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An Alternate Path: The Experience of High-Potential Individuals Who Left School

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Abstract

Dropping out of school represents the culmination of a process that begins long before a student enters high school. It is estimated that a quarter of students with high potential leave school without a high school diploma; however, research on how high-potential students uniquely experience dropping out of school is in its beginning stages. This study sought to acquire a rich understanding of how 14 gifted individuals who did not complete high school interpreted this experience and the meaning they attributed to it. Six major themes emerged from the data: (a) significant external circumstances, (b) need for support, (c) social influences, (d) outlets, (e) an alternate path, and (f) reflecting on the path. This exploratory study enhances our understanding of why gifted students choose to leave school and supports the validity of alternate paths to success.

Keywords

dropout, gifted, secondary, interpretative phenomenological analysis

Dropping out of school is often not a spontaneous decision, but the culmination of a process that begins long before high school (Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013; Zabloski & Milacci, 2012). It is estimated that a quarter of students who leave school before completing their degree program were once considered high potential (Renzulli & Park, 2002). Although some have argued this estimate is inflated (Matthews, 2006), when more diverse groups of gifted students are sampled, this estimate is supported and should cause concern (Landis & Reschly, 2013).

Dropping out of school is associated with negative life outcomes. High school dropouts tend to be jobless (Sum et al., 2003), earn lower salaries than their peers who graduated from high school (Doland, 2001), and perhaps, most important, represent a high societal cost. The potential of gifted students, in particular, to meaningfully contribute to society may decline when they choose not to complete high school.

Researchers have recently contended that we need to place emphasis on uncovering the curricular and affective needs of gifted students in order to prevent them from dropping out of school (Doll et al., 2013; Landis & Reschly, 2013; Zabloski & Milacci, 2012). The current study sought to understand the experience of gifted individuals who drop out of school in order to uncover *if* and how their needs can be addressed before the cumulative process begins.

Operationalizing High School “Dropout”

The definition and measurement of the term “dropout” is controversial. At both the state and federal levels, operationalizing and quantifying “dropout” varies. While many individual

states (e.g., North Carolina) count students in their event dropout rates who earned their general education development (GED) credential in the academic year they were scheduled to graduate, these students are excluded from the federal event dropout rate. For example, comprehensive data from the U.S. Department of Education’s High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSL:09), a nationally representative, longitudinal study of more than 23,000 students who were in the ninth grade in 2009, estimated a federal event dropout rate of 3% (Ingels & Dalton, 2013). Students who received a GED or other equivalency were not included in this figure.

The U.S. Department of Education is not the first to distinguish between students who drop out and those who leave school and earn a GED or other equivalency credential. Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson (2004) delineated two categories of dropouts, “temporary dropouts” and “permanent dropouts.” According to Entwisle et al., “temporary dropouts” are those students who receive a high school diploma or GED by the age of 22, while “permanent dropouts” are those students who fail to meet this criteria. Entwisle et al. contended that “temporary dropouts” differ from “permanent dropouts” on several factors. Based on their findings, “temporary dropouts” outperformed “permanent dropouts” on

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academic measures, had significantly higher educational expectations in ninth grade (70% expected to at least complete a high school education as compared with 57% of the “permanent dropouts”), and received significantly higher ratings from their teachers on “temperament and disposition,” which included motivational characteristics.

Common Reasons for Not Completing High School

Reasons for not completing high school tend to be less ambiguous than definitions and measurements. These reasons are often referred to as push, pull, and fallout factors (Doll et al., 2013; Finn & Pannozzo, 1995; Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 1996; Watt & Roessingh, 1994). Students are “pushed out” of school by adverse factors that occur within the school. These factors discourage students from continuing their education and may include failing classes, suspensions, and expulsions. Conversely, students are “pulled out” of school by factors that are internal to them and occur outside the school. These factors may include anxiety over working long hours to meet family needs, divorce of caregivers, pregnancy, and illness. Students are believed to place greater value on these factors, resulting in the decision to not complete school. Finally, students “fall out” of school when they do not see significant improvement in the affective and/or academic aspects of their schooling over time and disengage. “Falling out” is thought to increase gradually for students as educational support declines (Doll et al., 2013).

“Falling out” of school may be supported by recent HSLS:09 findings. Of those students who dropped out of high school by 2012, 17.4% had educational expectations in the 9th grade of earning a master’s degree or higher. By their 11th grade year, only 6.9% of these students still held this expectation. Of this same student sample, 47% of the future high school dropouts reported a “low sense of belonging in school” in 9th grade as compared with only 25% of their peers who completed high school. This particular factor included the following components: teacher/other adult support at school, the importance of getting good grades in school, and seeing value in school. Similarly, 43% of the future high school dropouts also reported “low school engagement” in 9th grade as compared with only 25% of their peers who completed high school (Ingels & Dalton, 2013). Although subsequent years of data could not be located on these factors for students who would eventually drop out of high school, these data suggest they were “falling out” of school in 9th grade.

Falling Into a GED

Entwisle et al. (2004) contended that “the growing popularity of GED programs is a symptom of the traditional high school’s failure to meet the needs of students who find high school alienating or . . . irrelevant to their future” (p. 1197).

Dropping out of school and soon after taking the GED may be seen as an attractive alternative to receiving a high school diploma for students who have become disengaged or disillusioned with the educational system. Their future educational goals (e.g., attending college) can be attained sooner through simply passing a 240-item test with an essay component that requires little preparation. For gifted students, in particular, this option may be most viable. One study reported several of the gifted participants who dropped out of school went on to earn a GED (Hansen & Toso, 2007). Another study similarly found gifted students were three times as likely as other students to drop out of school to attain a GED (Matthews, 2006).

Giftedness and the “Dropout” Phenomenon

It has been conservatively estimated that gifted and talented students may comprise up to 5% of the high school dropout rate in this nation (Matthews, 2009). Given the statistic of 613,379 high school dropouts (Stillwell, 2010) and the aforementioned 5% estimate, more than 30,000 of these students may have had IQs in the gifted and talented range. This figure is, however, only an estimate, and the precise number of high school dropouts who are gifted remains unknown. Furthermore, given the scant research base on gifted students who drop out of school, why they choose to do so is also uncertain. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88), Renzulli and Park (2002) conducted two studies, the first to acquire information about gifted students who drop out, and the second to examine factors that influenced their decision to drop out. The most prevalent reasons for dropping out given by both male and female gifted students were not liking school and failing school (Renzulli & Park, 2002); and these reasons do not clearly distinguish gifted students who drop out of school from the general population of students who do so.

