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Exploring Positive Youth Development Among Young People Who Leave School Without Graduating High School: A Focus on Social and Emotional Competencies

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Much qualitative and quantitative research has examined the individual and contextual risk factors of youth who have left high school without graduating. However, few studies have examined their strengths and, to the authors' knowledge, no studies have used a positive youth development (PYD) perspective. To begin to fill this gap, we explored a component of the PYD process, an individual's social and emotional competencies, among 27 youth (57.64% male; 45% African American and 24% Hispanic) who had previously left school without graduating. We used an interpretive phenomenological approach in combination with the competency framework proposed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning to examine whether (and, if so, how) these youth expressed these social and emotional competencies. Contextualized within their lived experiences, we found that youth exhibited multiple competencies, including making responsible decisions, creating and implementing strategies for goal pursuit, and understanding how their thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to their development. Implications for policies and programs that support youth at risk for leaving school without graduating and for reengaging these youth are discussed.

Keywords: high school graduation, positive youth development, social and emotional competencies

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Characteristics of the individual, family, and community are all associated with youth leaving high school without graduating[1] (Hammond, Linton, Smink & Drew, 2007; Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Despite the range of factors examined, much of the literature has been framed within deficit models of development. In particular, research examining individual-level factors typically focuses on the capacities these youth supposedly lack in comparison with high school graduates; for example, showing lower impulse control, self-confidence, maturity, sociability, and academic abilities, motivations, and expectations about the rewards of graduation (Combs & Cooley, 1968; Eckstein & Wolpin, 1999; Rumberger, 1983; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). The

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[1] In this paper, we use the term "leave high school without graduating" to denote those young people who had an interrupted secondary educational experience. We use this term instead of "dropout" because, in our opinion, and the opinion of others (e.g., Dance, 2009), the term dropout promotes a deficit-based perspective of the youth and connotes that it was the sole fault of the young people. In addition, we believe this term is neutral enough to enable the youth in our study to describe why they did, in fact, leave school.

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recent focus on so-called "character traits" such as "grit" as the silver bullet for educational success implies that youth who succeed have "it" and those who do not succeed lack "it." However, focusing on the remediation of deficits does not provide a comprehensive or necessarily accurate depiction of the capacities of youth, nor does it provide insights into the full breadth of policy and practice possibilities for encouraging youth's positive educational outcomes (Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem & Ferber, 2001). To close this gap in understanding, the focus of the current study is to explore how youth who leave school also express the strengths delineated as necessary for positive developmental outcomes.

There is evidence to suggest that youth who leave high school without graduating express individual strengths not typically portrayed in the extant, deficit-based literature. For instance, results from qualitative research have provided details about the reasons why young people leave school. These reasons, which include providing for themselves and their families, and taking care of their own children or other children (e.g., Center for Promise, 2014; Fine, 1994; Fine & Zane, 1991), contradict deficit-based models. Furthermore, leaving school does not necessarily mean a young person's educational trajectory has ended. Nearly two thirds (63%) of youth who leave school obtain a high school diploma or a degree equivalent within eight years of leaving (Hurst, Kelly, & Princiotta, 2004). It is possible that a much greater number of youth could and would reengage to successfully complete their education if provided with sufficient supports. The positive youth development (PYD) perspective emphasizes that all youth have the capacity to thrive (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006; Damon, 2004; Lerner, 2004). However, how youth who have left school express this capacity is not well understood.

The focus of the current paper is to examine whether and how youth who leave high school without graduating express aspects of PYD (Benson et al., 2006; Lerner, Phelps, Forman, & Bowers, 2009) as described by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework (Payton et al., 2008); adding to the body of research that gives voice to the experiences of youth who have disengaged from school (e.g., Center for Promise, 2014; Fine & Zane, 1991; Tuck, 2011). The purpose of this exploration is twofold: (a) to understand whether and how these specific competencies are displayed by youth who have left school; and, if they are apparent, (b) to provide insights for policymakers and practitioners into how these strengths can be leveraged to improve the academic and life prospects of youth who have left school.

We come to this work with the assumption that all youth have strengths. However, because the empirical literature lacks depth in describing the presence of strengths in youth who have left school, we begin with a framework that has been applied to youth with continuous enrollment (i.e., those who have not left school), asking whether and, if so, how youth who leave school display these strengths. In the next sections, we present an overview of youth in America who leave high school without graduating, detail why we are examining the expression of aspects of PYD among these youth, and describe existing evidence on the potential strengths of these youth which suggests that our inquiry is warranted.

Youth in America Who Leave High School Without Graduating

Estimates show that approximately 20% of youth in America do not graduate on time, if ever (Balfanz et al., 2014; Stetser & Stillwell, 2014). Approximately 500,000 youth are defined by the United States Department of Education as "school drop outs" each year (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014). Youth not graduating results in substantial individual and societal economic, civic, and social costs (Levin, 2009). For instance, these youth face lower employment rates and lower lifetime earnings than high school graduates (Rouse, 2007; Sum, Khatiwada, & McLaughlin, 2009). They are also less likely to vote or otherwise be civically engaged (Nover, Godsay, Kirby, & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2010), more likely to participate in criminal activity and be incarcerated (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003), and more likely to have poorer health outcomes and higher health costs (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Because of these substantial costs, understanding the factors that influence youth leaving school without graduating could have significant implications for indi-

vidual youth and broader society (Catterall, 2011).

Researchers have documented a variety of factors within the individual, the family, the school, and the broader community that make youth more vulnerable to leaving school. These factors include, among others, caring for family members, pregnancy, family financial constraints, and homelessness (Center for Promise, 2014; Fine & Zane, 1991; Hammond et al., 2007; Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). Furthermore, youth may experience clusters of these risk factors (Bowers & Sprott, 2012; Hammond et al., 2007; Moore & Zaff, 2002), creating what has been called a *socially toxic environment* (Center for Promise, 2014; Garbarino, 1995). This environment not only comprises proximal factors, but also systemic factors such as economic inequality and institutional racism (Warikoo & Carter, 2009), which exacerbate or create proximal adversities. Qualitative research methodologies can provide an opportunity to explore the lived experiences of youth who have left school and the processes, perspectives, and individual-context relations informing the reasons youth leave school without graduating (e.g., Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Davis, 2006; Fine & Zane, 1991). For instance, through an analysis of 24 interviews with African American males in an academic reengagement program, Davis (2006) found that these young men were surrounded by multiple adversities in their communities and often engaged in what could be considered deviant behaviors. However, by examining these behaviors as reflective of the individual's lived experience in context, these behaviors could be viewed as adaptive in context; for example, dealing drugs as a means of putting food on the table or to secure housing for their families.

