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One Step Toward Success: Motivation for Reengagement for Out-of-School Youth

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to gain understanding, from the perceptions of former out-of-school youth (OSY), as to what motivated reconnection into education or training programs. In addition, the study investigated what recruitment and program approaches they felt were important engagement strategies. A phenomenological design was chosen to capture the lived experience of OSY, aged 20 to 24 years old, who have reconnected at adult literacy and training centers. Nine OSY participated in open-ended interviews. As a result of the rich stories and open discussion, the researcher was able to identify the following four themes that capture the overall essence of the experience of the group: (a) OSY have goals for the future, (b) OSY need continuous support, (c) reconnection was a positive experience, and (d) OSY exhibit self-motivation and drive. Findings suggest a need for discretionary funding to meet the needs of OSY, redesigning K-12 education to provide individualized career pathways that begin in earlier grades, and providing a network of support agencies designed to seamlessly serve OSY.

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One Step Toward Success: Motivation for Reengagement for Out-of-School Youth

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

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Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education

St. John Fisher College

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Dedication

Two important women come to mind as I complete my doctoral dissertation: my grandmothers Margaret Soluri and Alma Wasson. Although long gone from this earth, their wisdom and beauty are forever on my mind and in my heart.

I am blessed with the support of my family and friends, who gave me strength and encouragement in so many ways.

Thank you to my staff and coworkers who listened and gave valuable insight, which enabled me to process my thoughts and continue writing with patience and a clearer voice!

I would especially like to recognize my husband, Mark, who has shown unwavering support with my educational, professional, and personal endeavors. My world is not possible without him being in it. I am forever grateful for your love, advice, and technical assistance!

A big thank you to the best cohort ever! I was inspired by your brilliance and honored to be part of a group of such special people. Amy, Mitch, and Steve—the process was easier with the support of such a highly functioning team! I will miss our Zoom meetings and getaway lunches.

To my committee members, Dr. Guillermo Montes and Dr. Gloria Morgan, the dream team of knowledge and professionalism, thank you for your encouragement and expertise! I could not ask for two better people to collaborate with on my journey. I will truly miss our time together.

Thank you, Susan, for assisting me with my research; your support made a world of difference. To the wonderful adult education professionals who work with OSY, especially those at the Literacy Zones in Niagara County, what you do matters to the individuals who reenter into education and training programs. For some students, it is the first time they have experienced a supportive educational environment. The caring and encouraging relationships are appreciated and cited as a major reason for their success! Thank you for what you do!

Biographical Sketch

Karen Kwandrans is currently the Assistant Vice President of Academic Affairs at Niagara County Community College. Ms. Kwandrans attended the University at Buffalo from 1984-1988 and graduated with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Nursing in 1988. She attended SUNY Buffalo State College from 1997-2000 and graduated with a Master of Science in Education in 2000. She came to St. John Fisher College in the summer of 2018 and began her doctoral studies in the Ed.D. program in Executive Leadership. Ms. Kwandrans pursued her research on the motivation for reengagement for out-of-school youth under the direction of Dr. Guillermo Montes and Dr. Gloria Morgan and received an Ed.D. degree in 2020.

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to gain understanding, from the perceptions of former out-of-school youth (OSY), as to what motivated reconnection into education or training programs. In addition, the study investigated what recruitment and program approaches they felt were important engagement strategies. A phenomenological design was chosen to capture the lived experience of OSY, aged 20 to 24 years old, who have reconnected at adult literacy and training centers. Nine OSY participated in open-ended interviews. As a result of the rich stories and open discussion, the researcher was able to identify the following four themes that capture the overall essence of the experience of the group: (a) OSY have goals for the future, (b) OSY need continuous support, (c) reconnection was a positive experience, and (d) OSY exhibit self-motivation and drive. Findings suggest a need for discretionary funding to meet the needs of OSY, redesigning K-12 education to provide individualized career pathways that begin in earlier grades, and providing a network of support agencies designed to seamlessly serve OSY.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Population

Out-of-school youth (OSY), individuals who are 16 to 24 years old and who are not enrolled in school nor are seeking employment, face multiple barriers to reentering an educational environment and completing their educational goals. Barriers preventing OSY from reentering education, job training programs, and employment include the lack of educational attainment, becoming a young parent or caregiver, limited transportation, or experiencing housing instability (Bloom, Thompson, & Ivry, 2010; Corcoran, Hanleybrown, Steinberg, & Tallant, 2012). In 2018, OSY represented 4.4 million individuals, totaling 11.2% of young adults in this age group in the United States, which is lower than during the 2008 recession, when the percentage of OSY was 12.6% (Burd-Sharps et al., 2017; Lewis, 2020). The number of OSY peaked at 14.7% in 2010, and although this decrease represents 1.3 million fewer OSY, often persistent barriers are still in place that impede reconnection, including the lack of a high school diploma and parenting and caregiving obligations (Burd-Sharps et al., 2017). At this writing, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, real numbers on OSY are unknown. We do know that unemployment rates are estimated to increase, and prior research shows that the percentage of OSY aligns with unemployment trends (Lewis, 2020).

Many other factors contribute to the problem of youth disconnection in the United States (Boylan & Renzulli, 2016; Burd-Sharps et al., 2017). Geographic location, quality of education, racial and ethnic background, and poverty all influence high school

completion and entry into the workforce. These contributors are important because education level and lack of training often leave OSY working in entry-level jobs with limited benefits (Belfield, Levin, & Rosen, 2012). Age is also an important component, as the number of OSY youth ages 19 to 24 years makes up 78% of the OSY population, with 22% within the age of 16 to 18 years (Corcoran et al., 2012). Gender does not make a considerable difference, with young women in the United States slightly less likely to be disconnected than young men, at 10.8% versus 11.5% (Lewis, 2020). As older young adults represent the majority of OSY, they often face difficulty in attaining or advancing in employment because of a lack of education and job skills and are faced with family responsibilities or parenting and caregiving. These factors may act as a motivating factor or become barriers to reconnection with an educational environment.

The percentage of OSY is not homogeneous across the United States; there is great variability among the states (Burd-Sharps, Lewis, Basu, Ofrane, & Recio, 2018). Young people in this category are disconnected at a rate of 7.0% in the state of North Dakota (the lowest in the United States) to the highest percentage of 17.9% in Alaska (Burd-Sharps et al., 2018). Reasons for the difference include state unemployment rates, race, income, and geographic location. States with lower percentages of youth disconnection include North Dakota (7%), Iowa (7.4%), Massachusetts (7.4%), Rhode Island (7.5%), and Minnesota (7.5%) (Burd-Sharps et al., 2018). Individuals who reside in the Midwest or Northeast are at a lower risk of disconnection (10.2% compared to 12.9%, respectively), compared to those living in Southern states (Burd-Sharps et al., 2018). States with the lowest rates share similar features, such as low unemployment

rates, higher income levels than the national average, populations with less diversity, and quality school systems (U.S. Department of Labor [USDOL], 2019).

In contrast, states with the highest percentages of disconnection include Alaska (17.9%), Louisiana (17.5%), West Virginia (17.3%), New Mexico (15%), and Arkansas (16.1%) (Burd-Sharps et al., 2018). All of these states struggle with unemployment, racial and ethnic disparities, and poor educational systems. New York State has a youth disconnection rate of 12.1%, placing it at 32 out of the 50 states. New York State, in comparison to both the highest and lowest performing states for youth disconnection, ranks in the middle as far as youth disconnection, unemployment, and high school graduation rates. New York State has a higher-than-average annual income for the nation, ranking with the best performers, and it is also more diverse than states with both the lowest and highest rates of disconnection (Burd-Sharps et al., 2017). OSY residing in Niagara County, in western New York State, are the focus of current research. OSY in the Buffalo-Cheektowaga-Niagara areas of New York include OSY populations of 12,800 or 9.2% (Burd-Sharps et al., 2017).

OSY are not unique to the United States: 16 to 24-year-old teens and young adults who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET) are also a global issue (Millett & Kevelson, 2018). The Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reports that 18% of youth in the 38 countries included within the OECD are disengaged (Millett & Kevelson, 2018). There is a wide range of youth disconnectedness rates throughout the OECD countries, with rates highest in Turkey (35%) and Italy (28%) and lowest in Iceland (8%), Luxemburg (8%), and the Netherlands (7%) (Millett &

Kevelson, 2018). The United States is in the center of these statistics, at 11.2%, as they relate to youth disconnection in those aged 16 to 24 years (Lewis, 2020).

Although NEET youth represent individuals through the age of 29 years, for the United States, the range of 16 to 24 years is considered for this research, since information on student status is not available for individuals ages 25 years and above (OECD, 2018). Youth in education includes any attending either part-time or full-time classes. Employment is defined, according to the OECD (2018), as all those who have been in paid work for at least 1 hour in the referenced week of the survey or were temporarily absent from such work. Therefore, NEET youth, like OSY, are not in education, training, or employment.

A breakdown of the NEET population by age, according to the OECD (2018), shows similarity with the United States in that the majority of NEETs are in their 20s. Individuals aged 25 to 29 years old are the highest group, accounting for 45% of the NEET population across OECD countries; youth aged 16 to 19 years make up only 16% of NEETs (OECD, 2018). Rates also varied by sex, where women were represented at a much higher rate than men in almost all OECD countries except the United States. The OECD average NEET rate for young women is about 6 percentage points higher than the rate for young men (OECD, 2018).

Regardless of their ages, there are many reasons OSY do not reenter education, job training programs, and employment. These include a lack of educational attainment, becoming a young parent or caregiver, limited transportation, or experiencing housing instability. Youth disconnectedness is not a problem that is limited to the United States, but it also affects countries worldwide. Similar factors for youth disconnection, such as

high unemployment, parenting, and caregiving, are comparable. The United States differs from other countries when gender is considered because the United States has no significant difference between male and female disconnection, whereas higher rates of female OSY were reported for all other OECD (2018) countries. There is a wide range of individual issues that prevent OSY from reengagement into education or job training, requiring those who offer academic and vocational programs to address the individual needs of those seeking services. The next section reviews the programming available to those who are OSY.

Programs

Most countries have tried two different approaches to reduce the percentage of OSY. They include programs and policies focused on basic skills and job training and those that focus on education attainment. This section summarizes programs for OSY in the United States as well as NEET individuals internationally. Most countries researched provide national funding for programs with the goal of increasing basic academic skills while also providing job and employability training.

Programs to reengage youth into education programs and prepare them for employment have been in place in the United States as early as 1963 with the creation of Neighborhood Youth Corps (NYC). Neighborhood Youth Corps, sponsored by the United States Department of Labor, was designed to assist unemployed 14- to 21-year-old individuals from low-income families by increasing job skills while earning income and completing high school (USDOL, 2018). Programs continued to be developed that focused on the education and employability of youth.

Job Corps, another organization for OSY, was established in 1964 as part of the Economic Opportunity Act. This legislation provided programming for 16- to 24-year-old students in need of educational and workforce training. JOBSTART was created by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) and was funded by the Job Training Partnership Act of 1982 (USDOL, 2018). JOBSTART provided academic and technical job skills training for OSY with the goal of increasing access to higher-wage employment. Most recently, in 2014, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) established new goals for the education and technical skills development of workers and increased the opportunities for employers as well (USDOL, 2014). WIOA extended opportunities for OSY by requiring grantees to increase the number of OSY enrolled from 25% to 75% of the participants. This shift in funding priorities addresses the need to engage OSY with a pathway to education, training, and employment (USDOL, 2018).

Program Effectiveness

Program development and effectiveness is a concern for sponsors, providers, local and federal governments, and private foundations. Many factors, such as age, gender, and ethnicity, and other demographic information for individuals considered OSY, are important for program development. Implementing methods to recruit and engage participants can be difficult with the various barriers and wide demographic range of those considered OSY. Many well-designed, true empirical studies have been implemented to measure the effectiveness of programs serving OSY. These programs are primarily large, federally funded programs. Most smaller programs have not been rigorously evaluated for several factors. Most are executed by community-based

organizations with few resources or knowledge to perform a study, or it is not practical given the funding cycle or number of participants (Lerman, 2005). A breakdown of major U.S. programs and the results of the evaluations are summarized in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1

Selected Rigorous Evaluations of Programs for High School Dropouts in the

United States

Program Name and Evaluation Dates	Target Group	Program Design	Summary of Results
JOBSTART (1985-1993)	Disadvantaged youth 17 to 21 years old who lack a high school diploma	Education, training, support services, job placement assistance.	Increases in GED receipt; few impacts on labor market outcomes (except in CET site). Overall null effects.
National Guard Youth ChalleNGe (2005-Present)	Disadvantaged youth, 16 to 18 years old, who lack a high school diploma.	Education, job training, and community service residential quasi-military setting.	Increased attainment of GED attainment, increased gains in employment, increased (20% more) in earnings to control group, no difference in crime, delinquency, health, or lifestyle.
Job Corps (2008)	Disadvantaged youth, ages 16 to 24 years old, who lack a high school diploma	Education and technical/vocational training. Primarily residential program.	Increases in number enrolled in education, increase in the number of vocational/technical certificates, decrease in arrest and conviction rates. Earning results continue for older youth (20 to 24 years old)
YouthBuild (2011-2013)	Low-income family youths, 16 to 24 years old, who lack a high school diploma	Education, training leading to construction trades certification.	Increase in the number of high school equivalency credentials, increased numbers of college attendance, increase in the self-reported employment rates, increase in civic engagement (primarily due to YouthBuild activities). Few participants completed a 4-year degree, no effects noted on positive youth development

Note. Data for JOBSTART from “Building a Learning Agenda Around Disconnected Youth,” by D. Bloom, S. L. Thompson, and R. Ivry, 2010, New York, NY: MDRC. Copyright 2010 by MDRC; M. Millenky, D. Bloom, S. Muller-Ravett, and J. Broadus “Staying on Course: Three-Year Results of the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Evaluation,” 2011, New York, NY: MDRC. Copyright 2011 by MDRC; and “Laying a Foundation: Four-Year Results from the National YouthBuild Evaluation by C. Miller, D. Cummings, M. Millenky, A. Wiegand, and D. Long, 2018, New York, NY; MDRC. Copyright 2018 by MDRC.

In the short-term, the majority of the programs were successful in two areas:

- (a) compared with the control group, several studies noted increased high school equivalency completion for participants, and
- (b) compared to the control group, program

completers entered employment at higher rates (Bloom et al., 2010; Hassain, 2015; Lerman, 2005). Although these results mean increases in education and employment for a great number of OSY, most programs reported fade-out effects in the long-term. In addition, the cost of most programs outweighed the advantages that some participants experienced through participation (Bloom et al., 2010; Hassain, 2015; Lerman, 2005). Only Job Corps showed a positive record for improving the earnings of youth, number of weeks of employment, and increases in attainment of a GED or vocational certificates. Participation in Job Corps was linked to decreases in criminal activity, convictions, and incarcerations (Lerman, 2005). Of all federal programs, Job Corps was the only program that was cost effective as far as the outcomes obtained (Bloom et al., 2010).

International programs aimed at NEET populations show mixed results as well. In 2013, the EU established a Youth Guarantee program, which specified, “The term ‘Youth Guarantee’ refers to a situation in which young people receive a good-quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within a period of four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education” (European Commission, 2015, p. 2).

The Youth Guarantee program is designed for youth and young adults up to the age of 25 years. Countries with youth unemployment levels of more than 25% established Youth Guarantee Implementation Plans (YGIP) and can use EU funding from the Youth Employment Initiative. The main goals of the Youth Guarantee program are short-term solutions with education and training. The longer-term goals of programs designed as pathways from school to work include education and training within in-demand technical

skills (European Commission, 2015). EU countries have established individual programs due to the vast differences in the NEET populations between countries.

In 2015, 3 years later, an evaluation of the Youth Guarantee program showed widespread success. Unemployment decreased 3.4%, and of the 14 million participants in Youth Guarantee programs, nine million, or 64%, reconnected with employment, education, traineeship, or apprenticeship (European Commission, 2015). Individual countries boasted improvements in education and employment indicators, including Spain, which increased apprenticeship from 4,000 apprentices in 2013 to 15,000 apprentices in 2015. Spain also increased the number of enterprises that sponsored apprenticeships from less than 500 to 5,600 in the same timeframe (European Commission, 2015). An evaluation of the Brussels Transition Trainingship Program, which was designed for NEET participants with low education levels, reported that 73% of participants obtained employment or reengaged with education compared to 47% in the control group (European Commission, 2015).

Canada also has programs designed to decrease the number of NEET individuals and to increase participation in education, training, or employment. Federally funded programs aim to address the barriers youth and young adults, ages 15 to 24 years, have with obtaining employment. Programs such as Blade Runners, which was established in 1994, report that 75% of program completers are placed into employment (Cooper, 2018). An evaluation of the Toronto Youth Corps states that 67% of participants reentered employment or education. Similarly, the Pay for Success Program saw increases in both educational and soft skills, with a 93% completion rate for participants in the academic program (Cooper, 2018).

Problem Statement

Multiple factors play a role in students navigating, entering, and completing their educational and career goals. Research has shown that situational, institutional, and motivational barriers disrupt the education of students (Corcoran et al., 2012; Flynn, Brown, Johnson, & Rodger, 2011). Many OSY have not completed a high school education, and they have few job prospects. Education level and lack of training often leave OSY primarily working in entry-level jobs with limited benefits (Belfield et al., 2012). “Research has shown that young persons with significant gaps in education-work sequence of activity clearly experience a pay and employment handicap even when they later seek work” (Belfield et al., 2012, p. 4).

In addition to decreased employment opportunities, those who are disconnected from education and employment also lose the benefit of adult mentors and advocates in school and the workplace, as well as support from peers who are in school or work. For OSY who reconnect, completing either some postsecondary education or a degree or certificate program leads to increased earning (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2012). One pathway to education for OSY are programs that enable OSY to receive postsecondary training leading to certifications in high-demand areas.

Even so, the needs and qualities of OSY vary in many ways, which suggests that education and training programs cannot use a one-size-fits-all approach to recruitment and design. Research on effective education and job training programs exists, but additional research focused on recruitment to and retention in programs is needed. In particular, the views of OSY are missing from the research, leading to an incomplete understanding of how these programs can be more effective and engaging. Thus,

knowing what motivates OSY who have overcome barriers and have reengaged into education, training, or employment may be valuable when developing effective reengagement programs. This research examined what motivated 20- to 24-year-old OSY to reenter education or training programs, and if positive youth development components affected participant retention.