Additionally, while factors like poor attendance, disabilities, dislike of school, and family conflict have been connected to gifted students who drop out of school (Hansen & Toso, 2007; Matthews, 2006), these factors are also prominent in the general population of students who drop out (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Landis & Reschly, 2013). However, this is not to suggest that gifted students who drop out are always influenced by the same factors as their peers in the general population. Matthews (2006) once characterized the act of dropping out of school by gifted students as “an extreme manifestation of academic underachievement” (p. 217). Academic underachievement among gifted students is not synonymous with low achievement. Gifted students who underachieve are most likely capable of high levels of achievement, but for myriad reasons, academically perform at a level that is not commensurate with their ability (Reis & McCoach, 2000). Underachieving gifted students may still meet grade-level standards and are often capable of exceeding these standards, whereas low-achieving

students are more likely to fall below grade-level standards (Landis & Reschly, 2013). The important question then becomes if gifted students are capable of high achievement, why would they entertain the idea of dropping out of school? The answer to this question seems to be tied to engagement.

In their seminal study, Kanevsky and Keighley (2003) found that gifted high school students' "resentment and boredom evolved and escalated as they consistently experienced a lack of control, choice and challenge, complexity and support within the classroom setting" (p. 26). These students "gradually disengaged from classroom tasks and their productivity and grades decline[d] as their boredom intensified in middle and high school" (p. 26).

Furthermore, Landis and Reschly (2013) recently reviewed the gifted underachievement and dropout literature using a student engagement framework. They found gifted students who underachieved and/or dropped out were not engaged on many different levels, including academically, behaviorally, and cognitively. Academically, gifted students who underachieved and/or dropped out of school primarily demonstrated academic disengagement through lack of effort in their coursework. Behaviorally, students often did not attend classes and exhibited noncompliant behavior in school. Cognitively, students felt bored, unchallenged, and uninspired by perceived busywork that they did not feel was meaningful. Findings for affective engagement, however, were mixed. Some aspects of affective engagement were actually positive for the gifted students who participated in the reviewed studies. While social acceptance appeared to be a struggle for these students, a lack of perceived teacher, school personnel, and parent support was not consistently found across studies.

Interestingly, a recent study conducted by Zabloski and Milacci (2012) on gifted dropouts that was not included in this review found that "relationship issues . . . ascended above all others as a driving force to drop out" (p. 186). Kanevsky and Keighley (2003) similarly found that "The significance of experiences with caring teachers cannot be underestimated" (p. 26). Underachieving students in their study desired meaningful connections with caring adults. Nonetheless, Landis and Reschly (2013) concluded that "cognitive engagement may be a more prominent variable in academic outcomes among gifted students than in the general population" (p. 239).

Given that the decision to drop out of school tends not to be a spontaneous decision (Doll et al., 2013; Zabloski & Milacci, 2012), the process that leads to this decision may begin as early as elementary school. Hansen and Toso (2007), for example, found that gifted students who dropped out of school started to cognitively disengage during the elementary school years when they perceived the disappearance of learning and mental stimulation. Depending on the reason for dropping out of school, gifted students may actually view this decision as a form of self-preservation. Hansen and Toso (2007) further reported that gifted individuals in their study

did not believe they "were sacrificing their futures by dropping out of school, and some thought they were saving them" (p. 40). On dropping out of school, many of their study participants actually pursued advanced education in the form of bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, and even a law degree. Dropping out of school, in cases such as these, may be viewed with less finality and more as "a means to an end."

With this said, it is unwise to extrapolate meaning from such a limited research base. Research on how gifted students uniquely experience dropping out of school is nascent, and more research on this topic is greatly needed. Therefore, the primary purpose of the current study was to acquire a rich understanding of how gifted individuals who did not complete high school interpreted this experience and the meaning they attributed to it.

Method

Participants

A combination of voluntary (or self-selection) sampling (Remler & Van Ryzin, 2015) and snowball sampling (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) was used to identify gifted adults who did not complete high school. Information about the research study was disseminated through a statewide listserv for individuals interested in gifted education, presented at a statewide meeting for directors of gifted education, and posted with flyers throughout a university in a Western state. Individuals who identified as "gifted" and who did not complete high school were asked to contact the researchers. Because there is no universal definition of the term "dropout," Zabloski and Milacci's (2012) flexible definition guided this study. Dropouts were those who (a) were not currently attending high school, and either (b) did not graduate with their class, or (c) earned a GED or other nontraditional diploma, or (d) did not complete their high school education. Through these efforts, two individuals self-selected for the study.

Because we theorized that adults who met the criteria of this study would not readily self-identify, a variation of snowball sampling was also employed. Gifted educators familiar with the characteristics of giftedness were asked to refer gifted adults who had not graduated from high school. Through this method, 12 additional participants were added to the study for a total of 14 gifted individuals who did not complete high school.

Of the 14 participants, 50% were female and 50% were male. Furthermore, 100% of the participants identified as Caucasian. Two of the participants were in the 20 to 29 age range (14%); six were in the 30 to 39 range (43%); two were in the 40 to 49 range (14%); three were in the 50 to 59 range (~21%), and one participant was in the 60 to 69 age range (7%). Eight of the participants reported being formally identified as "gifted" in school. Gifted identification was confirmed through the participants' parents. The majority of the

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Age range	Formal gifted identification	GED or other	Highest educational level attained	Additional exceptionality
Lexi	Female	Caucasian	30-39	Yes	No	Master's	None
Peverly	Female	Caucasian	40-49	Yes	No	Master's	None
Rocky	Male	Caucasian	50-59	No	GED	Trade school	None
Evan	Male	Caucasian	30-39	No	GED	Community college	None
Jessica	Female	Caucasian	50-59	No	GED	Continuing education	None
Stranger	Female	Caucasian	30-35	Yes	GED	Continuing education	None
Jack	Male	Caucasian	30-35	Yes	No	Bachelor's	Learning disability and visual impairment
Bella	Female	Caucasian	60-69	No	GED	Master's	Speech/language
Max	Male	Caucasian	20-29	Yes	GED	Bachelor's	None
Greg	Male	Caucasian	30-39	Yes	GED	Bachelor's	Learning disability
Katy	Female	Caucasian	40-49	No	GED	Master's	Learning disability
Sparky	Male	Caucasian	20-29	Yes	GED	Bachelor's	ADHD
Martin	Male	Caucasian	50-59	No	Other	Doctorate	Learning disability
Rose	Female	Caucasian	30-39	Yes	GED	Doctoral student	None

Note. GED = General education development; ADHD = attention deficit hyperactive disorder.

unidentified participants (5 out of 6) were in the 40 to 69 age range and reported gifted identification and programming were not available when they were in school. One of the unidentified participants did report taking an IQ test in middle school and scoring a 143. Gifted educators with advanced degrees in gifted education (i.e., master's or PhD) nominated these six participants for inclusion in the study based on their expertise. Each educator explained his/her rationale for nominating a potential participant over the phone, in person, or via e-mail. Rationales were based primarily on nominators' extensive knowledge of gifted characteristics but also included consideration of the following factors: college-level classes taken during high school; advanced levels of postsecondary education (e.g., master's, PhD); and current occupation (e.g., gifted coordinator; published author).