Not embedding the lived experience of youth who leave school without graduating in their ecologies (Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997) and/or using deficit perspectives to frame the lives of these youth may result in missed opportunities for understanding, supporting, and effectively intervening with them. Moreover, a developmental systems approach (Lerner, Lerner, Bowers, & Geldhof, 2015) suggests that examining only situational or individual factors without considering their interaction results in an incomplete picture of youth development. Complementing previous studies such as Davis' (2006), we adopt a PYD perspective (Benson et al., 2006; Damon, 2004) to examine the accounts of youth who have left high school without graduating and have subsequently reengaged. We examine their personal narratives in context to better understand the meaning behind their behaviors and attitudes and how young people can achieve adaptive developmental outcomes in adverse conditions (Werner, 2005). In the following section, we present our theoretical frame and provide justifications for the current investigation.

Positive Youth Development and Youth Risk

The term 'Positive Youth Development' (PYD) has been used in numerous ways: as the underlying principles for youth programs (i.e., youth development programs); as a philosophy for how youth should be viewed (e.g., not as problems to be resolved, but as assets to be promoted); and as a framework for positive outcomes or capacities (e.g., academic achievement, prosocial attitudes, and healthy relationships; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2004). As such, many developmental models have been proposed to describe PYD (e.g., Benson et al., 2006; Damon, 2004; Larson, 2006; Lerner et al., 2009). However, what undergirds these multiple models is the premise that all youth have the potential to thrive (Benson, 1997; Taylor et al., 2002). Included in this belief is the idea that all youth have individual assets and that their surrounding ecologies contain assets as well. Importantly, though, PYD, particularly for low-income youth, urban youth, and youth of color, cannot be understood disconnected from the systemic adversities that these youth too often experience, such as violence in neighborhoods, lack of economic opportunity, access to few high quality schools, and criminal justice systems that disproportionately incarcerate youth (and adults) of color (Amos, 2008; Belfield, Levin & Rosen, 2012; Sum et al., 2009). Instead, as Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) have proposed, and as we use in constructing our analysis in the current study, PYD frameworks should recognize the systemic adversities that young people may face and therefore how their attitudes and behaviors adapt to these systemic adversities. This perspective is also consistent with the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST; Spencer

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et al., 1997), which emphasizes the essential function of adaptation for racial and ethnic minority youth within a context of systemic racism and discrimination.

In this paper, we describe PYD as a developmental process in which there is a reduction in the probability of risk behaviors and an increase in the probability of thriving through the alignment of the assets of a young person's context (e.g., family, school, community, broader society) and the strengths and capacity of that young person (Benson et al., 2006). It is important to note that the process through which PYD unfolds is bidirectional and dynamic, with youth as active agents who help to shape their surrounding ecology, which in turn influences their development (Lerner, 2006; Overton, 2014). As such, thriving is theoretically maximized when the individual capacities (assets) of a young person are continuously aligned with developmental supports (assets) available within their families, schools, and throughout all aspects of their communities (Lerner, Bowers, Geldhof, Gestsdóttir, & Desouza, 2012). However, adapting to adverse conditions that results in benefits to the youth and to others (what has been called adaptive developmental regulations; Brandtstädter, 1998) can also promote the development of individual strengths, temper the impacts of the adversity, and help to resolve the adverse conditions. Our hope is that by taking this approach we can add to the evidence-based conversation about engaging youth in community and societal change instead of using "control and containment" (Ginwright, Cammarota & Noguera, 2005).

A growing body of research has used a PYD perspective to identify the individual and ecological assets that promote positive development among youth placed at risk of negative outcomes (e.g., McDonough, Ullrich-French, Anderson-Butcher, Amorose, & Riley, 2013; Murry, Simons, Simons, & Gibbons, 2013; Taylor et al., 2002; Taylor et al., 2003). Oftentimes in this work, risk status is defined by economic disadvantage, with researchers finding that those from lower socioeconomic status (SES) families and communities are less likely to succeed academically and vocationally than those from higher SES families and communities (Hammond et al., 2007). However, fewer studies fully address the multilayered ecology within which the youth are embedded, including their social context, and the historical and cultural contexts that shape how society views young people and how young people view themselves (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Spencer et al., 1997). This dynamic between individual and the broader ecology has particular salience for youth who are developing within historically disenfranchised and oppressed communities. Research by Taylor and colleagues (2002), who interviewed gang-involved African American youth to ascertain whether these youth expressed characteristics of PYD, provides insight into how existing frameworks of individual and ecological assets may be utilized to begin investigating PYD within diverse populations. Although there seems to be no prior research applying a PYD framework to youth who have left high school without graduating, we build on the research by Taylor and colleagues (2002, 2003) to focus on the processes through which positive individual development occurs among youth who left school. Specifically, we focus on building an understanding of the ways in which individual strengths and capacities function as assets within their lived experiences.

The Current Investigation

We begin our inquiry with the assumption that all youth have the capacity for positive development. This assumption, aligned with the developmental process model of PYD (Benson et al., 2006), holds important policy and practice implications as it implies that what differentiates youth with supposedly maladaptive outcomes (e.g., leaving high school without graduating) from those with positive outcomes (e.g., graduating high school) is access to more supportive ecologies (i.e., supportive youth systems; Zaff, 2011). However, aside from a few studies, the strengths of young people who do not display traditional markers of positive developmental outcomes (e.g., high school graduation) have not been explored qualitatively within a PYD framework. Therefore, we focus on understanding the ways in which young people who have left high school without graduating engage their strengths and capacities. To understand *which* competencies, in *which* contexts, may exhibit *which* aspects of PYD among youth who have left high school without graduating, we must first ask: (a) Do youth who

have left school and later reengaged describe expressing the competencies and strengths outlined by the CASEL framework? And if so, (b) how are these competencies and strengths expressed?