Theoretical Rationale

Positive youth development (PYD) theory provides a framework for research investigating why program recruitment and design are both essential to reengagement. PYD theory states that “if young people have mutually beneficial relationships with the people and institutions in their social world, they will experience clear, positive experiences through contributions to self, family, community, and civil society” (Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2016, p. 12). In addition, the same research suggests programs that use positive youth development approaches encourage positive youth behavior and show higher student reengagement.

PYD grew from the work of comparative psychologists and biologists who began researching plasticity of developmental processes (how an organism or individual adapts to its changing environment) associated with biological and contextual levels of organization (Lerner, 2005). This idea impacted the area of human developmental science in the 1970s and led to theoretical papers by both Overton in 1973 and Lerner in 1978. This research shifted the nature-nurture debate to an “integrated, relational prospective about genetic and contextual influences on human development” (Lerner, 2005, p. 13).

PYD is one of the many theories and models under the metatheories of relational-developmental systems. The theory is based on the ideas and frameworks associated with

developmental systems theories that were presented as early as the 1930s. Relational-development systems moved away from the idea of Cartesian dualism (nature vs. nurture) and supported the idea that across the lifespan, individual and contextual relations are mutually influential for development (Lerner, 2005). At its core, PYD is built on ideas associated with the relational-development systems metatheory of human development associated with psychologist Willis Overton. Relational-development systems metatheory relates that “adolescence is a period of relatively extensive plasticity in that adolescents have the capacity to actualize that plasticity through intentional self-regulatory processes” (Lerner, Harris, et al., 2016, p. 3).

Contrary to the deficit model of research that frames youth as a negative period, the PYD model looks to build on the unique strengths of individuals (Lerner, Almerigi, et al., 2016). PYD theorists suggest that research on adolescents has mainly concentrated on deficits instead of on adolescents’ strengths, and the goal should be to provide programming to develop assets in youth (Patterson, 2018). PYD is of the view that adolescents are resources to be developed. “PYD works through three individual but connected concepts: (a) a developmental process, (b) a philosophy or approach to youth programming, and (c) instances of youth programs and organizations focused on fostering the healthy and positive development of youth” (Lerner, Burkhard, Murray, & Robinson, 2018, p. 2). These concepts are important for those who work to reconnect OSY into education or training. The “strength-based individual context conception” is one of the major adolescence theoretical foci today (Lerner, Harris, et al., 2016, p. 3). This means connecting youth to programs and opportunities to encourage positive growth and development so that individual thriving can be accomplished.

As a result of the work of Overton and Lerner, interest in developmental systems theory began to grow and research on PYD increased (Lerner, 2005). As scientists sought to explain interindividual differences across a lifespan and potential for systematic change, a respective developmental system emerged. “This potential for change represents a fundamental strength of human development” (Lerner, Lerner, von Eye, Bowers, & Lewin-Bizan, 2011, p. 1108). PYD distinguished itself from other relational-development systems theories with the concept of thriving. Lerner and Lerner’s model shows thriving as a progression of personal skills and qualities. These attributes—competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring—are the characteristics termed the *Five C’s of PYD* (Lerner et al., 2011). Equally important, Lerner et al. (2011) emphasized that “such programs are most likely to result in the development of these C’s when they involve positive and sustained adult-youth relationships, youth skill-building activities, and opportunities for youth participation in leadership of community activities” (Lerner, Almerigi, et al., 2016, p. 12). Thriving is also fundamental in the PYD approach modeled by Damon and his associates (Lerner et al., 2018). Their work looked at PYD and how cultivating purpose and thriving in individuals impacted an individual’s development. This was accomplished through participation in programs and activities that served and contributed to the community.

The use of the term *developmental assets* as a measure of strengths of adolescents was created by Benson and associates at the Search Institute (Lerner et al., 2018). This PYD model looks at thriving by measuring internal assets that individuals possess and combining them with the external assets of their community, thus producing thriving. Individual and community characteristics were also researched in the PYD model

(Eccles, 2004) that studied the fit between circumstantial variables and individual characteristics, which led to positive development. Other models contributed to the body of research on PYD, including theories on self-development; how individuals understand or explain variables in their development; resilience and development; the progression from adolescence to adulthood; and the influence of schools, adult interactions, and programs (Lerner et al., 2018).

Given that PYD considers the role of external variables, such as schools, communities, and adult interactions and programs, the role of community-based organizations has been shown to benefit the growth and thriving of adolescents. Consensus among researchers began to develop that “successful transition to adulthood requires more than avoiding drugs, violence, school failure, or precarious sexual activity” (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004, p. 100). PYD and the promotion of youth development have been deemed the answer to preventing problem behaviors to begin with. With this in mind, PYD theory may explain why there is so little youth connection despite multiple federal-, state-, and foundation-sponsored youth programs. Research is needed to determine how programs implement the theory of PYD, because programs that provide youth and young adults with mutually beneficial relationships show that they are more likely to experience clear positive experiences through contributions to self, family, community, and civil society (Lerner, Almerigi, et al., 2016). Catalano et al. (2004) describe PYD programs in this way:

Positive youth development programs are approaches that seek to achieve one or more of the following objectives: (1) promotes bonding, (2) fosters resilience, (3) promotes social competence, (4) promotes emotional competence, (5) promotes

cognitive competence, (6) promotes behavioral competence, (7) promotes moral competence, (8) fosters self-determination, (9) fosters spirituality, (10) fosters self-efficacy, (11) fosters clear and positive identity, (12) fosters belief in the future, (13) provides recognition for positive behavior, (14) provides opportunity for prosocial involvement, and (15) fosters prosocial norms (pp. 101-102).

Research on the evaluation of programs that include PYD activities has been conducted, and although there were multiple strategies used throughout the programs, several strategies emerged in successful programs, including:

Methods to strengthen social, emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and moral competencies; build self-efficacy, shape messages from family and community about clear standards for youth behavior; increase healthy bonding with adults, peers, and younger children; expand opportunities and recognition for youth; provide structure and consistency in program delivery; and intervene with youth for at least 9 months or longer. (Catalano et al., 2004, p. 114)

Research suggests that successful programs have improved positive behaviors for youth, leading to educational attainment and thriving; therefore, positive youth development approaches in recruiting and programming may be beneficial. Researchers, policymakers, grant funders, and organizations can benefit from the use of PYD in the design and implementation of programs serving OSY.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to gain understanding from the perceptions of former OSY as to what motivated their reconnection to education and training programs. In addition, this study sought to understand what recruitment and program approaches

they felt were important engagement strategies to draw OSY back into education or job training programs. Information gained from academic and job training program participants, as well as those seeking to reconnect, will contribute to the literature on youth reengagement. Research is available regarding education and job training programs, but a gap exists in the literature as to the youth perspective on reengagement.

Research Questions

This study examined 20- to 24-year-old former OSY who have reconnected into an education or training program. An analysis of the factors that led to disconnection, as well as the reason for reconnection and what aspects of the training program attracted them, were studied. Through open-ended interviews and discussions with the study participants, information, and perspectives on reengagement were examined. A phenomenological design was chosen in this study to capture the lived experiences of OSY. Education and job training programs that work with OSY use a variety of strategies to recruit individuals into the programs. Gaining a better understanding from the youth and young adult perspective was important to measure the effectiveness of these approaches. The guiding questions for this research study included:

1. What do OSY perceive to be the main influence for reengaging in education or job training programs?
2. What engagement strategies do participants say attracted them to education or job training programs?

Potential Significance of the Study

Although research has been conducted on OSY and barriers to engagement, little research has been conducted relating to recruitment and program design using the

perceptions of the individuals who engaged with programs or those who reengaged but did not complete the previous programs (Bloom et al., 2010). Research will benefit policymakers who appropriate funds for OSY programming and also leaders in organizations that design and administer programs targeting OSY. Determining the main reasons that OSY reentered education, training, or employment was necessary to guide policy, evaluate current program design, and establish outcomes for future funding opportunities. Conducting research designed to gain information on youth perceptions of programming and what influences reengagement addresses a gap in the existing body of literature.

Definitions of Terms

Organizations that provide programming to the OSY population often use different definitions when categorizing this population of youth and young adults. Although there are many similarities among the measures studied, not all use the same criteria and verbiage when describing OSY. Researchers have analyzed how programs define the population and percentages of youth who meet each criterion (Fernandes-Alcantara & Gabe, 2011). Table 1.2 includes information on studies of OSY and the definitions of those included as participants in each.

Table 1.2 highlights that, although many studies focused on 16- to 24-year-old OSY, some looked at wider age ranges when considering youth and young adult disconnection, with one study evaluating subjects as young as 12 years old with an ending cohort age of 23 years (Fernandes-Alcantara & Gabe, 2011). Youth disconnection has differing definitions, and the issue has been studied for a better understanding of who constitutes this population in the United States. Many foundations and federal

departments use data to better understand the demographics and trends of those who are OSY (Fernandes-Alcantara & Gabe, 2011; U.S. Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2008). Organizations and government offices primarily use 16 to 24 years as the age range for OSY, while other qualifiers—income level, being a parent or caregiver, homelessness, foster care participant, mental or physical handicap, or having been in the juvenile justice system—vary among programs for participation. The lack of a shared operational definition of the term for individuals in this age group is not a problem that is exclusive to the United States.

As shown in Table 1.3, internationally, the definition of the NEET population varies not only by individual countries but also between the OECD and European Commission. The OECD defines NEET as 15 to 24 years old, whereas the Council of the European Union (EU) includes individuals up to the age of 29 years (Batini, Corallino, Toti, & Bartolucci, 2017). Most often, the populations' age range, as well as the age of compulsory education between countries, accounts for the difference in NEET population definitions.

Age, gender, and ethnicity information for individuals considered OSY is important for program development and implementing methods to recruit and engage participants. Defining the target population is essential for program designs, development of outcomes, measurement, and recruitment. Older OSY and those who are considered idle, for example, are more difficult to reach and may prove challenging to recruit enough participants (Bloom et al., 2010). Because the OSY population is heterogeneous, organizations and funding organizations need to understand the differences in order to reconnect individuals with education and employment programs.

Table 1.2

Select Studies of Disconnected Youth

Study and Data Set	Definition of Disconnected Youth
<p>The Condition of Education (2007), U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.</p> <p>Current Population Survey, Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce.</p>	<p>Disconnected label not applied; however, the study evaluated the number and characteristics of noninstitutionalized youth 16 through 19 who were out of school and not working.</p>
<p>What is Happening to Youth Employment Rates? (2004), Congressional Budget Office. Current Population Survey, Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce.</p>	<p>Disconnected label not applied; however, the studies evaluated the number and characteristics of noninstitutionalized and institutionalized youth ages 16 through 24 who were out of school and not working.</p>
<p>Reconnecting Disadvantaged Young Men (2006), by Peter Edelman, Harry J. Holzer, and Paul Offner. Current Population Survey, Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. Supplemented with data on youth incarceration rates from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice.</p>	
<p>Left Behind in the Labor Market: Labor Market Problems of the Nation's Out-of-School, Young Adult Populations (2003), by Andrew Sum et al., Northeastern University. Current Population Survey, Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce.</p>	
<p>Prevalence, Patterns, and Outcomes, by Brett V. Brown and Carol Emig, Child Trends, in America's Disconnected Youth: Toward a Preventative Strategy, (1999), by Douglas J. Besharov, Editor. National Longitudinal Survey of Youth for 1979 (NLSY79). Youth were surveyed annually through 1994, and biennially after 1994. For purposes of the study, data were evaluated for youth who were ages 14 through 16 at the start of the survey. The most recent year for which data were evaluated was 1991, when the oldest youth in the cohort were 28.</p>	<p>Disconnected label applies to youth in the survey who were not working (including in the armed forces) or in school and were not married to a connected spouse for at least 26 weeks in a year over the period 1979 through 1991. Short-term disconnection is 26 weeks in each of 1-2 years. Long-term disconnection is 26 weeks in each of 3 years or more.</p>
<p>Profiling the Plight of Disconnected Youth in America (2006), by Thomas MaCurdy, Bryan Keating, and Sriniketh Suryasasha Nagavarapu, Stanford University, for the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. National Longitudinal Survey of Youth for 1997 (NLSY97). Youth are surveyed annually. For purposes of the study, data were evaluated for youth who were ages 12 through 16 at the start of the survey. The most recent year for which data were evaluated was 2003, when the oldest youth in the cohort were 23.</p>	<p>The disconnected label applies to youth in the survey who were not working or in school. A second definition applies to youth who are not in school or working and not married. Youth are considered disconnected for a year if they were not working or in school in the month they were surveyed and in at least 8 of the following 11 months over the period 1997 through 2003</p>
<p>The Transition to Adulthood: Characteristics of Young Adults Ages 18 to 24 in America (2003), by Susan Jekielek and Brett Brown, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Population Reference Bureau, and Child Trends. 2000 U.S. Census, PUMS-5 File, Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce.</p>	<p>The disconnected label applies to noninstitutionalized youth ages 18 to 24 who are not working (including in the armed forces) or in school and have no more than a high school diploma or GED. The study appears to be a point-in-time estimate.</p>
<p>Connected by 25: Improving the Life Chances of the Country's Most Vulnerable 14-24-Year-Olds (2003), by Michael Wald and Tia Martinez, Stanford University, for the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Cross-sectional analyses of data from Current Population Survey, Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce, and various national surveys of prison and jail populations.</p>	<p>The term disconnected is not precisely defined for youth ages 14 to 17, but youth are at risk of becoming disconnected—or having long-term spells of unemployment (i.e., 1 year or more) if they are: a high school dropout, and/or in the juvenile justice system, and/or unmarried mothers, and/or in foster care. The disconnected youth label applies to youth ages 18 to 24 who have a high school degree or less and are unemployed for a year or longer or are incarcerated.</p>

Note. Adapted from “Disconnected Youth: A Look at 16- to 24-Year Olds Who Are Not Working or In School,” by A. L. Fernandes-Alcantara and T. Gabe, 2011, p. 46-50. Copyright 2011 by the Congressional Research Service.

Table 1.3

Comparison of Definitions of NEET Around the World

Country	Name	Age	Compulsory Education
Australia	NEET	15-29 years	5-16/17 years old
Austria	NEET	16-24 years	6-15 years old
Brazil	NEET	15-29 years	7-14 years old
England	NEET	16-24 years	5-16 years old
Japan	NEET	15-34 years	9 years of education
United States	OSY, disconnected, opportunity, idle	16-24 years	5-16/18 years old, depending on state

Note. Adapted from “NEET: A Phenomenon Yet to Be Explored,” by F. Batini, V. Corallino, G. Toti, & M. Bartolucci, 2017, *Interchange: A Quarterly Review of Education*, 48(1), p. 19. Copyright 2017 by Springer Netherlands.

For the purpose of this study, the term *out-of-school youth* or *OSY* was used according to the USDOL (2020) definition, which is youth aged 16 to 24 years who are school dropouts or hold a secondary school diploma or the equivalency, but are low-income individuals who are also deficient in basic skills or are English-language learners. They may also have been involved in the juvenile or adult justice system, homeless, runaway, in foster care or aged out of the foster care system, pregnant or parenting, or an individual with a disability (USDOL, 2020).

Chapter Summary

OSY, who are 16 to 24 years old, make up 11.2% of the population of individuals in this age range in the United States. Older OSY, those 19 to 24 years old, account for 78% of all OSY. In the United States, gender is insignificant as a factor, but geographic location does make a difference in OSY rates. In addition, states with high

unemployment rates also tend to see higher rates of OSY. With the onset of COVID-19, a resultant increase in the national unemployment rate may also negatively impact OSY.

OSY are a concern not only for the United States but throughout the world as well. Known as NEET in most other countries, and consistent with the United States, older young adults make up the majority of the NEET population. Internationally, gender differences do occur with females experiencing higher rates of disconnection than males, whereas, in the United States, males and females experience similar rates. Youth and young adults who are disengaged lack the social capital as far as know-how and experiences, as well as supportive adults and peers who can assist them in education, training, and employment opportunities (Burd-Sharps et al., 2017). Educators, policymakers, community-based organizations, and businesses support programs aimed at reconnecting OSY and can assist with building connections and increasing their social capital.

Programs focus on two strategies for reconnecting OSY: providing basic academic and workplace skills or preventative programs aimed at high school education completion. Academic and training programs for OSY have been in existence for over 50 years in the United States, and some show success in reengaging this population. Large federally funded programs, such as Job Corps, have been extensively studied in randomized longitudinal studies and show short-term success for program participants through increased employment and higher levels of high school equivalency among program participants. These gains were not sustained in the long term. Research on the long-term effects of programs was lacking. International programs have cited better longitudinal success, with a majority of OSY and young adults reconnected with

education or employment. These results are encouraging as legislation, such as WIOA, allocates funds for programming aimed at recruiting and training OSY.

PYD theory provides a framework for research investigating why program recruitment and design are both essential to reengagement. Unlike the deficit models for youth, PYD considers the distinct strengths of individuals and how positive experiences in their lives lead to thriving. The purpose of this study was to gain understanding from the perceptions of former OSY as to what motivated reconnection with education, training, or employment programs. There is an abundance of research on high school dropout and disconnection, but little research available on reconnection.

Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature relating to motivational factors for reengagement into high school, alternative schools, training programs, or employment for OSY. The literature review was the basis for the phenomenological research methodology described in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 presents the findings of this study, and Chapter 5 offers a discussion of the research and its implications.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

OSY, those who are 16 to 24 years of age and who are neither employed nor in school, are a subject of research exploring educational and employment outcomes (Belfield et al., 2012; Burd-Sharps et al., 2017; Mawn et al., 2017). Chronic youth disconnection occurs when individuals have been out of school or unemployed for a period of time, which is often quantified as at least 1 year (Millett & Kevelson, 2018). In 2018 in the United States, there were 4.4 million individuals 16 to 24 years old who were not in school or employed, and who represent 11.2% of young adults in America (Lewis, 2020). In the United States, the following terms are also used in research to identify disconnected individuals: *out of school*, *disengaged*, *at risk*, *opportunity youth*, and *idle*. Youth disconnection is a complex issue because many youths go in and out of disconnection, often by entering alternative education, employment, or job skills programs (Millett & Kevelson, 2018). Federally funded programs are available to provide training, but recruitment and retention of OSY into programs can prove difficult depending on individuals' motivations and the barriers they face. Studies have found that there is no one universal factor motivating OSY to engage.

