to determine whether students' experiences conformed to the general four-step progression of experiential learning, in which students proceed from engagement in concrete activities to reflection, generalization, and applicability of what has been learned to other settings (Miller, Tung, & Ward, 2008).

The interview protocol was piloted with three students at Explorers Academy who were not included in the sample. Feedback from these students led to minor revisions in the wording of some items. Interviews were semi-structured and allowed for follow-up questions in order to gain better understanding of ideas and examples shared by interviewees. Students were asked to provide a pseudonym at the completion of the interview to ensure anonymity, and these names are used throughout this paper when students are quoted. Interviews lasted on average 47 minutes (range: 32-70 minutes). Transcribed, altogether these interviews amounted to 304 pages of double-spaced text. See Appendix C for the interview protocol. Horizontalization (the process in which I removed statements from the dataset that did not pertain to the phenomenon of interest) resulted in minimal exclusions since I was broadly interested in students' experience of school. Most of what was omitted from further analysis consisted of informal

conversation with participants that occurred prior to and subsequent to the end of the formal interviews.

Bracketing the Role of Self as Research Tool

The approach and conclusions of research are affected by three main influences: the extant literature and theoretical base, data collected through the study, and the researcher's own experiences, commitments and values (Mills, 1959/2000). This last item merits additional discussion when conducting phenomenological inquiry.

My professional experience and training uniquely position me to conduct research on how experiential education may relate to school completion, and also increases the importance of transparency throughout the research process. Prior to commencing my graduate studies, I spent several seasons working as an instructor for experiential education programs in which I took adolescents on extended expeditions during their summer vacations. These professional experiences enabled me to develop the technical and interpersonal skills required to lead expeditions and allowed me to collect myriad anecdotes of how participation in these expeditions seemed to engage youth in experiences that fostered learning and development. My involvement in experiential programs led me to wonder about the potential for offering experiential pedagogy to more diverse populations of young people than the primarily white, upper-middle class students who could afford these summer programs.

At the same time, I recognized that the effects I observed first-hand as a wilderness instructor may have been specific to those particular groups, settings, and experiences, to other variables I was unaware of, or simply to my own mindset and interpretation. In addition, although I saw students develop new skills and relationships

during the month-long expeditions I led, I was also familiar with the research literature that showed that gains made in "one-shot" programs tend to fade quickly when students return home. It made sense to me that experiential learning had the potential to spur more lasting benefits if it could be incorporated into students' lives in an ongoing manner.

I pursued graduate training in educational psychology because of the potential to make effective social, emotional, and academic interventions more accessible to all students. My training as a researcher has motivated me to examine the conclusions and theories I developed while working as an experiential education instructor in a methodical and objective way, using the literature on what facilitates school completion to guide my investigation.

I designed this study to help determine if evidence exists to justify further research into the implementation of experiential education as a whole school approach to facilitate school completion. Prior to commencing this study, I developed a relationship with this school through my experiences as a practicum student in my doctoral training to be a school psychologist. The director and several teachers had welcomed me into the school and their classrooms. I had also observed, counseled, and spent time talking with many of the students prior to their participation in the study. The director granted permission and offered support for conducting this study.

In order to understand how the researcher's own expectations and beliefs may affect phenomenological data analysis and interpretation, it is useful to identify what findings seem likely to emerge from the data before it is collected and analyzed. Based on my own experiences at Explorers Academy, other schools, and experiential education programs as well as my familiarity with the extant research literatures, before

commencing data collection I identified the structural elements (the conditions and situations of *how* they experienced the phenomenon) and textural elements (*what* students experienced) I thought seemed likely to emerge. I listed the following structural themes: participation in expeditionary learning, participation in project-based learning, advising from teachers, group work, outdoor environments, intentional group development activities, community settings, and the Explorers Academy community. Textural themes that I thought may emerge included: relationships with peers and teachers, feeling a sense of control over learning, believing that learning is relevant to their lives, and a sense of personal growth over time.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of the shared experience of successful students at an experiential high school. This chapter presents the findings of this inquiry and will include a description of the pertinent characteristics of participants, the textural and structural themes, and the essential invariant structure of the students' shared experience.

Pertinent Characteristics of the Participants

In partnership with the director of Explorers Academy, I recruited participants from the class of students graduating in May 2014. To better understand the characteristics of this sample and gain a sense of the challenges and growth they had experienced during high school, I also conducted interviews with the director of Explorers Academy and a teacher who also served as a case manager for students receiving special education services. Comparing the sample to the entire graduating class, the director noted that, like the sample, this graduating class was majority female, though in other years the gender balance has been more evenly split. He said that the sample had a typical portion of students receiving special education services. This sample included students who were graduating ahead of schedule and students who had spent more than four years in high school, as is typical for this school. The director commented that in general, this class of seniors was friendly and comfortable with one another, but that they did not seem to share as strong a sense of unified class identity as he had noticed with prior classes.

When asked how the sample compared to the broader school population, the teacher responded:

> You've got a mixture…some of them are, were, or became the overachiever type, successful student that just needed that extra piece. There's a lot of them, you have kids that are sort of, like maybe a little different like, um, like gender-wise or socially or behavior-wise that needed somewhere that they wouldn't get bullied… yeah, it's a good cross section of our kids.

The teacher and director provided information about specific participants. In order to protect the identity of these students, the most sensitive information shared by the director and teacher are not included in individual descriptions. This sample includes students who have struggled with chemical dependency, students who have spent time in juvenile detention and residential treatment centers, and a student who was the victim of an assault by peers at a previous school.

The following descriptions of each student include data taken from school records, student surveys, and interviews with the director and teacher that were conducted the week after graduation in May 2014. These descriptions were developed to give the researcher and reader a better sense of *whose* experience is being described in the subsequent analysis of student interview transcriptions.

Abigail. Abigail is a white female who transferred to Explorers Academy from a large public school during her freshman year. She named the high student-to-teacher ratio, lack of flexibility in the learning style, and feeling excluded by peers as reasons she left her previous school. The director commented that when Abigail enrolled at Explorers Academy, she was a "cyclone of negativity" who had a difficult time staying focused because of her inclination to contribute to social drama. This student lived with her boyfriend and had limited outside support. Over time, she developed increased awareness

of her academic ability and, with support from her advisor, succeeded in completing college credits while at Explorers Academy. She has shared with him that she realizes she was on the wrong path when she first enrolled, and he was impressed by how much more self-reflective she became during high school.

Bart. Bart is a white male who transferred from a large public high school as a junior. He left because of its large size and because he felt like it lacked a sense of community. Bart received special education services for autism spectrum disorder. The director relayed that Bart was able to use his communication and personality strengths to succeed in most social and academic situations, although there was often a disconnect between his positive perceptions of situations and the actuality of how peers responded to him and the quality of his work. However, the teacher, who also served as his advisor, noted that over the years Bart increasingly sought out feedback from peers and had become more socially savvy as well as comfortable with his own quirks. Bart took five years to complete high school, but the teacher noted that while Bart struggled to work independently on projects, as a senior "all of a sudden he started powering through things, getting things done and he, like, pulled himself up by the bootstraps and got his act together."

Daisy. Daisy is a white female who enrolled at Explorers Academy as a freshman. She transferred from a large public high school because she felt that her previous school was too big and that teachers did not know her as an individual. The director said that when she started at Explorers Academy, she was angry and impulsive and had an unstable living situation. The director believes that a "Women and Science" expedition during her junior year was a turning point for Daisy, and that this experience inspired

Daisy to plan a career in environmental science. The teacher said that while Daisy continues to display a lot of anxiety she has developed better skills for dealing with social conflict and unexpected events at school.

Natalie. Natalie is a white female who transferred from a large public high school as a junior because she felt that the large size of previous school made it difficult to get to know teachers or other students and because she wanted to have more say in what she learned. She has autism spectrum disorder but did not qualify for special education services. The teacher, who served as Natalie's advisor, described her as brilliant, introverted, and artistic. The teacher noted that while Natalie spent every morning in her advisory, she had gotten to know her best while on expeditions, during which Natalie was much more engaged with peers and more forthcoming about her interests and talents. The director also noted that Natalie thrived on expeditions. He was impressed by Natalie's intellectual curiosity, and noted that while enrolled, she had learned Mandarin Chinese via online software and PSEO classes. Natalie expressed reluctance about interviewing, concerned that she would not provide a good interview, yet proceeded to offer descriptive and insightful reflections on her experience as a student at Explorers Academy.

Em. Em is a white female who transferred from a large public high school as a junior because she felt that her previous school was too strict and she did not like the teachers or her case manager. She received special education services for autism spectrum disorder. Prior to enrolling at Explorers Academy, Em received all-day special education services in a non-inclusion setting. The director felt very positive about the role Explorers Academy played in Em's development:

> Em had spent a lot of her time [at previous schools] in pull out services and isolation even in a classroom because of her disabilities and was not, didn't have a lot of connections with things…here, she was able to do things that she was interested in, she was able to connect with other students and feel like she had a place.

Em experienced a lot of anxiety regarding completing projects and participating in expeditions, but both the director and teacher (who served as her advisor) felt that her coping skills were much improved. Em will be joining a residential program next year to continue to receive supports for her disability.

Elizabeth. Elizabeth is a white female who transferred from a public high school as a junior. She left her previous school because she felt that it was boring and that no one wanted be there, and also because of its large size. The director of Explorers Academy described her as a very driven but scattered student. He commented that her "follow-through or completion isn't always great, but she has a ton of energy and a lot of great ideas and I think the hope for her is that she figures out how to balance things and complete them because the quality of her work is really, really good when she gets it in." She was active in her community throughout high school, competing in pageants and working on a political campaign, but it was not certain until the week of graduation that she would complete all requirements.

Shae. Shae is a white female who enrolled at Explorers Academy near the end of freshman year. She received special education services because of a mood disorder and PTSD. The director said that when she first enrolled, her advisory peers were very welcoming and he believed that atmosphere helped her believe that school could again be

a place where she felt safe. He said she thrived her first couple years at Explorers Academy, noting that Shae was "our number one rock star. I mean she did everything. She went on all the trips. She did fantastic projects. She was at expos. She kind of ran into a bumpy road over the last year and I kind of think that was external things going on." Along with graduating on time, Shae was able to earn about a year's worth of college credit through PSEO and has received numerous scholarships to attend college. The teacher noted that Shae benefited from Explorers Academy's ability to accommodate her schedule given the many outside services she required during high school.

Erin. Erin is a Latina and black female who transferred to Explorers Academy seeking a more welcoming environment than she had experienced at her previous school. She received accommodations through a 504 plan related to a mood disorder. She is out as a lesbian, and the director said that when he conducted her exit interview (something he does with all graduating students), "one of the things she came back to again and again was how welcoming and safe she was here and that she hadn't ever been at a school where she could be herself to the extent that she was here." She reported frequent bullying at previous schools.

Alice. Alice is a white female. She enrolled at Explorers Academy subsequent to negative experiences with peers at her previous school. The director commented,

> I think what worked really well for Alice with us was having a group of peers who also had their own basketful of things they were going through and the flexibility to work with her when she was struggling and sticking with her through it all.

The teacher, who served as her advisor, noted that the advisory relationship was very important to Alice, and because they had a strong relationship they were able to have frank conversations about decision-making and risky behaviors. She summarized Alice's evolution as a student:

> She's always been really fun, always been very smart but now I think she's come to recognize what her true strengths are and she is, she sees herself differently. She started to see herself as a successful student and a successful future adult and just her ability to apply her skills and her gifts and talents that she has.

