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## Trauma and Academic Impact: Stories From At-Risk Youth

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## **Trauma and academic impact: Stories from at-risk youth**

### **Introduction**

The educational system continues to struggle to ensure that all students successfully graduate from high school. The consequences for leaving high school before earning a diploma are significant; unemployment, reliance on public assistance, and lower earning potential (Christle et al., 2007; Fortin et al., 2006; Hickman, et al., 2017). Youth continue to leave school before earning a high school diploma, despite focused attention and resources on this population of students (Porche, et al., 2011), leaving unanswered questions about what support these students need.

What is known is that dropping out of high school is a long-term process where students, for a variety of reasons, gradually disengage from school (Christle et al., 2007; Doll et al., 2013; Jimerson et al., 2000). Poor attendance, behavioral issues resulting in disciplinary action, and low grade point average are often indicators of impending dropout. But, these factors are not limited to the high school experience. The academic foundation built before the student even enters high school serves as a significant determinant to whether or not the student chooses to drop out or successfully graduate (Hickman et al., 2017). Their first-semester report cards can measure the strength of the academic foundation. For those who successfully graduated from high school graduates, Hickman et al., (2017) reported identical final GPA at high school completion to that of the first semester of their freshman year. However, one factor that warrants consideration is the role of the lived experiences of those who drop out.

Harris (1983) called for researchers and policymakers to consider students' life and traumatic experiences and the impact those experiences have on their decision to drop out of high school. We must understand the underlying cause of school dropout before we can create and implement meaningful interventions. By understanding the prevalence of dropping out of school for students who have experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE), interventions and policies can be designed to support this vulnerable group of learners (Iachini et al., 2016).

Since Harris (1983), only two studies were found that specifically considered Adverse Childhood Experiences related to school dropout and with students already identified as at risk (Iachini et al., 2016). And, only a handful of studies considered the role of trauma as determined by specific elements of traumatic experiences on the ACE survey. Therefore, this study sought to add to

the conversation by exploring the role of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) through the lived experiences of youth at-risk for dropping out of school.

### **Literature Review**

The literature and data show that students choose to drop out of school for various reasons. There are broad demographic categories identified as contributors to dropping out (Jimerson et al., 2000), and other factors, including poor attendance, failing grades, and behavioral issues resulting in suspensions and expulsions. However, these identifiers and demographic categories do not reveal why students have poor attendance, fail classes, or why they continue to behave in a way that results in disciplinary actions.

### **Life Experiences of Youth**

Harris (1983) criticized previous studies on school dropouts, citing research that "suffers from serious mythological flaws, such as mistaken identifying correlates as causes, superficial analysis of the data, use of inaccurate school records as the database, and failure to differentiate sufficiently among dropouts of varying social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds" (p. 4). Therefore, Harris explored the lived experiences of students who dropped out of high school. She found that adverse and traumatic experiences had a significant impact on students' academic outcomes. Among her findings, Harris reported 67% of students at risk for dropping out had been victims of abuse, sexual assault, or incest, compared to 27% of the control group. Death of a parent was found in 15% of those at risk for dropping out versus 2% for the control group. Running away from home was reported by 57% of the at-risk group and 6% of the control group. Suicide attempts and self-mutilation accounted for 27% of the at-risk group versus 1%. She concluded that the "major error" in prior research on school leavers was that conclusions were inferred from the behavior, resulting in "pseudo explanations" (p. 4) as none explored the life experiences the youth had lived through, including the trauma they had suffered. These adverse and traumatic experiences shaped their individual growth and development and impacted their academic and social functioning.

### **Adverse Childhood Experiences**

Advances in neurobiology and traumatology confirm that trauma damages the brain. Trauma is a term used to describe the impact of an event, regardless of actual or perceived, that interrupts an individual's ability to maintain a sense of psychological and/or physical safety and well-being (Berardi & Morton, 2019). A

victim and a witness to an event happening to a loved one can cause trauma. Trauma is real, prevalent, and causes significant damage to the brain (Morton, 2018; Craig, 2017; Perry, 2006). Trauma affects academic/cognitive and social functioning, mental and physical health challenges throughout adulthood (Anda, et al., 2006). The Centers for Disease Control (2015) estimate that approximately 50% of children in schools today have been impacted by trauma. Blaustein (2013) has called this an "epidemic" (p. 4).