OSY may experience different reasons for engagement based on their individual circumstances and future goals. In work on motivation of marginalized youth, Katznelson (2016) provides five motivational tendencies that lead to reconnection for OSY. *Necessity motivation* is cited by those who need to complete or obtain further education, who are

motivated by the desire to acquire additional education in order to find employment. *Relational motivation* is important to many of the youth and young adults studied who state that the relationship with a trusted adult resulted in participation. *Mastering motivation* is an important feature of youth programs in the sense that the participants acquire skills and education. This feeling of accomplishment provides motivation through an appreciation of progressing in their lives. *Perspective motivation* relates to the knowledge of the choices and opportunities available for OSY. Students with perspective motivation are driven and are motivated to reconnect. Finally, *practice motivation* includes the opportunity for flexible entry into programs and creative program designs that include individualized learning, including hands-on work experiences (Katznelson, 2016). These types of motivation are present throughout the literature reviewed, albeit described in multiple ways.

The purpose of this review is to evaluate research on formerly disconnected youth who reengaged into high school or the equivalent, job training, or employment. Although there is a vast amount of literature examining school dropouts (De Witte, Cabus, Thyssen, Groot, & van Den Brink, 2013), there is a much smaller body of research regarding reengagement in dropout populations. This review considers factors that motivate individuals to reconnect, such as self-determination, supportive peers and adults, the effect of limited employment options, paid educational opportunities, and program designs. The literature examines a multitude of indicators and how they contribute to connecting youth and young adults into academic or technical education.

Self-Determination as a Factor for Reengagement

Self-determination is noted as a factor contributing to productive engagement in numerous studies. The research includes student perspectives of being a high school dropout compared to the stereotypes and prevailing thoughts about high school noncompletion (Bickerstaff, 2010; Lukes, 2013; Zaff, Ginsberg, Boyd, & Kakli, 2014). The majority of participants studied do not think of themselves as dropouts, but they think of themselves as students. Disconnections occur as a result of school environments where students are concerned about their personal safety and gang violence, lack of positive relationships with caring adults, and feeling a lack of significance or worth (Bickerstaff, 2010). Other factors contributing to individuals failing to obtain an education and the skills necessary for obtaining employment include unhealthy relationships that pull them from education, caregiving roles, and becoming the wage earner for their families (America's Promise Alliance, 2014). Additionally, for a number of students, physical and mental health issues, participation in the juvenile justice system, or foster care also result in interrupted or incomplete educational attainment and employment (Loprest, Spaulding, & Nightingale, 2019). For OSY who disengage due to emotional or behavioral health issues, alternative adult or college programs are often ways for them to reconnect into education and training (Wilkins & Bost, 2014).

As part of a large study on high school completion and reengagement (America's Promise Alliance, 2014), participants who reconnected into educational programs were unhappy with the term *dropout* and did not associate with it as a way to describe their situation. Since two-thirds of OSY eventually reconnect with education, training, or employment, the majority of participants are successful in taking steps toward completing

their educational or career goals (America's Promise Alliance, 2014). Despite the barriers they faced, many reconnected into education programs in other schools or through nontraditional methods of education or skill delivery, such as alternative programs. An overarching pattern in many of the studies is that many participants show a high level of persistence, they reconnect into high school equivalency or job training, and they show self-determination and dedication to finish their education. One study of youth disengagement (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012) found that 83% of the 613 respondents had the goal of completing some type of postsecondary education.

While the issue of reengagement of students in a degree-granting program has been studied, data have also been analyzed on young adult immigrant dropouts in the United States who return to education through adult and alternative programs (Lukes, 2013). Contrary to research stating that dropouts have little interest in academics or future education, study participants desired college degrees and careers requiring postsecondary education. Reasons for the disruption of education in this population included the need to work or support their families, and similar to students in the previous studies, these students did not agree with the view that they were dropouts, due to their intent and determination to reenter educational programs when they were able to do so.

Consistent with earlier work by Bickerstaff (2010), Lukes (2013), and Zaff et al. (2014), Iachini, Buettner, Anderson-Butcher, and Reno (2013) cited self-motivation as a reason for students attending classes in an alternative charter school. Participants stated a personal goal of acquiring a general education diploma (GED) or the desire to graduate with high school credentials to better support their families. Again, consistent with other studies, this self-determination is often a factor for students restarting their education.

Many of the study participants also cited self-discipline as the reason for staying in a program despite the challenges they experienced.

Individual or self-motivation is an important contributor to reengagement. Participants in many educational and training programs understand that obtaining additional education or training is important to their future and a necessity for personal and professional growth (Katznelson, 2016). Relying on self-determination and resilience, many young adults purposely make the decision to reenter into education. Often in spite of personal barriers and risk factors, individuals are driven to enter into and complete high school equivalency programs as well as training in technical education programs (Varga et al., 2019). In many cases, reconnection occurs when the issues experienced by OSY are resolved and they are able to attend programs without disruption (America's Promise Alliance, 2014).

Disconnected youths' engagement at a workforce and education center was also examined to determine the relationship between risk factors and the developmental process of reengagement among disconnected youth (Zaff et al., 2014). Specific risk factors were not predictive in determining youth reconnection. Several important findings were noted, including the differences in the trajectories of four groups: *low engagers*, *positive engagers*, *decliners*, and *waves*. Low engagers continuously left and resumed programming at the center, and due to that pattern, they did not make significant progress. Positive engagers, on the other hand, showed motivation to complete and all graduated from the program. Decliners reached a high level of achievement in the program and then dropped down in achievement and engagement in the program and did not complete. Finally, waves, like decliners, were high achievers but whose progress

dropped, but unlike decliners, they were able to rebound and successfully complete the program. Although no relationship between specific risk factors (such as poverty or caregiving) and engagement in the program was found, cumulative risk did affect attendance (Zaff et al., 2014).

Another important consideration is that OSY cannot be seen as a monolithic group, because some groups do have the motivation and desire to successfully engage in academic and vocational programs (Zaff et al., 2014). Even for OSY with similar backgrounds and barriers, differences in gender, location, length of disconnection, or age may impact the level of reengagement (Bangser, 2013). Youth who are disconnected do reengage, but studies suggest that the programs need to have at least 8 to 10 months for students to understand and adapt to a program before assuming a positive result in programming. Time is needed for participants to acclimate into a program, be influenced by positive youth development approaches, and for practitioners to be confident that intended outcomes are being met as a result of programming (Catalano et al., 2004; Zaff et al., 2014). Providing ample time for programming ensures that real progress and gains are made by OSY who participate in programs (Bangser, 2013).

Researchers have concluded that many students who are disconnected do not consider themselves to fit into the stereotypical notion of dropouts (America's Promise Alliance, 2014; Lukes, 2013). Factors that frequently pulled individuals out of education included employment to support their families, caregiving or parenting, and mental and physical health issues (America's Promise Alliance, 2014). Most participants viewed these as factors that were temporarily disrupting their progress, and all studies reviewed suggest self-determination was a motivating factor to return to education and job training

programs ((Bickerstaff, 2010; Lukes, 2013; Zaff et al., 2014)). Another factor identified as a motivator for those seeking to reconnect was peer and adult support (Baldrige, Hill, & Davis, 2011; Morrissette, 2018; Smyth, McInerney, & Fish, 2013). The next section highlights research in the area of peer and adult support.

Peer and Adult Support as a Factor for Reengagement

Peer support and adult support are often a significant factor for the reengagement of OSY. Studies looked at the perceptions of those who reengaged (Baldrige, Hill, & Davis, 2011; Iachini et al., 2013; Morrissette, 2018; Smyth, McInerney, & Fish, 2013), why individuals returned to school (Boylan & Renzulli, 2016; McDermott, Anderson, & Zaff, 2017), and student characteristics and reenrollment as well as student experiences with dropout and reenrollment (Barrat, Berliner, & Fong, 2012). The influence of a peer or adult was reported as a positive factor for reengagement among individuals who were formerly out of school or unemployed.

Boylan and Renzulli (2016), in a large study using longitudinal educational data, focused their work on the impact of dropping out via either being pushed or pulled out of school, by examining how the routes out of high school impact reengagement. The NCES defines dropouts as students aged 16 to 24 years old who have dropped out of high school. *Pushouts* are defined as students who were in high school and were advised to drop out and pursue a high school equivalency, and *pullouts* are defined as students who dropped out because issues in their lives made attending high school difficult, such as family responsibilities or having to earn money (Boylan & Renzulli, 2016). Results suggest there were no significant differences in the number of individuals who returned to school and those who were pushed or pulled out of high school. Also noted is that

participants who reported better relationships and peer support were more likely to reconnect in education through high school equivalency programs. Former students were 38% less likely to reengage if they had negative experiences with teachers or classmates (Boylan & Renzulli, 2016).

McDermott et al. (2017) built on the theoretical perspectives of Boylan and Renzulli (2016) to study push and pull factors relating to dropouts by comparing those factors and youth reengagement. Findings in this study align with other research stating that students who drop out of school are not permanently out of school, but that many will return to formal education. Also, in agreement with previous research, the majority of the individuals studied indicated they returned to school because of the encouragement they received (McDermott et al., 2017).

Development of a connection to positive peers and caring adults who are available to offer encouragement and assistance to individuals looking to reconnect is essential for their success (America's Promise Alliance, 2014). OSY cited encouragement of an adult from the community or support from family as the main reason for returning to school. This encouragement or support was needed, in addition to the self-determination shown by many OSY as a way to counter the barriers they experience (America's Promise Alliance, 2014; Bridgeland & Milano, 2012). Supportive and positive relationships are also essential to program success once students have reconnected with education and into job programs. Peers, mentors, and workers in alternative education and training programs are seen as a positive influence for OSY, and they are another critical factor for success for many individuals (America's Promise Alliance, 2014; GAO, 2008).

Additional studies on student motivation to reenroll in education included a small study of students at an urban dropout recovery charter school. Iachini et al. (2013) examined how students made decisions to drop out and then reconnect into formal education. Results indicate that the majority of students stated they were motivated to reengage due to referrals from family, friends, or school staff. Students cited the influence of individuals who were part of their support system, including family, peers, mentors, and teachers, in their decision to return to school (Iachini et al., 2013).

Student engagement was also studied using an analysis of student data from a large school district in California. Barrat et al. (2012) examined the number, characteristics, and motivations of those who dropped out in the 2001-2002 school year and reenrolled by the 2005-2006 school year. This research study differs from previous literature by including not only student motivations for reenrolling but challenges for school districts when those students return. Graduates were classified as students who completed their high school diploma in 4 to 5 years, dropouts were students who withdrew from the district before graduation, and others were considered students who transferred to another district. Results show that 35.1% of the ninth-grade cohort experienced disconnection from school by at least one dropout event. Dropout events include leaving school before graduation, not being enrolled in any education that leads to a high school diploma, stopping attendance at school, or transferring out of the district (Barrat et al., 2012). Consistent with other studies on dropout reenrollment, 31% of those who left school reenrolled in the district (Barrat et al., 2012). Again, in agreement with other research, all enrollees interviewed acknowledged the “persuasive power of caring and persistent school staff in pulling them back to attend high school” (Barrat et al., 2012,

p. 227). Due to the disadvantages of reregistering dropouts back into high school, information on the pushout factors that led some students to alternative education is an important consideration.

The use of a college navigator, identified counselor, or mentor in postsecondary settings has also been identified as beneficial for OSY who look to reengage in an educational setting (Loprest et al., 2019). Precollegiate coursework for those in need of high school equivalency, as well as noncredit and credit short-term training, are offered at community colleges. In addition, certificate, degree, and transfer options also are available. OSY connecting through postsecondary programs identify the guidance and support of a trusted peer or adult as a positive factor for persistence. Youth benefit from the connectedness they feel from a caring adult as well as the knowledge they bring to assist OSY reentering education or training. OSY feel it is just as important to have an adult advocate when faced with personal or educational barriers (Varga et al., 2019). Caring adults, whether family or community members, assist OSY to reenter based on the trusting relationship they have formed (Litzau & Rice, 2017). Relational motivation is noted as one of the top reasons for OSY to reengage in programs, and having a sense of connectedness, support, and acceptance also increases the retention of students (Katznelson, 2016).

The research tells us that supportive adults and positive peers assist students in reconnecting and completing education or job training. Several authors studied the importance of alternative education programs for those not in education or employment to gain academic and employment skills, with one study targeting OSY at a federally funded nonprofit youth leadership and community development program. Participants

received education, job training, and employability skills in this alternative setting. This study concluded that many factors contribute to engagement in a program, including strong relationships with teachers, many of whom the students considered father figures. Participant support and encouragement may further be developed by the program hiring former program members who have similar backgrounds and experiences (Baldrige et al., 2011).

Consistent with this finding, OSY who were part of a second-chance academic and employment skills program were asked why they enrolled, the impact of being part of the program, and how it differed from their traditional high school experience (Smyth et al., 2013). Participants reported wanting to attend school at the alternative program because of the climate and supportive staff, which they did not experience in their former educational environments. Other participants stated that the staff made the program comfortable and individual interactions with teachers helped support students' learning. Positive relationships are a major component of youth development programming retention and success; therefore, the important role of supportive adults as a strong motivator for OSY reconnection is critical for program success.

While caring adults have been previously identified as a motivation for reconnection for OSY, support from program staff is also mentioned as a motivator for reengagement of OSY (Litzau & Rice, 2017). Although the design of a program is one area leading the successful reconnection of OSY, hiring individuals who have the knowledge, interest, and background to recruit and retain OSY is equally important. Many OSY experience multiple barriers that impede ongoing attendance in academic and training programs. Program staff need to be aware of the individual needs and goals of

OSY in order to assist them in navigating and remaining engaged in programming.

Program staff members who are known to be living in the community and having shared experiences and circumstances is another important factor in successfully recruiting and retaining OSY (Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, 2019).

From the research, students attribute reengagement, retention, and success in traditional high schools, as well as alternative educational and job training programs, to support from peers, family, teachers, or educational staff. The studies suggested that youth and young adults who have supportive individuals in their lives have increased motivation to reenroll in education. In a study of a federally funded youth leadership and community development program, adult support was found to aid in retention in programs as well (Baldrige et al., 2011). Although the research locations and programs varied, support from adults and peers aided in the reengagement and retention of OSY in education and training programs.

Studies, thus far, have explored self-determination and peer and adult support as motivation for reengagement, but few have explored support in relation to retention and success in programs. Another factor influencing reengagement is the inability of individuals to obtain employment. Next, the impact of limited employment options as it relates to youth reconnection is discussed.

Effects of Limited Employment Options as a Factor for Reengagement

OSY who have not completed a high school education are faced with limited job choices. Education level and lack of training often leave those without high school credentials working in entry-level jobs with few benefits (Belfield & Levin, 2012). This is significant considering that in 2018, almost two-thirds of all jobs required at least some

form of postsecondary education. With advances in automation and robotics, those with low-wage jobs will be further negatively impacted. Postsecondary education has led to consistent earnings advantage for over a generation (Carnevale et al., 2012). Incumbent or current workers with less education will feel the effects of technology as fewer job opportunities will be available (Loprest et al., 2019).

In addition to the decreased earnings potential for disconnected youth, estimates of the taxpayer burden for them create a lifetime economic drain of \$4.7 trillion dollars (Zaff et al., 2014). This includes lost revenue from OSY not working, the increase in social services for this population, and the loss of taxes from nonparticipation (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012). One pathway for OSY are programs that enable them to receive postsecondary training leading to certification in high-demand areas.

Postsecondary certifications have a strong track record in promoting economic mobility and success (Wolf-Powers & Andreason, 2012). Training focused only on “low cost and low prestige remediation options” further alienates OSY (Rajasekaran & Reyes, 2019, p. 25). Career pathways are another way to assist OSY to transition from entry-level employment to options for growth into mid-level positions and higher wages. When training is aligned with regional economic needs and job opportunities, there is a higher impact on the wages and availability of careers.

Entering into employment is a popular way that OSY reconnect. Longitudinal data have been examined to determine youth disconnection and those who reconnected from specific starting points in education, ages 15 to 24 years in one study (Black, Polidano, & Tseng, 2012), 12 to 14 years in a second study (Hair, Moore, Ling, McPhee-Baker, & Brown, 2009), and age 16 years in a third study (Millett & Kevelson, 2018). All

of the studies evaluated disconnection and reconnection rates, one at the ages of 25 and older (Black et al., 2012), 16 to 21 years (Hair et al., 2009), and at ages 18, 20, and 26 years (Millett & Kevelson, 2018). Similar results were found concluding that youth reconnected at least once with employment or education during the timeframes studied. The largest percentage of those who reconnected did so through employment (77%), followed by those going back to school (17%), and finally, those who entered the military (1.8%) (Hair et al., 2009). When youth disconnection was studied to determine the influence of families, programs, peers, and communities on leaving high school and reconnecting in education or employment, the findings suggest that employment appears to be the most frequent method of reconnection for young adults who were formerly not in education or employment (Hair et al., 2009).

Similarly, Millett and Kevelson (2018) sought to understand student characteristics and how high school experiences predict high school connection, and to what extent prior disconnection predicted future disconnection. Their results suggested that although most disconnected youth were actively job searching at age 26, at the age of 20, the number of those seeking employment was equal to those who were not. Findings also showed that young adults leave and reenter education and employment, and that reconnection did occur during the three age points studied (Millett & Kevelson, 2018).

Even for OSY who are looking for jobs, factors such as low unemployment rates, the number of jobs available for those without specific academic and technical skills, and a lack of awareness as to how to apply, make securing employment difficult. Many OSY cite the need for additional education and training to secure employment. Some lack even the basic literacy and numeracy skills needed for employment, or they have not

accumulated enough work history to successfully secure the employment they are seeking.

For many OSY, having a good career is an important personal goal (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012). Motivation to attend programming is often based on the OSY's readiness to engage in learning, particularly with the understanding of the importance of completing a degree and how this is related to potential opportunities and earnings (Iachini et al., 2013). A strong sense of providing for family or children was another strong motivator for OSY to attend classes (Iachini et al., 2013). Conversely, the study found that fatherhood at a young age may also have a negative effect on employment. Often the responsibility of providing for children and family leads to low-paying, entry-level employment. Therefore, it is important to identify individuals who can assist OSY to reenter educational and job training arena and influence the type of training and job opportunities that are available to OSY.