Justification for participant inclusion was also based on Peterson's (2001) rationale for inclusion of unidentified gifted underachievers in her study. Peterson proposed more flexible selection criteria based on

the likelihood that "gifted programs" did not exist at the time some prospective participants were adolescents. In addition, there was no way to verify either assessment data for those who had been identified as gifted or selection criteria for programs. (p. 238 [AQ: 1])

Peterson (2001) further contended,

Whether or not participants were, or could have been, identified as "gifted," they probably represent countless highly able adolescents who are misperceived by educators and missed during screening for gifted programs. If researchers are to learn about the experience of underachievement in highly capable individuals in order to help educators and parents better identify

and nurture them, methodology must be flexible, phenomenological, and sometimes exploratory, open-ended, and retrospective. (p. 247) [AQ: 2]

Renzulli and Park (2002) also justified more flexible participant selection criteria for their national study of gifted dropouts:

If educators and researchers use a restrictive definition of giftedness, focusing on IQ only, some talented young students who are potential dropouts will be overlooked and not provided with appropriate educational assistance, such as counseling services. Therefore, it is more appropriate to use a broad definition of giftedness when we study the population of dropouts. (p. 269)

Based on the recommendations and rationale of these researchers, we determined that using more flexible participant selection criteria was not only appropriate but necessary for this study in order to fully capture the phenomenon of gifted students dropping out of school. Therefore, the terms *gifted* and *high potential* will be used synonymously in this study.

With regard to alternate pathways taken after exiting high school, 6 of the 14 participants never earned a GED; however, 4 of these individuals still went on to earn bachelor's and master's degrees. Of the eight participants who earned a GED or alternate credential, six either completed trade school, community college, bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, or doctorates. Additionally, 6 of the 14 of the participants reported challenges such as attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), learning disabilities, visual impairment or speech-language disorder and could be considered twice-exceptional. See Table 1 for participant

demographics. Please note that participants selected their own pseudonyms, which are used throughout this article.

Research Design

According to Cresswell (2009), the goal of qualitative research is to understand a social or human problem through creating a complex picture of the phenomenon being studied. Qualitative research was most appropriate for this study because the researchers were interested in acquiring a deep understanding of the way in which gifted students who did not complete high school interpreted their experiences and made meaning from them (Merriam, 2009). More specifically, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, 2004) was used to guide the analysis. IPA “aims to capture and explore the meanings that participants assign to their experiences” (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005, p. 20). Unlike traditional phenomenological inquiry, IPA is based on a hermeneutical approach to qualitative data analysis, which recognizes the researchers’ central role in interpreting data (Smith, 2004). Participants’ experiences of a particular phenomenon are examined with the understanding that a genuine first-person account is unachievable; in other words, meaning is constructed by both the participant *and* the researcher (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). Semistructured interviews are considered the “exemplary” form of data collection for IPA (Smith, 2004, p. 50).

Data Gathering

Individual, semistructured interviews with participants lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes each at a location of their choosing. If distance was an issue, interviews were conducted over the phone. All participants were encouraged to participate in follow-up interviews but none chose to do this; however, some did continue to correspond about their experiences via e-mail. Given the delicate nature of this inquiry, participants were offered the option of completing written responses to the interview questions as opposed to being formally interviewed by one of the researchers. Two participants chose this option and did not meet in person. Zabloski and Milacci (2012) also allowed participants to complete written responses in lieu of face-to-face interviews. They contended, “This approach was consistent with Groenewald’s (2004) research in which some participants wrote essays while others were personally interviewed . . . in other words, using multiple forms of data gathering was a form of triangulation” (p. 181). We followed up with these participants via e-mail to clarify their responses as needed.

Interview questions were developed using a team approach (Rubenstein, Schelling, Wilczynski, & Hooks, 2015). The initial questions were designed by one of the researchers in order to address various aspects of the experiences of gifted students who dropped out of high school (see Appendix A, available in the online version of the

journal). [AQ: 3] Two other specialists in the field of gifted education then reviewed the questions and made additional suggestions.

The first and second authors interviewed all of the participants. They had a combined 30 years of experience in education, including 25 years teaching advanced and/or gifted classes and coordinating gifted programming. The majority of those years had been at the middle and high school levels. Both of them had advanced degrees in gifted education.

Analytical Procedures

Investigator triangulation, or the practice of “multiple investigators collecting and analyzing data” (Merriam, 2009, p. 216) was utilized to increase the internal validity of the research. Both researchers collected data and individually analyzed it before meeting to compare notes and reach consensus on themes and subthemes.

Before beginning data collection, gifted identification of 57% of the participants (8/14) was confirmed by one of their parents over the phone or via e-mail. Prior to data analysis, an initial member check was implemented that provided participants the opportunity to clarify and elaborate on their original responses. Each participant was e-mailed a copy of his or her transcribed responses and asked to read through them and to correct or elaborate on statements as they felt necessary by either using Track Changes or highlighting edits. Next, the researchers reread the transcripts several times to become immersed with each participant’s account. Individually, the researchers highlighted potentially significant excerpts (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Reflective notes were made in the margins of each transcript during this process. The researchers then searched for emerging patterns in the data and color coded phrases related to particular emerging categories. Constant-comparative methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967 [AQ: 4]) was employed throughout the process to compare emerging categories across participants and regroup categories if needed. These emerging categories were continuously reassessed until clusters of meaning were formed. Axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998 [AQ: 5]) was then used to confirm emerging themes and relate them to the overall phenomena of why these high-potential individuals chose to leave school. Coding was discussed until 100% agreement was reached on the themes, subthemes, and representative quotations (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). A final member check was done at the conclusion of data analysis. Participants were e-mailed themes and subthemes and asked if their experience was accurately captured.