The field of neurobiology has offered insights into how and why life events impact academic and social functioning. What is known is that the brain develops and adapts to the environment during positive and negative events (Berardi & Morton, 2017). The three central regions of the brain, essential for cognitive functioning, memory, reasoning, and problem-solving, are most susceptible to harm due to unmitigated stress and trauma (Berardi & Morton, 2017; Yank & Yeigh, 2020). The central nervous system becomes overwhelmed, unable to find relief, causing the individual to often respond through fight-flight-freeze. The overproduction of norepinephrine and cortisol influences fear and anger, meaning the student is prone to difficulty with self-regulation, resulting in behavioral problems and academic failure (Berardi & Morton, 2017).

**Academic impact.** In the school environment, the trauma impacted brain manifests as difficulty focusing, inability to take in new information, recall previous learning, and/or inability to regulate emotions (Berardi & Morton, 2017; Craig, 2017; Perry, 2006;). Academic success requires students to control their behavior and emotions, absorb information, and recall that information. Yet, the student impacted by trauma cannot engage in academics when their central nervous system produces high levels of norepinephrine and cortisol (Berardi & Morton, 2019). Trauma-impacted students experience an over-abundance of norepinephrine and cortisol surges, which creates stress on their emotional and cognitive processing, digestive, and immune systems, and further increasing the child's vulnerability to social, emotional, and physiological dysregulation due to sustained distress (Everly & Lating, 2012; van der Kolk, 2014). This dysregulation overpowers the child's ability to manage emotions, inviting reactive behaviors such as withdrawal or aggression, further complicating the child's social interactions (Cozolino, 2013).

Students impacted by trauma are often described as "anxious, inattentive, slow learners, and highly dependent on classroom teachers for approval, encouragement, and assistance" (Bernard & Newell, 2012, p. 207). Instead of focusing on academic learning in the classroom, survival becomes their priority, impairing their ability to accurately recognize threats from non-threatening situations. Therefore, students can become overwhelmed by the classroom environment, activities, and directions, without the power to communicate or

articulate what they are feeling and experiencing, and without the ability to ask for help (Berardi & Morton, 2017).

A situation, a scent, a color, a seemingly innocent interaction, academic or social challenges regularly experienced in the school environment, can trigger a threat response causing a neurobiological physical reaction, resulting in behavior that is unpredictable or impulsive, and often labeled inappropriate (Carrion & Wong, 2012; Perry, 2006; Souers & Hall, 2016). Fight, flight or freeze are common responses to perceived danger, especially in children/students who are in a constant state of heightened anxiety. In a classroom setting, fight, flight, or freeze can be seen in students who withdraw, skip class, avoid interactions with others, act out, display aggressive behavior, become defiant, refuse to engage, or stare blankly when addressed. It is not surprising that teachers could interpret these behaviors as defiance or disinterest and refer the child for disciplinary actions (Perry, 2006).

Suspensions have been identified as a predictor of adverse student outcomes, including crime, delinquency, and drug use (Hemphill et al. 2014), and paired with trauma, students often have lower grade point averages, higher rates of absences, decreased reading ability, and higher rates of school-leaving than their peers with fewer ACEs (Boden et al., 2007; Kendall-Tackett & Eckenrode, 1996; Berardi & Morton, 2019; Berardi & Morton, 2017; Souers & Hall, 2016). Students with a history of trauma are therefore at a significant academic disadvantage.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Since Harris's (1983) study on ACEs and the relationship to dropout, only a few studies have been found that specifically examined the link between ACEs and trauma on school leaving (Iachini et al., 2016). The data show that students drop out of high school for various reasons. There are broad demographic categories identified as contributors to dropping out (Jimerson et al., 2000), including poor attendance, failing grades, and behavioral issues resulting in suspensions and expulsions. However, these identifiers and demographic categories do not reveal why students have poor attendance, why they fail classes, or why they continue to behave in a way that results in disciplinary actions. Therefore, this study sought to explore the lived experiences of rural high school students at-risk for school failure/school leaving by listening to their experiences through reflection and introspection on what they believed contributed to their academic challenges. Understanding the prevalence of ACEs for students identified as at-risk for not completing high school could inform the creation of appropriate interventions and policies to support this vulnerable group of learners (Iachini et al., 2016).