Reengaging with education or training programs is an important step for OSY to increase their education, learn job-seeking skills, and obtain employment. Patterns of reengagement in early school leavers—those who leave school before Grade 11—have also been examined (Black, Polidano, & Tseng, 2012). Data were collected using a large nationally representative survey beginning with individuals ages 15 years and older, and they were compared with data in the age groups of 15 to 24 years and again for those ages 25 years and older. Career advancement is the reason that young school leavers with positive employment experiences reenter education. Findings suggest that failing to obtain employment appears to be the prime motivating factor for returning to school, with youth in short-term unemployment (less than 12 months) more likely to engage in

education more frequently (17 percentage points greater) than those who have steady employment. In contrast, the study also stated that those who are unemployed for 12 months or more (5% of early leavers under 25 years old) are not motivated to reengage in education.

Other studies looked at those who sought to reconnect through employment. Studies by Russell (2014) and Russell, Simmons, and Thompson (2011) explored disconnected youth who entered into job and career training programs as a way to gain employment. Both studies underscored the desire for youth to find employment as ways to reconnect, but the research also highlights the misalignment between the skills needed for employment and those that high school dropouts possess.

Russell et al. (2011) focused on the characteristics and experiences of learners who attended alternative education and job training sites. Nearly all participants had specific aspirations as far as employment or further education, which motivated them to attend the center as a way to gain employment. A negative result found in this study was that the training and education were neither effective nor relevant to future employment. Although continued academic and job skills training is important for growth and participation in the workforce, the level of academic and basic job training attained would most likely lead to low-skilled work that requires few skills or low education level.

For participants seeking to obtain employment and to end their welfare dependency, reengagement into an education and employment center gave the support and resources needed to find a work placement (Russell, 2014). Lower educational achievement in youth and young adults, typically from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, limits employment opportunities. Research conducted on the correlation

between youth disconnection and employment concludes that employers are unable to hire some participants because of low skill levels, something also noted by Russell et al. (2011). Even with a high degree of motivation during the time the OSY were disconnected, employment was difficult to find. For this reason, reengagement into an education and employment center gave the support and resources needed to find a work placement. Although motivated to become connected via employment options, some barriers, such as low educational achievement, can prevent OSY from being hired.

This mismatch between job requirements and the skills needed for employment often motivates individuals to reengage in academics or job training. Difficulty finding meaningful employment may lead individuals to reenter education and job training since many of the jobs available for those without high school or college credentials are lower paying (Millett & Kevelson, 2018). The studies reviewed agreed that disconnected youth are motivated to reengage into education and job training due to a desire to work. Those without a high school diploma or postsecondary education are limited in the job market due to a lack of the skills and education required by current job positions (Millett & Kevelson, 2018). The Russell et al. (2011) and Russell (2014) studies raise concerns regarding the value of the education students receive at alternative education sites versus what skills and knowledge are sought by employers. Knowing that disconnected students most often reconnect into education to find employment, the importance of quality education and job training is vital to reentering the labor force.

Although employment is a major factor in reengagement for OSY, some do not spend adequate time looking for jobs, training, or education programs that would increase the technical or job-seeking skills needed to apply for and obtain employment. Survey

results by Bridgeland and Milano (2012) noted that OSY in their study primarily spent their time on recreational activities with “67% answering hung out with friends, 46% using the internet, and 44% watching television or playing video games” (p. 20). Only 37% of those surveyed indicated that looking for employment was how they spent the majority of their time. In the same study, OSY felt that there were barriers to receiving further education and a rewarding career, with many stating that the need to work to provide for families as a reason they were unable to enter education or training (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012).

Motivating Reengagement Through Flexible On-Ramps

Reengaging OSY is imperative for creating positive changes and making education and employment viable for students. Often, barriers are in place that make reengagement in the educational system difficult. Factors influencing reengagement are multifaceted and deeply personal to those seeking to reconnect. The disengagement process is frequently gradual and, likewise, reengagement of individuals often requires a steady infusion of options for entrance (Hassain, 2015). “A significant share of OSY do not enroll in education and training programs because they have been alienated from mainstream institutions, like schools and social welfare agencies, due to earlier negative experiences” (Hassain, 2015, p. 3). Exiting education, especially secondary education, is extremely effortless in the United States. Providing entrance back into education should afford the same level of ease to ensure that those who wish to attend programs can do so (America’s Promise Alliance, 2014). Institutional barriers also negatively impact those seeking education and job training. Class schedules, location, tuition cost, and information and support to navigate reentry are often an issue. Systematic barriers

include the difficulty youth experience navigating reconnection into education (Corcoran et al., 2012). Several researchers agree that more support and information regarding how to reenter education is needed (Corcoran et al., 2012; Hassain, 2015). Multiple, flexible pathways back into the educational arena is also a real motivation for individuals looking to rejoin programs (America's Promise Alliance, 2014; Anderson et al., 2019).

To attract participants, programs need to balance desired outcomes with the educational design (Anderson et al., 2019). Doing so will ensure that programming is not so structured that it dissuades potential participants who feel that the inflexibility in traditional education created a barrier to attendance (Anderson et al., 2019). School policies that are rigid and not aligned with circumstances that prevented regular attendance lead many students to disengage from school (America's Promise Alliance, 2014). Organizations that design education and training classes to allow flexibility while still providing rigorous, relevant coursework provide an attractive alternative for those seeking to continue their education.

Faced with multiple barriers that keep OSY from reconnection into education, providers must also be aware that it may take multiple attempts for students to complete training programs. The same factors that lead OSY to disengage may still be factors that pull them, again, from reaching their educational goals. Reengaged OSY may still face significant challenges. Programs that offer flexibility and focus on both academic and technical skills in a nontraditional setting create opportunities for OSY to persist (Litzau & Rice, 2017). In order to best serve OSY, program staff should be prepared to assist participants in remaining engaged when barriers to persist are present. Likewise, program curricula should be designed so that setbacks in attendance and course completion will

not derail the progress that has been made (Rajasekaran & Reyes, 2019; Varga et al., 2019).

Additionally, although OSY who reengage in programming find assistance in navigating many former barriers, participants hope for assistance to address day-to-day challenges. In the Anderson et al. (2019) study, difficulty finding transportation to training, obtaining soft and employability skills, as well as support with family and childcare, financial assistance, and connections to mental health services, were features also sought by those seeking to reconnect. The needs of OSY are complex and individualized. OSY are motivated to reconnect when programs understand the population they are serving and address their strengths as well as challenges (Varga et al., 2019). Optimally, programs include multiple options for attendance, including different times of the day and evening class schedules and bundled academic and job training (Wilkins & Bost, 2014)

Earning Potential in Programs

Further motivational factors cited as important are program content and the ability to earn money while attending programming (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012). OSY often lack employment experience or the educational or technical training needed to secure well-paying or mid-level employment (Sack & Allen, 2019). They also lack social capital, reducing the informal ways in which some may find work or other training opportunities. Deficiencies in personal and social resources to connect to employment, and not possessing the skills needed for employment, leave OSY with few choices to enter a career. Results from a survey of 613 OSY, 16 to 24 years old, report that they are interested in reengaging into programs that include job training and apprenticeships, but

also other programs that include financial incentives, paid work, or service opportunities (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012). Likewise, disconnected youth who engage in education or training programs in multiple U.S. cities were studied by Anderson et al. (2019). The youth participants stated that the use of financial assistance was a significant reason for ongoing attendance (Anderson et al., 2019).

Programs that offer OSY with the ability to earn a high school credential, in addition to a paid work experience, provide crucial support for those seeking education and employment (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012). OSY are motivated to reengage through programs such as paid internships, pre-apprenticeship, apprenticeship, or other earn-to-learn opportunities that also provides educational programs to finish school (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012). These programs afford OSY with the ability to earn through wages, stipends, or other incentives while they learn valuable skills to assist them long-term. In a study of OSY, this dual-purpose program design was favored by the participants, followed by only job training or apprenticeship (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012).

Programs for OSY that employ the use of subsidized work enables youth and young adults to obtain important technical job skills as well as gives them an opportunity to observe workplace norms. Another benefit of participation in job skills programs is that training is seen as a positive step for employers hiring those with a history of unemployment (Loprest et al., 2019). A study of Project Rise, a 12-month program designed to reconnect 18- to 24-year-old OSY who had been out of education and employment for a significant period, found that the participants studied had very little work experience (Bangser, 2013). Being out of school or out of a job for 6 months was a requirement for entry into the program studied. In addition to this period of

unemployment, one-third of those studied had no experience with employment, and those who did were typically in part-time, low-wage positions, even though half of those in the program stated that they spent the majority of their time seeking employment (Bangser, 2013).

OSY see the benefits of training that is aligned with jobs in their communities, whether through on-the-job training models or tied to an apprenticeship. Adding monetary incentives further motivates youth to enter into and remain in programs (Hassain, 2015). Financial assistance helps OSY to stay motivated in programming, whether through incentives when benchmarks are achieved or by work-related wages for on-the-job training and experiences. More importantly, the wages or incentives earned provide much-needed assistance for many OSY who are economically disadvantaged (Hassain, 2015). On-the-job training programs are another avenue for OSY to reconnect into employment. As individuals learn and develop job skills on-site, employers benefit from assistance with paying the costs associated with the onboarding and training of employees hired through the program.

Apprenticeships provide a strong model of training for OSY for the in-demand jobs available in their communities. Registered apprenticeships include supervised on-the-job work experience and related instruction in a classroom setting (Sack & Allen, 2019). The combination of theory and practical training is a good approach for OSY who have been out of school or employment (Sack & Allen, 2019). Apprenticeship programs combine many of the factors that lead to reengagement by combining hands-on and classroom training with support from a supervising worker while being paid for the training (Loprest et al., 2019). OSY who reconnect into training through apprenticeship

acquire highly technical skills, develop workplace norms, and earn a wage that will benefit them in the short and long terms. Another important feature of apprenticeship training is the credential that is awarded to those who complete their apprenticeship. Apprenticeships awarded by the New York State Department of Labor or the United States Department of Labor provide industry-recognized qualifications, which are important because many OSY do not have postsecondary aspirations.

Other Factors Identified for Motivation

Although the research reviewed supported factors such as self-motivation, support, and need for additional skills for entry into or advancing in employment, one study cited by America's Promise Alliance (2014) stated that a cluster of factors may lead to disengagement as well as to reengagement of OSY. Those factors can include many of the previously mentioned relationships, self-motivation, and the need for additional skills for employment, but also cited the availability of time as a factor for reengagement, program design, and awareness of the types of programs available. Participants in programs named a number of supportive elements as important factors to reconnecting. Although OSY exhibited strength and perseverance, the programs studied also aided participants with support from adults to help navigate their personal barriers and to give them the direction needed to enter into and complete training programs. Programs designed to reach OSY need to have effective ways of reaching the population for recruitment for and advertising of programs that are available (Corcoran et al., 2012; Holzer, 2012; Stephens, 2010).

Even for OSY with similar backgrounds and barriers, differences in gender, location, length of disconnection, or age may impact the level of reengagement (Bangser,

2013). Youth who are disconnected do reengage, but studies suggest that the programs need to have at least 8 to 10 months of time for students to understand and adapt to a program before assuming a positive result in programming. This time is also needed for participants to be influenced by positive youth development activities, and for practitioners to be confident that the intended outcomes are being met as a result of the program design (Catalano et al., 2004; Zaff et al., 2014). Ensuring sufficient time ensures that real progress and gains are made by OSY who participate in programs (Bangser, 2013).

Increased time in programming is also linked to the development of stronger bonding with program staff and the supportive services available for participants. Trusting, positive relationships are formed not only with program staff, but through the development of peers who provide a support system through cohort education models or through continued attendance at program centers (Bangser, 2013). Self-determination and the resilience shown in many OSY can be considered a primary factor for reengagement. For many OSY, these personal factors alone may be enough to overcome barriers and complete education and training programs. Creating bonds with program staff and peers, in addition to self-motivation and personal educational and occupational goals, are both needed for success for many OSY (America's Promise Alliance, 2014).

Many OSY are not engaged in education, training, or employment but are involved with community-based or public systems. Partnering with these systems is an avenue to connect with OSY who were formerly involved in foster care or who received assistance for physical or mental health issues or addiction issues (Bloom et al., 2010). For OSY who experience a high level of barriers to reengagement, education and job

training programs are a first step. Individualized services to address ongoing barriers to reconnection or retention in programming is essential.

Understanding the individual needs of OSY is a common thread throughout the literature. Creating mentoring, advisement, or centers to work with youth to determine where they can be connected is needed (Corcoran et al., 2012). OSY enter into educational, technical, and employment programs at varying levels of academic and technical attainment. Some OSY have very low levels of literacy and numeracy, and they will need significant education in basic skills development before postsecondary and career goals can be established (Bloom et al., 2010). Although barriers to education are extensive and individualized, combining several types of support may lead to successful reconnection for OSY. Programs that include a combination of supports to assist with reentering academic programs, job readiness skills, and soft skills are also of interest to OSY seeking to reconnect. Programs that connected youth and young adults with wraparound supportive services are important for the success of long-term support and building self-confidence and self-reliance in individuals (Corcoran et al., 2012).

Varga et al. (2019) studied the reengagement of OSY in Tucson, Arizona, finding similar results as those discussed above. The personal drive of OSY, in association with a concerned, connected adult in the lives of those seeking to reconnect, was cited as important factors for success. Also noted was the design of the programs, many of which included positive youth development approaches to assist youth and young adults in navigating their barriers and promoting individual strengths. Coordinated solutions that encompass educational and employment assistance while including assistance with childcare and transportation, providing flexibility in programming, and ongoing support

are all factors for successful reconnection and retention of OSY (Varga et al., 2019). Participants cited inconsistent support as a reason for not persisting. Alternatively, OSY reported positively about adults who showed real commitment to supporting those in the program, even when the OSY faced multiple issues. The sense of connectedness and caring made a tremendous difference in their lives (Varga et al., 2019).

Litzau and Rice (2017) also cited multiple factors for reengagement in a study on the characteristics of programs in southern Wisconsin. The authors concluded, after a survey of 85 participating schools, that high schools are using many identified best practices to reconnect with OSY, but some successful practices were not being utilized, which may lead to continued disconnection. Aspects of successful programs include training leading to industry credentials, flexible education choices, the presence of caring adults, and staff and services available to address mental health issues and other needs of students (Litzau & Rice, 2017). Table 2.1 presents factors motivating OSY to reconnect.

Chapter Summary

The literature review concludes that formerly disconnected youth are motivated by several factors. Self-determination is cited as one influence regarding the decision to reenter education for those who dropped out of education. In spite of the push and pull factors that led to disconnection, many individuals see the value of education to support future goals and sought to reenroll. Supportive and caring relationships with peers and adults are also important as a motivation for individuals to reengage. Direct referrals or encouragement assist youth and young adults in returning to complete their education. A combination of self-motivation and resilience, paired with caring adult and positive peers,

Table 2.1

Factors Motivating OSY to Reconnect

Major themes	Examples
Self-Determination	<p>Many students who are disconnected do not consider themselves to fall into the stereotypical group of dropouts.</p> <p>Factors that frequently pulled individuals out of education included employment to support their families, caregiving or parenting, and mental and physical health issues.</p>
Peer and Adult Support	<p>Students attribute reengagement, retention, and success in traditional high schools, as well as alternative educational and job training programs, to support from peers, family, teachers, or educational staff.</p> <p>Studies suggested that youth and young adults who have supportive individuals in their lives have increased motivation to reenroll in education.</p>
Effects of Limited Employment	<p>For many OSY, having a good career is an important personal goal.</p> <p>Postsecondary education has led to consistent earnings advantage for over a generation.</p> <p>Employment appears to be the most frequent method of reconnection for young adults who were formerly not in education or employment.</p>
Flexible On-Ramps	<p>The disengagement process is frequently gradual and, likewise, reengagement of individuals often requires a steady infusion of options for entrance.</p> <p>Institutional barriers and systematic barriers impede reconnection.</p> <p>Multiple, flexible pathways back into the educational arena is also a real motivation for individuals looking to rejoin programs.</p>
Earning Potential	<p>Ability to earn money while attending programming.</p> <p>Job training and apprenticeships, financial incentives, paid work, or service opportunities.</p>
Other Factors for Motivation	<p>Cluster of factors may lead to disengagement as well as to reengagement of OSY.</p> <p>Time as a factor for reengagement, program design, and awareness of the types of programs available.</p> <p>Individualized services to address ongoing barriers to reconnection or retention in programming is essential.</p> <p>Positive youth development approaches increases retention.</p>

was often the combination that enabled OSY to reconnect. Through these relationships, OSY receive emotional support and encouragement and the guidance they need to thrive. Other OSY may have the time to reenter into education or employment due to the fact that their previous barriers have been resolved.

Other studies confirmed that the hope for a well-paying job or a future career motivated many disconnected youth and young adults to seek employment and academic assistance through alternative education sites. Often youth who have not completed high school are forced into dead-end jobs with no future growth (Morrissette, 2018). Alternative education settings are in place to assist those who need high school credentials and job skills training to obtain employment. Obtaining a job is consistently named as a primary factor for the reconnection of OSY. Training and education programs that include wages while attending is an important component for many OSY. Concerns regarding the quality and value of alternative education are mentioned in two articles (Russell, 2014; Russell et al., 2011). Since the majority of those who are disconnected reenter through employment, alternative education programs need to align job training offerings and academic programs with employers' needs to ensure employability (Hair et al., 2009).

Paid work experiences, whether through on-the-job training, pre-apprenticeship, or apprenticeship, promote employability for OSY. Programs that include job training and classroom instruction, leading to industry credentials to assist those who may traditionally have little employment history, and opportunities for participants to earn while learning are cited as being important motivational factors for OSY who seek ways to support their families and advance in their careers. OSY who attended programs that

did not provide financial support stated the impact pay would have made as they attended classes.

Despite multiple factors attributed to youth disconnection, many youth and young adults seek to reconnect with education and job training. Youth who drop out of education or employment cannot be considered a monolithic group, since there are multiple reasons for disengagement (De Witte et al., 2013). Likewise, researchers found multiple motivations for reconnecting, including self-determination, supportive relationships, and the lack of job opportunities (Bickerstaff, 2010; Boylan & Renzulli, 2016; Hair et al., 2009). Other reasons that lead to reconnections include clusters of supportive services tied to overall training programs and the availability of time to participate in education and training based on resolving many of the issues and barriers that conflict with participation. Paid programming in the form of incentives or opportunities to earn wages as OSY participate in job skills programs also provide motivation for reconnection. In addition, successful programs promoted youth development focused on individual strengths as well as providing an accepting culture for participants from different backgrounds.