Beyond the transcribed interviews, the researchers kept field notes on reflections from the interactions with the participants during and after the interviews. In some instances, the participants continued to correspond with the researchers about the topic after completion of the initial interviews. These notes and reflections were utilized in the analysis process.

Table 2. Themes, Subthemes, and Representative Quotes.

Themes	Subthemes	Representative quotes
Significant External Circumstances (57%)	Changing to Different Schools (43%)	“At that time I was in the foster placement. What was going on outside of school and trying to survive, that was what was the most important.”
Need for Support (100%)	Home Issues (36%)	“I kind of get upset at the educational system for not noticing who I was.”
	Educational support (100%)	“My mom was there to help. Without her, I really believe I wouldn’t be alive.”
Social Influences (93%)	Family support (64%)	“I just remember feeling very ostracized and isolated. I just kind of developed this fascination of wanting to belong and be a part of a group.”
	Acceptance (93%) Bullying (43%)	“I spent lot of time in the mountains. . . . Trying to find meaning and purpose in life has always been a struggle for me even at a very young age.”
Outlets (93%)	Purposeful Outlets (50%)	“Ninth grade year I failed my first class and had to go to summer school. I was sexually active in ninth grade. I was smoking cigarettes and pot.”
	Escape Outlets (71%)	“The phrase that really stuck out to my mom was, ‘What if we’re not talking about a high school diploma’”
An Alternate Path (100%)	No GED and College (21%) GED and College (57%) GED and Training (21%)	“I could’ve gone down much darker paths . . . it wasn’t perfect, but it was definitely better than if I had just pursued the typical path.”
Reflecting on the Path (100%)	It Had to Be that Way (50%) A Catalyst for Better Things (86%)	“I’m proud that this young girl that was so lost and scared is now doing something that she never thought she would be doing.”
	Forming Connections (86%) Something to Prove (21%) Darker Paths Avoided (14%)	

Findings

Six major themes emerged from the data analysis. The italicized themes that follow are intended to be read as factors that were influential in the participants’ lives. Many participants shared *Significant External Circumstances* that shaped their decision to stop traditional schooling. Every participant expressed the *Need for Support* as a key factor that had impact on their decision to leave school, their ability to persevere once they left school, or both their decision and perseverance. For many of the participants, *Social Influences*, the need for acceptance in particular, played a role in their decision, as well as *Outlets*. Purposeful outlets helped participants see a future beyond high school and gave them hope when they left. On the other hand, escape outlets provided participants an escape from high school. All 14 participants embarked on an *Alternate Path* to success after they left school that took different forms, each influenced by several of the aforementioned themes. Success was individually defined by participants and represented a general sense of meaningful accomplishment in life. *Reflecting on the Path* was quite emotional for many of the participants and provided meaningful implications for working with high-potential students who are considering an “alternate path.” Direct quotations from individual interviews are used within each theme to represent individuals’ voices in the sections that follow. Themes, subthemes, and representative quotations are also located in Table 2.

Significant External Circumstances

Over half of the participants (57%) noted significant circumstances outside of school that factored into their decision. Within this theme, two subthemes were identified. The participants mentioned *changing to different schools* throughout the course of their schooling, as well as *home issues* that ultimately indirectly or directly contributed to their decision to leave school. Please note that several of the participants’ voices are represented in more than one subtheme.

Changing to Different Schools. Six of the participants (43%) stated that they changed from one school to another, sometimes across states, in elementary, middle, and high school. For some of the participants, this led to gaps in learning and social difficulties. Rocky said, “Between elementary schools and high school . . . I probably went to five or six different schools” (Interview, March 24, 2015). Bella also acknowledged, “By the time I dropped out I’d been to 11 schools” (Interview, October 7, 2015). She went on to explain the repercussions of changing schools so many times:

When I kept changing schools . . . that school was at a different place in each of the content areas. I wasn’t really lucky enough to be in a school that I had already learned the material and could get settled . . . it seemed like they were always ahead of where I had been, and I was struggling to catch up. (Interview, October 7, 2015)

For Bella and other participants, ability, alone, could not compensate for the gaps in learning that resulted from changing schools. “Struggling to catch up,” coupled with other factors, ultimately contributed to participants’ educational disillusionment and decision to drop out.

Home Issues. In addition to earlier schooling experiences, five of the participants (36%) also had home experiences that were harmful to their learning. Bella shared this experience: “At that time I was in the foster placement. What was going on outside of school and trying to survive, that was what was the most important. My foster family was emotionally and physically abusive” (Interview, October 7, 2015). Rose, who was adopted at a young age and grew up in different homes, was living with her biological mother before she left high school:

I was living with my biological mother who abandoned me as a baby. . . . I sacked groceries on the weekend and found a cheap motel that we could afford through all of my paychecks plus hot checks. I was hungry all the time. I once tried to make dinner at the hotel. It was spaghetti noodles cooked in a coffee pot. We had nothing. (Interview, January 27, 2016)

In addition to foster care, poverty, and emotional and physical abuse, other participants also mentioned divorce, parental mental illness, parental incarceration, parental drug abuse, and sexual abuse as factors that influenced their decision to leave school. These external circumstances were not within participants’ control and prevented them from fully committing to their schooling. For many, survival outside of school took precedence over school completion.

Need for Support

Another theme reflected in the comments of 100% of the participants was their need for support. Two subthemes were *educational support* and *family support*. “Educational” was chosen instead of “school” because many of the participants did not fault a particular school but the educational system as a whole. Furthermore, peers have been included in *family support* because, for several of the participants, their peers were their family at that time.

Educational Support. All 14 participants described an overall lack of *educational support*. Many did not believe that schools nor that adults in the schools either went out of their way for them or were able to provide them with meaningful learning opportunities. Twelve of the participants (86%) stated that their disillusionment with the traditional schooling system began before high school. Of his elementary school years, Greg said, “They took me and another gifted student and stuck us in front of the computer. That was where we were getting our advanced learning from” (Interview, October 14, 2015). Opportunities to explore personal interests and to

acquire a deeper understanding of the curriculum were desired by participants but rarely offered. Many believed their individualized learning needs were ignored by educators and even felt that their teachers did not support gifted programming. Rose shared this experience:

In the fourth grade, my teacher was not happy about us being pulled out . . . she complained to my gifted teachers that I was daydreaming during class. I had a wonderful relationship with my gifted teachers, but one pulled me aside and threatened being kicked out of the program if I kept daydreaming in class. . . . I dropped out of the gifted program after that. (Interview, January 27, 2016)

Unfortunately, gifted programming, in Rose’s example, was viewed as a privilege that could be taken away as opposed to a learning need.