## Methodology

For this study, phenomenological methodology was intentionally chosen. It provided an opportunity for students to share their individual lived experiences, providing unique insights into why students are at-risk, ascribing meaning to those experiences. The stories and experiences of the participants needed to be told. Phenomenological methodology focuses on the lived experiences of a group of individuals who share a specific experience (Creswell, 2007). It is a "human science, which studies persons" (van Manen, 1990, p. 6). This research design aims to take the shared, lived experiences of a small group of individuals and provide a description and interpretation of the significance of this experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; van Manen, 1990). To that end, the methodology is purposefully open-ended to give voice to the participants, allowing the essence of their experiences to surface (van Manen, 2014), is conducted in the setting where the phenomenon under study occurs and employs inductive and deductive data analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Finally, as the participants share their experience, meaning is attributed to their lived experiences, making the researcher and participants co-researchers (van Manen, 2014). Specifically, this research sought to explore the following question: (a) What life experiences did the participants have during their K-12 education that contributed to their academic success and failure?

## Setting

The research was conducted in an alternative education program in a rural school district in a Northwest state. According to state data, approximately 927 students enrolled in the school district, 221 at the high school. Even though 81% of students entered their freshman year on track to graduate within four years, only 65% graduated on time (School and District At-a-Glance Profiles, n.d.). The traditional high school reported a 7.16% dropout rate, with the alternative education high school reporting a 20.56% dropout rate (Dropout Rates in Oregon High Schools, 2017-2018). This is despite the fact the average class size in core subjects was 13 students, significantly less than the state average of 25. Of those who successfully earned a high school diploma, 48% enroll in a two-year community college or four-year college/university. (School and District At-a-Glance Profiles, n.d.).

There are three alternative pathways for students to earn their high school diploma. The first is the alternative education high school setting with approximately 10-14 enrolled in this program. The second alternative educational setting is for female teens, pregnant or who recently delivered a child. Students in this school are working on completing their high school diploma or are working

toward their General Education Diploma (GED). The third pathway is an online program, where students from the two alternative schools can choose to complete their education online.

## **Participants**

Upon Institutional Review Board approval, participants were solicited from all three alternative educational pathway programs. This was accomplished by attending classes, presenting the research project, and asking for participants. For absent students, information about the research study was shared the next day. I worked with the principal for the online program to forward information about the research study and consent forms to all enrolled students.

Participants were purposefully selected from all three alternative educational pathway programs, using a convenience sample method, adhering to phenomenological methodology protocols. In phenomenological methodology, participants must be purposefully chosen to ensure that those invited to participate all had similar experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this case, that similar experience was enrollment in alternative education due to being identified as at-risk for academic failure. Those who were interested in participating signed a participation consent form. All participants were aged 18 or older. Those who returned the consent forms were then scheduled for interviews. This resulted in six participants; all enrolled in one of the district's three alternative educational programming pathways, and all six actively pursuing a high school diploma or GED.

## **Methods**

Two specific types of data were collected using both a survey and an interview. Data collection began by interviewing each participant at a table in the back of the high school library. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes and was audio recorded. During each interview, I also completed a qualitative observation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), where I took field notes on the behaviors exhibited by the participant during the interview. All participants were asked the same unstructured, open-ended questions, along with a couple of demographic questions. The interview questions focused on their educational experiences and what they believed contributed to their academic success or challenges throughout their K-12 experience. Last, participants completed the 10 question ACE survey developed by Anda, et al. (2006).

## Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed at the end of each day. From there, the data was analyzed using Creswell (2007) protocol, which includes:

- Creating a listing of essential statements from each interview
- Making a description of the "what" or the "textural description" of the experience
- Building on the list of essential statements by sorting these into themes
- Creating a description of the experience, including the "how" of the participants' journey. This also includes the "structural description" (p.159)
- Constructing a description that incorporates both the textural and structural, sharing the experiences as perceived by the participant. The textural description includes "significant statements and themes" (p. 159). The structural uses the "significant statements and themes" to create a description of the "context and setting that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon" (p. 159)

Each interview was read and re-read, and significant statements were identified. Significance was attributed to their language, tone of voice, an evident emotion, voice level, and to those statements or experiences mentioned more than once. Each interview was re-read to "winnow the data" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 192) to narrow the focus on specific aspects of the data and to set aside others. Once this was narrowed, I was able to sort the statements into themes. Next, a "textural description" of the "what" and "how" of their experiences was created (Creswell, 2007, p. 159). The ACE surveys were analyzed by capturing their responses in a spreadsheet. Finally, once the final themes were identified and the data organized, a draft of the research was sent to each participant for member checking to ensure accuracy.