David. David is a white male who transferred from another charter school during his junior year. He left his previous school because he did not like how much homework was assigned as part of the college preparatory curriculum, and did not feel that he was doing well there. The director described him as quiet and mature but not very motivated. It took him five years to complete high school. The director and teacher both felt that he benefitted from a smaller school community that allowed for more flexibility since he was consistently slow at completing work, although the work he completed was typically of high quality. The director felt that for David, "high school wasn't something he wanted to rush to get done with and get out of obviously! You know? And it was a comfortable, safe place to be. He enjoyed being here and he set his own pace and was fine with it."

Judy. Judy is a first generation Asian-American female who transferred to Explorers Academy from a small private school as a junior because she wanted to have more control and independence in her learning. The director noted that from the start,

> Judy had super great ideas. She's got a great personality. She's got intellectual skills off the charts. She kind of is really excited about doing projects. And none

> of that changed but we got to find out a lot of other things about Judy. Extremely high anxiety ridden, um, one of the biggest ones is change—really, really difficult for her.

Both the director and teacher noticed how much progress she made in developing coping mechanisms to deal with her anxiety and to build her confidence during high school, although despite being accepted into college for the fall, she was unsure whether she would attend because of the level of change it would require.

Michael. Michael is an Asian American male who transferred from another charter school as a senior, following a transition in his family living situation. The director described Michael:

> He's got layers. As you peel back the layers on Michael you discover so many things: He's an amazing athlete, he's an amazing musician, he's got all kind of tech skills that he's been doing, he's got outside connections and cultural groups that he's part of and does.

The director expressed regret that Michael had not enrolled at Explorers Academy sooner because he saw much untapped potential that could have been developed through projects.

Kate. Kate is a white female who transferred from a large public school as a sophomore because she disliked her teachers and peers, as well as the size of her previous school. According to the director and teacher, she transformed during her time at Explorers Academy. According to the director, when she enrolled her "emotional regulation was awful. She would storm out and leave. She would drop f-bombs as she was going." She also had chemical dependency issues. The director believes that

participating in a service learning expedition was a turning point for Kate, who then started to care more about her education and future. The teacher commented that during her final year at Explorers Academy,

> she really, like, approached it from the perspective of what can I get out of this, how can I improve my skills…she really used opportunities to build her skills. That's how she viewed things so that was a lot different, I think, than she used to be so she just really blossomed.

Ron. Ron is an African American male who transferred to Explorers Academy during his senior year from another charter school nearby because he felt like he was asked to do too much busy work at the previous charter school. Neither the director nor teacher knew him well. The director commented that he knew Ron was attracted to Explorers Academy because of its expeditions, and he was very excited to participate in his first expedition over the upcoming summer, which would fulfill his last credit requirement (Ron was allowed to walk at graduation with his classmates but would not receive a diploma until he completed this planned expedition).

Survey Results

Prior to being interviewed, students responded to survey questions regarding the last school they attended and their experience at Explorers Academy. Keeping in mind that this sample consists entirely of students who chose to leave previous schools and remain at Explorers Academy through graduation, these responses provide quantitative descriptors that serve as a starting point in understanding their experience of being a successful student at an experiential school. Students' ratings of the importance of items

on a list of known facilitators of school completion were also used to inform subsequent interviews.

Paired-samples *t*-tests were conducted to compare students' ratings of how they felt about their experiences at Explorers Academy and the last school they attended prior to enrolling at Explorers Academy. These items asked students to respond using a 5-point Likert-type scale in which a rating of 1 signified strong disagreement with the statement and 5 signified strong agreement. It is important to keep in mind that since this sample consists entirely of students who have made the choice to leave previous schools and to enroll at Explorers Academy, their responses could reflect a desire to justify their earlier decision. These comparisons each used data from two survey items, which involved students answering parallel questions regarding their experiences at Explorers Academy and the school they previously attended.

Participant ratings favored Explorers Academy on all survey items that allowed for comparison between their experiences at Explorers Academy and previous schools. There was a significant difference between how much students reported caring about their school previous school (M=1.64) and Explorers Academy (M=4.14). There was also a significant difference between reported levels of engagement at their school previous school (M=2.36) and Explorers Academy (M=4.07). There was a significant difference between whether they felt they were an important part of the community at their previous school (M=1.79) and Explorers Academy (M=3.57). There was also significant difference between items asking students if they could select a high school again, they would go to their school previous school (M=1.43,) or Explorers Academy (M=4.36). Table 6 presents these findings.

Table 6

Means, standard deviations, and paired t-tests comparing students' previous and current school experiences

	School			
	..my last school	..Explorers Academy	*t*	*df*
I care about..	1.64	4.14	6.68***	13
	(0.84)	(0.77)		
I was engaged at..	2.36	4.07	3.81**	13
	(1.15)	(0.73)		
I was an important part of the community at..	1.79	3.57	4.88***	13
	(0.89)	(0.85)		
If I could select a high school again, I would go to..	1.43	4.36	8.64***	13
	(0.76)	(0.74)		

Note. **p<.01, ***p<.001. Standard deviations appear in parentheses below means. Responses used a 5-point Likert-type scale in which 1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, and 5=Strongly agree.

Students were also asked to rank how important 17 characteristics of school had been to their success in graduating from Explorers Academy. This list included 15 characteristics of school known to facilitate school completion and 2 characteristics central to the framework of Explorers Academy (participation in extended expeditions and trips during the school day). Responses used a 4-point Likert-type scale in which 1 indicated the characteristic was not at all important and 4 indicated that characteristic was essential to the student's success. Items were scored 0 if students indicated that item was not characteristic of their school, and therefore could not contribute to students' success. This score was assigned because if an item were deemed not characteristic of the school, it would not be perceived as contributing to positive outcomes. The following characteristics received the highest mean ratings: Flexibility in timeline to graduation (*M*=3.79), Autonomy and choice (*M*=3.71), Opportunities for active learning (*M*=3.50),

Strong relationships with teachers (*M*=3.50), Participation in extended expeditions (*M*=3.43), and Participation in trips during the school day (*M*=3.43). See Appendix B for the survey that includes descriptions of each characteristic that were provided to students and Table 7 for means, standard deviations, modal responses, and ranges for each characteristic.

Table 7

The perceived importance of various facilitators of school completion

	Mean	SD	Mode	Range
Flexibility in timeline to graduation	3.79	0.80	4	2-4
Autonomy and choice	3.71	0.43	4	2-4
Opportunities for active learning	3.50	0.76	4	2-4
Strong relationships with teachers	3.50	0.53	4	1-4
Participation in extended expeditions	3.43	0.83	4	2-4
Participation in trips during the school day	3.43	0.88	4	3-4
Sense of belonging	3.29	0.77	4	2-4
Staff availability	3.29	1.17	4	2-4
Fair discipline policies	3.21	1.03	4	3-4
High expectations	3.14	0.76	4	2-4*
School organization	3.14	0.76	4	2-4
Service learning	3.14	0.47	4	2-4
Relevant learning tasks	3.14	0.86	3	2-4
Small school size	3.14	0.73	3	2-4
Family school partnerships	3.00	0.85	2	1-4*
Positive peer culture	2.50	0.85	2	2-4
Participation in extracurricular activities	2.36	1.28	3	2-4

Notes. Responses used a 4-point Likert-type scale in which 1=Not at all important, 2=Somewhat important, 3=Very important, 4=Essential. Items were scored 0 if students indicated that item was not characteristics of their school. SD is the abbreviation for standard deviation. Ranges marked with an asterisk indicate that for these items, one student indicated that this characteristic did not apply to Explorers Academy.

Presentation of Themes

This section presents the structural and textural themes of successful students' experience of attending an experiential high school. Structural themes represent the settings and contexts associated with the phenomenon of succeeding at Explorers

Academy, and textural themes represent the various personal experiences associated with that phenomenon. Following descriptions of these themes, the interplay of structural and textural themes is explored, with emphasis on how certain textural themes tend to co-occur with specific structural themes.

Theme identification. In reviewing and analyzing the transcriptions of student interviews in order to identify the essential, shared themes of students' experience, initially a much longer list of themes was identified than will be defined here. In the first and second iterations of coding, I was most aware of the diversity of experiences students shared, and noted specific codes such as *Bonding on expeditions*.

However, in reviewing methodological guidelines for phenomenological inquiry, I noticed that many of these initial themes, in fact, included both structural and textural aspects of students' experience. In the third and fourth iterations of coding, rather than applying the extensive list of unique codes to the transcriptions, a more methodologically consistent approach was used. This required coding many sections of interview with two themes, one structural and one textural, in order to disaggregate these aspects of students' experience. This phase of analysis resulted in the identification of four structural themes (*Advising from teachers*, *Projects*, *Expeditions*, and *Close-knit community*) and four textural themes (*Connection with others*, *Appreciation of individuality*, *Learning as relevant/enjoyable*, and *Growth in response to challenge*).

While this system succeeded in delineating the structural and textural elements of students' experience, important nuances were lost, specifically regarding the progression of students' experience from enrollment at Explorers Academy to graduation. In the fifth and final iteration of coding, sections previously coded as *Growth in response to*

challenge were recoded using themes that highlight various aspects of this element of students' experience. Complete transcripts were reviewed again in order to code all instances of commentary related to the final set of themes.

An example may serve to illustrate this progression of iterative coding. The following quotation from Elizabeth was coded as *Teacher recognizes individual* in the initial round of coding:

> It's targeted towards you. It catered to your learning style, what you want to learn. The teachers care about you, um, if I wanted to know how to do my taxes I could sit down with a teacher and say 'Hey, how do I do this?' and they'd tell me! I could ask them anything I wanted to, or if I had a problem, school or personal, I'm free to ask. They're always there to talk, our teachers are always there.

In a later iteration of coding, this quotation was recoded with two themes that delineate the structural and textural aspects, respectively: *Advising from teachers* and *Appreciation of individuality.* See Table 8 for a list of themes that emerged during the first and second rounds of coding and how they correspond with themes identified in the final analysis.

In line with the objective of understanding students' *shared* experience, only themes that appeared consistently across *all* interviews were maintained in final iterations of coding. In other words, except where noted and explained, each theme was present in every interview. Along with frequency of mentions, the intensity of students' statements also influenced the identification of themes and the final model of how the themes relate to each other.