We use the five core competencies of social and emotional learning developed by CASEL (Payton et al., 2008) because it is consistent with other strengths-based social and emotional frameworks, such as those that focus on *noncognitive skills* and/or *character* (Farrington et al., 2012; Gutman & Schoon, 2013; Tough, 2012) and is used widely in school districts throughout the country. Furthermore, meta-analyses of programs that promote social and emotional learning (SEL) and syntheses of the social and emotional literature show that social and emotional competence positively impacts youth outcomes in academics and beyond (e.g., social behaviors, mental health, and drug and alcohol use; Durlak & Weissberg, 2011; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Farrington et al., 2012; Sklad, Diekstra, Ritter, Ben & Gravesteijn, 2012). The CASEL framework includes self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Payton et al., 2008; see Table 1 for definitions). Although we recognize that these competencies are not the only strengths and capacities that may be expressed by these youth, we use this framework as a starting point for building an understanding of PYD among youth who leave high school without graduating. Importantly, these competencies do not emerge from, nor are they expressed in, a vacuum. As the person-context relation defines development (Lerner, 2013), we must examine a young person's competencies in relation to the contexts within which they live and grow. To this end, we use a phenomenological approach as it offers a "more dynamic, culturally responsive, context sensitive perspective for interpreting the individual's own meaning making process" (Spencer et al., 1997, p. 828) and thus provides a more accurate depiction of the strengths a young person possesses in relation to her context. As individuals are active agents embedded within multiple layers of the individual's ecology (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Lerner, 2006; Overton, 2014), each individual differentially interacts with those contexts. An individual's lived experience is influenced by how she makes meaning of and interprets those contexts and her interaction with those contexts (Spencer et al., 1997). Understanding individual lived experience as the dynamic relations between individual and context could provide new insights into the capacities of young people who leave high school without graduating. For instance, Smyth and Hattam's (2002) idea of "voiced research" may be used as a counterweight to the prevailing, deficit-based assumptions underpinning research on youth who leave school without graduating. In short, and consistent with phenomenological approaches (e.g., Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008), researchers relying on voiced research methods begin without a preconceived notion of the motivations and life circumstances of the young people who participate. Instead, these researchers seek to understand more clearly the authentic lived experiences of youth. Furthermore, in understanding how individuals interpret and act on their contexts, researchers fo-

Table 1
CASEL Social and Emotional Competencies

SEL competency	Definition
Self-awareness	Identify one's thoughts, feelings, and strengths, and recognize how they influence one's choices and actions.
Self-management	Establish and work toward short- and long-term goals, and handle emotions so that they facilitate rather than interfere with the task at hand.
Social-awareness	Identify and understand the thoughts and feelings of others, respect their rights, and appreciate diversity.
Relationship skills	Establish and maintain healthy and rewarding connections with individuals and groups through communication, listening, and negotiation skills.
Responsible decision-making	Generate, implement, and evaluate positive and informed solutions to problems, and assume responsibility for personal decisions and behaviors.

Note. Derived from Payton et al. (2008).

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cused on social justice may employ findings illuminated by voiced research for creating or refining public policy and practice (Charmaz, 2008).

Consistent with previous conceptualizations of PYD, we posit that the expression of a set of strengths and capacities should lead to "thriving," or what has been called "exemplary positive development" (Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000; Lerner, 2004). The specific outcomes for thriving have varied across studies, with those that cut across multiple domains (e.g., Search Institutes' indicators of school success, leadership, helping others, maintenance of physical health, delay of gratification, valuing diversity, and overcoming adversity; Leffert et al., 1998; Scales et al., 2000) and examples that focus on one domain (e.g., *flourishing* as the maintenance or improvement in psychological functioning; Keyes, 2007). Thus, although the youth in our sample have not achieved a typical marker of success (e.g., high school graduation), their lives and narratives may still connote aspects of thriving. As such, we build on a small body of research that focuses on the emic accounts of youth who leave high school without graduating (e.g., Center for Promise, 2014; Fine & Zane, 1991), using a Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework to examine the individual assets displayed by such youth and subsequently reengaged in some type of educational or vocational experience.

Method

Sample

Participants were recruited through community reengagement organizations that serve youth in high-poverty, urban neighborhoods. These organizations were based in 15 cities located in the Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, Southwest, and West of the United States. Youth were invited to participate in group interviews if they reported that they were under age 25 and had left high school without graduating for some period of time. Youth were not recruited based on the risk expressed in their life experiences. A total of 203 youth took part in 27 group interviews, with groups ranging in size from 3 to 12 participants. The youth ranged in age from 18 to 25 (M = 19.40, SD = 1.92), with the majority (71.60%) between 18 and 21 years of age. There were more males (57.64%) than females, and youth were primarily African American (45.00%) and Hispanic (24.00%; see Table 2 for demographic information). Although the organizations helped to recruit neighborhood youth regardless of whether the youth were involved with each organization, the majority of youth recruited were involved in the organizations, and as a result, were also reengaged and were on a path toward obtaining their GED.

From the group interviews, we selected 27 personal narratives for use in the current analysis. After listening to all 203 stories and reflecting with the group facilitators on their experiences with the youth, we chose 27 narratives that represented the range of lived experiences expressed during the group interviews, such as experiencing multiple adverse life events (see Center for Promise, 2014). Selected narratives were representative in that the experiences these youth recounted were no more or less remarkable or extreme than the others; that is, they had what would be considered a typical case among our larger sample (Creswell, 2013).

All 27 of the selected narratives were from youth who had reengaged in an educational

Table 2
Participant Demographics

Characteristic	Subsample (n = 27)		Full Sample (n = 203)	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Cities represented	13		15	
Gender				
Male	15	55.60%	112	55.20%
Female	12	44.40%	91	44.80%
Race/Ethnicity				
African American	13	48.00%	91	45.00%
Hispanic/Latino	7	26.00%	49	24.00%
Caucasian	5	19.00%	24	12.00%
Mixed race	2	7.00%	12	6.00%
Age				
18	14	51.80%	38	18.90%
19	4	14.80%	38	18.90%
20	1	3.70%	33	16.20%
21	5	18.50%	36	17.60%
22	1	3.70%	11	5.40%
23	0	.00%	14	6.80%
24	1	3.70%	22	10.80%
25	1	3.70%	11	5.40%

and/or vocational experience in some way. The demographics of the youth chosen for the current analysis were representative of the full sample (see Table 2). The youth came from 13 of the 15 cities, were primarily between the ages of 18 and 21, and were primarily African American (48.15%) or Hispanic (22.22%). There were slightly more males (56.00%) than females. We did not transcribe stories from two of the cities because of issues with audio quality and/or because the manner in which the youth told their stories in these cities often made the elements of the story (i.e., the beginning, middle, and end) incomplete.