Although two of the participants did note that elementary school experiences influenced their decision to leave school, most of the participants (71%) did not appear to become disillusioned with the educational system until middle school. As Lexi said,

It was middle school where I really started losing my enjoyment of school. I just didn’t have any passion for school at that time. . . . I wouldn’t say passion for *learning* but I definitely lost my passion for *school*. (Interview, September 14, 2015)

Similarly, Evan said, “Middle school was pretty boring to *me* and I didn’t really like going. . . . I think I learned pretty much what I needed to know the first couple of years I was in middle school” (Interview, March 18, 2015).

Asked about gifted and talented services in middle school, Peverly said, “Seventh and eighth there was pretty much nothing. Then once you hit the high school you got kind of that pre AP or AP honors, AP track options. I took those. I did do those” (Interview, March, 15, 2015). Furthermore, when asked about “giftedness,” Martin said, “I honestly had never heard the word” (Interview, December 8, 2015). When Martin was in middle school, he said he actually scored a 143 on an IQ test. He expressed the following frustration: “I think to myself, ‘My God, why didn’t somebody say anything?’ 143 is not something to spit at and I was failing everything” (Interview, December 8, 2015).

In general, participants spoke about the educational system letting them down. Reflecting on her journey from elementary through high school, Peverly, who is currently an educator of gifted students, stated, “I think there is something about just the progression of less and less support” (Interview, March, 15, 2015). Katy, who is also an educator of gifted students, lamented, “I kind of get upset at the educational system for not noticing who I was” (Interview, October 19, 2015). Others expressed similar frustration over how burdened educators seemed to them at the time. Jessica said, “The teachers are busy. The counselors are busy. Everybody’s too busy”

Acceptance. Most participants mentioned wanting to experience *acceptance* from their peers. In middle and high school failure to identify with a peer group contributed to many participants' decision to leave. With regard to social cliques, Rose described feeling different:

Their parents were doctors and **architects and** many of them were cheerleaders and athletes. I felt like I didn't belong in the group of kids taking honors classes. I dropped out of the honors program and enjoyed an easy, breezy 8th grade year where I was bored, but fit in a little better. (Interview, January 27, 2016)

Jessica, who also came from a low socio-economic background, had similar feelings:

It was just too hard. I didn't like the cliques in the high school. I tried to be in one of them, one of the best-dressed cliques that there was. When you started re-wearing your clothes . . . they didn't want anything to do with you. (Interview, August 15, 2015)

Not feeling accepted by cliques also led some participants to seek acceptance from peer groups that were not necessarily positive influences but that accepted them as they were. As Stranger noted, "The acceptance I sought was unfortunately in people that weren't necessarily positive influences or on the right path. . . . High school was cliquey. I didn't have a good experience when it came to that" (Interview, August 19, 2015).

Wanting to fit in with a peer group was often also accompanied by feelings of loneliness and a sense of longing. As Greg said, "I just remember feeling very ostracized and isolated. I just kind of developed this fascination of wanting to belong and be a part of a group" (Interview, October 14, 2015). Max discussed peers valuing social skills more than intelligence:

It's better to be the funny guy than the smart guy. What I witnessed is that being socially outgoing is more beneficial to being successful in society than any intelligence. I feel like I would trade being smart/gifted for enhanced social skills and good looks. (Interview, October 12, 2015)

Yet, social influences were not always perceived by the participants as negative. Many found acceptance with peers who shared their interests. Often, these peers were much older than they were. Katy worked as a ski instructor in high school and talked about feeling accepted by "the other ski instructors, people that were in their twenties; some of them were in their thirties and had kids. Those became my peers" (Interview, October 19, 2015). For Katy, feeling more commonality with older individuals reaffirmed that she did not fit in with high school peers who failed to understand or accept her.

Bullying. Almost half of the participants used the word *bullying* in their interview, having experienced it in middle and high school. Rose did in middle school:

I was extremely bullied in 8th grade by a couple of girls. My English teacher . . . stood up for me and lectured the whole class about bullying. Everyone knew she was taking up for me, and it was appreciated but *so* embarrassing. (Interview, January 27, 2016)

Bella shared the following: "I was a stutterer and kids mocked me and made fun of me. My self-concept was so poor" (Interview, October 7, 2015). Shockingly, this participant also mentioned that her teachers reinforced this bullying. Not seeing high school as a safe place ultimately influenced her decision to leave. Furthermore, Martin explained that at his high school "there were a lot of gangs. I couldn't even go to PE at that point. I wasn't allowed to walk down and go into the locker room to change. . . . At that time, education was gone" (Interview, December 8, 2015). Bullying was just one more negative factor preventing him from learning and leading to his decision to leave school.

Outlets

The majority of the participants (93%) described outlets that either helped them find a sense of *purpose* during their high school years or provided an *escape* from what they perceived as a difficult period of their lives. *Purposeful outlets* helped participants maintain hope for their future, while *escape outlets* either functioned as temporary distractions or a way out of high school. Several of the participants engaged in both purposeful and escape outlets.

Purposeful Outlets. Half of the participants discussed needing to find purpose in high school. They did not feel connected to school and longed to feel connected to something in order to preserve hope for the future. Martin explained as follows: "I did a lot of journaling, a lot of thinking. I used to walk a lot late at night . . . just really trying to think about how can I make my way here" (Interview, December 8, 2015). Furthermore, Lexi said, "I spent lot of time in the mountains . . . trying to find meaning and purpose in life has always been a struggle for me even at a very young age" (Interview, September 14, 2015). Other participants did not directly mention engaging in outlets to find purpose, but these outlets did help cultivate a sense of belonging for them. For example, two participants mentioned the arts. Sparky said, "I excelled in my theater class because that's probably where I put most of my effort" (Interview, October 29, 2015). Jessica reflected on loving the arts as well: "Oh, I loved music. . . . I was in the band from probably fifth grade through high school, loved the band" (Interview, August 15, 2015). Two other participants (Stranger and Bella) also mentioned tending to horses at stables and saw this as therapeutic. Equestrianism is still a passion for both of these participants. Purposeful outlets provided participants with a healthy sense of belonging and in some cases, goals for once they left school. Sparky, for example, enrolled in film school after dropping out. Had he

not found theatre during high school, he might have dropped out without a clear plan for his future.