Even with the number of studies available on youth reconnection, additional research is needed to ascertain what makes a program successful in meeting the varied needs of OSY. Empirical research on youth connection lacks in many areas, including a motivational factor and successful outreach and recruitment, as well as program evaluation. Identifying what motivates youth and young adults to reconnect in education or job training is valuable information for policymakers, educators, and program providers. The perception and lived experiences of OSY as they relate to reconnection

will add to the existing knowledge on this topic. Chapter 3 explains the methodology used to add to the research on youth engagement.

Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

OSY, those who are 16 to 24 years of age and who are neither employed nor in school, are a topic of research exploring educational and employment outcomes (Belfield et al., 2012; Burd-Sharps et al., 2017; Mawn et al., 2017). Chronic youth disconnection occurs when individuals have been out of school or unemployed for a period of time, which is often quantified as at least 1 year (Millett & Kevelson, 2018). In 2018, there were 4.4 million individuals in the United States aged 16 to 24 years who were neither in school nor employed, representing 11.2% of young adults in the United States (Lewis, 2020). The number of OSY ages 19 to 24 years makes up 78% of the OSY population, with 22% within the age of 16 to 18 years (Corcoran et al., 2012). Youth disconnection is a complex issue as many youth go in and out of disconnection often by entering alternative education, employment, or job training programs (Millett & Kevelson, 2018).

Despite multiple factors attributed to youth disconnection, many youth and young adults seek to reconnect in education and job training, with 63% of disconnected youth obtaining a high school diploma or equivalency within 8 years of their scheduled graduation date (Bloom et al., 2010). Although similar themes emerged as reasons for disengagement, some OSY have distinct experiences barring them from reconnection. Youth who disconnect from education or employment cannot be thought of as a monolithic group, due to the multiple reasons for disengagement (De Witte et al., 2013). Researchers also found multiple motivations for reconnecting, including self-

determination, supportive relationships, lack of job opportunities, paid educational opportunities, and program design (Bickerstaff, 2010; Boylan & Renzulli, 2016; Hair et al., 2009).

Although research has been conducted on OSY and barriers to engagement, little research has been conducted on recruitment and program design, using the perceptions of individuals who are engaged, or who were reengaged but did not complete the previous programs (Bloom et al., 2010). This research will benefit policymakers who appropriate funds for OSY programming and will also benefit organizations that design and administer programs targeting OSY. Determining the main reasons why OSY reenter education, training, or employment is necessary to guide policy, evaluate current program design, and establish guidelines and standards for future funding opportunities.

Data from academic and job-program participants, as well as those seeking to reconnect, contribute to the literature on youth reengagement. Research is available on education and job training programs, but a gap exists in the literature as to the youth perspective on reengagement. Education and job-training programs that work with OSY use a variety of strategies to recruit individuals into their programs. Gaining a better understanding from the youth and young adult viewpoints is important to measure the effectiveness of these approaches. Conducting research designed to gain information on youth perceptions of programming and what influences reengagement addresses a gap in the existing body of research.

Research Design

A phenomenological design was chosen for this study to capture the lived experience of OSY. The view of the participants who better understand the phenomenon was beneficial for data collection on this population. Designed by Edmund Husserl, this method of research has a strong philosophical root (Moustakas, 1994). Indeed, “phenomenology seeks meanings and appearances and arrives at the essences through intuition and reflection on conscious acts of experience, leading to concepts, judgments, and understandings” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 58). Formal and informal conversations and interviews were used to obtain descriptions of the experiences of OSY to learn the meaning of the problem from the participants, based on their understanding and knowledge of youth disconnection. Phenomenology depicts the shared experience of those being studied and creates a composite description representing all of the individuals. Analysis of the data was performed using van Kamm methods adapted by Moustakas (1994).

Research Context

The setting for this study was in three Orleans Niagara Board of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES) Literacy Zone Centers located in Niagara County, New York. Literacy Zones are part of a reform initiative to close the achievement gap in urban and rural communities of concentrated poverty and high concentrations of families and individuals with limited literacy or English language proficiency (New York State Education Department, 2013). The Niagara County Literacy Zone program serves over 2,000 individuals per year, providing TASC preparation (Test Assessing Secondary Completion, or high school equivalency), remediation, job readiness, career exploration,

short-term job skills training, and computer literacy. Research was conducted at the Literacy Zone locations in Niagara County, New York. Orleans Niagara BOCES provided access to the study participants, who were 20- to 24-year-old OSY, with a dedicated space for the interviews to be conducted.

Research Participants

A total of nine OSY, ranging in age from 20 to 24 years old, were recruited from four adult literacy and training centers. This age range was selected because older OSY account for the majority of the OSY population in the designated areas. The site was purposely selected to “best help the researcher to understand the problem and research questions” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 185).

The participants in this study were attending Literacy Zones located in Niagara County, New York. All participants lacked a high school diploma, were attending high school equivalency classes, or were enrolled in adult education classes for short-term technical training. The participants volunteered for the study and met the following criteria for participation: (a) 20 to 24 years old at the time of the interview, (b) attending a high school equivalency and/or job training program at the Literacy Zone, and (c) willingness to voice their experiences of reconnection into education or job training with the researcher. A sufficient sample was reached when data no longer contributed fresh perspectives or contained additional themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher expected saturation to occur after interviewing five to nine OSY who were attending a Literacy Zone program.

Instruments Used in Data Collection

Following Moustakas's (1994) methods and procedures for conducting research, questions were developed to guide the interview process, with the purpose of "revealing more fully the essence and meanings of human experiences" (p. 105). The interview questions, developed based on a review of the literature, and the study research questions, can be found in Appendix A. The questions were formulated based on the literature review and the researcher's identified gaps. Interview questions 1, 2, and 3 were asked to seek information on disconnection and challenges, along with reconnection and supports. Interview questions 4 and 5 asked the participants how they discovered the Literacy Zone and what attracted them to the program for education or training. Interview questions 6, 7, and 8 looked to discover what motivated retention in the program by asking the participants about challenges since reconnecting, why they believed they persisted, and how the participants felt they differed from those they knew who have not reconnected into education or job training. The final two questions, 9 and 10, related to how the adult education program differed from their high school experience, and what about the program they felt was important to their success and their future plans. According to the Moustakas (1994) research method, a general interview guide was also used when the participants' accounts did not include enough significance or did not capture the essence of their stories.

In addition to the phenomenological method described above, demographic information was collected through a study application that was completed after the interview was completed. The following information was collected from all study participants by using a study application:

- current age of participant,
- address of participant,
- cell phone number and email address,
- race,
- marital status,
- parenting status,
- caregiving status,
- physical or mental health problems that impeded participation in education or training,
- age participant first left education or training,
- age the participant first reconnected into education or training, and
- number of times the participant reconnected with education, training, or employment.

Procedure for Data Collection and Analysis

After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from St. John Fisher College, recruitment was conducted in a total of six classes at four Literacy Zone locations. Recruitment included attending each class to speak about the research being conducted and leaving flyers with information on the purpose of the study and how to participate. Those interested and available for the study were directed to contact the researcher or to indicate to their instructors their interest in participating. After speaking about the focus of the research in high school equivalency and training classes, participants were recruited for participation using a convenience sampling.

Before the start of the study, questions were pilot tested with 19- to 24-year-old students from another adult learning program (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). With input from the pilot group, instructions and open-ended interview questions were finalized for use. A general interview guide (Appendix B) was also in place if the participants' stories did not lead to a rich qualitative narrative or if they lacked adequate meaning and complexity after using the initial questions (Moustakas, 1994).

Data were collected using Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological model to "arrive at the essence of the experience" (p. 49). Prior to the interview, the researcher practiced the epoche process to clear bias and prejudice from clouding the information obtained in the interview and to set the tone for relationship building (Moustakas, 1994). One-on-one meetings, conducted in person, were scheduled for each of the study participants. The meeting began with a casual conversation to build trust with the researcher and to create a comfortable atmosphere. Next, the researcher initiated a brief moment of reflection for the participants to think about their experiences in preparation for the interview. The participants were then interviewed for approximately 30-60 minutes, using an informal and interactive process with open-ended questions meant to draw out the interviewees' accounts of their experiences. Interview questions were used with the understanding that they "may be varied, altered, or not used at all when the co-researcher shares the full story of his or her experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114). Recordings of the interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist service and analyzed as described in the data analysis section.

Participants' privacy and confidentiality were protected by following several procedures. Interviews were conducted at the Literacy Zone locations in private meeting

rooms. Study participants used self-determined pseudonyms in the interview sessions, and only the interviewer knows the identities of the individuals. Interview data were recorded via handwritten notes by the researcher as well as through audiotaping at each session. The audiotapes were professionally transcribed and enabled the researcher to analyze data through the phenomenological analysis described in the data analysis section. All participants received a \$25 Tops supermarket gift card in appreciation of their insight and contribution to the study.

The data were organized and analyzed using van Kamm methods and procedures of phenomenological analysis modified by Moustakas (1994). The data were horizontalized by inspecting each statement as having equal value and establishing meaning or units from the statements. Next, the units were clustered into invariant qualities, removing recurring themes as the data were analyzed. Each phrase was evaluated for inclusion of the experience that would be an essential element for interpretation or if it were possible to conceptualize or categorize. If so, the expressions were included, while those not meeting those conditions were eliminated. The final classification of invariant components was then identified by reviewing the themes against the transcripts of the participants. Individual textural and structural descriptions were then constructed.

Individual textural descriptions of the experience for each participant, including their opinions, beliefs, and instances that describe the experience, including verbatim examples, were formed. Composite textural descriptions of the experience for each participant were developed by integrating all of the individual textural descriptions. Individual structured descriptions were created based on the individual textural

description and the imaginative variation, considering each meaning from diverse perspectives or views. Textural-structural descriptions of the significance and core of the experiences combining the invariant constituents and major themes were then developed. Member checking was performed to ensure the accuracy of the statements and transcriptions and to confirm that the participants' experiences were adequately captured. Finally, using the individualized textural-structural descriptions, a composite description of the significance and heart of the experiences representing the group as a whole was established. The findings of the study were then developed based on the composite description, study data, and the guiding research questions.

Summary

This chapter described the methods of the phenomenological study that was used to gain understanding from the perceptions of participant OSY as to what motivated their reconnection to the education, training, or employment programs. In addition, the study sought to understand what recruitment and program approaches they felt were important engagement strategies. This study examined the lived experiences of 20- to 24-year-old former OSY who have reconnected in an education or training program or through employment. This chapter outlined the study participants, a basis for a phenomenological study, and the research questions used to gather information on factors that led to disconnection, the reason for reconnection, and the aspects of the existing training program that attracted the OSY. Information and perspectives on reengagement were examined through open-ended interviews and discussions with the study participants. Finally, the procedures for data analysis were outlined.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

As stated in Chapter 1, the purpose of this research was to gain information on youth perceptions of what influences 20- to 24-year-old out-of-school youth to reengage in education, employment, or training programs. In order to understand the lived experience of those motivated to reconnect and what attracted them to the programs they chose, a phenomenological design was selected, and data were analyzed using the van Kamm method modified by Moustakas (1994). Information and perspectives on reengagement were examined through open-ended interviews and discussions with the study participants, which provided rich textural descriptions as well as the structural essence of the experience.

This chapter is structured around the two research questions and presents the textural and structural themes as well as the composite descriptions of the experiences of the participants. Research Question 1 looked to discover why individuals reengaged into education, training, or employment, while Research Question 2 sought answers to what attracted participants to the program they were currently in. Demographic information for each of the study participants at the time of reconnection is found in Table 4.1. In addition, the research questions and method of data analysis will be reviewed. Table 4.2 includes a composite of textural and structural themes for participants. Finally, the data analysis and findings are discussed, illustrated in Table 4.3, which shows textural

descriptions, textural-structural descriptions, and composite themes followed by a summary of the results.

Demographic information was collected in the form of a survey at the end of each interview. Each participant was given the option to choose a pseudonym for the study. If they declined the use of a pseudonym, one was assigned in order to keep their information anonymous.

The majority of the participants in this study were referred by instructors and case managers to the researcher. They were willing and open to tell their stories and felt it was important to add their understanding to the research. Several of the participants spoke of negative high school experiences that led to the disruption of their traditional high school education, and although they stated an intention to continue, for some, it took years to actually reconnect. All but one were currently in courses to complete their high school equivalency, one had completed the courses and was in job training, and one was in high school equivalency classes as well as in a job training course. Only one participant did not reside in the Niagara Falls, NY school district. Table 4.1 provides additional information about the participants of the study.

The information gathered in the table highlights several findings. Over half the participants had a gap of 3 to 7 years before they reconnected, and reengagement did not happen until they were no longer a traditional-aged high school student. As discussed in the review of literature, one factor for disconnection from high school among females, as well as a barrier to reconnection, is parenting. In this study, five of seven (71%) of the female participants were parenting. Also noteworthy is that the majority attempted reconnection more than once, with 77% of the participants attempting two or more times.

Table 4.1

Demographics of Participants at the Time of Engagement

Pseudonym	Gender	Race ^a	Age	Pregnant/ Parenting	Care- giver	Age first discon- nected	Age first recon- nected	Times recon- nected
John	M	W	21	No	No	20	21	1
Alice	F	B	21	Yes	Yes	17	18	3
Sher	F	H	20	Yes	Yes	16	18	3
Luciid	M	W	20	No	No	18	19	2
Jill	F	W	23	Yes	Yes	14	21	4
Terry	F	B	24	No	No	16	19	2
Nicci	F	B	20	No	No	17	20	2
Jackie	F	W	24	Yes	No	16	20	3
Kay	F	B	20	Yes	No	16	20	1

^a B=Black, H=Hispanic, W=White

Research Questions

The research questions were asked to gain insight regarding what factors motivated 20- to 24-year-old young adults to reengage into education or training programs, or employment. Using the lived experience of the participants provided valuable information as the questions were answered directly by the individuals who have reconnected. Also important were their perceptions of what attracted them to their current programs. The guiding questions for this study were:

1. What do OSY perceive to be the main influence for reengaging in education or job training programs?

2. What engagement strategies do participants say attracted them to education or job training programs?

Although similar, the first question seeks to know why they went back, whereas the second question wants to know why they chose the specific program they joined. Interview questions were developed based on a review of the literature and were designed to find meaning in the participants' experiences. Each person in the study had unique experiences, but as a whole, they displayed common characteristics when describing their motivation for reengagement.

Method of Data Analysis

Phenomenology depicts the shared experience of those being studied and creates a composite description representing all of the individuals. The data were organized and analyzed using van Kamm methods and procedures of phenomenological analysis modified by Moustakas (1994). Data were analyzed in the following order:

1. horizontalization by inspecting each statement as having equal value and establishing meaning or units from the statements;
2. units were clustered into invariant qualities, removing recurring themes as data were analyzed;
3. final classification of invariant components was identified by reviewing the themes against the transcripts of the participants;
4. individual textural descriptions were constructed using the experience for each participant, including their opinions, beliefs, and instances that describe the experience, including verbatim examples;

5. composite textural descriptions of the experience for the group were developed by integrating all of the individual textural descriptions;
6. individual structured descriptions were created based on the individual textural description and the imaginative variation, considering each meaning from diverse perspectives or views;
7. textural-structural descriptions of the significance and core of the experiences combining the invariant constituents and major themes were then developed; and
8. a composite description of the significance and heart of the experiences representing the group as a whole was established.

The findings of the study were developed based on the composite description, study data, and the guiding research questions. Data were organized in an Excel datanase as well as in narrative form, taking care that confidentiality was maintained. The composite descriptions (themes) identified included self-motivation, progression of goals, positive experience, and supportive relationships.

Results

Examination of the responses to Research Question 1 produced two textural and one structural themes as related to reconnection. In addition, three textural and two structural themes emerged from Research Question 2 regarding reengagement strategies. The identified themes not only explain what was happening in the lives of the participants, but also how they were experiencing their circumstances at the time of reengagement.

Research Question 1. Analyzing data regarding what OSY perceived to be the main influence for reengagement led to several textural and structural themes threaded throughout the stories and information provided to the researcher. Although each individual had a unique perspective, common experiences and meanings emerged. Lacking opportunities, positive relationships that provided support, and a better career or life were overarching ideas. These themes will be discussed as textural descriptions and structural themes, as well as a composite description for the essence of the experience for the group.

Textural theme 1. Lacking opportunities. Understanding the advantages of having a high school equivalency to increase career and postsecondary opportunities was mentioned in multiple interviews. Several participants realized that their current status resulted in a lack of opportunity to improve their lives. They saw that having a high school education is important not only to secure a job, but for their personal growth as well. For the majority of the participants, this was not the first time they attempted to reconnect into education programs, making this effort at reconnection especially important as they try to change their current circumstances.

Terry, a single mother, had multiple barriers to continuing her high school education. Being a young mother without reliable childcare and the time commitment of caring for her children while working led to her disconnection. Even with experiencing difficulties with the math portion of the high school equivalency program and the demands of caring for her family while working, Terry is determined to complete her high school equivalency. She explained, “I [‘ve] seen that I couldn’t do much without my education and stuff like that.” Reconnecting is already benefiting her as she shares, “even

though I do not have my GED yet, I learned stuff over the time that helps a lot now with education-wise, like reading and writing and stuff like that.”

John also realized that a high school equivalency was necessary in order to obtain employment. He made several references to the importance of finishing his high school equivalency in order to find employment, stating, “I’ve been applying, they ain’t calling.” Future plans also led him back to education programs at the Literacy Zone. John explained, “So I said, you know what? I am going to come here because I plan on doing a military career after this.” The desire to complete education in order to change the path participants were currently on was reflected in several statements like this.

Luciid realized that education was important to him as well. This is the second time he has reconnected into high school equivalency courses. The first time, he started classes at the insistence of his mother, but he did not continue and got a job instead. His second reconnection was based on the fact that he was working a full-time job and was thinking, “Man, I don’t want to work this hard all my life.” Although he does not mind working hard, he did not want that type of job for the level of pay he was receiving for the rest of his life. He stated, “So I was like, I’ll go back.”

Often, the participants described a feeling of being “stuck.” Nicci gives us an example of that feeling stating, “I just felt like, not that I’m losing life, but just like I’m not doing anything. I’ve got a lot of energy I could be investing but I wasn’t.” The other important factor for her reconnection was her desire to play basketball competitively again. She was happy with her decision to reenter education, noting, “ It was like a thrill because I’m like, I wanted to be in college, I wanted to be playing basketball. I see myself just doing things that I know I was capable of doing and was doing.” She once again

spoke about basketball being her motivation for success in the program, saying, “I know if I can get a basketball in my hands that to know I am finishing and following through. That right there is a big achievement.” Nicci had future plans and shared, “I want it to actually go somewhere, trying to take care of myself.”