Procedure

Two individuals facilitated the group interviews, one female and one male. The male facilitator took the lead in conducting the group while the female facilitator served in a secondary role to guide the activities and to take notes. The method for the group interview drew on facilitation techniques developed by the Center for Teen Empowerment, an organization founded in 1992 whose focus is on raising the voices of youth and young adults in a community in order to effect social change (Pollack, 2005). The two individuals who ran the group interviews have extensive experience and training in these techniques, as well as in working with and organizing youth who have disengaged from school. The lead facilitator, who identifies as African American, had 22 years of experience using these methodologies and the secondary facilitator, who identifies as Indo-Trinidadian American, had two years of experience and was trained by the primary facilitator. The underlying premise of the Teen Empowerment method is that interpersonal interactions are optimized when comfort and trust is first developed. Facilitators started each group interview with a brief introduction, during which they outlined the expectations and purpose for conducting the group interview. The facilitators also confirmed that the participants had all left school without graduating, as only youth who had left high school without graduating were included in the group interviews. Along with the facilitators, participants then engaged in several group exercises to engender trust, establish norms, and build connection and comfort among individuals in the room. Once rapport was established, participants shared their personal narratives one at a time including their reason(s) for leaving school, and if they had returned to school, their reason(s) for returning to an academic path, and the barriers and opportunities that supported or impeded their efforts to reengage. Narratives were started with the prompt, "Tell me your story and what led up to you dropping out of school?" The process of sharing of narratives varied within the groups, with some youth constructing their full narratives without interruption, whereas other youth constructed their narratives through a discussion with the other participants in their group. After each participant had shared his or her narrative, the facilitators led the participants through a conversation about the similarities and differences present in their stories. Facilitators closed the group interviews with participants' reflections and thoughts about the session. Each participant was given a $40 gift card for his or her participation in the group. Group interviews were audio recorded and both facilitators took field notes during and after the group interviews. The 27 personal narratives included in this analysis were transcribed for coding purposes.

We recognize that we, as participants in the research process, bring our biases to our analysis and interpretation of the young people's personal narratives (Denzin, 2009). As a team, our individual foci represent a diversity of theoretical and applied backgrounds, from critical theory, to racial and ethnic identity, to mental health, to programming and interventions. We also come from a diversity of social and economic backgrounds, ranging from economic and social privilege to economic and social disenfranchisement. However, what we all bring to this topic is a belief that all young people, including the youth who leave school without graduating, have internal strengths and these strengths provide the opportunity for all of them to thrive. In addition, we all have experience working with youth who have come from similar backgrounds as those of the youth represented in this study, whether as mentors, teachers, youth workers, or applied researchers working in low-income, urban areas. As a result, although our backgrounds do not perfectly align with those of the youth included in this study, our prior involvement with this popula-

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tion allows us a unique entry point from which to try to understand their lived experiences.

Analysis Plan

For our analysis, we took an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA; Smith, 1996), uncovering themes ("phenomena") through the perspective of those young people who left high school before graduating. Consonant with our PYD perspective, IPA views humans as inherently embedded within context. Thus, an interpretation of a phenomenon can only be made by examining it as a function of the relation between the person and the context (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). The process of our analysis followed three stages, applied iteratively: description, thematization, and interpretation (Orbe, 2000). This iterative process allowed us to continually refine and validate our findings through reflection throughout the analytic process (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999).

Description encompasses the collection of and reflection on the personal narratives heard during the group interviews and field notes taken during the group interviews. We reflected on the personal narratives we were hearing from the youth, making note of how the youth described their life experiences. During this reflection, we developed the initial codes for each of the SEL competencies, combining our knowledge of the SEL competencies conceptualized by CASEL and what we heard in the participants' narratives. To begin to examine the efficacy of this coding scheme, three of the authors applied those codes to the same three personal narratives. After this initial coding exercise, all of the authors came back together to discuss the utility of the codes; whether the codes were being used and interpreted consistently. We decided that coding of any given portion could not be accurately done without considering the entire personal narrative. For example, without considering the lived experience of the youth detailed in their narratives, obtaining a GED could be considered a negative outcome and proxy a deficit since those with a GED do not fare significantly better than those who do not graduate (Heckman & Rubinstein, 2001). However, for the young people in our sample, obtaining a GED signaled a monumental achievement that necessitated the expression of multiple SEL competencies. Thus, coding was difficult and arguably inaccurate if only considering a portion of a given personal narrative. Therefore, we decided that all coding would be conducted with consideration for the entire narrative. The three authors responsible for coding then returned to the three narratives to apply the coding scheme. Afterward, the authors again reflected on the process to see where there were agreements or discrepancies. The coders discussed any discrepancies among their codes until the discrepancies were resolved (Elliott et al., 1999; Mishler, 1990; Saldaña, 2012). Six additional narratives were coded by two out of the three coders for reliability, with the remaining 18 personal narratives were divided evenly.

Next, for *thematization*, we discussed the themes that emerged from the codes. This discussion included not only whether a given code was appropriate for a given passage, but also, what each code meant in relation to the individual's context. These themes and codes were revised and organized to reflect the lived experiences of the participants. At this point, we determined, based on the issues that the youth raised about the inequalities around them and consistent with the Social Justice Youth Development model (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002) and PVEST model (Spencer et al., 1997), that the *social awareness* code should be expanded. The CASEL definition is focused on understanding the thoughts and attitudes of individuals. We expand this definition to include an awareness of other's people's actions and how those actions implicate others and the broader society (e.g., actions taken to oppress others or to create systemic inequality).

The organization and *interpretation* of the themes was the next decision point for the research team. We decided to discuss the expression of the SEL competencies as embedded within the youth's lived experiences. As such, within the context of their personal narratives the youth often described their goals, the processes they took (or were in the middle of taking) to achieve those goals, and competencies related to the pursuit of those goals. Throughout the reflection process, we discussed discrepancies in coding, the ways that the data were interpreted, and the biases that each of the

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researchers brought to the interpretation of the narratives.