Table 8

Evolution of coding system used to identify shared aspects of students' experience of attending an experiential high school

Initial coding system		*Final coding system*		
Appreciation of individuality		*Textural themes*		*Structural themes*
Appreciation of peers	→	Appreciation of individuality	&	Close-knit community
No peer bullying	→	Appreciation of individuality	&	Close-knit community
Small school size	→			Close-knit community
Teacher encourages curiosity	→	Appreciation of individuality	&	Advising from teachers
Teacher recognizes individual	→	Appreciation of individuality	&	Advising from teachers
Welcoming peers	→	Appreciation of individuality	&	Close-knit community
Peers at other schools (-)	→	Dislike of previous school		
Small school size (-)	→	Dislike of previous school		
Meaningful learning experiences				
Active/hands-on learning	→	Learning as relevant/enjoyable	&	Expeditions; Projects
Adjustment period	→	Struggling to initiate		
Developing projects	→	Seizing learning opportunities	&	Projects
Individual support from teacher	→	Appreciation of individuality	&	Advising from teachers
Learning on expedition	→	Seizing learning opportunities	&	Expeditions
Personal growth	→	Recognizing need to be self-motivated; Seizing learning opportunities; Reflection on successes		
Pride in school	→	Reflection on successes		
Project-based learning	→			Projects
Pushing boundaries/comfort level	→	Struggling to initiate; Seizing learning opportunities	&	Expeditions; Projects
Real world relevance	→	Learning as relevant/enjoyable	&	Expeditions; Projects
Reflection on learning	→	Reflection on successes		
Self-discipline/motivation	→	Recognizing need to be self-motivated	&	Projects
Service learning	→			Projects; Expeditions
Relationships				
Advisor across years	→	Connecting with others	&	Advising from teachers
Bonding on expeditions	→	Connecting with others	&	Advising from teachers; Close-knit community
Collaboration with peers	→	Connecting with others	&	Close-knit community
Knowing the teacher as a person	→	Connecting with others	&	Advising from teachers
Relationship with director	→	Connecting with others	&	Close-knit community
Teacher as mentor/support	→	Connecting with others	&	Advising from teachers
Teacher as mentor/support (-)	→	Dislike of previous school		
Peers (-)	→	Dislike of previous school		

Note. Sections of interviews originally coded with themes from the first column generally were re-coded using corresponding themes in the second and third columns during final iterations of coding. A minus sign (-) indicates themes that were originally coded when students were negatively contrasting their experience at previous schools with their experience at Explorers Academy.

Within the next two sections, themes are presented in order from most to least frequently mentioned across interviews. See Table 9 for counts of each theme. The total number of occurrences of each theme is not necessarily indicative of its centrality to students' experience because the interview protocol led to some topics being queried more frequently and deeply than others. Furthermore, because the interview protocol included sections specifically probing expeditionary learning and project-based learning, lengthy sections of interview transcripts sometimes were coded only once because the topic did not vary from a specific theme. Textural themes tended to be mentioned more frequently but in shorter passages, whereas structural themes were coded less frequently but coded passages were often longer. The final iteration of coding accounted for frequency of mentions, but also the intensity of the statements, as became clear to me as I became increasingly familiar with the interview transcripts through multiple iterations of coding.

The distinction between structural and textural aspects of students' experience allows for a secondary level of analysis regarding the interplay of these elements. The reader may notice that many of the interview excerpts included in descriptions of structural themes could fit into textural themes, and vice versa. Following descriptions and examples of the structural and textural themes, an explanation of the interplay between these two types of themes will be provided.

Quotations are included in each theme description in order for the reader to better understand students' experience. Quotations were chosen based on their representativeness of a shared aspect of students' experience. In addition, quotations were

Table 9

Counts of overlapping instances between structural and textural themes

	Structural themes			
Textural themes	Projects (126)	Advising from teachers (103)	Expeditions (85)	Close-knit community (43)
Connecting with others (125)	13	43	64	25
Appreciation of individuality (81)	13	40	6	10
Learning as relevant/ enjoyable (114)	69	2	35	0
Choosing to enroll at Explorers Academy (19)	8	1	8	8
Struggling to initiate (30)	8	3	11	0
Recognizing need to be self-motivated (44)	12	10	7	0
Seizing learning opportunities (100)	48	7	36	0
Reflection on successes (55)	19	3	14	1

Note. Numbers in parentheses indicate the total instances of a theme.

selected that would make sense to the reader as stand-alone examples without a great deal of explanation or context beyond students' own words. Including quotations from all participants was also prioritized in order to give voice to all participants' experience

Structural themes. Structural themes describe the contexts and situations that students described as key aspects of their experience of being successful students at Explorers Academy. Four structural themes emerged from the data: *Projects, Advising from teachers, Expeditions,* and *Close-knit community.*

Projects. The interview protocol probed students regarding their experiences related to project-based learning, so it is no surprise that all students described their involvement in projects. However, many students mentioned the importance or centrality of projects and project-based learning prior to the interviewer querying this topic, and the descriptions indicated that completing projects is a core component of how students learn and progress towards graduation at Explorers Academy, both as part of their afternoon classes and independently during time in morning advisory. Elizabeth provided the following description of a project she completed during an afternoon class her senior year:

> In the wolf studies class I took we actually did an experiment with wolves. We weren't just 'Oh, here's some movies and worksheets. Stuff you can research.' It was 'Hey, let's go!' What I did was feed meat or put sage and mint separately into mystery meat and see if their reaction to it, if they were repelled by it or you could use that to keep them away from farm animals or crops, communities. We experimented with, um, actually two other endangered species of wolves that don't even belong in [this state]. Nowhere else would you be able to do that.

Erin provides her reflections on a project she completed individually:

> One project that I've completed was my music history project, which is the history of music because my passion is music. I love to learn about certain trends during music like society how that changed. So I feel like with that I've gained more knowledge in music...Music school is what I want to get into so you know, finishing that project was a good accomplishment…teachers here let you do your project. You're not assigned a project so if you're learning about something you

love or you do or you want to learn more about, it's easier to finish and accomplish that project because you like that project.

Advising from teachers. All students described their relationships with teachers as another important context of their experiences at Explorers Academy. Teachers provided students with academic guidance as well as mentorship, and many students credited teachers as playing a pivotal role in their high school success, such as Alice who talked extensively about the importance of her advisor:

> If you have that close relationship it encourages you to do better and then soon you're just on your own track and you just want to do better for yourself and then voila! You've graduated!

Students' often described relationships with teachers at Explorers Academy by noting how they were different from previous experiences, such as having the same teacher serve as their advisor across years, being on a first name basis with teachers, and knowing more about teachers' lives outside of school than they had elsewhere. Like several other students, Abigail described teachers at Explorers Academy by comparing them to experiences with teachers at other schools:

> Like, they talk about their children and they talk about things like that. With regular teachers [at other schools], they're like, 'teach the subject, wait for the next class, whatever,' so. I think it's really nice that they tell us about their personal lives. And then the first name connection is something that really, really helped me feel welcome here, like I felt like I was on the same level and that they were working with me and not just telling me to do my work. And they want to help me succeed.

Daisy expressed a common sentiment regarding teacher-student relationships being stronger than students had experienced previously:

> All the teachers, you're their friend pretty much. I mean, obviously they get respect and they throw down the laws and rules and everything because they're still teachers but it's a lot different than how it was at all my other schools growing up. It's like they actually seem to care on a personal level and actually remember the, like, certain things about you that makes you different from all the other people.

***Expeditions*.** Because expeditionary learning is another cornerstone of Explorers Academy's design, the interview protocol included questions regarding students' experiences related to participation in expeditions. However, students frequently mentioned expeditions as a central component of their schooling without prompting. Students described experiences related to expeditions throughout the state, cities and national parks in other states, and a recent trip to China. While several students discussed the same expeditions, their descriptions often focused on very different aspects of the trip, indicating that shared experiences often left very different impressions.

All but one student spoke favorably of expeditions, such as Judy, who described them this way: "Expeditions are awesome. 'Cause, like, every kid likes field trips, right? Expeditions are like field trips on crack." Em was the only student who did not appreciate the role of expeditions, as she felt they should not be required for students who felt too uncomfortable: "I really didn't get anything out of it. It was really unpleasant. So nothing really beneficial came out of it other then when I got to get the heck out of there."

Students reported that expeditions include structured reflection activities that typically occur at least daily and require students to share their reactions to different aspects of the trips with other participants. These activities provided opportunities to reflect on challenges, successes, and new insights that occurred while on expedition, and to learn more about how other participants' experience.

Close-knit community. All but one student described the close-knit community of Explorers Academy as an important aspect of their experience. Students reported that the diversity of the student body coupled with a shared history of negative experiences at previous schools created a community in which students felt comfortable and welcomed. Abigail described the school community as follows:

> I don't think we really have really cliques or anything here. It's so, there are so many different people, and it's so diverse and everything here…like I know for me I can bounce around all different types of people and feel OK and feel welcomed from them.

Frequently, descriptions of the community included contrasting statements that indicated that Explorers Academy felt safer than the environment at schools students had previously attended. Natalie explains: "This is a really good school to go to for those who faced bullying at their last school so that's one thing. So it's like a safe environment. "

Also included in this theme were statements regarding an awareness of the close ties that exist between teachers and students because of the structure and size of the school, specifically the opportunity to remain in the same small advisory across years with the same teacher and peers and to travel together on expeditions. This awareness was often coupled with a sense of pride in being a member of the school. Shae discusses

how shared experiences contribute to the a development of a close-knit community, and her resulting pride:

> It makes me really proud to be a student here because I'm able to experience things that no one else has. It makes me feel really part of a community that cares for each other and kind of looks out for each other when we go on [expeditions], so, like the community-like feeling I guess.

Natalie provides another example that contrasts the bonds that emerge through participation in experiential activities with her experiences at a traditional high school:

> Like, I don't know, like probably I approach a lot more people here than at [my previous school] and there's a lot less people here than [at that school, where] I would've known most of my classmates since kindergarten but it's a lot different to go out and do something that's like actually interactive with the small group of people than to just sit in rows with the same people for years and years.

Although this structural theme did not occur as frequently as the others, the nature of students' comments indicated that this was a central aspect of their experience, and was a primary reason that many students decided to enroll at Explorers Academy. David was the only student who did not mention the close-knit community in describing his experience at Explorers Academy. He transferred from another small charter school, so this aspect of his experience at Explorers Academy may not have stood out to him, or may not have been a salient factor in his experience.

Textural Themes. Textural themes are presented here in two subcategories that emerged from the interviews. The first set includes three overarching elements of what students experienced at Explorers Academy: *Connection with others, Learning as*

relevant/enjoyable, and *Appreciation of individuality.* The second set includes six themes that evolved from an early iteration of coding in which they were grouped together as *Growth in response to challenge*. These themes describe the progression of students' experience of finding success at Explorers Academy, and include:

1. *Dislike of previous school*
2. *Choosing to enroll at Explorers Academy*
3. *Struggling to initiate*
4. *Recognizing need to be self-motivated*
5. *Seizing learning opportunities*
6. *Reflection on successes*

Although these six themes overlap chronologically and were not experienced in a uniform pattern, they are presented in the order that generally emerged from analysis of interviews. Though the timing and duration of the events within this progression varied widely, successful students described similar situations and personal responses, beginning before enrollment and continuing through graduation. Following descriptions of these textural themes, the frequent overlaps of text coded with both textural and structural themes are explored in order to better understand which settings and contexts students associated most closely with various aspects of what they experienced at Explorers Academy.

Connection with others. Connecting with teachers and the school community was a central component of students' experience at Explorers Academy. Students spoke frequently about developing strong relationships with teachers, whom they viewed as individuals providing support and encouragement in dealing with challenges inside and

outside of school. They also spoke of connecting with peers, and that these relationships often emerged through collaboration on expeditions and projects. Some students also described feelings of connection to other community members that emerged through completing projects and service learning in the local community.