Many participants expressed a sense of readiness to engage in and complete their high school equivalency and job training as a way to move forward. Alice described that feeling and stated, “I feel like I'm stuck. If I don't go to school, then I'm not getting any further than I am now. So, education is important.” She, like most of those interviewed, said that as they got older and entered the job market, completing their education became a priority to gain additional opportunities.

The feeling of not being where they should be was apparent in the interview with Jackie. Having been in the same job for the last 2 years, she is unable to get promoted without her high school equivalency. Jackie said, “Honestly, I think the only reason I came back is because you can't really get a good, decent job without it. Well, I've been at my same job for 2 years now, but they want to promote me and unfortunately, they can't unless I have a GED. That's one, and then plus, I am a mother too, so my child motivated me to do more.” She described the difficulty of juggling a job, classes, and a child, but knows in the end, it is necessary for advancement and growth in her career.

The lack of opportunities also was reflected in those who sought to reconnect as a way to be a better role model or provide more for their children. Becoming a parent was the primary motivation for several participants. Jill became pregnant with her first child at the age of 14 and due to a lack of childcare, had to drop out of high school. She wanted her children to look up to her and understand that with hard work, you can accomplish

your educational goals. She was the first one in her family to obtain a diploma and values the education and information obtained by completing. She was motivated to reenter education because of a desire to have a better future as well as be a role model for her children. She stressed that she needed some type of degree or diploma. Jill stated:

I mean, working minimum wage jobs, and it was time to have them when they grew up and since they are starting school to look at me like, Mommy completed this. Mommy finished and have someone to look up to.

Sher also thought of her child when deciding to pursue her high school equivalency. She explained that once she had a son, “that is when I really was like, I need to get my life together, being a Mom is the one thing, the main thing actually, that motivates me to continue my education.”

Kay’s experience with reengagement was different from the others, but she also realized how important education was not only for her but for her son, who has special needs. A judge mandated her to attend education classes or face jail time. “ I wasn't talking about going back to school and I never went back, so I feel like if it wasn't for him mandating me to go, I would never start going again. I [would] still be lollygagging.” She did not feel his actions were punitive and stated she was happy she was pushed back into education. She said, “it helps me because I feel like now that I'm back in school, I can teach my baby because I know he will need help as he grows up.” She plans to begin a training program as well as completing her high school equivalency to provide opportunities that she previously did not have.

Textural theme 2. Supportive relationships. Most participants identified someone in their lives who encouraged them to pursue and persist in their reconnection. This

positive peer or family member was important to individuals in the study and gave them needed encouragement. Knowing that there was someone who showed concern and would be excited about their success was what assisted many in their pursuit.

Alice was an eager participant who was happy to tell her story. A combination of issues including becoming a parent, lack of childcare, and an abusive partner led to her disconnection from high school. Alice felt there were a lot of people in her life who discouraged her and did not support her in high school as well. Although childcare and transportation are still barriers at times, Alice has support from her best friend. She feels that this support assists her as she persists with the program. She stated, “She just tells me she’s proud of me pretty much, and just makes sure that I’m making it to school every day and stuff like that.”

Terry was grateful that she has the support of her children as well as their godparents and their family as she attended classes. She says, “They are big on education and stuff like that. They just was encouraging me to go to school to just think about the girls and showing them a good example.” It was easy for the majority of participants to identify someone, either a friend or family member, whom they felt showed interest in them personally and encouragement for successfully completing education or training. Participants stated that their supports gave them reminders why it was important to complete their education: to improve their job opportunities, personal growth, or to provide a better life for themselves and their children.

John was quick to state that his uncle was a support to his reconnection. He credited his uncle for the support of his decision to reenter education and motivation to

graduate. John stated, "I have to say, my uncle, he supported me. He actually motivated me to come here, saying you need to do this, or you won't be anything in life."

Although Jackie was primarily motivated to reconnect due to a lack of career options, she does have the support of her mother and manager, who are both pushing her to complete the TASC exam. She cited that even her district manager was anxious for her to complete so she can get promoted. Jackie said with a smile that she was asked by her district manager, "Did you get your GED yet? What's going on here?" One participant expressed that even though her supports did not live locally, she felt the importance of being able to contact them. She specifically mentioned two supportive relationships, siblings who live out of town, but as she stated, "Them two are the main supports, that I mentally know I can call them and tell them, look, I'm back in classes."

Structural theme 1. Better career and life. Many of those interviewed did not take the steps to reengage into education or training until they realized they could not get a better job or begin a real career without it. Once they experienced difficulty finding employment, or difficulty advancing, they realized it was time to finish their education. Many sought to stop living paycheck to paycheck and hoped that completing their high school equivalency would provide more stability for themselves and their families.

John's disengagement from high school was attributed to multiple factors, including what he felt was poor education due to the quality of the teachers and the disrespectful way they communicated. These factors, combined with poor choices he made, led to suspension and caused him to further fall behind in credits to graduate from high school. Since he was no longer on track to graduate, and was already 20 years old, it was recommended that he drop out, which he did with the intention to continue at some

time. It was not until John was unable to secure a job that he reconsidered attaining his high school equivalency. The need to complete his education became especially important when John also began thinking about future plans, such as joining the military.

Alice felt motivated to attend classes, liked the routine and the feeling of doing something to better herself. She was proud that she was attending classes and looked forward to completing the high school equivalency so she could immediately start college. The desire for a career was also what attracted Sher to the current program she was in. She felt that she could take advantage of the job training programs at the Literacy Zone, start with a job, and progress once she obtained more work experience and decided if the job was the right fit for her.

Luciid's motivation for reconnecting into the current education program was that he felt he needed to further himself if he wanted to have additional career options. He felt he was working too hard and at a low level of pay and did not want that for the rest of his life. Once he was working full time in a low-paying, strenuous job, he realized that if he wanted to have a better future, he needed a high school diploma. Many of the participants expressed that working in a low-paying job was a major factor in their decision to reconnect. Jackie was motivated to reengage at the Literacy Zone to receive her high school equivalency because she is unable to be promoted in her current job without it. She was also motivated by being a parent, wanting to do better for her child, even though working in the morning and attending classes in the afternoon did not allow a lot of time for her to spend with her child. Jackie said she did it to provide a better life for her and her child, but also because she was sick of living paycheck to paycheck.

Jill knew it was time for her to get her education once her children were in school. She was motivated to have a better career and future for her family. Like Jill, seeing that she could not progress with career and personal goals, Terry reconnected into the Literacy Zone to pursue her high school equivalency and to take advantage of the career training that was offered. She completed her Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) certification and was also taking coursework in order to take the TASC exam.

Nicci felt that her unstable living environment was the main reason for not completing her high school education. She flipped between two households during high school, and due to housing issues did not complete her education. Nicci stated that a feeling of losing out on life and the desire to play college basketball were what motivated her to pursue her high school equivalency. She saw herself as capable of achieving her long-term plan of playing college basketball at a 4-year college. This focus kept her motivated to attend programming through completion. She felt that this experience was unlike high school due to the fact that she was now in a different predicament and had the mindset that you cannot change anyone but yourself. She saw the benefit of attending classes at the Literacy Zone and was focused on the end result of being able to enter college.

Unlike the other contributors, being involved in the justice system and being told by the presiding judge that she should take advantage of a WIOA youth program led Kay to the Literacy Zone and compelled her to reconnect. She considered the judge's actions a positive influence on her life since she was not thinking of completing her education. She believed having her high school equivalency and job training a benefit to her and her son.

She felt the education would not only help her advocate for her son, but she would be a role model for him in the future.

Research Question 2. Multiple textural and structural themes emerged from the answers to the question seeking to know the engagement strategies participants said attracted them to programming. Support and assistance from others, career options, program design and instruction, and mindset will be discussed in textural and structural accounts.

Textural theme 1. Career training options. Job skills training was an important factor that attracted the participants to the Literacy Zone. Although some participants were focused solely on only obtaining their high school equivalency, many stated that having the option to get short-term training was valuable to them. A few participants were drawn to the program due to the fact that training was offered, whereas others found out during the intake process that there were other educational opportunities available.

Completing job training to obtain a career was also appealing to Kay. Giving birth to a child with health issues is what caused Kay to disconnect from high school. “Once he got out of the hospital, I was scared to leave him with anybody.” She was not looking to reconnect into the Literacy Zone, but was court ordered to do so. Even so, she was attracted to the program because of the training options and stated that attending classes is having a positive effect. She says, “I can get a career for me. I feel like a big, really just something lifted off my shoulders, like something that was opened.”

The desire for a career was what attracted Sher to her current program. Although she initially doubted her ability to be successful, she persevered when she put the time into her training classes, studied, and pushed herself. Sher stated, “I realized I was smart,

and I can do this.” Sher wanted a good future for herself and her family. She notes, “I want to be stable. I think of the long run, what happens in the future.” The sense of learning a new skill in order to enter employment was also appealing. Terry was attracted to the current program because of the career training they offered, sharing, “I ended up taking my CNA through here.” After completing the Certified Nursing Assistant program, Terry was happy. She shared, “I was excited that I finally finished something. Finished it, and I called my Mom, and I told her I did it, I finished something.”

Textural theme 2. Mindset/drive. Most of those interviewed felt they had a different mindset compared to others who also lack a high school diploma. Participants felt they were focused on future goals and they displayed more perseverance and ambition. They stated specific ways in which they feel they differ from family, friends, or peers they knew who did not reengage into education or training programs. Most said it was their way of thinking and outlook for the future that had set them apart from others.

A lack of supportive relationships caused much anxiety for Sher in high school. She decided to drop out and pursue a GED after her principal told her there was no way she was going to graduate. Despite feeling like she was not smart enough to reconnect into education or training, she was motivated to do so. Sher confided that she experienced challenges while attending school, including balancing time between studying and being a mother. Even so, she was determined to complete her coursework. Sher also spoke of longer-term plans and the desire for a good future. She expressed that she has a different way of thinking than a lot of people her age who dropped out of and have not returned. She said:

I feel I'm different because I do want a good future. I want to be stable, and a lot of people my age and people who got out of school, they don't think about those things. They don't really feel like it's important to live comfortably and not have to deal, like not being able to pay rent and stuff like that. So, I feel like that's what makes me different. I think about the long run, what happens in the future.

Having a plan for the future was stated frequently. The participants were all out-of-school youth at the higher end of the age spectrum (20 to 24 years old). Many felt that it was time for them to look at longer-term plans and were determined to make their plans a reality.

John was also someone focused on long-term plans. He stated a combination of factors that he believed allowed him to enter into the Literacy Zone program. John felt he was more of a leader than a follower and unlike people he knows who did not reconnect, he was not involved with drugs or the criminal justice system. He summed up his reengagement, saying, "I just went on my own path and continue my career and what I am supposed to do."

Luciid was at ease while being interviewed and freely shared his story. He found out his senior year in high school that he did not have enough credits to graduate. Unable to make up the coursework, he chose to drop out, stating, "I was going to get my GED because I was only going to get the regular basic high school diploma anyways, it is basically the same thing." Luciid noted how he was unlike others his age who have not reconnected because they are looking at the present, and he is looking at the future. He also spoke about the difference between his current engagement compared to his first attempt at reconnection. He felt it was all about the person and if a person really wanted

to do it, then he or she would actually complete. Luciid cited that he was looking past the paycheck and immediate gratification to the future and long-term goals. He explained:

It is the mindset. People have different things in life. Like my cousin, he didn't get his GED, but he dropped out in the ninth grade. I mean, I had the job too, but he's going through the same thing I did. He didn't try to go into this program, he's working right now, full-time job, all that. And of course, he sees the money. I guess that he's looking at the present and I'm looking at the future.

Besides determination to complete to accomplish future goals, others frequently described their outlook using the words *motivation* and *ambition*. Their decision to reconnect into education and training was based largely on their motivation to do so.

Whether to enter or advance in a career, set a good example for their children, or to live more comfortably, participants felt they had more push explaining why they have reconnected while others their age do not.

Jackie's high school experience was disrupted as a result of bullying. She stated, "I was bullied a lot and I had no interest in school at all." Her negative high school experience was what she attributed to not completing her high school education. Jackie had no hesitation when asked how she differed from those who have not reengaged into education or training. She felt she had more drive than they do. She further explained:

I think I have more motivation than they do. They're still young, so they want to do their own thing. Especially if you don't have kids, this is something you're not really worried about until you absolutely have to do it. But I don't know. I'm different than a lot of people. I just have a different mentality than a lot of people my age. They're still on the kid side.

Alice used the word ambition to describe how she differed from those who have not returned to obtain a high school equivalency. She felt others lacked the push that she had and felt that was the vital part of her success. She summarized:

I guess, because I'm planning to move back home soon, but my goal when I moved here ... I think about ... When did I move here, in 2015 ... was to get my GED and to get my CNA, stuff like that, so I figured just get it done before I move back so I can say that I did it.

Jill also had no hesitation about how she differed from those in her family or others she knew who lack a high school equivalency. Jill stated that she considered herself to be highly motivated compared to others she knew who have not entered or completed their education and was happy she took advantage of the adult education programs. She also equated it to having more ambition. Thinking more about it, she added, "I would have to say that, I don't know, when I want something I just try. I have motivation." She also felt that by reengaging she got her confidence back and used the education and knowledge she obtained on a daily basis. She was pleased to have received her diploma and was now in job training. She also shared that she was the first one to receive a diploma in her family and hoped to be the first one to go to college as well.

Textural theme 3. Program design and instruction. In addition to references to program flexibility and content, there were instances describing helpful, caring staff as a motivation to reconnect and remain in education and training programs. John felt the current program was better than what he experienced in high school. He liked the freedom he was given and also felt the teachers at the Literacy Zone location he attended were better than any teacher he had previously. This was important to him since he had

negative experiences with teachers in the past. The quality of the teachers was, as John expressed, “a win for me.”

Luciid liked the structure of the high school equivalency program he was in because it was more like college. Luciid said, “They are not on your butt all the time worried about your grades or worried about everything else.” The self-paced nature of the program and having no rush to complete the program at the same time as others in the class were both attractive features. Similarly, Alice was attracted to the program due to the flexible schedule. She appreciated that “I can tell them and let them know what I’m going through and stuff like that, they can work around my schedule also.”

The flexible schedule was essential to Jackie’s success in her high school equivalency program. Jackie chose to attend the Literacy Zone because they offered afternoon classes. This was important to her because it was not in conflict with her work schedule. She liked the smaller class sizes at the Literacy Zone and also added, “We’re all grown up too, so we all don’t have that child mentality of being immature and the bullying is the big thing that stops a lot of motivation from even going.”

The flexible class times was one of the things that also attracted Kay to the programs. Kay explained, “I pick the days that I want to do, that I feel like that I’m available, or they ask me what days I want to come back for my class.” She finds the flexible schedule, class structure, and support of the instructors to be the main reasons she was persisting. She also appreciated the support she felt she received in her adult education training class. She liked that “I have people that I can look to and talk who can help me.” She felt like there was a support system of people who cared. She enjoyed the program and was proud of what she has accomplished thus far. She also felt the structure

and support was why she is doing well. Jill did not feel that in high school she received instruction that assisted her in understanding what she needed to learn. She felt she experienced a different culture at the Literacy Zone. Jill stated, “The teachers were more cordial, more friendly. They knew what I needed help on and where to direct me.” Compared to her high school experience, Jill felt that the Literacy Zone teachers took the time to explain the lessons in order for her to understand them. Jill gave the example, “Okay, this is what you are missing; this is what you have to work on, and they would give me different resources.” Alice also cited that the assistance of the Literacy Zone instructors will help her go farther in life, “Actually, I do think they are helping me a lot. My instructor just shows me the areas that I need to work on and stuff like that.”

Structural theme 1. Seeking more options. The majority of the interviewees cited that reengagement into education or training programs was important in order to have more options in life and career. Most had multiple reasons they were attracted to and continued into the program, but overall, a sense of having more options as a result of the completion of the TASC exam or job training was a theme throughout. John liked the format and the flexibility of the Literacy Zone classes and appreciated the quality of instruction he received in class. He believed the adult education program was better than the education he received in high school. He felt he was learning new things and they were teaching him what was important for him to be successful. He felt this would set him on his path of employment and eventually joining the military.

Motivated by the long-term goal of better employment and higher education, Terry entered back into education. She selected the current programs due to the program design and the fact that it offered career choices. Terry completed her Certified Nursing

Assistant certification, leading to entry-level employment and plans to complete the TASC exam. Sher was motivated to join her current program because it was a good way to start a career and due to the support that she received from the instructor and program staff to enter the programs offered. She was happy that she made the choice to reconnect into education and training and felt completing her education would lead to more job opportunities.

Alice knew she wanted more for herself and that obtaining her high school diploma was the first step. Knowing that an education would provide more opportunity was motivating to her because she knew she was doing something to advance herself. She did not want to be in the same place she was currently in and desired to accomplish more while she was still young.

Having more options was especially important for those who were mothers. Participants in the study who had children expressed that completing education and training would not only lead to better employment but also allow them to be role models for their families. Jill's experience mirrored this. She wanted more options than the minimum wage job she currently was in and knew that the time was right to get her high school equivalency and job training. She was proud of her accomplishment as it would provide her with additional job opportunities, and she would be an example of hard work and perseverance for her children. Jackie also had a desire to achieve more in her career and provide a better life for her child. She saw the advantages that a better job would provide. Her motivation was a feeling that she did not have a choice at this point, so she was set to complete her education.

Although Kay had a different path in reconnecting into education and job training, her goals were similar to other mothers in the study. Kay is a single mother and was proud that she was back in school. She knew she made mistakes in her past and only reengaged into high school equivalency courses in order to avoid jail time. She was happy that she was forced into classes and did not view being told to enter as a negative experience. Even with self-doubt and the feeling she was not going to make it, she was motivated to complete her high school equivalency and job training. Completing was important to her so she could model for her child that goals can be achieved in spite of persistent barriers and an overall lack of support in her life.

The goal of more options, including postsecondary options, was what motivated Nicci to reconnect and persist. She was focused on the goal of playing basketball again. She missed the positive aspects of being part of a team and was passionate about the sport. She realizes that in order to fulfill that goal, she needed to obtain a high school equivalency. She had written down steps she wanted to take, including the colleges she wanted to apply to in order to keep focused and motivated. She saw the benefit of taking classes and doing homework as part of the end result of completing and moving to the next step.