Results

Each young person in our sample encountered multiple adverse life experiences that created what could be considered a toxic environment (Center for Promise, 2014). These experiences included physical and emotional abuse at the hands of parents and significant others, being victims of or witnesses to violence, personal medical issues or those of a close family member, neglect from adults in their lives (e.g., parents, teachers, coaches, counselors, other adults in their neighborhoods), negative experiences in the foster care system, and high rates of mobility (school and housing). Despite these negative experiences, participants' personal narratives demonstrated evidence of SEL competencies. In these narratives, we saw deliberate, thoughtful decision-making and planning around leaving school and the alternative goals the youth devised for themselves and their families. In addition, youth expressed relationship skills (see Arbeit et al., 2016) not only in negotiating the negative relationships in their lives, but also in capitalizing on positive relationships. Furthermore, youth demonstrated awareness of their own actions, thoughts, and feelings, as well as those of others, and conducted themselves responsibly in acts directed at those around them.

In the following sections, we discuss each of these competencies, utilizing specific examples from participants' personal narratives to illustrate their experiences. Although we write about each competency separately, we note that these competencies are theoretically interconnected and were expressed by the youth in interconnected ways (for a breakdown of competency occurrences and frequencies, see Table 3). Also, we note that we used pseudonyms for the participants to protect their identity.

Responsible Decision-Making and Self-Management

The CASEL definition of *responsible decision-making* includes generating, implementing, and evaluating "positive and informed solutions to problems" and assuming "responsibility for personal decisions and behaviors" (Payton et al., 2008). Consistent with this definition, the youth in our sample made decisions that were adaptive means for developing within adverse contexts and for expressing positive developmental characteristics such as expressing responsibility and care toward others. Furthermore, these youth combined these decision-making skills with *self-management* to work toward long- and short-term goals (Payton et al., 2008). Notably, these youth often had goals, and strategies to reach these goals, that were not consonant with staying in school. Rather, these goals and strategies were aligned with the demands and opportunities afforded in the youths' contexts and were often in service of obtaining or maintaining the needs (e.g., food, shelter, etc.) pertinent to their lives.

The decision to leave school was crucial in allowing participants to meet short-term goals. For instance, by leaving school, youth were able to financially support, take care of, and protect siblings, other family members, or themselves. As Stacy explained:

> I was working [and] I was also in a group home, so school was the last thing on my mind. I didn't really care about school cuz school wasn't puttin' clothes on my back and school wasn't feeding me. . . . So I did what I had to do.

Table 3
Competency Occurrences and Frequencies

Theme	Number of interviews occurred in (Percent)	Total number of occurrences	Avg. occurrences per interview
Self-awareness	27 (100%)	130	4.81
Self-management	27 (100%)	95	3.52
Goal setting	22 (81.48%)	66	3.00
Social-awareness	25 (95.59%)	124	4.96
Relationship skills	24 (88.88%)	60	2.50
Responsible decision-making	27 (100%)	102	3.78

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For participants like Stacy, working was the solution to her financial problems, not attending school. Furthermore, this goal was consonant with her immediate needs. For many of the participants, the income that they earned was used to provide for their families' basic necessities such as food and shelter.

Participants further reported that their schools were not responsive to the needs of their families. This was also true of many participants who explained that they made the decision to leave school in order to take care of a child or sick relative. For example, Andrew stated that, because his ailing mother was a single parent and his siblings were younger, it was his responsibility to assume the adult role, leaving no time for school.

> My mom could not cook herself, she could not bathe herself - she couldn't do anything on her own, so I had to step up. . . . I understand that my education is important, but I refuse to let my mom sit there and starve to death, and just . . . sit in her own filth. I'd rather . . . take care of my mom, as opposed to going to school.

Shouldering the burden of supporting their families started early for many of the youth, illustrating how the demands of life outside of school gradually superseded their school goals. In several instances, we heard youth describe engaging in illegal activities, but for prosocial, goal-oriented purposes. For instance, drug dealing was seen as a viable way, in a community with few economic opportunities for youth, for them to make money quickly as a means to support their families. As John said:

> My father passed when I was 6. That's when I changed, selling drugs, got into gang banging, you know. . . . So it was me, my mom, and my sister, so I was the breadwinner in the house. I had, you know what I'm sayin', to go out and support them.

Similarly, Sam describes the decision to turn to drug dealing as a solution to lacking financial and medical access.

> She [grandmother] got sick in about sixth grade. Well, she got sick and she didn't have a job to get her medicine, because she had a brain tumor or whatever. So about sixth grade I started selling crack cocaine to get the money for her medicine. I ended up going to jail for about a year for just having a little, you know, rock in my pocket, or whatever.

In this instance, Sam's goal was to get his grandmother the medication she needed to treat her cancer. This narrative provides an example of the ways in which youth created strategies to meet their needs and, importantly, the needs of their families. Furthermore, it demonstrates how these youth used their self-management competencies to determine that the short-term goals (obtaining medicine for a family member) superseded the pursuit of longer-term goals (e.g., completing their high school education).

Although the decisions these youth made initially led them away from school, this same competency also allowed these youth to make the decision to reengage in a traditional high school or in an alternative GED or High School Diploma program. Additionally, participants used their self-management skills to aid them in working toward their goal of reengagement or returning to school; a goal that was often sequenced after the nonacademic goals previously described. For instance, Sophia said:

> I'm 22 now and I decided to really like, get back on top of my, even go back to school and get my high school diploma, like last year, I been trying to find places. So once I found here, and I was staying down the street [from the reengagement program], and I seen the age, I'm like, well I'm not too late to go ahead and try.

In many cases, participants' decisions to return to school were catalyzed by the realization that not having completed high school would hinder their ability to take care of their families in the long run. Allison, who always felt that her mother prioritized others over her, ran away from home and left school, only to return two years later after becoming a mother herself. She explained:

> I realized that I had this daughter that I needed to do that for, and . . . I need a job and most of the jobs out here now won't accept you unless you have your high school diploma or GED. So I realized that it's time for me to provide for my daughter so she won't live the life that I lived.

As such, Allison made the informed decision to work toward long-term solutions for financial stability. For others, the decision to return to school involved multiple decision points. One participant, Brandon, who had moved around often realized that to get his life "back on track" and accomplish his goals, he needed to put himself in a different context.

> I kind of figured out, you know, what I wanted to do with myself. It was easier in Minnesota to get your life back on track . . . since I was moving back and forth

> from home into a new place, I was confused on whether if I wanted to be, you know, go this route or go this route. I always been book smart, so moved back down here.

Although he was initially conflicted about his goals, he ultimately made the decision to set the long-term goal of educational attainment.