## Findings

Two significant themes emerged, which I titled school and family factors. These represented both challenges and supports they identified, which either contributed to or hindered their academic achievement. The theme, school factors, focused explicitly on the challenges and supports they encountered within the confines of the high school building. The second theme, family factors, included the events captured by the ACE survey and items that, while not directly identified by the ACE survey, caused emotional upheaval. The findings are organized by a short introduction to each participant, Table 1 Participant summary, and participant narrative by theme. Finally, participant ACE scores are shared in Table 2 Adverse Childhood Experiences.

## **Introduction to participants**

**Daniel.** Daniel is an 18-year old senior. He has attended two different high schools in the last four years. He received special education services for reading and writing at his previous school but was uncertain why those services did not follow the current school. He failed math and history classes at the current high school, which placed him at risk for not graduating. Daniel shared he was frustrated with the reading required in history class. He continued to be a slower reader than his peers and quickly gave up. Reading difficulties continued into his math class as well. The class he enjoyed the most was a forestry class that included significant time outside the traditional classroom. Daniel hoped to successfully graduate with his diploma and continue to community college, where he wished to pursue a certification as a welder.

**Jeff.** As an 18-year old high school senior. Jeff is behind in English. He failed freshman English class and must complete that class to be on track to graduate. His educational history is one of up's and downs. He received special education services for reading up through his fifth-grade year. When he entered middle school, Jeff was regularly in trouble with teachers and administration for behaving poorly. This resulted in three suspensions in middle school and continued into high school, where he was suspended twice. His favorite classes are those where hands-on learning was offered: these included shop, forestry, and physical education classes. After high school, he hopes to join the military and become a pilot. If that does not work out, he will work for his father's roofing business.

**Kathryn.** Kathryn is 15 years old and in her freshman year. She is interested in a career as an ultrasound technician or paramedic and hopes to work in her hometown. She attended two middle schools before entering high school. During her middle school years, she was suspended twice for fighting. These fights occurred when her mother was in a rehabilitation facility for drugs. She moved in with her father during this time, a man she didn't know. The living situation and distance from her mother caused a lot of stress and anger. During her freshman year, her father was hospitalized. She spent a significant amount of time with him during his recovery. At the same time, her boyfriend became paralyzed after a roll-over car accident.

**Casey.** Casey is a soft-spoken 16-year-old. She would like to graduate from high school and go on to college. She would be the first in her family to attend college. She failed several classes during her freshman year and is working to pass those classes through credit recovery. She has no concern she won't graduate from high school. She credits her friends and parents for their support in her success so far this year.

**Joel.** Joel is a 17-year-old in his junior year of high school. He hopes to graduate with his GED. Core classes such as math and English have been difficult for him to pass. His frustration has bubbled over into what he called “stupid choices”, resulting in a suspension from high school earlier this year. The difficulty passing classes and his suspension have caused him to consider dropping out of high school. He is attending the credit recovery program, hoping it will prepare him for the GED exam.

**Paige.** Paige is a 15-year-old sophomore. She has been taking credit recovery classes since her freshman year. She has found math and language arts classes particularly difficult and confusing. She shared that she is easily distracted, especially when she is in classes that she does not understand the content. She enjoys mechanics and agricultural courses that she has taken and has been successful in those. When she graduates, she wishes to join the Marines and specialize in mechanics.

**Mary.** Mary's difficulties in high school began during her junior year. Her mother became terminally ill. Without medical insurance to support hospice and without family near, Mary became the primary caregiver to her mother. She would care for her mother early in the morning, go to school until lunch break, and then return home to her mom. She did not share with the school or her teachers what was going on at home. Therefore, no one knew she needed help; they only saw her failing classes. She failed social studies, health, and math, leaving her ability to graduate with a traditional diploma in jeopardy. Her mother passed away, and she was placed with a relative she had only met a couple of times. She was trying to successfully regain the lost credits through alternative education. After high school, she hopes to join the Marines.