Escape Outlets. The majority of the participants engaged in outlets that provided escape (71%). Most mentioned escape outlets that served as distractions from their unfulfilling high school experience. Stranger explained her decision to frequently skip school:

I would skip school so much and then go to school on test day and still pass the test, which was really my biggest downfall in high school. . . . I have to be challenged. If I'm not challenged, then I tend to create my own challenges that are not necessarily good challenges. (Interview, August 19, 2015)

She also said, "I was sexually active in ninth grade. I was smoking cigarettes and pot" (Interview, August 19, 2015). Several of the other participants who sought escape also mentioned skipping school and trying various drugs. Asked what finally prompted her to leave high school, Jessica said: "One, I wasn't happy there because I felt I didn't belong. Two, I think living at home, not being happy there, and then, of course, finding someone that loved me, and I got pregnant" (Interview, August 15, 2015). Escape outlets "pulled" participants from school. Disconnected from school, feeling that no one cared at school or home, and trying to cope with instability outside of school, participants like Stranger and Jessica sought escape from their discontentment.

An Alternate Path

All of the participants attributed special meaning to dropping out of school. Whereas dropping out is often viewed negatively by society, to these participants, dropping out meant deviating from a traditional path that was not meeting their needs. Although paths took on many different forms, every participant ultimately did find success in their lives. As Greg said,

I have a lot of frustrations with the way schools are set up now. It's kind of a one-size-fits-all experience. That's probably good for a lot of people, but there's also a significant number of people where that experience isn't good. They're the ones that might benefit from leaving school early and going down alternate paths. (Interview, October 14, 2015)

This sentiment was seconded by Jack, who said, "A lot of it is just being aware that there are alternatives even if they're not necessarily very clear cut . . . you don't have to be . . . following the typical path because it's the only thing you've heard of" (Interview, October 15, 2015). Alternate paths assumed three different forms for the participants in this study: (a) No GED and college (21%), (b) GED and college (57%), and (c) GED and training (21%).

No GED and College. Three of the participants in this study left school without a GED or alternative proficiency credential and went on to earn college degrees. Jack was one of these participants. He explained he was too asynchronous and traditional schooling could not meet his advanced learning needs. His mother, who was exploring alternative high school options for him at the time, realized through talking to other parents that her son might not need to go the traditional route through high school. Jack said, "The phrase that really stuck out to my mom was 'what if we're not talking about a high school diploma?'" (Interview, October 15, 2015). He circumvented traditional schooling through a combination of home schooling and online high school classes; he began community college without a high school diploma or GED when he was 13 years old.

Two other participants also never received a high school diploma or GED but went on to earn bachelor's and master's degrees at notable universities. In reference to taking the GED, Lexi said, "My theory was that until somebody made me get it, why spend the \$65 at the time?" (Interview, September 14, 2015). In all of these instances, participants had supportive parents that realized traditional schooling could not meet their children's needs. These parents helped their children identify alternatives to completing high school and plan next steps after leaving.

GED and College. Slightly over half of the participants did take the GED or an alternative proficiency examination and attended college. Although earning a GED in place of a high school diploma is often perceived less positively by society, for some of these participants, it remained a point of great pride. Of his GED, Sparky said,

I think the GED option was good because I was always telling people "Look, I already know all this stuff. I don't need to do it again . . . if I can just prove that I know all this stuff, would you guys leave me alone?" I feel like that's exactly what doing my GED was. (Interview, October 29, 2015)

Others did not necessarily view getting a GED positively but felt it was forced upon them. Rose got her GED to avoid retention due to excessive absences:

I missed so much school. . . . I would have to repeat my junior year. I was an honor student who made a perfect score on the state standardized test and was recognized for it . . . and I have to repeat the 11th grade? And go through the hell of being homeless and attending high school? I think not. I dropped out. (Interview, January 27, 2016)

Rose was more than capable of excelling in her high school classes but was "pushed out" of school by poor attendance and the **threat of homelessness**. Rose found that she did not need traditional schooling to achieve her goals. During what should have been her senior year of high school, Rose got her GED and began college.

GED and Training. Three of the remaining participants also received their GED but went on to take either continuing education courses and licensing credentials for their careers or attend trade school. One of these participants owned a successful company and had published several children's books. Rocky explained how this was possible:

When I was born, my grandpa had set aside a little money for me. . . . I took that and went to a welding trade school. . . . I started on that path . . . and that got me going. (Interview, March 24, 2015)

It is interesting to note that for these three participants, there was minimal family support. Participants noted that parents were divorced, incarcerated, suffered from severe mental health issues and/or were apathetic toward them completing school. To these participants, traditional schooling was simply not equipped to meet their affective needs.

Reflecting on the Path

All of the participants reflected on the path they took to leave school and the meaning they attributed it. Despite the elapsed time, reflecting on this decision was quite emotional for the majority of these participants. None wished they could go back and change their middle and high school experiences. The majority of the participants actually expressed that there was no other path they could have taken, *it had to be that way* (50%), and the decision was *a catalyst for better things* (86%) to come. With that said, the majority did mention that *forming connections* (86%) might have prevented them from leaving school or eased their transition upon leaving. Although less common, three participants also talked about having *something to prove* (21%) once they decided to leave high school, and two other participants felt *darker paths were avoided* (14%) by the decision to leave school.

It Had to Be That Way. While reflecting on his path, Jack said, "I was so asynchronous with where I was intellectually and socially and emotionally that I don't know if there would have been a good fit anywhere." He believed leaving school was his best option because traditional schooling simply could not meet his academic and affective needs (Interview, October 15, 2015). Jessica simply said, "I have no regrets. You don't move backwards. You move forward" (Interview, August 15, 2015). Furthermore, Bella shared this powerful example to illustrate why she had to leave school:

You know, I think it was the path I had to take . . . a high school teacher asked my older sister if she was interested in babysitting . . . we were so starved for attention; my sister walked for over an hour to babysit for this teacher, just for somebody to give her the attention. It just freaked the teacher out . . . and she didn't ask her to babysit anymore. We were such an emotional wreck . . . at that point, I think I needed to get my life together. I don't think I

would have been successful in school. I know I wouldn't have. (Interview, October 7, 2015)

These participants questioned whether the educational system could have done anything to prevent them from dropping out and concluded that leaving school was their best option at the time.