Alice shared a common sentiment regarding relationships with others in the Explorers Academy community: "People are closer, not a lot of people here so you can know everybody, like I pretty much knew everyone here. Like, it's just nice being in this school." Students often described the connections that emerged through structured reflection activities that occur each day during expeditions, such as Judy's experience:

> And then during the trip, like every day before we all went to bed, we would sit down and have a discussion about what we did that day and we'd all like respond to it and what we thought about it and what we were looking forward to and we have a response thing here called like your rose, your thorn, and your bud. So the rose is what you enjoyed, your thorn is like, "uh, that could have gone better!" and your bud is something that you're looking forward to. So we'd do that every night, and I feel like that enriched the experience. Cause you're finding out how other people responded in ways that you might not have even thought of and like learning more about your classmates and the people who you see every day, and that's like exciting.

Connections made outside of the classroom influenced how peers interacted back at school as well. Natalie provides an example:

> Expeditions are usually good ways to make friends here and learn more about each student. Sometimes you learn about their work ethic too. If you have to do a

> group assignment and you don't want to be with these people who don't do anything, that's a good way to sort of pick and choose!

These quotations from Judy and Natalie provide examples of many aspects of students' experience included both textural and structural elements (in these cases, *Expeditions* and *Connecting with others).* Such connections are explored further after all themes have been presented.

Learning as relevant/enjoyable. All students described experiences of feeling that their schoolwork was enjoyable and relevant to their interests and goals. Students appreciated having a sense of control over what they learned, including selecting topics, developing project plans, and determining how to present their findings in order to meet standards and earn credit. Students also described feeling that what they were learning about while at Explorers Academy was relevant to their educational or career ambitions. Kate's description highlights the flexibility students have in developing projects that interest them:

> I had to create a career portfolio that was within 10-20 pages and just explaining like my background, what I want to do for my future, a resume, references, recommendation letters and, um, a background of my next career choice so the next thing I'm doing is becoming a CNA [certified nursing assistant] and that was probably one of my favorite projects this year because I got to interview not only a CNA but also her mom. She was a pediatric nurse and that's like my ultimate goal to become a pediatric nurse. So that taught me everything about my career that I need to know and like, open my eyes to the true facts about it.

Specific Explorers Academy requirements were also experienced as particularly relevant. Judy provides an example:

> This school more prepares you for adult life and not just life as a student in a college.
>
> *(Interviewer: Can you give an example of that?)*
>
> Um, well like there's Career and Life Plan, which is an actual set of standards you need to look at to graduate. And that's all like learning about taxes and insurance and uh, those are things that I have other high school friends that are looking at now that they've graduated, and they're just like, "What is this? Why didn't I learn about this?"

Students seemed to appreciate opportunities to learn life skills that would be beneficial outside of school.

Appreciation of individuality. Students described feeling noticed and appreciated for their individuality. This appreciation most often came from teachers but also from peers. Often, mentions of this theme included statements contrasting their experience at Explorers Academy with experiences in schools attended previously. Students frequently described experiences of teachers helping them develop projects that matched their individual interests and learning styles. They also noted experiences of feeling like teachers and peers made an effort to get to know them as individuals, and that a culture of openness and welcoming existed instead of one in which bullying or exclusion pervaded.

The ability to progress at an individual pace also contributed to appreciation of individuality. Michael provides an example:

> It's like you're more comfortable with yourself and a place where you're at. Like when you go to a regular high school it's like it's hard because they have things that they want to do, you have to learn at their pace, and they don't, they don't wait for you, they just keep on going. And then it's hard because sometimes if you miss a day, you miss a lot of things. It just makes it hard for you. At regular schools you miss a day you're kind of killing yourself. While if you come here and you miss a day or two or like a week, you can work on it at home or just talk about it with your teachers and everything is set.

Some students were glad to feel accepted despite being a fifth year senior, and others were appreciative of the opportunity to earn college credit while still in high school or to graduate ahead of schedule. Judy explains:

> Cause like, I mean, I feel like there's a bit of a shame factor in high school where if you don't graduate on time…With the flexibility with the timeline [at Explorers Academy], it's like totally ok if you don't make it in time. It's always, like, the optimal for you to graduate on time because that way you can just keep on getting on with your life, but it's YOU getting on with YOUR life, instead of you need to get this done so you can get out of here, so you can go to college, it's just like, if you don't wanna go to college next year that's fine, if you need a little extra time that's fine.

Dislike of previous school. Students all chose to leave previous schools because of dissatisfaction with various elements of their education, including the size and nature of the school community, the methods for learning, and the advising and teaching they experienced. Within this theme, there were 26 coded instances that referred to the size

and nature of the school community as undesirable, 21 instances regarding disliking the structures for learning, and 19 instances related to negative sentiments about teachers and staffing arrangements.

Some students, like Shae, left previous schools because they felt like the schools could not meet unique needs:

> Well, for [my previous school] it was huge and I, like, always tried getting support but every time I did I was sent to someone else like some other person or whatever and, like, for my, just like, for my anxiety and all that I needed to have my own private space and like all these accommodations that they weren't able to do and that they told me they could try to do but it probably wouldn't happen and so I was like, 'Well, I can't be a student here then.'

Natalie was also frustrated with her previous school, but her reasons for leaving focused more on the general learning structures and lack of access to teachers:

> It felt very much like a conveyor belt. You just go to your class and then you go to your next class and you do the same thing as everyone in those classes and like there wasn't a lot of choice even when you did have choice, like electives…I didn't like the huge scale of the school. It wasn't very easy to really talk to any of the teachers or get help. I don't know, you just kinda got lost in the crowd.

The interview protocol probed for why students left previous schools, but students frequently returned without prompting to their dislike of previous schools throughout interviews.

Choosing to enroll at Explorers Academy. All students recounted clear memories of choosing to enroll at Explorers Academy. Unlike attending traditional public schools

where enrollment is typically passively decided based on residence, the decision to enroll at Explorers Academy is an active choice, and this decision contributed to the shared experience of Explorers Academy students. Students made decisions based on the influence of friends, parents, and research they had conducted themselves about different options. Many students listed a specific structural element of the school, such as its size, the focus on project-based learning, or the inclusion of expeditions. Others, like Em, decided to enroll after touring the school:

> *(Interviewer: On that tour what did you notice about the school that you liked?*
>
> Well, I liked that it wasn't so enormous because I feel if I'm in a big building I just get lost. Um, and I also liked the people seemed less high strung and strict. They seemed more laid back and understanding.

Struggling to initiate. The transition to the project- and expedition-focused learning structure of Explorers Academy involved experiences of discomfort and confusion. Students reported experiencing a period of initial difficulty in successfully designing and completing projects independently. Students' experience of this struggle varied widely in duration, with some students reporting that they caught on quickly and others recalling wasting years before succeeding in these areas. Kate recalled:

> And that's like the thing that you get at our school like everyone's like, 'You're capable of anything and it's up to you if you want to do it or not.' And I think even at that first hearing that definitely makes it a lot harder. Like, 'Oh, I don't have to do schoolwork while I'm here? Ok, I'll watch TV my first three years' and, like, that's exactly what I did too. I just watched TV, did a little bit of

schoolwork. Like this year's my actually only year I actually I buckled down and did a whole bunch of projects and did all my work.

Students also often struggled with their first overnight expedition. Alice recalls:

> It was hard at first. I remember my first year here they have a leadership class and they have a leadership expedition…and so a couple months into school at the end of October and I'm like, 'I don't really know these people. It's kind of weird and going overnight with them.' Like, I don't know. So it was definitely hard to step up my boundaries like that. I didn't know anybody, didn't have friends.

Recognizing need to be self-motivated. The students all recognized that succeeding at Explorers Academy required self-motivation. Students conveyed that they came to realize that unless they developed personal motivation to complete projects, it would be impossible to accrue sufficient credits to graduate. Judy explained what type of students is likely to do well:

> People who are able to, who are self-motivated. That's important, and who are able to focus on long-term goals, but within their long-term goals, they need to have short-term goals and they need to be able to, um, be thinkers. If you can sit down and think about a project and make it happen because you have the self-motivation to make that happen, and like people who are willing to think outside of the box.

Michael summed up succeeding at Explorers Academy succinctly: "The work you put in—that's the credit you earn."

Seizing learning opportunities. Once students began designing projects and participating in expeditions, they created and participated in diverse learning

opportunities. These opportunities were created during independent learning time in morning advisory and during afternoon classes, as well as while students were away from school on day trips and extended expeditions. Abigail describes how students eventually learn how to successfully earn credits through completing projects:

> Some people stay a year and don't really do much and then the next year they got in the swing of things and they caught up in credits. That's usually what happens. People really, really fall behind and if they stay long enough and have the drive then they'll obviously go farther and get their credit and it seems to be really rapidly when they get in the swing of things too.

Once Alice decided to do an independent project involving making a documentary about the aurora borealis, she eagerly engaged in opportunities to learn:

> And then I was really interested at that point about, like, the aurora borealis, I was following this thing on Twitter that tells you when it's coming and how strong it is. I went through the papers so much that I really like learned it. I knew it. I can tell you I'm an expert, tell you anything. And so, I was like watching for them and waiting for it to be the right level so we can see it and not drive up north and watch them and it was like really interesting. So, it motivated me to actually finish my project.

In regards to expeditions, Rachel described how learning opportunities emerge before students even leave campus:

> In preparation for the trip [to China] we did a couple of workshops to just figure out what we were gonna do and like the planning process so the first one was in the beginning of the year, I think it was in like November and we were setting up

> fundraising options that we can do, and the second one was in January, and that was more about figuring out the specifics of the trip, like how we're getting there, what we're taking, what we need to take and like money exchanges and like how much we're supposed to tip and that sort of thing, and like bring your own toilet paper.

Sometimes, one learning opportunity led to the development of another, as Daisy noted when asked how trips away from campus affect her learning: "I guess it also opens my mind up to different projects and stuff 'cause, like, you see things wherever you go and it sparks interest."

Reflection on successes. Students reported varying reflection on the personal growth and successes they achieved while enrolled at Explorers Academy. The general level of insight and ability to reflect on their experiences was a noteworthy characteristic of students, and this inclination to reflect on their experienced was described as an important aspect of their experience at Explorers Academy. Students described how frustrations they experienced upon enrollment yielded to a sense of self-efficacy and pride once they succeeded. Kate explains:

> It makes me, like, embrace my decisions a lot more, like look at every angle of them, like actually think through. Like I'm graduating now and I can't like mess around and that's pretty much what Explorers Academy has taught me. It's like you gotta start taking stuff serious at some point in life and high school definitely is the place to start.

Experiences of challenge and growth in high school seemed to contribute to a sense that students could continue to succeed when faced with challenges in the future.

Kate, for example, saw clear connections between her success in project-based learning and her belief that she could continue find success after graduation:

> It's definitely molded me and like showed me that only I can say what I'm going to do or not going to do…So it's kind of like it just makes you, it makes me, like, embrace my decisions a lot more. Like, look at every angle of them, like actually think through. Like, I'm graduating now and I can't, like, mess around and that's pretty much what Explorers Academy has taught me. It's, like, you gotta start taking stuff serious at some point in life and high school definitely is the place to start because once you're over eighteen any mess-up decisions—you can't take those back and a lot of them can get you in a lot of trouble that won't go away.