Structural theme 2. Support/assistance of others. The participants found out about their current programs from multiple sources. The majority did so from a referral or information that was given to them by someone who was willing to assist with reentering education. This was the experience that John described. He received a recommendation from his high school guidance counselor (praising his high passing rates on the TASC exam at the Literacy Zone). This recommendation is what attracted him to the Literacy

Zone. Although he did not have a good high school experience, John felt the counselor was supportive with the transition into programming by providing the information and paperwork that was required to register. Luciid reconnected into a high school equivalency program due to his mother's insistence but did not complete his degree. He also learned about the program from information his mother requested from his high school. Luciid was motivated to attend the second time, stating that he just had to get it done and get it over with. Kay also found out about the program through a referral. She discovered the program through the judge personally reviewing a program pamphlet with her and mandating her to go. She considered his actions as supportive and was happy she was pushed. She explained to avoid jail time, and in order for the judge to close her case, he shared information on a high school equivalency and job training program and suggested she attend.

Even when a supportive person did not make a referral, their encouragement often led individuals to seek out information about training programs. Jill found out about the Literacy Zone by visiting the Niagara County WorkSource One Center in Niagara Falls, N.Y. after her boyfriend encouraged her to reconnect. She felt her boyfriend instilled confidence that she could do it. He did this by reinforcing that she was smart and encouraged her to go back. That assistance prompted her to start looking to go back to school. She was attracted to the Literacy Zone program because of the assistance she received right from the beginning.

Participants signaled that the support they received, either by assistance with registration information or by emotional support and encouragement, was a factor that helped with the reentry process. Having some sort of supportive relationship helped with

reconnection. Even those who disconnected due to a bad educational experience felt that their home district staff provided information and support that enabled them to reenter into adult education programs. Table 4.2 summarizes each textural or structural theme as it related to the participants.

Table 4.2

Composite of Textural and Structural Themes for All Participants

Themes	John	Alice	Sher	Luciid	Jill	Terry	Nicci	Jackie	Kay
Textural									
Lacking opportunities	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Career and job options		X	X		X	X	X		X
Mindset/drive	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Program design	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Benefit of supportive relationship	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Structural									
Better career and life	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Education/training options	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Schedule/content/instruction	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Essence of total experiences. The feeling of being stuck without further education or job training was an experience that was described frequently in the interviews. Participants in the study were all eager to express their plans for the future and how reengagement moved them one step closer to their individual goals. They conveyed that finishing their high school equivalency or job training would provide them

with additional job opportunities and positively affect their future. For some, the future held additional postsecondary education at the college level. Others were looking for job advancement and more stable careers, including a military career.

Another common thread included the determination to complete their education and training and move on with their lives. Many realized that they were not using their time to benefit themselves and they were ready to make a change. They described themselves as motivated and ambitious, or ready and determined when attempting education in adult education programs. They were looking to the future and committed to completion this time around.

Support from family members, friends, and instructors at the Literacy Zone all contributed to the reconnection and current success of the participants. Another collective view was positivity when speaking of their experiences in high school equivalency classes or training programs. The overarching themes that emerged were those of gratitude for the support from teachers who took the time to individualize lessons, provide supplemental resources, or lend an empathetic ear. Other participants appreciated the culture of adult education classes versus their high school experience, saying they enjoyed the maturity of the class participants as well as the respectful tone displayed by teachers and staff.

Data Analysis and Findings

This research study included interviews with nine out-of-school youth who were attending programming at a Niagara County Literacy Zone. The study sought to understand the experiences of 20- to 24-year-old OSY and their motivation to reengage into education or training programs. The researcher collected interview data, field notes,

and demographic surveys to use for analysis and interpretation. Table 4.3 is a summary of data that highlights the textural description, including verbatim quotes, textural-structural descriptions, and the composite themes, which are the essence of the experience representing the entire group.

Table 4.3

Textural Descriptions, Textural-Structural Descriptions, and Composite Theme

Sample Quotes	Textural-Structural Themes	Composite Descriptions
“They was telling me about you guys had a lot of training stuff over here, like classes for like CNA, stuff like that, so I ended up getting my CNA through here.”	Job training	Progression of goals
“I’ll finally get farther in life.”	Education/training options	
“In today’s world you need a GED or high school diploma to get a job.”	Lacking opportunities	
“My mom, especially since she really wants me to get it, but she knows I can get it.”	Benefit of supportive relationship	Support
“Here, like I can tell them and let them know like what I’m going through and stuff like that.”	Assistance from others	
“Makes me want to dance. Yeah, that is the way I feel about it for real.”	Better career and life	Positive experience
“Actually, I am more motivated now than before I didn’t have to go to school and stuff like that. So now when I wake up and have the routine that I have, I feel more motivated and I’m doing something to better myself.”	Mindset/drive	Self-motivation

Summary of Results

Nine 20- to 24-year-old OSY participated in interviews that enabled the researcher to gain insight into their experiences. The interviews provided 98 statements related to reconnection. As a result of data collection, four composite descriptions were formed that spoke to the heart of the experience of the participants. Through an analysis

of the data, the following themes were developed in relation to the guiding research questions.

Study participants felt a sense of relief that they were finally doing something that provided a better future. All but one participant stated that they did not consider themselves “dropouts” since reconnecting into education was always their plan. Participants were eager to complete their high school equivalency or job training to advance their careers, pursue college educations, or enter the military. Some have career advancements waiting for them with completion of the program, while others will be starting new careers because of the job training they completed. For those with dreams of postsecondary college educations, this first step was necessary to advance. Many explicitly stated that they were focused on the future due to their long-term plans.

Having a supportive relationship to enter and remain in education and training was also a vital factor for the participants. Even those who stated that self-motivation or lack of career options were the biggest factors for their reengagement, having a supportive person provided a benefit to them. Supportive people were often close family members, including mothers, uncles, children, and godparents, but for others, it was a positive peer, instructor, case manager, or a judge. For many of those in the study, they wished they had better support systems when they were first thinking of dropping out of high school. The supports provided encouragement, reminders, check-ins, and resources that enabled individuals to remain focused on their education.

For study participants, being back in education or training was a positive experience. Even those who felt it was harder to be back in education, especially if working and parenting, were happy they were persisting. Many had self-doubt about

reentering education, fearing they had forgotten too much since they were last in high school. Once in the program, many expressed that the experience was very different than what they expected. The structure, flexible hours, support, and instruction allowed them to achieve their educational goals. Some stated that they never liked school, especially math, but now they understood it and were doing well. Most had a sense of pride as they thought about what they already accomplished and how much smarter they felt. None of the individuals interviewed expressed that they had a negative experience with reconnection.

Self-motivation was a theme that was expressed frequently by participants. Even with self-doubt and the fear of failure with reentering education, most participants cited their own motivation, ambition, and determination as the biggest factors in starting back into education or training. Participants expressed they felt it was too easy to not get an education and for that reason, many do not take advantage of the opportunities that are available. Study participants did not want to be limited in their thinking, education, career options, or life, and the thought of a better future motivated them to make the changes necessary to reconnect.

While these themes represented the group as a whole, participants who were mothers experienced reengagement differently. Mothers in the group faced additional challenges as they were required to balance class attendance, schoolwork, and in some cases, employment, with their parenting roles. This difference also magnified their motivation for achieving the next level of education or job skill attainment, as they sought a better life for themselves and their families. Mothers also stated a desire to be a

role model for their children and exemplify that in spite of barriers and setbacks, goals are achievable.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

As stated above, the purpose of this study was to gain understanding from the perceptions of former OSY as to what motivated reconnection to education, training, or employment programs. In addition, the study sought to understand what recruitment and program approaches they felt were important engagement strategies. Chapter 5 synthesizes the research literature and the guiding research questions and study methods with the findings. The chapter also reviews the findings, discusses their relevance to the literature, and offers recommendations. Information gained from those who are seeking to or have reconnected into academic and job training programs will contribute to the body of literature and knowledge on youth reengagement. Research is available regarding factors contributing to dropping out of traditional high school and best practices exhibited by successful education and job training programs, but a gap exists in the literature as to youth perspectives on reengagement. Research focused on OSY perceptions is important to understand their motivations for reconnecting into education and training programs.

This study examined 20- to 24-year-old former OSY who have reconnected into an education or training program. An analysis of the factors that led to disconnection, as well as the reason for reconnection and what aspects of the training program attracted them, were studied. Through open-ended interviews and discussions with the study participants, information about and perspectives on reengagement were examined. A phenomenological design was chosen to capture the lived experiences of OSY. Education

and job training programs that work with OSY use a variety of strategies to recruit individuals into the programs. Gaining a better understanding from the youth and young-adult perspectives is important to measure the effectiveness of these approaches. The guiding questions for this research study were:

1. What do OSY perceive to be the main influence for reengaging in education or job training programs?
2. What engagement strategies do participants say attracted them to education or job training programs?

As a result of the rich stories and open discussions with 20- to 24-year-old young adults, the researcher was able to identify themes and the overall essence of the experience of the group. The data gathered assisted the researcher in identifying the major factors for reconnection as well as learning what attracted participants to their specific programs. Four common themes were established: (a) progression of goals, (b) support, (c) positive experience, and (d) self-motivation. Understanding what motivated OSY to reengage into education, training, or employment may be valuable to policyholders, educational leaders, and program administrators who enact policy and create and deliver programs to marginalized individuals.

Implications of Findings

Research finding 1. OSY have goals for the future. OSY are often perceived as not having future or long-term goals. Frequently, individuals find it difficult to obtain or advance in employment as a result of not completing their high school degree or postsecondary job training. In this research, OSY participated in education or training programs to advance to the next step in their progression. They wanted and planned on

careers and advancement, and knew they needed additional education to achieve that. Katznelson (2016) cited *necessity motivation* to describe those who were motivated by the desire to acquire additional education in order to find employment. Similarly, in this study, OSY stated the need to complete their high school equivalence in order to attend college, enter the military, or obtain more career options or career advancement. Others felt that they would benefit from job training programs as the first step towards a real career versus low-paying entry-level employment.

Millet and Kevelson (2018) found that individuals who have not obtained a high school education have fewer job prospects, often leaving those who have disconnected from high school working in entry-level jobs with limited benefits. Education and training are especially important as two-thirds of all jobs require at least some postsecondary education. Many adult training programs, as well as colleges and the military, require a high school education for entry. Obtaining basic literacy and numeracy skills, as well as assistance and resources needed to find employment, further benefit those who reconnected.

Considering their importance for completing education and training, the schedule and options available for classes are important for OSY. Reentering education programs is often not as easy as dropping out of high school education. To attract participants to enroll, programs need to balance desired outcomes with the educational design (Anderson et al., 2019). Doing so will ensure that programming is not so structured that it dissuades potential participants who feel that the inflexibility in traditional education creates a barrier to attendance (Anderson et al., 2019). Class times based on public transportation schedules and availability of childcare are also important considerations. Organizations

need to allow for some flexibility while also providing a high-quality high school equivalency curriculum and relevant job training programs.

Participants in this study needed day and evening class options to be able to continue their employment, care for children, or align with their personal preference for when learning occurs best. Similar findings were reported in a quantitative study of survey participants, which found that programs that offer flexibility and focus on both academic and technical skills in a nontraditional setting create opportunities for OSY to persist (Litzau & Rice, 2017). An accommodating schedule, along with approachable staff, allowed individuals experiencing setbacks in attendance or progress a chance to continue without penalty. These *practice motivation* factors, opportunities for flexible entry into programs and creative program designs, were essential for the retention and motivation of individuals eager to complete training (Katznelson, 2016).

For older OSY, especially if they have attempted to reconnect more than once, a sense of readiness to engage and succeed was expressed. Barriers or attitudes that resulted in not completing their high school equivalency or training programs were now replaced with positive intention to succeed and move on to where they feel they should be at this point in their lives. The feeling of being stuck and living paycheck to paycheck were motivators to complete the program. Understanding that they lacked job training, a high school equivalency, and job and life opportunities were motivation to progress to the next goal they had in their journey. OSY reported a sense of pride and relief that better lives and careers awaited them when they completed their program.

Research finding 2. OSY who have reconnected need continuous support.

Barriers that disrupted the high school experience for OSY often have not entirely gone

away, making it crucial to have individuals in their lives who offer positive support to complete their education and training. Students who reconnect into education programs express the influence of family, positive peers, mentors, or teachers as a major influence on their reengagement (Iachini et al., 2013). Participants in educational programs were able to easily identify the person who provides support for their goals. OSY felt the reminders of why they were completing their education, check-ins to see how they were doing, or encouragement to continue all positively influenced their decision to enter into and persist in their education and training programs. While caring adults have been previously identified as a motivation for reconnection for OSY, support from program staff has also been cited as a reason (Litzau & Rice, 2017).

Once in programming, OSY also benefitted from the connectedness they felt from a caring adult as well as a sense of belonging by being with a positive peer group.

Relational motivation is named as a major reason OSY reengage into programs. Having the sense of connectedness, support, and acceptance also increases the retention of students (Katznelson, 2016). Caring staff and instructors who individualized instruction, showed encouragement, and understood the barriers experienced by participants also seemed to be a significant reason for students to enter and remain in programming.

Helpful, compassionate staff and individualized attention were factors that motivated OSY to enter into and remain in classes. The positive environment was important to those returning, especially since many disconnected from high school due to the negative experience they encountered with administrators, teachers, and staff. Compared to their high school years, those in adult literacy and training programs felt the quality of the instructors and programs were better. Personalized assistance focusing on

what participants really needed to learn, cordial and friendly instructors, and a sense of concern were all factors that retained OSY in their current programs.

OSY are unique and cannot be considered a homogeneous group. Program staff should be aware of the strengths and barriers that each individual possesses in addition to what their goals are for reentering into education. Understanding participants' specific needs is essential to assist participants in the completion of their educational and career goals. Participants appreciated that the educational programs were staffed by a support system of individuals who cared. Compared to their high school experiences, they valued the attention and encouragement they received.

Research finding 3. OSY who reconnected exhibit motivation and drive to complete. OSY who reengaged into education exhibited a strong sense of determination. Participants desired a better future, a sense of accomplishment, and the credential necessary for the next step in their lives. For some, high school completion meant a break in the cycle of non-high school completion that was prevalent in their families.

Perspective motivation relates to the knowledge of the choices and opportunities available to OSY. Students with this type of motivation are often driven to connect (Katznelson, 2016). A feeling of achievement and pride through their persistence provided additional inspiration as they progressed.

OSY felt that they differed from those they know who have not reentered education. Many attributed their mindset and drive as the differentiating factor. Even when participants exhibited doubt in their academic abilities, they still found the strength to enter. Those who reconnected felt they were more mature and can see past a partying lifestyle, being idle, or accepting the low pay in their current employment. Participants

felt that they took advantage of the opportunities that were available and were not complacent with being idle and receiving public assistance. A real desire for a better future fueled OSY to connect to and persist in education and training programs.

Many OSY cited a driving force as the reason for staying in a program despite the challenges they experienced. Self-motivation is often a reason that students describe as they obtain high school credentials to better support their families (Iachini et al., 2013). This purpose was expressed often, and sometimes as simply as, being a choice whether you want to do it or not. Often, despite personal barriers and risk factors, individuals are driven to enter into and complete high school equivalency programs as well as training in technical education programs (Varga et al., 2019).

OSY who had multiple attempts at reconnection felt it came down to the desire and drive versus the lack of purpose or inspiration they had in prior attempts. Personal barriers persisted in many who reconnected, but those who were determined to complete to advance their career or enter postsecondary education remained enthusiastic and remained in programs. “Ambition” was another word frequently included when describing what characteristics OSY possessed. The motivation, ambition, and drive described by OSY also provided a sense of pride and confidence for those who have reconnected.

Research finding 4. OSY feel that adult education sites offer positive experiences. Young adults who reconnected into education and training felt that the experience was a positive one. Many exited high schools after negative incidents with administrators, teachers, or peers. Experiences with adult education programs were much better, they felt, than what they had encountered in the past. Many expressed that

reengaging was a confidence booster and a way to overcome self-doubt. (Smyth et al., 2013) noted that OSY wanted to attend alternative programs because of the culture in an adult environment and supportive staff, which they did not experience in their former educational environments. Positive staff interactions and individualized instruction fostered learning for those at the Literacy Zone. Even those who had not been in a classroom for years felt smarter and realized they were finally able to master subjects they struggled with throughout their formal education.

OSY who reentered education and job training felt they had more education and knowledge to use, not only professionally but personally. Education and training classes were assisting them in moving towards the future. This *mastering motivation* was an important feature of youth programs in the sense that the participants acquired skills and education and had an appreciation of their development (Katznelson, 2016). With each gain or section passed on the TASC exam, students knew they were moving closer to their next plan. Postsecondary, military service, or additional job opportunities were next steps for many in the Literacy Zone programs.

OSY who completed their high school equivalency requirements or job training also felt pride with the accomplishment. They were happy to have finally finished a goal they set out to complete and saw this as a step towards providing a better future for themselves and their families. The realization that they finished something added to the sense of achievement as they felt a burden being lifted and excitement about the next chapter in their lives. A combination of factors led to the success of OSY, including training programs aligned with industry needs, flexible education programming, the presence of a caring adult, and wraparound services in place when assistance is required

in order to stay on track (Litzau & Rice, 2017). These factors are aspects of positive youth development programs that foster a thriving individual.

Alignment with Positive Youth Development Practices

Positive youth development (PYD) was the theoretical framework guiding this research. Although not specifically designed around positive youth development (PYD), the high school equivalency and job training programs contained many of the features of PYD models. PYD works through three individual but connected concepts: “(a) a developmental process, (b) a philosophy or approach to youth programming, and (c) instances of youth programs and organizations focused on fostering the healthy and positive development of youth” (Lerner et al., 2018, p. 2). Young adults expressed that their experiences were much different in adult alternative programs compared to the challenges they faced in high school. The specific program elements moved them along personally and professionally, allowing the development and growth of the youth they served.

Specifically, OSY increased competency in literacy, numeracy, and job training while fostering their self-determination and the self-resilience that many OSY described having or realizing as they continued their education. Instructors focused on individual strengths and formed positive bonds with OSY, which promoted a sense of caring and also provided the additional support necessary for some to remain in programming. Catalano et al. (2004) noted PYD programs as having approaches that seek to achieve one or more of the following objectives:

- (1) Promotes bonding, (2) fosters resilience, (3) promotes social competence, (4) promotes emotional competence, (5) promotes cognitive competence, (6) promotes

behavioral competence, (7) promotes moral competence, (8) fosters self-determination, (9) fosters spirituality, (10) fosters self-efficacy, (11) fosters clear and positive identity, (12) fosters belief in the future, (13) provides recognition for positive behavior, (14) provides opportunity for prosocial involvement, and (15) fosters prosocial norms (pp. 101-102).