A Catalyst for Better Things. The majority of the participants mentioned that they did not regret their decision to leave school because it was a catalyst for better things to come. Jessica reflected, "I'm proud that this young girl that was so lost and scared is now doing something that she never thought she would be doing" (Interview, August 15, 2015). A number of the participants who worked as educators explained that they used their lived experience to better support their own students. Lexi said, "I never wanted anybody to go through what I went through educationally. High school was simply the worst time in my life, but it was also the catalyst for my career" (Interview, September 14, 2015). Furthermore, Rose discussed how she was able to use her career "to advocate for more mental health services in the schools. Just because someone is an **honor's** student does not mean that they do not suffer from social-emotional problems" (Interview, January 27, 2016). For these participants, early challenges and the decision to leave school were transformational experiences that helped shape their future goals and successes.

Forming Connections. While none of the participants regretted their decision to leave school, most did acknowledge that *forming connections* might have influenced their decision or eased the transition upon leaving school. Twelve of 14 specifically mentioned forming connections with other adults in and outside of the school and making purposeful connections to their learning and to the future. With regard to forming connections at school, Peverly said,

If I had had more of a connection to the school as a whole . . . that might have helped. If I had had a counselor who actually kept track of me. . . . I think about it from my own kids' standpoint . . . who are gifted . . . they're forced to stay more connected by somebody within the system. (Interview, March 15, 2015)

Martin shared a similar longing for adult connections: "There's got to be at least one person that you can connect with that will hear you, that will see you. . . . I wish I would have found it within the system" (Interview, December 8, 2015).

In addition to connections within the school, several of the participants mentioned not having enough of a connection to life after high school. Max felt that he lacked guidance in this area:

I had a vague life goal early on of getting a job eventually. I didn't feel very passionate or guided to any particular subject/

direction. And I didn't have any experiences that helped me with that, and I wished there had been. (Interview, October 12, 2015)

Furthermore, Evan mentioned that the decision to leave school needs to be purposefully connected to the future. Like several of the participants, Evan felt as if he were drifting aimlessly after leaving school because he left without a purpose or a plan for his future:

I would just say, if you're going to leave school to get a GED, do it for a reason, to start college earlier or start working, rather than do it just because you're in a situation you don't want to deal with. You need purpose to it. (Interview, March 18, 2015)

Participants who left school without a plan and/or adult guidance faced significant struggle before they "found themselves." They wished adults would have helped them set realistic goals for their future and determine a course of action to attain those goals.

Something to Prove. Three participants discussed needing to prove something to others after leaving high school. Their journey to success was, in part, motivated by what Rocky referred to as "a big chip on [his] shoulder" (Interview, March 24, 2015). He said this meant "I'm going to prove to you that this is not going to stop me" (Interview, March 24, 2015). He attributed his success after high school to determination that originated from this "chip." Lexi also talked about feeling the need to prove herself: "I was angry at the school system at that point. The way I chose to deal with the anger was to show them that I would educate myself" (Interview, September 14, 2015). Anger and frustration motivated these participants to prove to those who did not believe in them that they did not need a high school diploma to achieve success in their lives.

Darker Paths Avoided. Also less common but still meaningful was the idea that leaving school prevented "darker paths." Jack powerfully explained as follows:

I don't know if I would have made it through middle school or high school in one piece. I could've gone down much darker paths . . . it wasn't perfect, but it was definitely better than if I had just pursued the typical path. (Interview, October 15, 2015)

Having turned to drugs as a teenager, Jack actually felt leaving school prevented him from seeking out other self-destructive outlets and provided him with the opportunity to refocus his life's trajectory in a positive direction.

Discussion

The phenomenon of high-potential students discontinuing their K-12 education is complex. In this study, we sought to acquire a deeper understanding of how 14 high-potential students experienced dropping out of school and the meaning

they attributed to it. Through our conversations with these participants, it became clear that they did not fit "dropout" stereotypes. In fact, all of the participants in this study could more accurately be called "nontraditional completers," who went on to experience success as adults. Use of the term "temporary dropout" (Entwisle et al., 2004) is a more sensitive way to represent those students who leave high school and then return for their diploma or complete their GEDs. Yet that term does not adequately mitigate the stigma associated with "dropout" or recognize paths to success taken by individuals who bypass either of these options.

"Nontraditional completers" encompasses both of the categories referenced in "temporary dropout" but also includes those individuals who choose not to obtain a high school diploma or a GED en route to college. "Nontraditional completers" did *complete*. They just took a nontraditional path. The paths the participants in this study chose to take were diverse, and within this group of "nontraditional completers," there were those who would be considered "self-selected accelerators." These are the students who utilized the GED, as Entwisle et al. (2004) foresaw, to bypass a system unable to meet their needs and to progress directly to more appropriate educational alternatives (i.e., training programs or college) or those who entirely forewent a GED on their way to college. They also tended to be the students with the strongest parental support. Regardless of whether the participants immediately pursued postsecondary options upon leaving high school, all of them ultimately completed a GED and training, completed a GED and college, or went to college without a high school diploma or GED.

Furthermore, the findings in this study support earlier research on students being "pushed out," "pulled out," or "falling out" of school (Doll et al., 2013; Finn & Panno, 1995; Jordan et al., 1996; Watt & Roessingh, 1994). For the majority of participants, learning stopped before ever reaching high school, a prime example of the process of "falling out." They recalled feeling unchallenged by their classes at an early age, and this, coupled with "the progression of less and less support" in school, resulted in overall disillusionment with an educational system that was not meeting their needs. This disillusionment and a perceived lack of support were critical factors in the decisions to leave school and align with prior research on the need for curricular and affective modifications to prevent students from discontinuing their K-12 education (Doll et al., 2013; Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003; Landis & Reschly, 2013; Zabloski & Milacci, 2012). It is important to note that while low-achieving students often struggle to maintain good grades and get *pushed or pulled out* of school (Landis & Reschly, 2013), all the participants in this study were achieving or capable of achieving at high levels during the process of *falling out* of school. This finding is supported by other studies (e.g., Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003; Hansen & Toso, 2007; Landis & Reschly, 2013; Matthews, 2006; Zabloski & Milacci, 2012) and may help distinguish high-potential students who drop out from the general population.

Changing to different schools multiple times often contributed to social issues such as difficulty establishing safe, healthy friendships and to academic issues such as falling behind in coursework. Several participants also recalled inflexible teachers or systems unwilling to attempt to meet their individual needs or to take into account the constraints under which they were forced to operate. All these factors contributed to *pushing* these students out of high school. Similarly, various home issues (e.g., poverty, abuse, divorce) functioned to *pull* them out of school, as did outlets that functioned as an escape (e.g., pregnancy, drugs). Conversely, constructive outlets such as performing arts, journaling, and nature served as protective factors that prevented many from giving up hope.