Interplay of Structural and Textural Themes

As noted previously, the majority of the text of interview transcriptions was coded twice in order to capture both structural and textural elements of students' experience. These overlaps provide information regarding the contexts (structural themes) in which different aspects of students' experience (textural themes) were more likely to occur. After coding was completed, the overlap in these themes was explored using QDA Miner 4 software, which allowed for the identification of all instances of overlap between specific textural and structural themes. Table 9 displays counts of the instances of overlap between each structural and textural theme. The textural theme *Dislike of previous schools* is omitted from this table because it did not overlap with any instances of structural themes (as would be expected, since these comments focused on students' experiences prior to enrolling at Explorers Academy).

As indicated in Table 9, textural themes varied in how likely they were to be mentioned in the context of each structural theme. Table 10 provides additional instances of quotations that overlap structural and textural aspects of students' experience. I selected quotations for inclusion in this table based on their representativeness of the shared aspect of students' experience and their clarity as stand-alone examples that do not require a great deal of explanation or context beyond the students' own words. I also prioritized including quotations from all participants.

Figure 1 illustrates this variability and shows that specific textural themes were more likely to be experienced in the context of certain structural themes. This visual depiction also aided in identifying the essential invariant structure of students' experience, since the frequent overlap of specific textural and structural elements captures an important aspect of students' experience.

Quotations used as examples in this section were chosen to illustrate aspects of students' experience that include both textural and structural themes, and also because they convey some of the intensity of emotion and thought students experienced in these instances. Students most frequently described experiences of *Connecting with Others* in the context of *Expeditions* and *Advising from teachers.* On expeditions, students mentioned the importance of connecting with peers, teachers, and other individuals they met in the community. In describing Explorers Academy, Bart noted, "I think the

Table 10

Sample quotations from student interviews that include overlapping structural and textural themes

	Structural themes			
Textural themes	Projects	Advising from teachers	Expeditions	Close-knit community
Connecting with others	I learned a lot about other people too because I've had to watch other people's "About Me" [projects] so it was pretty fun. -Ron	We don't have all that many teachers and I think if I were to go to any of them, they'd be able to help me with any type of project that I needed help with, because I'd just build that connection. -Abigail	Not all the time, but most of the time, students come back from expedition like, more open to each other. Like, that's not a thing that happens all the time by any means, but usually students come back and they know how to work with a person now. So like before they go on expedition, they're like, 'ok, you're annoying, I don't like you' but then you're like, 'I still don't like you, but I know how to tolerate you enough to do a project with you about the expedition. -Judy	I think the foundation of it is that there's a good connection between the students and teachers, and then from there it just becomes more community-based. -Bart
Appreciation of individuality	The thing about Explorers Academy too is like people are different, like, style learners. Like some people like to visualize it, some people like to do it hands on, or listen or watch it. And so you can choose. No matter what you are. You can find something that will work. -Erin	Well, since we have the longer advisory, I think that really, I mean I've had problems with stuff with it and wanted to switch but glad I didn't because during the four years she's the person that knows me best and knows how I learn and knows who I am as a person and I don't think a teacher at [my previous school] would really see who I am and just take into consideration the person that I am and how I need to learn and how I need to, the steps I need to be successful. -Abigail	And so the teachers like did a really good job of just meeting with everyone occasionally just to make sure that everything was ok and that everything was going smoothly and we weren't having any problems 'cause our teacher Val likes to do the rose, thorn and bud thing where the rose is like the good thing. And like the thorn is what is bad, and the bud is like what you hope to happen or get out of it. She did that a lot. -Daisy	Well, I liked that it wasn't so enormous because I feel if I'm in a big building I just get lost. Um, and I also liked the people seemed less high strung and strict [than at my last school]. They seemed more laid back and understanding. -Em

	Structural themes			
Textural themes	Projects	Advising from teachers	Expeditions	Close-knit community
Learning as relevant/ enjoyable	Designing projects is much more better because for example, if you go out into the work force they require you to have some skills and presentations and you know, knowledge of skills and to improve so with project based learning you get more hands on-work and you can take that into the workforce. That's what I like about this school. -Erin	The opportunities for active learning, I feel like they incorporate that into everything. Even when people are just doing boring slide shows the teachers are throwing out creative ideas of places you can go and you can talk to and, 'Oh! Maybe you can do an internship for this.' They're just full of these ideas. -Daisy	I got a lot out of just seeing it, like, 'cause you can read about the Great Wall but then you're actually there, you can read about culture, like with my [post-secondary enrollment option], I was taking Chinese language classes and the teacher would tell us about the culture and all this stuff and just being in China a week I would see those sort of things in action. -Natalie	n/a
Choosing to enroll at Explorers Academy	Project based learning. It was something new and it sounded interesting that I would rather do than just sit in a classroom and doing work...a friend told me he went here and, um, he told me that it was ah, the teachers were pretty cool and that, um, you worked at your own pace and how much work you put it, you got that much credit. -Michael	Well, I met with [my advisor] during the orientation, and he was really like into it and really helpful and trying to help me figure it out. He wasn't like 'it's awesome here! You should totally come here!' He was just like, 'you'll find out what's best for you. You're a student and an individual person, you'll find out what's best for you.' And that was the first time I'd heard that from a teacher. -Judy	Just 'cause she knew it was a cool school and we go on awesome trips here so, like canoeing trips and stuff. -Ron	It's a much smaller school [than my last]. I kind of looked it up. I didn't know it was project-based. I just knew it was smaller. Came here, learned about it. Next day I got my final grades from my teachers. Made the transcripts and later that day I signed the papers that I would start Monday. -Elizabeth

	Structural themes			
Textural themes	Projects	Advising from teachers	Expeditions	Close-knit community
Struggling to initiate	Probably just the fact that you have to design your own projects. That sometimes can be a little more difficult for me. I'm not very good at designing what I want to learn about. -David	If you do a crappy project a teacher's not going to let you do it. Like, if a teacher knows that you're not really wanting to do this project, they're not going to have you do it. Like, they expect you to do good work here. -David	I don't know any of [the other students on expedition], I don't know if I want to talk to them but then I'm like I'm with these people for a week so I can't ignore them for a whole week. So, I just, like, got to knowing them and it was just really cool. Like that was only awkward part was just in the beginning like I'm along for the ride. -Kate	n/a
Recognizing need to be self-motivated	You motivate yourself and teach yourself about what you want to learn, which is personally my favorite part. -Alice	It's unique, definitely, because even though there is that amount of structure that happens with afternoon classes and the way that the day is set up, there's still an enormous amount of opportunity for an individual to take charge of their learning. And at this school it is impossible to graduate without doing your own share of independent learning and like, the teachers are so on board to help out with that. -Rachel	I think being away from something you're comfortable, and being away, like I was away for 5 or 6 nights for Denver, and I think being away from what I'm used to really gave me a new perspective. -Abigail	n/a

	Structural themes			
Textural themes	Projects	Advising from teachers	Expeditions	Close-knit community
Seizing learning opportunities	Even just leaving school for a day is actually really awesome. Like I'm still going out and I'm learning stuff and I'm doing hands-on and I'm like, yeah, I have to come back here and it's not overnight. That's not a big deal to me though because the next day I can go around and tell people, 'this is what I did yesterday. While you guys were in class I went out and like, picked potatoes or something.' -Kate	Like, I don't know, you can get away with doing a regular PowerPoint with basic facts but the teachers also push you to try and do those alternative goals. -Natalie	I was really excited about the expeditions and really kind of nervous at first, but overall when I took my first expedition I got into the swing of things it was really, it was really a good experience for me and I didn't know that you could learn so much from just being in the outside world. -Abigail	n/a
Reflection on successes	I also realized it's so easy to contact someone in the community. I never thought I would do that ever. And then looking back on it I was like, 'why hadn't I done that for lots of things?' The project taught me a lot not just about the disorder but also about researching what to look for in a site. What to work on, not just using Google, using other things, using books, but not a lot of people use books these days! -Elizabeth	But here, I'm like I can't wait to [graduate] because I know that when I walk I'm going to miss my teachers. I'll probably end up crying but it's not crying because I'm happy to leave but I'm crying because I'm happy to leave, but I'll miss these opportunities and these people who actually helped me through what is already a difficult period in your life. -Elizabeth	You learn to be more self-aware of yourself. -Judy	It makes me really proud to be a student here because I'm able to experience things that no one else has. It makes me feel really part of a community that cares for each other and kind of looks out for each other when we go on them, so like, the community-like feeling I guess. -Shae

Note. Quotations were selected that would make sense to the reader as stand-alone examples without a great deal of explanation or context beyond the students' own words. Quotations from all participants were included in order to give voice to all participants' experience.

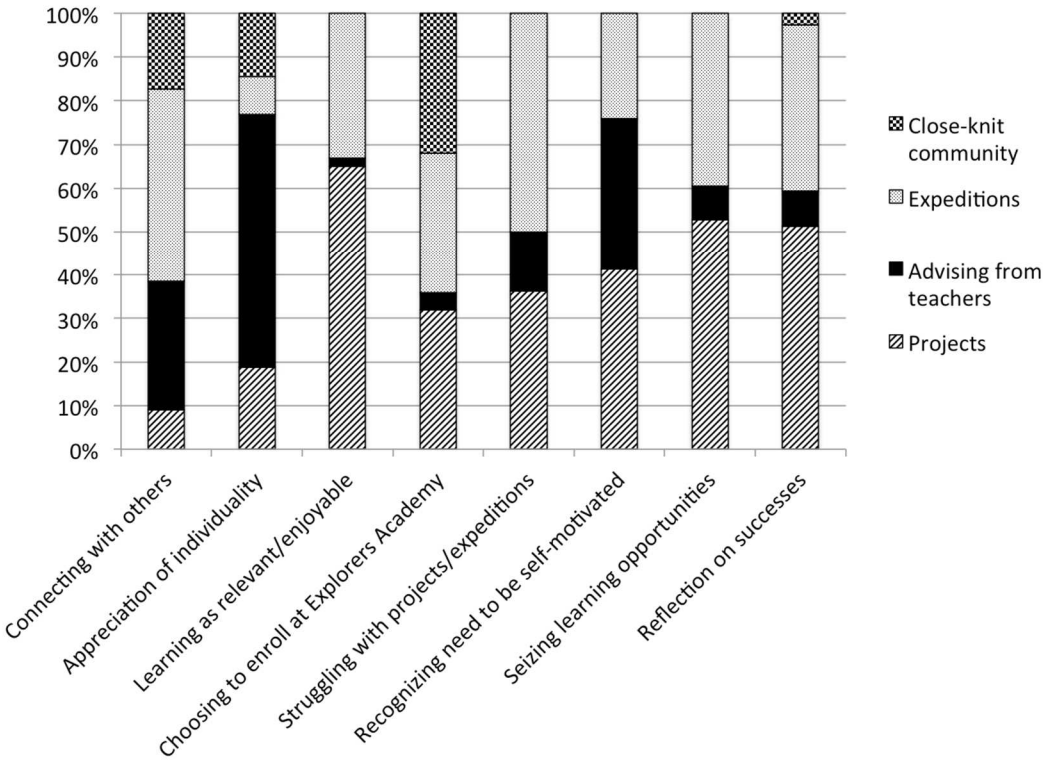

Figure 1. Percentages of overlaps between specific textural and structural themes. Percentages were calculated using total number of overlaps per textural theme as the denominator

foundation of it is that there's a good connection between the students and teachers, and then from there it just becomes more community based."