From the personal narratives of our participants, we heard about youth making responsible decisions to leave school to provide for their families or keep themselves and others in their families safe. These decisions were not made without deliberate forethought and were made in relation to their developmental contexts. Furthermore, the youth created plans to pursue their goals, indicating self-management skills. Although some of the strategies youth used could be viewed as antisocial (e.g., selling crack cocaine), when understood in the context of the youths' lived experiences (e.g., to buy cancer medicine for one's grandmother), they can be interpreted as strategies that draw on the opportunities available within the youth's neighborhoods. It is important to note that our intention is not to commend these youth for making decisions that may be detrimental to the larger community or to themselves and their families in the long run. Rather, by examining the complexities of the youths' lives and the seemingly nonadaptive tactics they are using to pursue their goals, we are seeking to understand how these competencies are employed and function within their contexts.

Relationship Skills

In the lives of the youth in our sample, relationships played a significant role in pushing them toward the decision to leave school, as well as in encouraging them to reengage later. Many of our participants described instances where they used relationship skills to develop positive relationships with others or to negotiate negative and often abusive relationships. For example, Brittany explained that her parents were "on and off in my life for my first ten years." However, when she turned 13, her parents returned permanently, at which point Brittany made an intentional decision to invest her energy to repair her relationship with her mother and to maintain her relationship with her father. She stated: "[I was] tryna [sic] build a relationship with my mom because my dad always kept a relationship no matter how bad or deep in the hole he was." Though her father passed away during her freshman year of high school, Brittany continued to build a relationship with her mother because as she explained, "that's all I had left."

Other youth had positive relationships in their lives, and it was often these individuals who encouraged them to remain in school or attend a reengagement program. Aiden states that his brother encouraged him to reengage through a program.

> When I left there, I came here [reengagement program]. Only reason I came here was because my brother went here. If it wasn't for my brother, I would be never came here. I probably would've just dropped out flat out and just said, 'Forget the whole thing.'

Similarly, Maya describes when her middle school guidance counselor referred her to a program.

> He was my guidance teacher in middle school, but he knows me since middle school, and I told him that I dropped out, and he told me he wasn't going to let me drop out, 'cause he knows me, and he sent me here.

In the lives of both of these youth, their positive relationships pulled them back into reengagement opportunities. In addition, these youth were able to use their relationship skills to advance their goals, even in particularly negative contexts. For example, Derek noted that when he was incarcerated, the prison administrators would not give him a GED study book, because they were only given to inmates who had life sentences. However, this youth relied on his relationship skills to borrow a study book from a fellow inmate in order to study for the tests.

Within our participants' narratives, we heard about the relationships and relationship skills they utilized within their lives. Although we often did not hear directly about the relationship skills on which the participants relied, the participants did discuss the existence of important relationships and how those relationships influenced their lives. We view the existence of these relationships as indicators of their skills for forming and maintaining relationships. The relationships the youth described often served as assets for the youth, providing them with

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ways to achieve their goals and meet their needs. Future research is needed to delve into this topic and illuminate the specific relationship skills these participants express.

Social Awareness Skills

Among these youth, social awareness skills (i.e., understanding of the motives, intentions, and feelings of others) were most often talked about as directed toward individuals or to broader society. These skills often allowed the youth to see the good and bad qualities in those around them. Our participants often expressed social-awareness skills in relation to their family members. For example, Carlos, whose experiences included frequent gang involvement, understood that his grandmother's efforts to get him involved in different extracurricular activities were a means to save him from "the streets": "My grandma wanted to keep me busy, cause I grew up in [name of city] so she wanted to keep me off the streets." Even though his grandmother's efforts were sometimes unwanted, Carlos understood that her intentions were to keep him safe.

In contrast to the positive motivations of Carlos' grandmother, youth in our sample often expressed social awareness of others in ways that highlighted the prevalence of negative relationships or lacking any notable relationships in their lives. For instance, Liam described his lack of a nurturing supportive relationship with his father:

> I lived with a single father. Um, he wasn't a mother, obviously, and he wasn't good at nurturing the emotional side that a child would have to have in order to be, you know, sound in most ways.

Liam used his social awareness to recognize that his father was not able to support him in his social-emotional development.

Furthermore, participants' social awareness helped them to acknowledge when other people's behaviors would be a negative influence on their lives. For instance, Ashley understood that her mother's behavior toward her and her siblings was and would always be marked by her drug addiction:

> [My mother has] always had a problem with meth and pills. . . . She goes to the methadone clinic 'cause she's trying to get clean and everything. She's had a stable job for about a year now, so she's doing a lot better. It makes me proud but at the same time, she's still got that druggie frame of mind. She's scandalous so it's hard for me to be around that because I don't want my kids to be like that.

Through Ashley's understanding of her mother's drug addiction, she was able to see her mother's good and bad qualities, and she used this understanding to guide her own life choices and decisions.

Another way social awareness skills were demonstrated in the narratives was in participants' understanding of how their actions affected others around them. For instance, Tara related the negative impact her school experience had on her parents: "I [was] promoted [to] sixth grade but I didn't promote [to] eighth grade, and like, it broke my parents' heart cause I wasn't allowed to [be in] ninth grade." Furthermore, it was this very awareness, coupled with the desire to make her parents proud, that motivated her to attain her high school diploma after leaving school.

Using their social awareness skills, the participants were able to understand the world around them, including the social, political, and economic factors that oppressed them. For example, the participants used their social awareness skills to examine their place in and understanding of their communities. After being bussed to a school in the suburbs for many years, Brian returned to school in his own neighborhood, only to realize that it was violent and dangerous. He explained that:

> Me being over in the suburbs so long over these years going to these schools, I never paid attention to my own neighborhood, and then when I got to start paying attention to my neighborhood I actually seen like how it was . . . how people is . . . they didn't go to the suburban schools, so they still had that hood life and they was beefing with all types of people.

Brian's return to his neighborhood schools emphasized his social awareness, and allowed him to see the social disparities between his experiences in suburban and urban schools.

In addition, many of the young people deconstructed what they considered to be unjust systems. For instance, Mark spoke of his desire to spur meaningful and sustainable change in policy. He had been involved in a school system that he described as "wanting us down." After leaving school, he joined an organization for young African American men that emphasized social awareness in their programming; mainly focused on systemic inequities based on race

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and class. Based on his experiences with this organization, and consistent with the PYD process of internal strengths aligning with ecological assets, he decided to invest his energy into improving policies for others similar to him. He said, expressing that he and his peers have an obligation, regardless of their histories, to stand up to have their voices heard by policymakers:

> You have to be a factor out here if you want to be known as someone that did something, that tried to do something at least and not just give up. . . . We go to the capitol . . . a lot of us, we never did stuff like that, we're going to the capitol to talk about second chances. We got felonies and we just ignore it, and we should be up there talking to these people because we're the ones [that] should be supporting ourselves.