**Amy.** Amy is in her senior year and is 17 years old. She has been suspended multiple times in both middle and high school. Each incident was for fighting. She has struggled academically each year. However, she has not considered dropping out of high school, believing she can successfully leave high school earning a diploma. She needs to complete a U.S. History and two math classes to finish her high school requirements.

**Toby.** At 17, Toby is in his senior year of high school. He believes he is on track to graduate with a traditional diploma at the end of the year. His educational journey has included multiple suspensions in high school and middle school. On more than one occasion, he seriously considered leaving school altogether. He realized, however, that he could get a better-paying job if he stayed.

**Brenna.** Brenna is 19. She has attended more than five schools during her K-8 education and three high schools. She received special education services for reading and math from elementary school through high school. She became increasingly frustrated when she entered high school. She described school as

"difficult" and felt she was always behind, which was reflected in her grades. She began hanging out with students she described as "the wrong people" making "bad choices." These choices included drug and alcohol use. She believed dropping out of high school was her only option after learning she was pregnant in her senior year. She enrolled in alt-ed, hoping she could be successful and earn a diploma.

**Riley.** Riley has attended more than seven schools throughout her K-12 education. She received the support of an Individual Education Program (IEP) in elementary school through the fourth grade. Her father was in and out of prison for most of her life, and her mom struggled with drug use and mental health issues. She was left to fend for herself for the majority of her childhood. Middle school proved to be difficult for her. She described being bullied, having few friends, and not connecting with any of her teachers. At the end of her eighth-grade year, she decided to drop out of school. Over the summer, she heard about the alternative education program in her district and decided to try a non-traditional school model. Her plans, however, were cut short when she learned she was pregnant. After her child was born, she enrolled in the alt-ed program and began completing the credits needed for her diploma.

**Briana.** Briana moved around a lot during her K-12 years. She described being in more than 15 different schools since first grade. She shared that she suffers from anxiety, particularly in large groups or crowds. In middle school, her class sizes increased, more students in the hallways, etc., caused her anxiety to overwhelm her ability to cope. She was suspended and then expelled in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. She enjoyed learning, but school just became too much for her to handle. When she was a week shy of her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, she learned she was pregnant. She shared that the pressures of becoming a mother made her realize she needed the education to provide for her child. She chose to enroll in alt-ed to make up for lost credits and complete her remaining coursework to earn her diploma. After she graduates, she plans to join the Navy or Army to become an auto mechanic.

A demographic summary is included in Table 1, Participant summary.

**Table 1**  
Participant summary

Student (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Grade	Suspended (S) or Expelled (E) * self-reported	Credit Recovery Class(s)	Adverse Childhood Survey Score (ACEs)
Daniel	18	Male	White	12	S – once in 10 <sup>th</sup> grade	Math: Algebra Social Studies	1

Jeff	18	Male	White	12	S - 3 times in middle school, 2 times in high school	English	3
Kathryn	15	Female	White	10	S - 2 times in middle school	English	3
Casey	16	Female	Hispanic	10	S - 10 <sup>th</sup> grade	English Geography	1
Joel	17	Male	White	11	S - 11 <sup>th</sup> grade	Math: Algebra	1
Paige	15	Female	Hispanic	10	No	English Math: Algebra	2
Mary	18	Female	White	12	S - middle school	Social Studies Health Math: Algebra	6
Amy	17	Female	White	12	S - multiple times in middle school, 2 times in high school	Social Studies Math: Algebra & Geometry	5
Toby	17	Male	White	11	S - 3 times in middle school, 1 time in 9 <sup>th</sup> grade	English Math: Algebra & Geometry	1
Brenna	19	Female	Hispanic	12	No	Has one year of courses to complete	7
Riley	19	Female	White	12	No	Has one year of courses to complete	1
Briana	18	Female	White	12	S & E - in middle school that turned into an Expulsion	Has one year of courses to complete	9

The participants were enrolled in an alternative educational pathway because they failed at least one course. When asked what contributed to the class failure, students pointed to teachers and classrooms that did not meet their academic and emotional needs and stress and trauma stemming from home.