Appreciation of individuality was mentioned most frequently with experiences of *Advising from teachers.* For Judy, this aspect of her experience began before she even enrolled at Explorers Academy:

> Well, I met with [my advisor] during the orientation, and he was really like into it and really helpful and trying to help me figure it out. He wasn't like 'It's awesome here! You should totally come here!' He was just like, 'You'll find out what's best

> for you. You're a student and an individual person, you'll find out what's best for you.' And that was the first time I'd heard that from a teacher.

A few students credited the individual support and guidance they received from their teacher as a main reason for their success.

Experiencing *Learning as relevant/enjoyable* occurred most frequently with *Projects* and *Expeditions*. Erin's description of a project provides an example:

> One project that I've completed was my music history project, which is the history of music because my passion is music. I love to learn about certain trends during music like society how that changed. So I feel like with that I've gained more knowledge in music. And, I could take it into college because I want to go to music school.

Shae's experience learning about wolves provides another illustration of this overlap:

> I was a part of the Year of Wolf with Peter so that was huge in my learning experience because it really made me interested in, like, biology and so a lot of the things I want to go to college for now and like going on the trips to Yellowstone. We got to meet with the, like, guy who started the, like, re-introduction of the wolves and we met with a lot of like biologists that are really important in the field and that was like something you don't get to experience anywhere else. So that was great!

The textural themes that fall into the progression from *Dislike of previous schools* to *Reflection on successes* also tended to overlap with specific structural themes. Examples of these overlaps are provided in Table 10. Statements regarding *Choosing to*

enroll at Explorers Academy overlapped with instances of *Close-knit community, Projects, and Expeditions* with equal frequency. *Struggling to initiate* occurred most frequently in the structures of *Projects* and *Expeditions.* Students frequently experienced *Recognizing the need to be self-motivated* in conjunction with *Expeditions, Projects,* and *Advising from teachers.* Descriptions of *Seizing learning opportunities* occurred most frequently when talking about projects and expeditions. *Reflection on successes* also occurred most frequently in relation to *Projects* and *Expeditions.* The implications of these overlaps will be discussed further in the discussion section of this paper.

Negative Aspects of the Experience. There were not enough statements regarding any negative aspects of attending Explorers Academy to include as shared themes of students' experience. However, students made a total of 15 comments regarding negative aspects of their experience (not including comments that focused on difficulties students faced completing projects and expeditions, that were coded as *Struggling to initiate).* These comments included complaints about other students (coming to Explorers Academy as a 'last resort' option, causing trouble on expeditions), teacher's availability (being too busy with multiple responsibilities, having to put too much time into students who take longer to catch on, inconsistency with rule enforcement and creating team building and service learning opportunities), expeditions (being disorganized, interfering with other school responsibilities), and the structure of learning making it difficult to transfer away because of credit issues

Summary of the Essential Invariant Structure

According to graduating students, the structures of an experiential high school—

notably projects, expeditions, advising, and a close-knit community—created a school experience of meaningful academic learning and strong relationships that made them feel valued as individuals. Successful students' descriptions of what they experienced included experiences of connection with others, learning as relevant and meaningful, and appreciation of individuality. These themes occurred during a progression that began when students recognized they wanted to leave previous schools and ended when students reflected back on their successes as they approached graduation. The structural components of the school—projects, expeditions, advising, and a close-knit community—created opportunities for those textural aspects of students' experience to occur. Projects and expeditions provided the context for relevant and meaningful learning experiences and also created opportunities for relationships to emerge and strengthen. Students associated their feelings of being accepted, challenged, and supported with the format of the school, including membership in a close-knit community and the centrality of the advisory relationship.

By aggregating students' individual descriptions of their own pathway through school, a typical progression is evident. Though the timing and duration of the events within this progression varied widely, successful students described similar situations and personal responses, beginning before enrollment. Typically, successful students at Explorers Academy began by feeling unhappy at a previous school and seeking a change. They enrolled at Explorers Academy with a limited understanding of what success would require. After enrolling, they discovered that teachers would offer significantly more acceptance and support than they had experienced in previous schools, but significantly

fewer rules and deadlines. Some immediately recognized and responded to the need for self-motivation, while other resisted these demands or took advantage of their freedom by not completing projects. All successful students at Explorers Academy ultimately responded to open-ended projects by enlisting the help of their teachers, taking the initiative to complete projects, and developing some sense of self-efficacy and excitement about learning. This progression through Explorers Academy involved cognitive and affective experiences of success and a greater sense of connection to others in the school community, as well as to the academic content being learned.

Figure 2 complements this description of the essential invariant structure to depict the relationship between textural and structural themes. The three textural themes depicted in large circles at the top of the figure are central to students' experience and emerge from their participation in the four structures listed in the rectangles. Arrows identify which textural themes were related to most strongly to the contexts of the different structural themes. At the bottom of the figure, the textural themes listed in small circles within arrows depict what students experience as they progress towards graduation. The structural themes are ordered to best align vertically with their centrality to each of the textural themes in the progression.

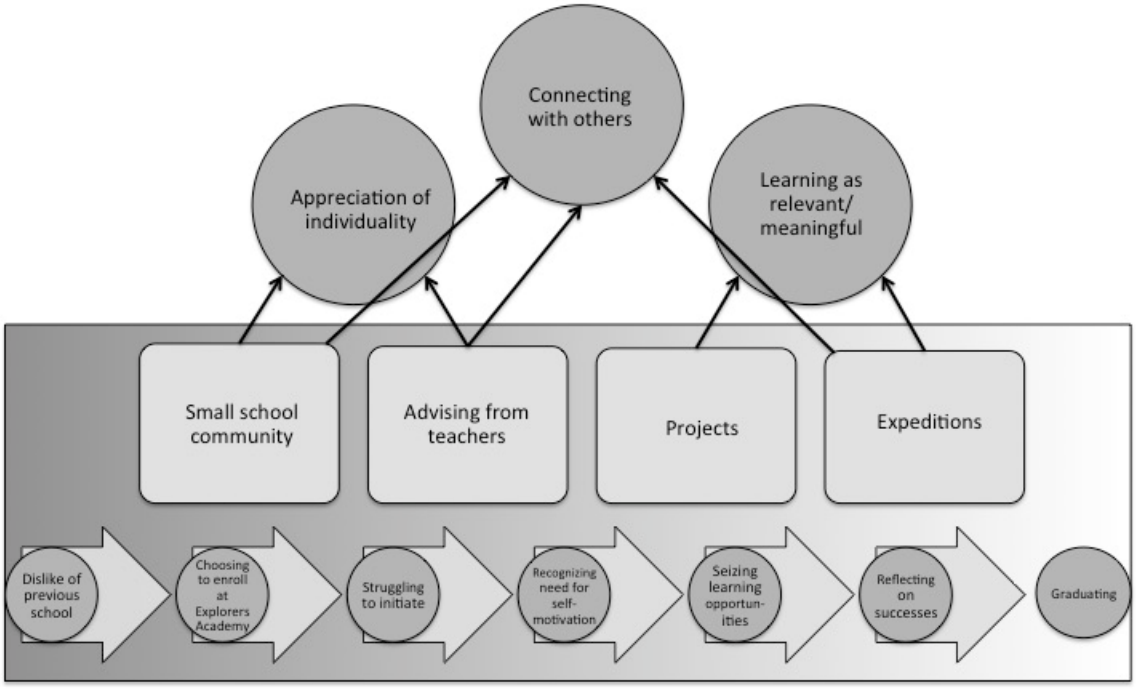

Figure 2. The relationship of structural and textural aspects of successful students' experience at an experiential high school. This figure is based on the experience of students who were previously disengaged before finding success at Explorers Academy. Textural themes depicted in large circles at the top emerge from their participation in the four structures listed in the rectangles. Arrows identify which textural themes occurred most frequently in the context of the different structural themes. Textural themes listed in small circles within arrows show the progression of students' experience as they approach graduation.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Compared to previous high schools they attended, successful students at Explorers Academy cared more about their school, were more engaged in learning, and identified more strongly as important members of the school community. When provided with a list of determinants known to facilitate school completion, students indicated that many of these variables were present at their high school and played an important role in their success. While the data underlying these conclusions came from surveying a biased sample consisting entirely of previously disengaged students who chose to enroll at Explorers Academy and to stay there until they graduated, these findings indicate that for this group of successful students, the experiential high school provided structures that were very different and more desirable to them than what they had found at the schools they chose to leave.

The essence of successful students' shared experience of attending Explorers Academy consists of cognitive and emotional responses to participation in unique school structures. Explorers Academy created the structures in which learning occurred for this group, including maintaining a close-knit community, creating a personal relationship with a single advisor/teacher that is maintained throughout enrollment, and requiring participation in projects and expeditions in order to earn credits and graduate. The students in this sample consistently described a small number of similar cognitive and emotional responses to these structures as being most significant to their success at Explorers Academy: successful students felt connected to their teachers and the school community, appreciated as individuals, and that learning was relevant and enjoyable.

These experiences occurred as part of a shared progression that began when students realized that they wanted to leave prior schools, continued as students struggled and later found success with projects and expeditions, and ended when students graduated from Explorers Academy.

The abundant overlaps of text coded with both structural and textural themes suggests that the emotional and cognitive components of what these students experienced were intertwined with the organized aspects of the school's framework for learning. In describing their experiences at Explorers Academy, students generally emphasized their reactions to specific aspects of the school over the specific content of what was learned or specific locations where learning took place. Frequently embedded in these descriptions of their experience were comments regarding how different these experiences were compared to what they had experienced previously or what their friends experienced at other schools.

These findings refer to the experience of a sample of successful students at a single experiential high school. Students who did not find success at Explorers Academy likely would report very different experiences, and students at other experiential schools may also have little in common with the sample at this school. Contextual information about the students, school, and research process were provided to assist the reader with gauging the transferability of these findings to other populations and settings.

Reflections on the Role of Self as Researcher

Prior to commencing data collection, I bracketed out how my own experiences, personal beliefs, and values related to experiential education could influence my

interpretation of the data. After completing analysis and interpretation, I undertook a second reflection on how the process and outcomes compared to my expectations. This provides a final opportunity to increase transparency for the reader regarding the role of the self as researcher.

Structural themes. All four structural themes that emerged from the data were included in the list of what I expected could emerge from the data. These frameworks for learning—projects, expeditions, the Close-knit community, and advising from teachers—are all central to the design of Explorers Academy, and are apparent from even a cursory review of the school's website. Other structures I thought might be salient contexts of students' experience (outdoor environments, group work, intentional group development activities, and community settings) were not mentioned as important elements of students' shared experience.

I was most surprised at how infrequently students spoke of the outdoor environment as an important context of their experience. These students did not come to Explorers Academy seeking wilderness experiences. Rather, students were primarily seeking to get away from characteristics that they disliked about their previous schools. The most frequent motivator was to find a school where students would no longer feel lost in the crowd. Interestingly, only one student reported enrolling at Explorers Academy primarily because of a previous interest in expeditions away from school.

Textural themes. Students' sense that the work they completed was relevant and enjoyable as well as the importance of feeling connected to others aligned with textural elements I thought might emerge from this study. I predicted that students would

experience feeling a sense of control over learning and personal growth over time as significant aspects of their experience at Explorers Academy. These two elements appear somewhat in the progression that students experienced, especially as they began seizing learning opportunities and reflecting back on their successes. I did not predict the sequence of struggling to initiate and recognizing the need for self-motivation that would precede these aspects of their experience.