OSY participated in education programs and job training opportunities that encouraged positive growth and development so that individual thriving was accomplished. Successful PYD programs strengthen individuals and provide structure and consistency. Participants felt the structure and design of the classes they were enrolled in provided flexibility but also had clear expectations for successful completion. In addition, the support from the staff and instructors increase healthy bonding with adults and peers. Programs that provide youth and young adults with mutually beneficial relationships show that they experience clear, positive benefits through contributions to self, family, community, and civil society (Lerner, Almerigi, et al., 2016).

High school equivalency and job training courses may not specifically design PYD programs, but nonetheless, they contain many aspects of best practices in theory. Programs that employ PYD methods often see increased retention and positive growth in individuals. These attributes—competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring—are the characteristics termed the Five C's of PYD (Lerner et al., 2011). The development of these qualities was promoted in the Literacy Zone and job training programs. OSY benefited from and were attracted to the classes because of positive adult and student relationships and the opportunity to gain high-school equivalency and job skill competencies.

Limitations

The dissertation study included interviews with nine OSY who reconnected into high school equivalency or job training. Findings include the unique experiences of women who were also mothers. Neither of the male participants were fathers or parenting during the study. Therefore, this study was able to report on the knowledge and feelings that only mothers provided.

The inability to completely triangulate the data was a second limitation. Consistent with methodological approaches that understand that experience may influence the interpretation of results, the researcher followed the practice of *epoche* (to put aside thoughts and understandings to see what is really there) to check for any bias in the study due to race, gender, education, or past experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, several peer reviewers conducted external checks of the data and findings of this study. Only one of the study participants consented to member checking to provide feedback on the analysis of data collected; therefore, triangulation of results was incomplete.

Recommendations

As stated in Chapter 1, studies have been conducted on OSY and barriers to engagement, but little research has been conducted related to recruitment and program design using the perceptions of the individuals who were engaged, or reengaged, but did not complete previous programs (Bloom et al., 2010). Recommendations based on this study may benefit policymakers who appropriate funds for OSY programming, leaders in organizations that design and administer programs targeting OSY, and K-12 administrators. Determining the main reasons OSY reenter education, training, or

employment is necessary to guide policy, evaluate current program design, and establish outcomes for future funding opportunities.

This section will provide suggestions relating to future research, policy development, leadership, and social justice practices based on youth perceptions of programming and what influenced reengagement, addressing a gap that existed in this body of research. The formerly OSY who participated in the study provided significant data regarding their disconnection, motivations for reengagement, and continued barriers to completion. In addition, data on why students chose the specific program they attended and how they differ from others they know who have not reconnected was gathered.

Recommendations for future research. First, further research is needed on how being an out-of-school mother impacts reengagement and retention. While the participants of this study shared similar experiences, those who were mothers were especially driven to complete their education. Participants spoke of wanting to be better off financially for their children and to be a role model of success to them as well. Those who were mothers also struggled with guilt over how little time they had for their children with their commitments to work and school. Even with a sense of determination to complete their classes, finding time to study while parenting was an obstacle to be managed.

Second, further research is needed on how being a father impacts reconnection into education. The number of OSY who are also fathers is difficult to determine, due to the current data collection methods for those who are parenting (Lewis, 2020). Research studies of fathers and schooling show that the fatherhood dimension is particularly important for reconnection and completion (Stokes, 2020). Like the mothers in this study,

fathers want to be a positive role model for their children. Fathers entered into education as a way to increase their earning potential and persisted due to the influence of their children (Stokes, 2020). Therefore, further studies on men who are fathers and the impact on reengagement and persistence will add to the body of research.

Lastly, additional research is needed to determine whether earning while learning or other monetary incentives drive OSY to reconnect. Previous research suggests that earning while learning is an important factor for engaging and retaining OSY in education and training programs (Anderson et al., 2019; Bridgeland & Milano, 2012). The results of this study did not concur with previous findings. Several participants were drawn to programs that offered job training but first wanted to focus solely on completing their high school equivalency programs prior to enrolling in any additional classes for skills training. Only one participant who was in a job skills program mentioned benchmark incentives as an attractive part of programming, but this was not a primary reason for starting. In Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)-funded youth programs, benchmark incentives are financial rewards for participants for achievements in areas such as completion of education and training programs, and job attainment and retention.

Recommendations for policyholders and makers. Discretionary funds should be allowable for programs serving OSY. Funding is so rigidly tied to retention and completion that existing policies do not adequately serve those for whom they were intended. Programs designed to reengage OSY should be allotted discretionary funds to assist individuals with childcare, transportation, and technology needs. In addition, funds should be allocated to address any individual need that impedes attendance or persistence

in programs (e.g., car repair bill, need for medication, medical appointment, emergency food purchase, or costs of caregiving). OSY have goals for the future, but oftentimes, barriers are in place that hinder their progress in reconnection. Many of these unexpected costs pull OSY from programming.

Policyholders and makers need to be aware of restrictions of the current funding streams. Legislation does not address the major barriers for youth participation into education, training, or employment programs; therefore, resources do not reach the people who need it most. Youth and young adults continue to experience obstacles reengaging due to a lack of childcare and transportation. For many looking to reconnect, childcare is unaffordable, and a lack of transportation continues to hinder those seeking education, training, or employment. Furthermore, with the onset of COVID-19, OSY also face a digital divide, with a lack of computers and connection hindering attendance in programs using alternative methods of instruction. COVID-19 is also adding to the need for discretionary funding to provide PPE and cleaning supplies to poor and underserved students who are most impacted by this pandemic. Self-sufficiency is hampered by these issues, which are not addressed in current policy; therefore, a percentage of allowable expenses should be earmarked to address these barriers.

Another recommendation for policyholders and makers is to increase the length of WIOA youth grants. Currently, WIOA youth grants in Niagara County are funded annually. This 1-year funding cycle is not long enough to deliver seamless education, training, and case management to program participants. Time is needed to build trusting relationships and develop a plan to decrease barriers to education that many OSY have. Greater flexibility to attend education and training programs at a pace that is beneficial to

OSY is also essential. As with many grants, 1 year is too short to have meaningful impacts, especially on students who enter in the third or fourth quarter. It is unnecessary and time consuming for organizations to respond to requests for proposals, await the notice of award, and then begin the student recruitment process in a continuous cycle each year. The time and money required to do this yearly can be better spent on the required program elements for each participant.

Recommendations for K-12 education leaders. Provide innovative forms of education tied to individualized career pathways that begin in earlier grades. Beginning at least in the middle grades, career exploration and an integrated curriculum showing the connection between careers and academics should be implemented. This may generate a spark in students with the intent of creating engaged learners. This new approach to education will also permit students to advance from exploration of careers in the middle grades to pre-apprenticeship, apprenticeship, and dual enrollment programs of interest as they enter high school. So often apprenticeship is thought of only as skilled trades (machining, welding, and electrical), but apprenticeships include areas such as healthcare, information technology, and culinary careers as well. OSY in this study cited obtaining job skills and personalized instruction in adult programs as two major factors for reengagement. Learning was individualized and not delivered through a herd approach to education. In a similar way, providing customized career paths and applicable academic classes may decrease disconnection for those who feel left out in the current system.

As stated in Chapter 1, education level and lack of training often leave OSY primarily working in low-wage jobs with few benefits (Belfield et al., 2012). Therefore, the importance of keeping youth in school cannot be understated. This model will better

serve not only those students who do not see the real-world relevance to what they are learning in school but would prime all students to be better prepared for careers or postsecondary training after completing high school.

As stated in Chapter 2, programs need to balance desired outcomes with their educational design (Anderson et al., 2019). In study participants, leaving high school created a lasting negative feeling, and often these damaging experiences led to anger, self-doubt, and mistrust of the educational system for those who experienced difficulties. Consistent with the literature, OSY may not feel the impact of disconnection immediately, but by age 30, there is a significant difference in income levels, employment, and health outcomes from those who remained in school (Lewis & Gluskin, 2018). Therefore, increasing high school completion by developing an alternative to our traditional education system may be a first step in decreasing the number of OSY.

Looking at countries with the lowest levels of OSY (NEET) populations, educational considerations such as degree attainment and vocational training are a major influence. Germany and Sweden, for example, have well-developed dual education systems that include academic and vocational education, and a low unemployment rate compared to other OECD countries (OECD, 2018). Countries that provide educational options such as individualized career pathways and apprenticeship also experience lower levels of NEET populations.

The United States needs to rethink its traditional high school model in order to increase high school graduation rates. Programs that tie academic coursework with pre-apprenticeship, apprenticeships, or dual credit programs for students to graduate with a high school and postsecondary degree are all options to consider. This will reframe the

question from how we attract OSY to reconnect to what the education system in the United States needs to look like to increase the engagement and graduation rates of our students.

Next, involve parents, caregivers, and other supportive adults when designing and executing education programs. Supportive relationships are found to be a major reason for OSY to reconnect and remain in programs. Earlier in their child's education, many parents and other caring adults look for ways to be involved in order to provide guidance and encouragement throughout their educational careers. Schools in the K-12 system should develop ways to make parents and other caring adults collaborative partners in the education of their children. As members of the community, they have knowledge and experiences practitioners may not have or may not be aware of. Educators need their ideas, support, and buy-in to increase educational effectiveness. The OSY in this study spoke of the importance of supportive adults in their lives and wished they received that support earlier in their education. Increasing the knowledge and presence of parents, caregivers, and significant adults will not only assist them in supporting their students but increase their advocacy skills as well.

Recommendations for youth program administrators. Develop a network of support agencies designed to seamlessly serve OSY. Currently, youth-serving organizations work in a silo. Agencies receiving state and county funds should be required to better coordinate efforts that advance youth and young adults. As was reviewed in Chapter 2, many OSY are not engaged in education, training, or employment but are involved with community-based or public systems. A network of agencies should be identified as providers of services in areas such as mental health counseling, high

school equivalency, job skills training, probation, disability services, departments of labor and social services, and drug and alcohol counseling. This network should be mandated to establish a plan for each individual and make appropriate referrals to each network partner. Currently, OSY reach out to other service providers and face the redundancy of entrance paperwork, proof of eligibility, and similar program orientations.

A *soft handoff* and a universal intake system will reduce the unnecessary paperwork that OSY are required to complete in order to receive services. A “whole village” approach may assist with connecting students to training programs since many OSY are already connected to assistance or community-based programs in some way. For individuals who have a trusting relationship established, a referral to education or training programs may be a better way to connect those looking for the next step in their lives. What OSY encounter now is a disjointed, time-consuming system of institutional barriers. This collaboration will enhance the student experience and ensure that OSY are provided not only education and training opportunities, but the wrap-around services they require to reduce barriers to completion. Table 5.1 includes a synopsis of recommendations and indicates their sources.

Conclusion

This study sought to understand the experiences of OSY and what their motivation was to reengage into high school equivalency or job training programs. Equally important was to identify what aspects of a specific program attracted them to reconnect. What this study tells us, supported by literature, is that OSY are a marginalized population in the United States. Although OSY are not a monolith, many similarities exist as related to factors such as poverty and race. OSY in this study had

Table 5.1

Summary of Recommendations and Basis

Recommendation To	Recommendation	Recommendation Basis
Researchers	Further research on how being an out-of-school mother impacts reengagement and retention is needed in the current body of research	Research finding 3. OSY who reconnected exhibit motivation and drive to complete.
	Additional research is needed to determine if earning while learning or monetary incentives drive OSY to reconnect	Motivational factors cited as important are program content and the ability to earn money while attending programming (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012).
Policy Holders and Makers	Discretionary funds should be allowable for programs serving OSY	Research finding 2. OSY who have reconnected need continuous support.
	Increase the length of WIOA youth grants from yearly to a 2-year cycle.	Time is needed for participants to acclimate to the program, be influenced by positive youth development approaches, and for practitioners to be confident that the intended outcomes are being met as a result of the programming (Catalano et al., 2004; Zaff et al., 2014).
K-12 Education Leaders	Provide innovative forms of education tied to individualized career pathways that begin in earlier grades.	Research finding 1. OSY have goals for the future. Research finding 4. OSY feel that adult education sites offer positive experiences.
	Involve parents, caregivers, and supportive significant adults when designing and executing education programs.	Research finding 2. OSY who have reconnected need continuous support.
Youth Program Administrators	Develop a network of support agencies designed to seamlessly serve OSY.	Research finding 2. OSY who have reconnected need continuous support.

difficulties in school that prevented them from acquiring the numeracy and literacy skills needed to obtain adequate employment or advance in a career. The lack of a high school diploma also made it impossible for some to enter into postsecondary education or the military. Acquiring high school equivalency as well as obtaining postsecondary education both increase the earning potential and opportunities for those who complete these educational milestones. Disparities will not be resolved until OSY have reconnected into education and job training programs that lead to advancement in employment.

The review of the literature shows a gap in the perceptions of OSY and their lived experiences as it relates to motivation for reengagement into education and training programs. Also missing was what attracted individuals into the specific program they chose. An analysis of data from previous studies does identify several factors leading to reengagement, including self-determination, peer and adult support, effects of limited employment, flexible on-ramps, and earning potential. First, many OSY do not consider themselves dropouts and planned to continue their education when they were able to do so (Bickerstaff, 2010; Lukes, 2013; Zaff et al., 2014). Self-determination in spite of continued obstacles was cited as a reason for students to reconnect into education programs (Iachini et al., 2013). Second, studies on reconnection of OSY cite the importance of supportive relationships with adults and friends. Peer support and adult support are often a significant factor for the reengagement of OSY. Studies looked at the perceptions of those who reengaged (Baldrige et al., 2011; Iachini et al., 2013; Morrissette, 2018; Smyth et al., 2013), why individuals returned to school (Boylan & Renzulli, 2016; McDermott et al., 2017), and student characteristics and reenrollment as well as student experiences with dropout and reenrollment (Barrat et al., 2012). Third,

entering into employment is a popular way that OSY reconnect. Longitudinal studies examined youth disconnection and those reconnecting. A large number did so through employment (Black et al., 2012; Hair et al., 2009; Millett & Kevelson, 2018). Fourth, multiple, flexible pathways back into the educational arena are also a real motivation for individuals looking to rejoin programs (America's Promise Alliance, 2014; Anderson et al., 2019). To attract participants to enroll, programs need to balance desired outcomes with the educational design (Anderson et al., 2019). Fifth, youth participants cited the ability to earn stipends and other financial assistance as a significant reason for enrollment and ongoing attendance (Anderson et al., 2019; Bridgeland & Milano, 2012).

A phenomenological design was chosen to capture the lived experience of OSY in Niagara County, New York. Formal and informal conversations and interviews were used to obtain descriptions from OSY and to learn the meaning of the problem from the participants, based on their understanding and knowledge of youth disconnection. Following Moustakas's (1994) methods and procedures for conducting research, questions were developed to guide the interview process in addition to a general interview guide to add rich data of significance. In addition, the researcher's field notes and a demographic questionnaire provided further information.

Analysis of the data were performed using van Kamm methods adapted by Moustakas (1994) and produced several textural and structural themes. Four themes described the motivation for reengagement (Research Question 1). Lacking opportunities, positive relationships that provided support, and a better career or life were cited as what motivated OSY in this study to reenter into education and job training programs. Predominant themes were established as to what attracted OSY to the program they were

attending (Research Question 2). Support and assistance from others, career options, program design and instruction, and their own mindset were cited as major influences.

As a result of the research findings, implications were discussed and recommendations for future research were suggested. OSY who were mothers had a deep desire to attend and complete their high school equivalency and job skills training. Additional research focused on how being a mother affects their reengagement and retention will add to the body of knowledge on OSY reconnection. The OSY men in this study were not fathers, but additional research should focus on this dimension as well. Also, future research is needed to determine if earning while learning or monetary incentives are a motivation for reconnection in OSY.

Next, several recommendations were made, specifically for those who are policymakers and leaders. Inequities faced by individuals served by WIOA and other funding streams to promote high school equivalency and job skills attainment do not do enough to remove the barriers in place for OSY to reenter programs. The lack of affordable childcare and limited transportation options continue to hinder those who seek a path to self-sufficiency. In addition, with the shift to online education platforms in the wake of COVID-19, many OSY lack computers and access to Wi-Fi in order to be able to participate in alternative training programs.

Those who have the ability to make and change policy need to allow flexibility to use funds to decrease childcare, transportation, and technology disparities that have historically afflicted members of poor communities. Also, increasing the length of WIOA-funded youth grants is another recommendation for policyholders and makers.

The current 1-year cycle inhibits seamless programming for participants who have to be tracked for multiple years.

OSY vividly described their high school experiences and what ultimately led to their disconnection in high school. Although there are many credit-recovery programs available, administrators need to understand how push-out factors have a scarring effect on individuals and frequently create doubt and insecurity about reengagement into adult education programs. Designing an innovative education system that individualizes learning and aligns relevant academic coursework with a career pathway may engage students and retain them until high school graduation. In addition, collaborating with parents, caregivers, and other significant caring adults may add an additional level of support needed by students to be successful in an attempt to decrease the number of disconnections.

Finally, as program administrators, the importance for individuals to obtain their high school degree and relevant job skills training to enter a sustainable career is known. However, recruitment and retention of OSY are often difficult. Motivations for reengagement for the OSY in this research study were (a) progression of goals, (b) support of others, (c) self-motivation, and (d) a positive experience in alternative education programs. Program administrators should take advantage of supportive relationships OSY may have already established with other community-based organizations and programs so that OSY feel a transition to another caring and encouraging educational program would continue their progression towards their future goals.

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Appendix A

Guiding Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me how you disconnected from high school?
2. What do you feel motivated you to reconnect into the adult literacy program?
3. What have been your main challenges, or who has been your main supports?
4. How did you find out about the Literacy Zone?
5. What attracted you to the current program?
6. Did you ever think about quitting the program? If so, why did you stay?
7. How are you different from friends or those you know who have not returned to complete their education?
8. What challenges have you experienced while attending classes at the Literacy Zone?
9. How is this experience different from your high school experience?
10. What aspect of the adult education program do you feel is most important to your success?

Appendix B

General Interview Guide

1. What thoughts, incidents, or people associated with your reengagement into education stand out for you?
2. How did reengagement into education affect you?
3. What thoughts or feelings stand out as you think about your reconnection?
4. Have you shared everything you think is important about your reengagement experience?