

Online Learning Within an Open-Door Program

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Abstract

Many Washington State schools struggled with keeping students engaged in traditional comprehensive high schools. Programs that gave students a second chance by providing alternatives to traditional high schools were thus created. This study explored how ten students of color from an online alternative 1418 Open Door program perceived their experience within the program. The findings included three major themes that developed from the analysis of the qualitative data, which included (a) student goals, with a subtheme of family support; (b) barriers to students, with subthemes of institutional socialization, transitioning as an online student, and school-based racism; and (c) benefits of a flexible online program.

Recommendations included three changes needed within the program. The first action step is to include staff, district leadership, and stakeholders to actively engage the voices of students in the planning, discussions around curriculum, and class offerings. The second action step is to promote student success by actively engaging families and students with direction and practice on how to be a successful online student. Lastly, the third action step is to actively engage students in hands-on learning activities leading to graduation credit.

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Online Learning Within an Open-Door Program

In the last decade, the Washington State legislature recognized that many school districts struggle to engage older youth who have dropped out of high school or are not gaining the educational credits necessary to graduate with their cohort (RCW 28A.175.100). In 2010, House Bill 1418 passed which allowed for a statewide dropout reengagement system for older youth. The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) was tasked with developing a model to encourage school districts, community and technical colleges, and community-based organizations to provide instruction and services to reengage older students who have dropped out of high school or are severely credit deficient (Open Doors Youth Reengagement, 2018). Programs that give students a second chance by providing alternatives to traditional high schools were thus created.

The model OSPI created, 1418 Open Doors Program (OD), is an alternative high school approach to reengage students 16–21 years of age (Open Doors Youth Reengagement, 2018). ODs offer alternative routes to high school diplomas and GEDs through a variety of ways, such as online learning and self-paced classes with flexible schedules. Students eligible for an OD program must be at least 16 years old and be severely credit deficient. Students who do not meet the credit status may also be recommended by the Department of Social and Health Services, district approved school personnel, a community agency that provides educational advocacy services, or the juvenile justice system.

In the 2015–2016 school year, 82 Washington State school districts participated in the OD program (Open Doors Youth Reengagement, 2018). The OD program encourages partnerships between ODs, colleges, and vocational schools to provide additional benefits, such as associate degrees, certificates, and job training through the program. OD

educational programs have the same graduation expectations as brick-and-mortar comprehensive high schools, including state assessments and number of credits. However, OD is not reliant on seat time for funding, which provides for more flexibility and creativity to engage students (Open Doors Youth Reengagement, 2018; Watson & Gemin, 2008). For an OD program to claim a student for the purposes of funding it must require a monthly face-to-face attendance requirement, whether at a school or other location (for example, student's place of work or local coffee shop), weekly status check requirements (via phone, text, or email), and indicators of academic progress, such as earning high school credit, passing tests, etc. (Open Doors Youth Reengagement, 2018).

Problem of Practice

To provide maximum flexibility in the OD program, the OSPI did not dictate how student learning would take place. Instead, school districts are allowed autonomy and flexibility in deciding what would meet their students' needs. For example, some OD programs offer General Educational Development (GED) and not a pathway to a high school diploma. Having a GED option helps those students that are severely credit deficient and will age out of the program before they can earn their high school diploma. Other programs offer job internships or industry certificates allowing students to begin their life goals (Open Doors Youth Reengagement, 2018). The delivery of learning can also be varied. Some programs offer classes that are face-to-face, online, blended, or project-based. The variety of OD programs in the State of Washington is vast, and OD programs can be very different in curriculum, delivery methods, and graduation outcomes.

Some districts have taken the OD model and incorporated full-time online schools to accommodate OD students, who are typically disengaged, have dropped out, or are severely

credit deficit (Open Doors Youth Reengagement, 2018). Acknowledging that there are many different variables in an OD program, however, makes comparing programs for success rate difficult. Putting aside graduation outcomes, whether a high school diploma, GED, or another pathway, and considering what existing research is available around online curricular delivery, would help practitioners in the field improve online teaching with OD students. Yet research on the effectiveness of online credit retrieval to make up some of the classes lost in improving student outcomes, which essentially is the purpose of OD programs, is limited (Rickles, Heppen, Allensworth, Sorensen, & Walters, 2018). There is also limited evidence available on online learning with high school students (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Curtis & Werth, 2015; Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2010; Murphy & Rodríguez-Manzanares, 2009; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Further, there is even less research on online learning with students of color (Beck, Maranto, & Tuchman, 2017; Corry, 2016; Yeboah, Dogbey, & Yuan, 2017). To accomplish its purpose, the present study explores one OD program in the Pacific Northwest that uses online learning delivery methods. Thus, this research helps clarify the effectiveness of OD programs designed to support students of color who are behind in credits (Palacios, & Wood, 2016; Rickles et al., 2018).