Other reflections. During interviews, I was surprised by students' eagerness to reflect on their experiences at Explorers Academy and the level of insight they brought to their experiences. When I mentioned this to the director of the school, he commented that reflecting on experiences is engrained in these students because they are required to do so either informally or formally after each project or expedition. I was also surprised at how much pride these students felt regarding their school and the unique opportunities it afforded them.

These students typically embarked on their first expeditions with more skepticism than enthusiasm, but grew to experience deep appreciation for the opportunities available to travel away from the school campus and to develop projects that furthered their interests. All but one student communicated enthusiasm in reflecting back on participating in expeditions. However, only a handful of comments were made regarding such expeditions making students want to participate in similar experiences in the future. Instead, expeditions primarily served as catalysts for students to form closer relationships with advisors and peers at Explorers Academy, and to make learning topics more relevant and enjoyable.

Finally, I expected students who had succeeded at Explorers Academy to have clearer plans for the future than was the case for many of these students. The interview protocol specifically queried students regarding their plans for the future, and many students provided vague comments about wanting to go to college at some point. However, only a handful of them had applied and been accepted to schools to start in fall of 2014. Several students commented on wanting to continue working in their current jobs in order to save money and be sure that they were making a good choice about college so that they did not take on unnecessary debt. It would have been interesting to probe further regarding whether students were planning for the future or simply responding to short term needs.

Experiential Education at Explorers Academy

In order to determine how closely students' experience aligned with the generally accepted four-step framework for experiential education, the interview protocol included sections in which students were asked to describe a specific project and an expedition in relation to each of the four steps (Kolb & Fry, 1975; Miller, Tung, & Ward, 2008):

1. Participation in concrete experiences
2. Observation and reflection on the experiences
3. Formation of concepts and generalizations based on experiences
4. Application of new understandings to other situations

In general, students had no trouble relating their experiences to the first two steps. However, they struggled to articulate how their experiences fulfilled the third and fourth steps. Many students asked that the questions on steps 3 and 4 be reworded, such as

Daisy, who, when asked to explain whether her project on the rights of indigenous peoples involved any formation of concepts and generalizations, said "Is there anyway to dumb that down a little?" These sections of the interview protocol may have benefited from additional piloting before data collection commenced.

It should be noted that in other sections of the interviews, students frequently asserted that what they learned at Explorers Academy prepared them well for future challenges and endeavors. Both the relevance of what was learned (for instance, developing a portfolio related to how to become a nurse), as well as the processes of learning (for instance, reaching out to community members) were frequently cited as useful attributes of their education.

Students may have struggled to recognize steps 3 and 4 in their experiences because of the challenging terminology and because these concepts may be more apparent to program designers and leaders than to participants themselves. In this particular study, students were still in high school at the time of the interview and may not yet have had opportunities to generalize what they had learned or apply new knowledge and skills to future life experiences. It is possible that the last two steps of the experiential education framework will be more salient to these students in the future. Follow-up interviews several years after graduation could offer more clarity on whether Explorers Academy is failing to achieve these steps in the experiential process or whether students simply were not overtly aware of these effects while still in high school.

A similar pattern emerges when comparing textural themes to the four-step framework, with strong alignment to the first two steps but weaker alignment with steps 3

and 4. Six textural themes fit into a general progression that students experienced prior to reaching graduation: *Dislike of Previous School*, *Choosing to Enroll at Explorers Academy*, *Struggling to Initiate*, *Recognizing the Need for Self-Motivation*, *Seizing Learning Opportunities*, and *Reflecting on Successes*. The last two themes in this sequence resemble the first two steps of the experiential education framework. Text coded as *Seizing Learning Opportunities* included many descriptions related to engagement in concrete experiences, and instances of *Reflecting on Successes* often included statements of observation and reflection on those experiences.

There was strong alignment between the structural themes identified in this study and the typical structures of experiential education courses. Of the four structures of Explorers Academy that emerged as themes in student interviews, three—projects, expeditions, and a close-knit community—are intrinsic to experiential education as indicated by studies described in the literature review. The fourth—advising from teachers—is described by Explorers Academy students in terms that echo the literature on relationships to leaders in a broad number of experiential education contexts.

In summary, the results of this study suggest that Explorers Academy aligns at least moderately with the broader pedagogy of experiential education. The study confirms that successful students consciously experience two of the four steps in the experiential learning process, and may experience all four. The interviews also suggest that Explorers Academy has successfully translated the core structures of experiential education into an academic setting. Given the significant number of textural themes that did not align with recognized experiential education pedagogy, it bears asking whether Explorers Academy

leaders consciously made efforts to achieve goals beyond the traditional scope of experiential education, or whether they would benefit from refocusing their programming to achieve a smaller number of coherently linked goals.

School Completion at Explorers Academy

The NRC's recommendations for increasing motivation to learn and school completion summarize what schools should strive to offer in order to engage disengaged learners in urban schools (2004; see Table 4). The experience of successful students at Explorers Academy suggests that this school is addressing six of their ten recommendations. The NRC's recommendation that courses and instructional methods be redesigned to increase engagement in learning is evident in students' description of finding projects and expeditions relevant and enjoyable. Explorers Academy is designed very differently than traditional schools, and interview and survey data suggest that students' experience increased engagement in learning in comparison to the more traditional schools they attended previously. The NRC recommends that schools provide supports and resources so that all students can meet challenging standards; Explorers Academy students described the consistent support and opportunities provided to them by teachers. Students at Explorers Academy do not take tests, but the portfolios and projects they create allowed teachers to assess high-level cognitive skills, as recommended by the NRC.

The close-knit community of Explorers Academy was an important contextual factor of students' experience, as was the consistency of having an ongoing relationship with an advisor across years. These characteristics align with the NRC's recommendation

to restructure schools into smaller learning communities that allow for personalized and continuous relationships between teachers and students. In addition, the project-based approach at Explorers Academy meant that students were not tracked by ability. Instead, students designed their own projects and recognized that teachers expected them to produce high quality work. Finally, rather than having guidance and counseling responsibilities assigned to a specific staff member, students experienced being advised and mentored by their teachers and the director of Explorers Academy.

Engagement in learning requires turning motivation into action. In Yazzie-Mintz's (2007) survey of a large national sample of high school students, 72% of students reported that they were engaged in learning. Using the same survey item as Yazzie-Mintz to get a crude sense of students' perceptions of whether they were engaged at Explorers Academy, 78% answered affirmatively. Only 14% of students answered affirmatively when asked to reflect back on their engagement levels at schools they attended prior to Explorers Academy. In their progression towards graduation, successful students at Explorers Academy came to realize that success required self-motivation and subsequently seized different opportunities to learn and earn credit through completion of projects and participation in expeditions. The freedom to design their own projects coupled with opportunities to participate in unique experiences through overnight expeditions and day trips away from school seemed to encourage students to embrace challenge, and doing so resulted in experiences of personal growth.

Feeling connected to others in the school community was central to the experience of successful students at Explorers Academy. The structures at Explorers

Academy seemed to create abundant opportunities for students to get to know and trust teachers and other members of the school community, and to be recognized as individuals by other members of the school community. Relationships with teachers were particularly important. Several students noted that the strong relationship they developed with the teacher who served as their advisor across multiple years was the primary reason that they graduated.

Implications for Practice and Research

The results of this study summarize the experience of disengaged students who found success at an experiential high school. This section includes statements that are more speculative in nature regarding the implications of these findings for practice and research. While these ideas are supported by the current findings, the reader is encouraged to use the data made available throughout this paper to make his or her own judgments regarding these speculations, the transferability of this study's results to other settings, and the utility and direction of additional research.

This study has specific findings that Explorers Academy may want to consider in regards to how it operates. As indicated by their low 4-year graduation rate, many students at this school are not succeeding, or at best, they are taking longer than usual to complete high school. A better understanding of the practices that graduating students credited for their success may help the school prioritize interventions that will be most impactful for struggling students. The progression that students experience from enrollment through school completion also provides useful information to the school. Explorers Academy may better serve students by identifying ways to increase supports

when they first enroll in order to abbreviate the period in which students seem to flounder. Such efforts could result in increased efficiency as students progress towards graduation, and perhaps more students finding success if this period of struggle results in some students dropping out or transferring elsewhere.

More broadly, this study contributes to the extant theory on experiential education (which is most frequently employed in non-school environments) by providing insight into how these processes can be experienced in school settings. In addition, this study contributes to the research literature on determinants that facilitate school completion (in which studies are primarily conducted in regular public schools) by delving into the experience of students who were previously disengaged but found success in a unique environment in which experiential education was employed as a whole school approach.

Findings from this study suggest that implementing experiential education as a whole school approach may better meet the needs of some students who choose to leave traditional schools. Students who were able to move from disengagement at a previous school to success at Explorers Academy felt connected, appreciated as individuals, and that learning was enjoyable and relevant because of their involvement in projects, expeditions, and advising. This happened over the course of a shared progression of experiences over time.

More research is needed to determine whether traditional high schools should consider incorporating some experiential methods into their approach. It is unclear whether the inclusion of isolated experiential structures in a traditional school environment (i.e., participation in a single expedition each year) has meaningful impact

on specific textural aspects of students' experience (i.e., feeling connected to others). Prior research suggests that 'one shot' efforts are of limited utility, but perhaps there exists an effective middle ground between such applications and whole school implementation of an experiential framework. The findings of this study suggest that the various structural and textural elements of students' experience combine in such a way that the sum may be greater than the parts when it comes to implementing experiential education in school. For example, expeditions seemed to contribute to a sense of connectedness, but so did the structures of advising by teachers and the close-knit community. It is not yet clear whether experiential practices can be effectively integrated into traditional school settings, or if their usefulness lies exclusively in schools that can implement them as a whole school approach in which multiple elements may complement and reinforce one another.

Phenomenological research provides the reader with a thorough investigation of the experience of a specific group of individuals. Among schools that could be described as 'experiential,' there is a great deal of variability, so the findings of this study may not be representative of successful students' experiences elsewhere. Still, understanding the essence of successful students' experience at Explorers Academy may help schools and researchers better understand some of the challenges and successes that are possible within an experiential framework.

Limitations of Findings and Future Research Directions

Four significant limitations of this study suggest important areas for future research. First, after interviews were transcribed and analyzed, I did not return to the

school to conduct "member checking," in which participants would have the opportunity to provide feedback regarding whether they felt that the essential invariant structure that I identified was congruent with their experience. Such feedback would have provided useful information regarding the accuracy of my conclusions. However, because this study was conducted immediately prior to students' graduation, member checking was not feasible since I no longer had access to students by the time the data was analyzed.

A second limitation relates to the inclusion criteria for participants in this study. As mentioned, the focus on students who have successfully graduated, paired with Explorers Academy's low four-year graduation rates, means that the experience of the majority of Explorers Academy students has not been explored. A similar study focused on the experience of unsuccessful students would be valuable. The "growth in response to challenge" progression that so many successful students identified begs the obvious question, "What happens to students who cannot grow enough to meet the challenges imposed by Explorers Academy's unique approach?" More research is needed to determine what types of students are most likely to find success at an experiential school, as well as what experiential schools can do to engage a broader population of students.