Among the youth we interviewed, they were able to understand the motives, intentions, and feelings of others, from family members to society as a whole. In having these social awareness skills, the youth were able to see good and bad qualities in those around them. Furthermore, their social awareness intersected with their self-awareness skills (discussed in the next section) as the youth were able to assess how others' behaviors and intentions impacted their lives and vice versa (e.g., Tara's recognition of how her leaving school impacted her parents) and, in some cases, even compelled civic action and involvement.

Self-Awareness Skills

Participants in our study demonstrated the ability to reflect on their previous actions and to understand their own feelings, thoughts, and motives, revealing several types of self-awareness skills. The participants understood that they were making decisions based on their emotions and were able to reflect on how those actions and decisions led them to being expelled or to leaving school. But, just as the social awareness findings suggest, these decisions were often made with an understanding of the systemic constraints (including adverse life experiences) throughout their developmental ecology. For instance, participants reflected on points in their lives that put them on either positive or negative trajectories. Referring to the impact that his brother's shooting had on him, Brian explained that:

> I was looking right out the window . . . he just went down . . . so I went out there and I had to look at my brother. I had to look at him, man, he was shot, couldn't move, body paralyzed, nobody helped him. . . . Going through that, I turned into a monster. . . . I started getting into the life, started carrying guns and stuff.

In this way, Brian reflects that the emotions he felt after losing his brother to gun violence influenced his future actions.

Participants also indicated self-awareness when they spoke of the turning points in their lives. Brittany, who came from a "gang-related" family, explained that:

> Probably eleventh grade, junior year, that's when I opened my eyes up. I was like, 'The fuck am I doing? That's not me.' I finally realized what was going on was the problem. I had already grown a connection with my mom so I decided to break the circle.

By "the circle," Brittany was alluding to the pattern in her family of not graduating from high school, and joining gangs instead. In her statement, and consistent with similar statements made by other participants, Brittany demonstrated both a retrospective understanding of why she decided to reengage, as well as self-awareness in the moment that she realized her situation was not optimal.

The participants also used their self-awareness to understand how their previous actions contributed to where they are now and where they want to be in the future. For one participant, Derek, this path includes not only getting a GED, but also learning how to manage his temper. Through his self-awareness, he saw how his emotions influenced his choices and actions. To help manage his temper, he has decided to join the military in the hopes that it will help to gain self-control:

> You know what I'm sayin', get out of this mentality that I'm in. Because if I stay in it, I'll be dead or in jail. You know what I'm sayin', I ain't tryin' to see the jail cell and I'm not tryin' to be six feet. So I'm just tryin' to do some things, better myself, and get us out this situation. . . . That's how it still is now, that's why I said I'm going to the army to better me, be a better person.

For Derek, the military was a valid option for becoming "a better person" but also served as a way out of his current situation and toward financial stability for his family.

Among our participants, self-awareness skills were demonstrated when youth reflected on their lives. In particular, Brittany and Derek described their self-awareness as enabling them

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to get out of negative situations and, how they use their self-awareness to guide their future plans. Notably, in their narratives, this self-awareness often arose in relation to the negative or unsafe contexts of their lives; for example, through gang violence.

Discussion

Prior research highlights that a confluence of factors at the individual, school, and community levels are related to youth leaving school before graduation (Hammond et al., 2007; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). However, studies that integrate youth voice (e.g., Fine & Zane, 1991) and focus on the positive attributes of youth who leave school without graduating (e.g., Fine & Rosenberg, 1983) have the potential for providing more comprehensive insights for effective program and policy development (Smyth & Hattam, 2002). Using a PYD perspective (Benson et al., 2006) and the CASEL core competencies framework (Payton et al., 2008), we took an interpretive phenomenological approach to examine 27 personal narratives from youth who left school without graduating to understand whether and how they express these competencies. Our analyses highlight that young people who have left school without graduating expressed the competencies previously identified among school-going youth. Furthermore, through these analyses, we were able to see how these assets were expressed in relation to the specific contexts of their lives (e.g., Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008). Our findings challenge the stereotypical beliefs that youth who leave school without graduating are deficient (Pew Research Centers, 2014). Rather, the youth in our sample display SEL competencies that enable them to pursue and successfully reach goals that are salient to their immediate contexts. In recounting their personal narratives, the youth in our study noted how they used their competencies to find resources that align with their strengths. As such, our findings align with prior research on the resourcefulness of youth in adverse contexts (e.g., Walsh, 2013).

The youth's competencies, as described in their personal narratives, were not necessarily directed toward academic goals. Instead, youth frequently directed these competencies toward goals that were more salient to their lives, such as caring for ailing family members, surviving violent and/or abusive situations, and providing for their families financially, thus exhibiting agency in the face of oppression. These competencies not only allowed youth to survive what could be considered toxic environments but also enabled the youth to reengage academically once their other needs were met. For example, the youth's relationship skills enabled them to disengage from unhealthy and abusive relationships, but also to connect with more positive influences that facilitated their reengagement process. These results align with prior research on youth living in economically disadvantaged and socially disenfranchised communities (e.g., Davis, 2006), which noted that although some youth engaged in deviant behaviors, these actions were adaptive in context. However, we do not suggest that all of the behaviors these young people engaged in were positive. Rather, the competencies these youth demonstrated in pursuit of their goals show that they have the abilities to succeed. If provided with opportunities to engage positively (e.g., Taylor et al., 2002), it is possible that these youth would rely on these strengths and abilities for success in those contexts as well. Although a discussion of the moral implications of these actions (e.g., in the Kohlbergian tradition; Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977) is beyond the scope of this paper, our findings raise questions about how to conceptualize developmental regulations that are mutually beneficial for the individual and the context (i.e., adaptive developmental regulations; Brandtstädter, 1998). For instance, although the actions of the youth often benefitted themselves (e.g., making money to survive, creating feelings of efficacy) and at least one other person (e.g., siblings, parents, grandparents), these same actions were potentially detrimental to the broader ecology of individuals in their neighborhoods (e.g., neighborhood safety). Furthermore, these actions (e.g., making money through selling drugs) are potentially detrimental to the youth's development over the course of time (e.g., putting the youth at risk for incarceration); thus complicating the conceptualization of these actions as mutually beneficial.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Understanding the lived experiences of youth provides unique opportunities for program and policy development (Smyth & Hattam, 2002).