Justification

This research is important because the dropout rate of high school students is critical, as about half a million students drop out of school each year, causing a significant burden on the students as well as on the communities where they live (Ream & Rumberger, 2008; Legters & Balfanz, 2010). In 2016, the national high school dropout rates were White students 5.2%, Black students 6.2%, and Hispanic/Latino students 8.6% (National Center

for Educational Statistics, 2016). These rates are the percentage of 16–24-year-olds not enrolled in high school and without a high school diploma or GED. Across Washington State, the 2016–2017 dropout rates were: White students 10%, Black students 14.4%, Hispanic/Latino 16% students, and Native American students 26% (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2018). Nationally, over time some improvements have been made in trying to close the achievement gap. However, there is still a wide gap between students of color and White students (Beck, Maranto, & Tuchman, 2017; Corry, 2016; Palacios & Wood, 2016; Yeboah et al., 2017). For the purpose of this discussion, the term *students of color* refers to African American, Latino, Native American and Native Hawaiian, and Asian American subgroups, including Filipino, Guamanian, Indonesian, Singaporean, Samoan, Thai, and Vietnamese (Pang, Han, & Pang, 2011).

Many students who do not obtain their high school diploma struggle with poverty, unemployment, sickness, and incarceration, and can be dependent on state services such as welfare (Legters & Balfanz, 2010; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009; Ream & Rumberger, 2008). Many youth who drop out are more likely to join gangs, feel depressed, engage substance abuse, become homeless, and be involved in the criminal justice system (Franklin, Streeter, Kim, & Tripodi, 2007; Hynes, 2014). Those who find employment have lower rates of retention and lower wages compared to others who have a high school diploma (Franklin et al., 2007).

Public resources are also impacted when students drop out of high school. Those students increase spending in health care, criminal justice, and public assistance (Rickles et al., 2018; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). A report that looked at prison rates showed that 68% of people in jail were students who dropped out (Harlow, 2003). Tyler & Lofstrom (2009)

suggested that students who dropped out of high school may be “less effective in parenting” (p. 88) and less engaged in the nation’s democratic process. Students that have not earned their high school diploma not only affect themselves and the community, but their children are also more likely to follow in their footsteps (Legters & Balfanz, 2010). Many students who graduate from high school are more likely to raise children who graduate and participate in society by voting, volunteering, and making other positive contributions (Legters & Balfanz, 2010). According to Losen (2005), the opportunity cost to families and communities is tremendous, and “since the greatest economic benefits of earning a diploma as opposed to dropping out are also realized in the next generation, the most significant loss is in the future” (p. 616).

In short, society is safer and healthier when more people finish high school, as high school graduates tend to contribute to the well-being of themselves and others (Legters & Balfanz, 2010). A graduating class of high school students also generate economic benefits in their lifetime by recouping billions of dollars that would be lost in tax revenues, health care expenditures, and social services had they instead dropped out (Legters & Balfanz, 2010). A study looking at the effects of education on crime noted that a 1% increase in male high school graduations could save society over \$1.4 billion (Lochner & Moretti, 2004).

Many school districts have thus adopted the use of online courses to address the needs of students who drop out of traditional high schools because of the cost savings and the flexible options such courses offer to students (Picciano & Seaman, 2009; Rickles et al., 2018). Supporters of online learning point to the flexibility, convenience for students, differential learning options, and tailored approach that online learning affords to recover missing credits (Archambault et al., 2010). Given the disparities in dropout rates for students

of color, more information about best practices of online learning is needed (Means et al., 2010). Existing research on K-12 online learning (Bakia & Jones, 2009; Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Corry, 2016; Yeboah et al. 2017), online high school credit retrieval (Rickles et al., 2018), and online learning for students of color (Beck, Maranto & Tuchman, 2017; Corry, 2016; Palacios & Wood, 2016; Yeboah et al., 2017) calls for more studies on the effectiveness of online learning with students of color. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how students of color perceive an online open-door program.

Literature Review

The growth of online education has outpaced the available research to ensure effectiveness and proper implementation (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Yeboah et al., 2017). Many researchers in K-12 online learning have agreed that the research is in its infancy stage (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Yeboah et al., 2017); much of the research is still focused on adult and college-level learning (Rickles et al., 2018). As online learning continues to grow in popularity, advocates are pushing for needed K-12 research-based best practices (Yeboah et al., 2017).