A somewhat unexpected finding was that participants ultimately did not regret their decisions to leave school. As adults, they still believed this decision was their best alternative at the time, and beyond that, they saw it as an integral part of the journey that had led them to their current success. Hansen and Toso (2007) similarly found that for some gifted individuals, leaving high school is seen as necessary to preserve their sense of self-worth and to accelerate them to a more appropriate level of learning. Just as there may be *honor* in underachievement for gifted students (Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003), there may also be *honor* in dropping out. That being said, we must be careful not to perpetuate the misconception that gifted students who leave high school will “make it on their own.” While the participants in this study did find personal and professional success, some faced significant struggle before they “found themselves.”

Consistent with prior research (Doll et al., 2013; Zabloski & Milacci, 2012), the decision for participants in this study to leave high school was not spontaneous for any of them. Elementary and, primarily, middle school experiences contributed to this decision. In line with Zabloski’s and Milacci’s (2012) research on gifted students who dropped out, an overarching theme throughout the study, similar to the need for support, was the need for connections with individuals within the school system and to future aspirations. The latter is supported by Landis and Reschly’s (2013) finding that many gifted students who dropped out cognitively disengaged from school when they were unable to meaningfully connect their schooling to their future goals.

All the students were “nontraditional completers.” All had a need for support; positive outlets; access to relevant, challenging content; acceptance from peers; and connections with adults and to future aspirations. They needed to “see” the future and have a plan for it, and they needed a purpose. When many of these individuals left high school, they floundered for a while before finding that purpose. Those who did not struggle with determining a future path tended to have strong support from parents who helped them find appropriate options; however, they were not immune to social and emotional issues. Many of them still struggled and could very well have benefitted from counseling support during the transition from middle school to high school as well as the transition to a more accelerated academic path.

Implications for Practice

A major implication of this research is that alternate paths to success are valid and need to be acknowledged by educators. Traditional schooling cannot meet every student’s needs as evidenced by this study’s findings. Participants in this study loved **learning but** for a variety of different reasons, their educational needs could not be met by traditional schools. All these participants, with or without family and peer support, eventually found success by nontraditional routes. If gifted students are determined to leave, educators and parents must be prepared to help ease that transition and to accept alternate paths as valid. Traditional schooling is not always the best fit for all gifted students, especially when considering their asynchronous development. Invested adults can help students establish trajectories that lead to success (Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003; Zabloski & Milacci, 2012). In part, this might consist of determining a plan of action for the future based on attainable goals.

Furthermore, there must also be institutional supports in place for gifted students who are considering a path out of high school. These supports might include college telecourses for high school and middle school (and possibly even elementary) students in order to appropriately accelerate their learning. They might also include differentiated options such as online classes (or schools), early participation in AP courses, concurrent and/or dual enrollment based on readiness instead of age, as well subject-based or whole-grade acceleration. Districts can also offer early career counseling and options for graduation from high school based on demonstrating competencies rather than arbitrary seat-time requirements. Ideally, there would also be programs in place that nurture the social-emotional development of gifted students, as well as counselors or other caring individuals who are aware of the unique affective needs of gifted students and can provide guidance and/or counseling as needed (Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003; Zabloski & Milacci, 2012).

Finally, the word “dropout” needs to be reconsidered. This term groups individuals together and identifies them by one event in their lives. It stigmatizes individuals and diverts focus away from the educational system that could not meet their needs. Educators and researchers should be sensitive in their choice of terminology. In addition to alternative terminology proposed earlier (i.e., nontraditional completers, self-selected accelerators), it is also worth considering the use of person-first language. For example, the term *dropout* could be replaced with *students who choose to leave school*. Person-first language is one small way educators and researchers can honor the individual and his/her complex journey.

Future Research

How did these individuals “beat the odds”? Was giftedness a protective factor? How do we nurture in others the resilience they displayed? These are areas for future research.

Additionally, given research on this topic is nascent and the findings of this study are limited to only these fourteen participants, more research is needed on why gifted students choose to leave school. Furthermore, when does the decision to seek an alternate path begin? Determining how early this decision process begins might allow appropriate supports to be put in place. Also, research based on effective supports is needed. The participants in this study reflected on several supports that could have helped them in school, offering a potential starting place for research on this topic. Finally, there are high-potential students who consider dropping out but who ultimately decide to graduate with a high school diploma. Future research should examine the factors that influence these students' decision to stay in school.

Limitations

One of the primary limitations of this study is the small number of participants and the fact that the sample was composed exclusively of Caucasian students. Additionally, because of the wide range of ages, it was not possible to obtain a large number of responses within a particular age range. This limits the findings to only the fourteen participants in this study.

Another limitation was related to sampling. Because of the sensitive nature of this research, it was difficult to get participants to self-select and therefore challenging to limit participation to those who met a specific set of predetermined inclusion criteria, including formal gifted identification. With that said, several participants did self-select, limiting the findings of this study. Overall, because individuals who agreed to participate could have been drastically different from others who did not participate, these findings cannot be generalized beyond this study.

A final, potential limitation centers on the collection of retrospective accounts. Individuals, in recounting, may attribute current emotions and feelings to past events (Roese, & Vohs, 2012). They also may be motivated to portray themselves and their actions/decisions in the most positive light (Sklad, 2012). However, the participants shared past experiences that were not "positive," giving their retrospective comments credibility. We attempted to mitigate participant bias by using such words as *alternate path* during interviews and correspondence to diminish negative associations and by conducting two member checks that gave participants time to reflect and alter their responses.

Conclusion

The gifted individuals in this study felt very strongly that the educational system was not designed to meet their cognitive and affective needs at the time that they chose to pursue alternate paths. Furthermore, most felt this decision was not only necessary but extremely influential in their future successes. In reality, traditional schooling is often not equipped

to meet every student's learning needs. If gifted students start to disengage from an educational system that cannot meet their unique needs, they need to be aware that alternate paths to traditional schooling do exist. Clearly, we do not want gifted students, or any students for that matter, to drop out of school, but if they do choose an alternate path, we need to make sure that they are making that decision from a place of knowledge about appropriate alternative options and with the guidance of caring individuals in their lives. We must also equip our gifted students with the skills necessary to be successful on their journeys, regardless of path they choose.

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