### School-level factors

Students shared the academic challenges and disciplinary events they encountered throughout their educational journey. When reflecting on their school experience, overwhelmingly, the participants described their school and fellow classmates in a positive light. They enjoyed the small high school environment. They knew the majority of their classmates and looked forward to attending school to see their friends. Several were proud of how clean their school was. The library was also mentioned as a welcoming place for them to go before or after school or a good place to 'hang out' during break time. When it came to their teachers and the classroom environment, however, the majority of students were disappointed, frustrated, and resigned to fail.

**Teacher attitudes and dispositions.** While several participants talked favorably about one or two teachers, the majority talked about core content teachers with inflexible teaching practices, which led to disconnects, confusion, frustration, and failure. Daniel described his frustration trying to get help from a teacher. He has an Individual Education Program (IEP) plan but believed he was not getting the support outlined in the IEP. He thought that if he had received the appropriate support, he would have been academically successful. Riley shared that she was particularly frustrated with her math teacher. She needed more help to understand the concepts, and she perceived her teacher as "unwilling to help me." Daniel specifically identified note-taking as difficult for him. He said, "teachers were not willing to help me fill in the missing information in my notes." Therefore, when attempting to study for quizzes or exams, he was operating with incomplete information. Brenna moved to the district from a neighboring town. She was academically behind when she arrived at the high school. She found that several of her teachers lectured the majority of the class period. She said this made it difficult for her to engage with the content. She described becoming more detached from the learning environment and more frustrated because she knew this meant she would fail.

Each participant was able to describe a favorite class and teacher over their kindergarten through high school education. They explained why that teacher and class were their favorite and why they believed they were academically successful in that class. Daniel identified a favorite teacher as "joyful, not all about work or lectures, and rewarded student effort." Mary liked her teacher, who "enforced discipline and had high expectations."

The participants knew what they were looking for from their teachers. Jeff said, "a teacher who listens to students and teaches to different learning styles." Briana would like to have a teacher who is "happy, doesn't put others

down," which includes students and other teachers, someone who "won't embarrass a student," and someone who is genuinely "nice." Mary hopes to have a teacher who "could discipline without being a jerk, won't give up on students, and will help without putting them down." Brenna identified "personal connection" as something she would like to see with her teachers.

A couple of the participants mentioned a specific class that they liked. These included experience-based classes, like science, where they could do experiments, agricultural courses, where they spent time outside, and shop classes, where they got to use their hands to build things. They described these teachers as "excited about the subject," "hands-on" teachers that were always willing to jump in, and "personal teaching style" that made them feel welcomed and included in the learning.