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Our analyses highlight that young people who have left school expressed the same competencies that have been previously identified among school-going youth. These competencies enabled them to pursue and successfully reach goals that, although not always legal or socially acceptable, were salient to their immediate circumstances. These circumstances, such as caring for ailing family members, surviving violent and/or abusive situations, and financially providing for themselves and their families, were often not consonant with staying in school. The young people in our study noted how they used these competencies to find the resources necessary to reengage academically later in life.

Although we are not surprised by these findings, because we approach this study with the evidence-based assumption that all young people have strengths, we also recognize that there is a prevailing national opinion that young people who leave school without graduating do not, in fact, express these capacities (Combs & Cooley, 1968; Eckstein & Wolpin, 1999; Rumberger, 1983; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Contrary to this opinion, our findings support the idea that these young people possess the abilities to succeed, if provided with opportunities to engage positively (Pittman et al., 2001). As such, our findings counteract negative stereotypes that youth who leave school without graduating are lazy, unmotivated and deficient compared to youth who did not leave school (e.g., Fine & Rosenberg, 1983; Pew Research Centers, 2014; Rose & Baumgartner, 2013). The recognition that these youth display SEL competencies may mobilize social and financial capital to support them, as people are more likely to help others when they can empathize with them (Eisenberg, Eggum, & Di Giunta, 2010 for review; Stürmer, Snyder, Kropp, & Siem, 2006). People are also more likely to help when the other person demonstrates that they are trying to help themselves (Gorski, 2008; Yosso, 2005).

Furthermore, our findings encourage policymakers and practitioners to leverage these competencies when a young person's strengths are properly aligned with their context. For instance, these findings could frame intervention strategies that recognize a young person's competencies and seek, for instance, to guide these competencies toward educational, vocational, or social goals. By recognizing the skills young people bring to a situation, interventions can be designed to meet young people where they are and improve upon these skills. The young people with whom we spoke were confronted with numerous adverse life experiences, such as physical and emotional abuse, taking on the caregiver role for their families, losing a loved one, being in the foster care system, changing schools and moving homes, and/or being homeless. By helping to resolve these adversities, these young people can begin to turn their strengths and capacities toward educational and vocational goals that were being superseded by their life circumstances.

These strategies, focusing on the strengths of the young people and resolving the presence and effects of adverse experiences, can be seen in exemplar reengagement efforts, such as at Gateway to College, Homeboy Industries, Ujamaa, and United Teen Equality Center (UTEC). Each of these programs work with youth to resolve issues of trauma that they experience, as well as economic and social needs. In addition, they provide hands-on job training, social justice experiences, and educational support. Importantly, these organizations work with the assumption that external factors, such as needing to provide for family, health problems in their family, or caring for siblings, among others, are the reason why youth may discontinue their engagement at any given time. This framing of the young people's lives undergirds the organizations' rationales to continually work with the young people, whether they are attending the programming or whether they need help to resolve barriers to their attendance.

There are policies in place that support or that could support this type of programming. For instance, the Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act (WIOA) is focused on the educational, workforce development, and life needs of reengaging youth, with mandated program elements that align with the work of organizations like UTEC, Homeboy, and Gateway to College (Center for Promise, 2014). Thus, WIOA provides an incentive for community-based organizations to leverage these young people's strengths while also recognizing the adversity that these young people face. Although the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) does not include specific language to prompt programs to leverage the competencies of reengaging youth, states and

districts have sufficient flexibility to encourage their schools and partnering community-based organizations to use a strengths-based framework for recovery and reengagement efforts. These workforce- and education-specific policies do not necessarily resolve the systemic issues facing the young people in our study. To complement the benefit of policies like WIOA and ESEA, LIFT (www.liftcommunities.org) was founded on the premise that youth and their families living in economic distress have the competencies to improve their educational, economic, and social prospects if systemic barriers were removed. LIFT works with families to connect them to the Federal and state programs that promote financial stability (e.g., Earned Income Tax Credit), food security (e.g., Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), community safety (e.g., programs through the Office of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Program), and health care access (Affordable Care Act). These policies and programs could individually and in concert resolve many of the issues that directed the competencies of the young people in our study toward noneducational goals.

Limitations and Future Directions

Though our analysis showed promising findings, there are several limitations in this study that should be considered. First, we examined a small subset of population of young people who have left high school without graduating—those who have reengaged and live in urban, low-income areas of the United States. As more than one third of youth who leave school never return (Hurst et al., 2004), it is possible that the youth who reengaged display more SEL competencies than those who do not, or that youth who do not reengage display these competencies differently (e.g., Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2004). Second, although this paper focuses on the five core competencies promoted by the CASEL framework, we recognize that these are not the only possible positive attributes youth may have (e.g., self-efficacy, hope, optimism); this is a point that should be explored in future research. Third, as individual-context relations define development (Lerner, 2006; Overton, 2014), it is possible that the manifestation of these competencies is different among youth who do not live in low-income, urban areas. Other cohorts of youth, such as those who have not reengaged or who live in rural areas, may have different expressions of these competencies or might access different resources to pursue their goals. Thus, inquiries into the lived experiences of youth who have left school without graduating in other contexts would broaden and deepen the understanding of individual competencies. Fourth, our study is limited by the use of retrospective accounts of the participants (e.g., Robinson & Wright, 2013). Although retrospective accounts are valid for exploring the lived experience of youth (Pufall Jones & Mistry, 2010), we were unable to determine whether the competencies discussed in these narratives were present at the time a student was leaving school, or whether the student developed the competencies through more recent experiences. For instance, we cannot be certain whether the participants had self-awareness at the time recounted in their experiences, or whether self-awareness emerged at a later point in time, such as after reengaging. Future research should examine the strengths present in youth who are on the cusp of leaving school, or those who have more recently disengaged.

Conclusions

Our research examined the lived experiences of youth who have left school without graduating. This investigation showed that youth who have left school without graduating express competencies related to PYD that enable them to pursue their goals. In addition, these competencies were essential to their reengagement efforts. Thus, programs and policies aimed at youth who leave school without graduating should recognize and leverage these strengths instead of focusing solely on remediation.

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