A third limitation of the study relates to its qualitative approach. The results of this study provide a description of how experiential education was experienced by students who found success at an experiential high school, but they do not provide direct evidence that this school allowed students to find greater success than they would have in more traditional settings. A quantitative study, ideally using a matched comparison group, would allow an apples-to-apples comparison of outcomes for students at

Glenbrook High School, the region's major high school, and those at Explorers Academy. This could include a survey administered to students at both schools based on the textural experiences of successful students at Explorers Academy to see whether successful students at Glenbrook High School have similar experiences, and whether struggling students at either school are having these experiences. This could lead to better understanding regarding whether Explorers Academy is helping students who struggle at traditional schools over-achieve what they could expect if they stayed in their original environment or under-achieve. This would be particularly important for school district leaders interested in establishing a similar school as an alternative to increase school completion in their districts. A quantitative study would also offer greater understanding about what characteristics make students more or less likely to succeed or fail in the Explorers Academy model.

A fourth limitation in this study—the focus on a single school—would also be important to policymakers. Future research looking at more students at similar schools would demonstrate whether these results are unique to Explorers Academy or whether they are common at experiential schools. It would also be helpful to see whether the same structures are cited by students as being most important and how faithfully the Explorers Academy model needs to be replicated.

Conclusion

After reviewing the data on graduation and dropout rates in the introduction to this paper, I posed two questions:

Do a fifth of all students simply lack some characteristic necessary to persevere

and graduate on schedule? Or are standard approaches to education consistently deficient in making graduation attainable and worthwhile for a large number of students?

For students at Explorers Academy, it seems that the answer to both of these questions may be a qualified yes. Findings from this study suggest that characteristics such as being self-motivated are attributes that many of these students do not have when they begin high school. Fortunately, this study also shows that there are interventions and strategies that can help disengaged students who were at risk of dropout develop such characteristics while in high school and find success.

Much is asked of schools. Not only are they required to provide access to the academic content mandated by state and federal requirements, they also must find ways to engage students in learning and provide opportunities for them to feel connected to others. While traditional schools do this adequately for most students, for one in five—an unacceptably high number—this is not enough. A singular focus on academic achievement often fails to equip these students with the sense of engagement of connectedness they need to persevere in school, and evaluation based solely on generalized academic standards may lead these students to feel overlooked as individuals, disengaged as learners, and unsuccessful as students. This study indicates that for some of these students, an experiential school provided them with opportunities to connect with others, be recognized as individuals, experience learning as relevant and meaningful, and successfully complete school.

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Appendix A

INFORMATION SHEET FOR RESEARCH

Determinants of school completion: Student perceptions of success at an experiential learning high school

You are invited to be in a research study of what it's like to be a student at [redacted] and how experiential learning strategies contributed to your high school success. You were selected as a possible participant because you are graduating from [redacted] during the 2013-2014 school year. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Elizabeth Hagen, Department of Educational Psychology, University of Minnesota

Procedures:
If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:
Complete an online survey about what aspects of [redacted] have been most important to you. This should take about 15 minutes.

Complete a one-on-one interview with Elizabeth Hagen. This interview will focus on why you chose to be a student at [redacted] and your experiences completing projects and expeditions. This interview will take about one hour. An audio recording will be made of the interview.

Confidentiality:
The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. The audio recordings will only be available to the researcher, and your name will not be included in the file. These audio files will be destroyed when the study is completed (within two years).

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota or [redacted] If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:
The researcher conducting this study is: Elizabeth Hagen . You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at (218) 213-8282 or hage0418@umn.edu. Hagen is under the supervision of her advisor, Sandra Christenson, who can be contacted at (612) 624-0037 or chris002@umn.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Appendix B

[redacted] School Completion Survey

* Required

Name *
First and last (your answers will remain anonymous--this is only to link your answers in this survey to the interview you will complete later)

What year did you enroll at [redacted]? *
example: 2012

What grade were you in when you started at [redacted]? *
- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior

When do you expect to graduate or when did you graduate? *
mm/yyyy

HOW IMPORTANT has each factor has been to your success in graduating from [redacted]? *
Choose N/A (Not Applicable) if a factor is not at all characteristic of your school

	Not at all important	Somewhat important	Very important	Essential	N/A (This does not describe what it's like at my school)
OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTIVE LEARNING: Designing projects, conducting experiments, participating in trips outside of school	○	○	○	○	○
RELEVANT LEARNING TASKS: Your school work is relevant to your life outside of school and future goals.	○	○	○	○	○

STRONG RELATIONSHIPS WITH TEACHERS: At least one teacher supports your learning and knows you as more than just a student	○	○	○	○	○
HIGH EXPECTATIONS: Teachers expect you to achieve challenging goals, offer you support, and provide you with constructive feedback	○	○	○	○	○
FAIR DISCIPLINE POLICIES: Your school's discipline policies make sense and don't make it more difficult to succeed	○	○	○	○	○
FLEXIBILITY IN TIMELINE TO GRADUATION: Even if you got behind in credits, the school would support you and help you develop a plan to graduate	○	○	○	○	○

HOW IMPORTANT has each characteristic been to your success in graduating from [redacted]? *

Choose N/A (Not Applicable) if a factor is not at all characteristic of your school

	Not at all important	Somewhat important	Very important	Essential	N/A (This does not describe what it's like at my school)
POSITVE PEER CULTURE: Students encourage each other to complete school work and support each others' academic goals	○	○	○	○	○

SMALL SCHOOL SIZE: Being a part of a small learning community	○	○	○	○	○
AUTONOMY AND CHOICE: You have opportunities to choose what you learn about and how you learn it	○	○	○	○	○
SCHOOL ORGANIZATION: Having the same teachers across multiple years and only a few classes each day	○	○	○	○	○
SENSE OF BELONGING: There is a sense of community among students and teachers	○	○	○	○	○
FAMILY SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS: The school creates opportunities for parent input and involvement	○	○	○	○	○

HOW IMPORTANT has each characteristic been to your success in graduating from [redacted]? *

Choose N/A (Not Applicable) if a factor is not at all characteristic of your school

	Not at all important	Somewhat important	Very important	Essential	N/A (This does not describe what it's like at my school)
SERVICE LEARNING: Participating in community service activities related to what you're learning about in school	○	○	○	○	○
STAFF AVAILABILITY: Along with teaching, school staff meet students' non-academic needs.	○	○	○	○	○
PARTICIPATION IN EXTRACURRICULARS: Activities outside of the	○	○	○	○	○

classroom, including clubs and sports (NOT including expeditions)					
PARTICIPATION IN EXTENDED EXPEDITIONS: Trips that include at least one night away from home	○	○	○	○	○
PARTICIPATION IN TRIPS DURING THE SCHOOL DAY: Trips away from the school campus during advisory or classes	○	○	○	○	○

Why do you go to school? *
Select ALL that apply to you.

- ☐ Because I enjoy being in school
- ☐ Because I want to get a diploma and go to college
- ☐ Because of my teacher(s)
- ☐ Because it's the law
- ☐ Because I want to acquire skills for the workplace
- ☐ Because I want to learn in classes
- ☐ Because of my peers/friends
- ☐ To stay out of trouble
- ☐ Because there's nothing else to do
- ☐ Other: [ ]

Rate each item. *

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
If I could select a high school again, I would go to [redacted]	○	○	○	○	○
I care about [redacted]	○	○	○	○	○
I am engaged in school.	○	○	○	○	○
I am an important part of my high school community.	○	○	○	○	○

What was the last school you attended prior to [redacted]? *

Rate each item. *

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
If I could select a high school again, I would go to my last school or district.	○	○	○	○	○
I cared about my last school.	○	○	○	○	○
I was engaged at my last school.	○	○	○	○	○
I was an important part of the community at my last school.	○	○	○	○	○

Submit

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.

100%: You made it.

Appendix C

STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Semi-structured, use follow up probes as necessary. To be recorded using digital voice recording software.

Overview
As a reminder, I'm going to ask you questions about your experience as a high school student, including completing projects and expeditions here at Explorers Academy. Everything you tell me will be de-identified, so no one here at the school will know what you say and when I describe what I've learned from students, nothing will be linked specifically to you. I'm going to start the recorder now.

Previous school experience.
1. What school were you at before you came to Explorers Academy?
2. Describe what it was like being a student there.
3. What were some of the reasons that you left your old school?
4. Did you ever drop out of a school?
    What were you reasons for dropping out?

Current school experience
5. What made you decide you wanted to become a student at Explorers Academy?
6. If you were going to describe what it's like to a student here at Explorers Academy to a friend at another school, what would you say?
    What are some of the best things about being a student at Explorers Academy?
    What haven't you liked about being a student here?
    What are the biggest differences between Explorers Academy and your last school?
7. What were your reasons for staying and completing school here?
    Did you ever consider leaving Explorers Academy? Tell me more about that.
8. Is there anything teachers or the director do at Explorers Academy that you think they should do at other schools?
9. In the survey you completed earlier, you ranked these characteristics as 'essential' or 'very important' to your success in completing school *(provide index cards that list appropriate characteristics).* Please arrange this in order from most to least important for your own success at this school.
    For top 3 characteristics: Tell me more about why that characteristic was important to you.

Project based learning
10. Describe a specific project you've worked on recently either independently or in an afternoon class here at Explorers Academy.
    What were you trying to learn or figure out in that project?
    How long did you work on it?

What motivated you to complete the project?
How was completing that project different than how you would learn in a more traditional class, like math or social studies?

11. There's a general 4- step framework for experiential learning *(provide an index card with the following steps)*:
    1. Engagement in concrete experiences
    2. Observation and reflection on the experiences
    3. Formation of concepts and generalizations based on experiences
    4. Application of new understandings to other situations.

Let's talk through each step in relation to the project you just described.
Did Step 1 happen? What was that like? *Continue through steps 2-4.*

12. Was this project typical of other projects you've completed at Explorers Academy?

Expeditions

13. Describe a recent overnight expedition that you participated in.
What were your reasons for signing up for that one?
What motivated you to show up for it?
What aspects/activities of the expeditions were most beneficial to you?
What aspects/activities were least helpful?
What were the most memorable aspects of that expedition?
Was anything about this expedition uncomfortable for you?

14. Going back to that 4-step framework we used earlier *(refer back to index card with 4-step framework)*
Let's talk through each step in relation to the project you just described.
Did Step 1 happen? What was that like?
Continue through steps 2-4.

15. Was this expedition typical of other ones you have gone on?

16. Are overnight expeditions an important part of the experience of being a student here?
How many overnight expeditions do you go on each year?

17. Describe a recent trip away from the school campus you went on during the school day.
How do trips like this one affect how you learn, compared to a more traditional class?
How do these day trips affect your experience at Explorers Academy?

18. Did you notice any changes in your experience back at Explorers Academy after you returned from the expedition?
Does going on expeditions have an effect on how you feel about being a student here? How so?
Has participating in expeditions changed your relationships with any teachers?
Has participating in expeditions changed your relationships with any classmates?

19. Are there any downsides related to participating in expeditions or trips within the

school day?

Future Plans
20. What do you plan to do after you graduation in terms of education or career plans?
21. If someone asked you in five years, 'what do you do for a living?,' what would you like to be able to say?

Wrap Up
22. How do you think Explorers Academy met your individual needs?
23. Are there any things you think the staff should do differently here?
24. What kind of students do you think would especially benefit from attending Explorers Academy?
25. Besides what you have already shared with me, what would you want a reader of this study to know about who you are and why you're a student here at Explorers Academy?
26. Make up a name that I can use to refer to comments you've made when I describe what I've learned from you.