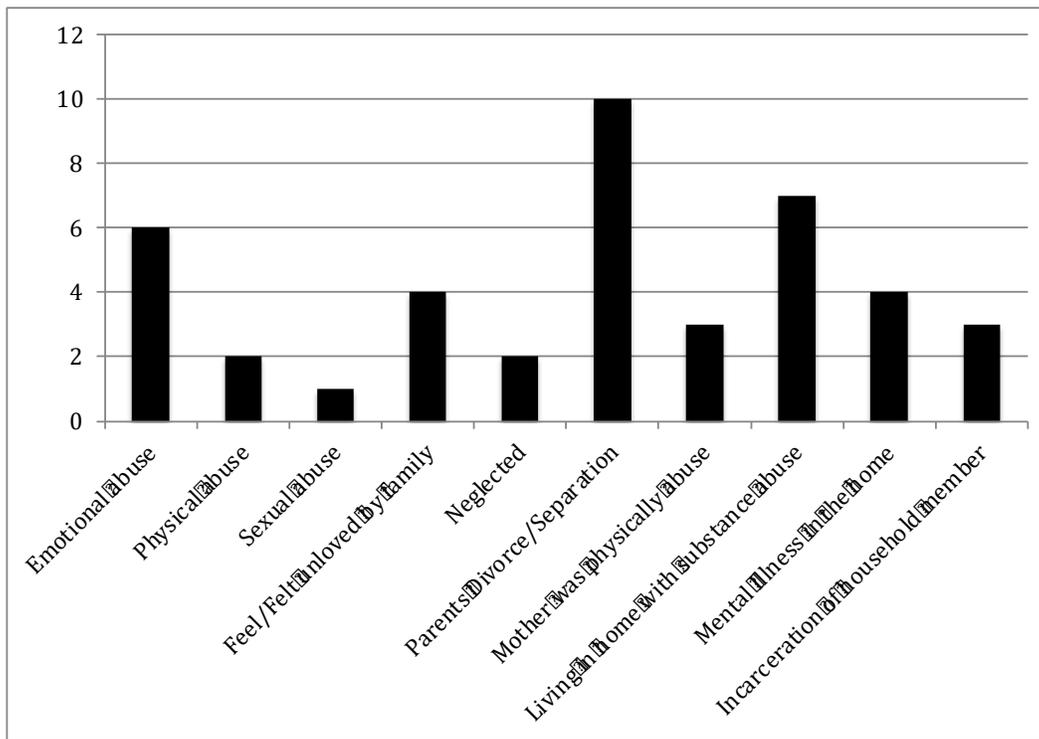
**Classroom climate.** Classroom climate was identified as an essential component of academic success. The participants articulated how the classroom climate contributed to failing that specific course. They described the lack of hands-on learning experiences, few if any activities with groups, dry content, and teacher(s) without "joy." Jeff described "too much paperwork, which was boring" as a reason he stopped turning in work. Brenna shared that "butting heads with the math teacher" led to her failing. "I just stopped doing the work because I didn't like him." They described teachers who they believed did not care about them or their success in that class. Those classes did not foster a love of learning nor a climate of trust where they could learn and grow through trial and error or feel comfortable contributing in class even if there was a chance their answer was wrong.

**Behavioral challenges.** The participants shared openly about their behavioral challenges. Many described making poor choices that ended up with suspensions and/or expulsions. Of the six participants, four reported being suspended or expelled from school at least once, either in middle or high school. The majority pointed to overwhelming frustration due to not being academically successful and disengaged in a classroom with teaching methods that did not "speak" to them, leading to poor classroom behavior, ending in-school suspensions and expulsions. The majority of suspensions and expulsions were for fighting. Riley shared, "I was going through a hard time. My mom was on opiates and in rehab. I was sent to live with my dad, who I didn't know very well. I was angry." Riley wasn't the only participant who was struggling both in school and at home. The majority of the participants faced significant challenges on both fronts.

### **Family level factors**

The participants shared stories of neglect, abuse, parents with mental health challenges, drug use by a parent, and death of a parent. These experiences made it difficult, at best, for them to focus on academics and left them with emotional needs that often went unmet. Table 2 displays the specific experiences of the six participants.

**Table 2** Adverse Childhood Experiences



Four of the participants reported an ACE score of three or more. Half of the students reported experiencing emotional abuse. In addition to those experiences covered in the ACE survey, Mary lost her mother due to cancer. Mary said she "fell into a deep depression and could not even think about school." She said she needed help to grieve and emotionally get to a place to go back to school. When she did, she was considerably behind. Riley almost lost her father due to a heart attack. She spent a significant amount of time at the hospital during his recovery, which put her critically behind in her studies. Her dad was her primary caregiver after her mother entered in-patient rehabilitation for her drug addiction, leaving her on her own during this time.

### Limitations

This study explored the lived experiences of a small group of high school students, identified as at-risk for academic failure and enrolled in an alternative high school. The alternative high school is located in a rural area in the Pacific Northwest. Each of the six participants shared the challenges and support they experienced during their K-12 educational journey. The journey was unique to each individual but fell into shared themes. This research intended to explain why students drop out of high school, offering a deeper understanding of the situations and/or events that influenced school leaving. Therefore, this phenomenological research study was not intended to generalize to all students but to contribute to the conversation on high school dropouts and provide a rationale for specific school support.

### **Discussion**

This study sought to explore two specific research questions: What life experiences did the participants have during their K-12 education that contributed to their academic success and failure? The data revealed both school level and family level factors contributing to academic failure in one or more classes.

#### **School**

The participants shared the tensions between social and academics. Overwhelmingly the participants said they enjoyed a small school environment where they had friends and participated in activities, demonstrating their ability to be socially successful. Yet, they struggled to be academically successful. A lack of personal connection to teachers, frustration with teaching methods, and not understanding the content led to poor self-regulation and disciplinary measures. Participants wanted to graduate from high school successfully, but the majority were uncertain if that was a real possibility, even with credit recovery support.

#### **Family**

The students shared the story of their family, including the challenges, abuse, and neglect within the family structure. These adverse experiences significantly impacted their academic achievement throughout their K-12 schooling. They shared how difficult it was to focus during the school day, study for exams, or complete homework when their home life was in chaos. These experiences illuminated the role of basic needs in everyday functioning.

The literature revealed the complex relationship between ACEs and academic achievement. This complexity was seen in the stories of the participants. While some were able to articulate disengagement from school due

to family-level factors, the students were unaware of the interplay between the trauma they experienced or were in the midst of and how that influenced their attitudes and dispositions toward school, teachers, and their performance. The same was true for their school behavior—an inability to be academically successful boiled over into poor choices, resulting in school exclusion.

Last, I learned that students are rarely asked about their educational experiences. Therefore, their critical voice is missing when considering programmatic or systemic changes. Without their voice, we often make the wrong changes or create ineffective interventions.

### **Recommendations**

The findings from this study illuminate the need for education and training for school personnel on ACEs, neurobiology, and the impact on academic achievement and social functioning. Three specific areas include: (a) Mental health training in teacher preparation programs; (b) Trauma-informed training for all school personnel; (c) Collaboration between teachers, administrators, and school mental health providers.

#### **Mental health education in teacher preparation programs**

As we are becoming increasingly aware of children impacted by trauma, it is clear that education in mental health is critical. Koller, Osterlind, Paris, and Weston, 2004 found that many teacher preparation programs graduate new teachers who do not feel prepared for the mental health needs of the students they will serve. They went on to say that "pre-service students should be taught not only how to recognize and cope with problems such as stress and burnout, but also who to go to in the school for support" (p. 43). This would prepare new teachers to enter the classroom confident and ready to support all learners and provide support to veteran teachers who had not had this same training.

#### **Trauma-informed education and training for all school personnel**

There is a growing movement toward creating trauma-informed or trauma-sensitive schools (Berardi & Morton, 2019; Massachusetts Advocates for Children, 2005; 2013; Stevens, 2015). In this model, teachers are educated in trauma and the impact on children and how that manifests in classrooms. Teachers are not serving as counselors but rather transitioning to inclusive practices that create a safe environment that acknowledges impact and builds resilience (Berardi & Morton, 2019; Craig, 2017; Prewitt, 2014; Souers & Hall,

2016; Stevens, 2015). Education in trauma must include the neurobiology of trauma so that teachers and school professionals can understand what is happening in the brain. Training should include neurobiology and best practices for the classroom. Currently, most of this training is happening with in-service teachers in their schools and/or districts. If teacher preparation programs joined this effort, it would ensure that graduating teachers are prepared and qualified to meet the needs of today's students and would support schools who have yet to implement trauma-informed programming (Berardi & Morton, 2017; Berardi & Morton, 2019).

### **Collaboration between mental health providers, teachers and administrators**

Historically, teachers, administrators, and school mental health providers have worked in isolation, typically connecting only when a student's concern or need arises. However, as the needs of students have increased, it is becoming increasingly important that these professionals come together to share their expertise. Teachers are often acting as first responders to students in their classrooms who share their stories and experiences and need to create strategies to help that child feel safe and secure in that classroom environment. But, they need the help and support of the school-based mental health professionals employed in the school or within the district. If both groups will welcome the other into their space, share the needs of students, their ideas and suggestions for interventions, the student(s), teachers, and larger school community benefit (Berardi & Morton, 2017).

### **Conclusion**

Educators must be informed by the fields of neurobiology and traumatology. Children and youth impacted by trauma suffer academic and behavioral challenges that can derail their education. The stories and experiences of the participants illuminated their struggle, both in school and at home. These findings call for changes in how we educate teachers and school personnel and construct trauma-informed learning environments so that all students can feel safe and nurtured in the school environment. By training teachers and others about ACEs and how they can impact the brain, we can build schools prepared to respond in appropriate, positive ways to support the trauma-impacted child.

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