Initial research has focused on enhancing the quality of K-12 student learning in an online environment (Cavanaugh, Repetto., Wayer, & Spittler, 2013; Repetto, Cavanaugh, Wayer, & Liu, 2010). Student perspectives on determining best practices in K-12 online learning, however, have been largely nonexistent (iNACOL, 2011; Stevens & Mark, 2016). As student dropout rates continue to grow and alternative learning, such as online education, is in high demand (Burdette et al., 2013; Rickles et al., 2018), looking at students' perceptions of online learning (Barbour, Siko, Sumara, & Simuel-Everage, 2012) may help alternative schools, such as OD programs, evaluate potential benefits and pitfalls that might

otherwise be missed when considering best practices for online learners. In what comes next, I clarify the literature on student perceptions, benefits of online learning, challenges of online learning, students of color in an online environment, and online learning for credit retrieval.

Student Perceptions

Some recent studies have begun to clarify student experiences in online learning. For example, Yeboah et al. (2017) interviewed 40 online high school students of color to determine factors that promoted or hindered their own beliefs or self-concepts about their learning in online classes. Seven themes emerged from the research: parent support, positive behavior support, positive student-to-student and student-to-teacher interaction, access to resources, flexibility in time, and collaborative learning sessions—all of these helped to enhance student online learning experiences. Borup and Stevens (2017) looked at 10 high school students' perceptions of effective teaching practices while enrolled in an online charter high school and found that students valued personalized learning, organization of the lesson and engagement with it, relationship with the teacher, and open lines of communication with the instructor.

Tunison and Noonan (2001) interviewed 50 high school students and found that the students were satisfied with the ability to work ahead and at their own pace. Students did express dissatisfaction with technology issues, lack of face-to-face communication, and the time management skills required. Barbour (2008) surveyed 38 students and found similar responses to the Tunison and Noonan study; students were satisfied with their online learning but felt frustrated with asynchronous communication tools, and online classes that had heavier workloads than did traditional face-to-face courses. Barbour, Siko, Sumara, and

Simuel-Everage (2012), conducted an in-depth narrative analysis of a 12th grade high school student taking an online course. The student's experiences revealed struggles with online learning and reluctance to reach out to virtual teachers. The researchers concluded that the student's experiences could be typical of those of other high school students, highlighting what needs to be considered, such as better strategies for design and delivery of online learning.

Much of the existing research on online experiences has thus far relied on the opinions of virtual teachers or administrators (Cavanaugh, Barbour, & Clark, 2009), in part because of the limited research on students and online learning. Cavanaugh, et al. (2009) and Schnere (2006) have called for more studies exploring the educational experiences of K-12 students, and in particular, of students of color in online settings (Smith, Clark, & Blomeyer, 2005).

Benefits of Online Learning

Despite the limited research on student perspectives of online learning, what research is available has suggested that students are more computer literate, and therefore more comfortable working online, than past generations (McLennan & Gibbs, 2008). Additionally, the ability to learn at one's own pace and convenience has made online learning more of an attractive approach to serve students (Curtis & Werth, 2015; Wicks, 2010; Yeboah et al., 2017). In the United States, each state now offers some variation of online learning for students in the K-12 school system (iNACOL, 2016). Some of the reported benefits of online learning are access, such as flexibility of where and when students choose to learn, differentiated learning, and more availability and choices of classes (Barbour & Reeves, 2008; Hartnett, St. George, & Dron, 2011; Yeboah et al., 2017). Many

students have also taken advantage of honors, advanced placement, and dual credit online classes to advance their learning and possibly graduate early (Curtis & Werth, 2015).

As schools struggle with the multitude of reasons why students leave without a diploma, online learning has become a popular choice for student retention and credit recovery (Rickles et al., 2018). Many school districts have adopted online learning to allow students to retake failed courses (Powell, Roberts, & Patrick, 2015). Levin et al. (2018) looked at 24 high school online programs and reported that students who needed to recover high school credit benefitted from online learning that allowed for course access outside the regular school day and covered only material students had failed previously. A meta-analysis looked at 51 online learning studies and found that students who took full- or part-time online courses outperformed students who had only face-to-face instruction (Bakia, Jones, Murphy, & Toyama, 2009). Thus, research has demonstrated significant benefits of online learning, including flexibility in time and location of where learning can take place.

Challenges of Online Learning

Some challenges of online learning include lack of student access to technology, social isolation, poor management skills, and limited student literacy (Barbour & Reeves, 2008). When Bakia et al. (2009) looked at the benefits of online learning, they found that students who took a hybrid class of online and face-to-face instruction did better than students who did only face-to-face classes or only online. These results suggest that full-time online learning is not as effective as a hybrid class. Freidhoff (2015) and Gill et al. (2015) similarly found higher attrition rates and lower academic gain when students took only online courses compared to traditional face-to-face courses. Additionally, a study that interviewed 42 teachers on student's motivation concluded that it was more challenging to

motivate students online than in a face-to-face learning environment (Murphy & Rodríguez-Manzanares, 2009).

Rickles et al. (2018) cautioned that studies looking only at the delivery method, online versus traditional face-to-face classes, are complex, and student success rate cannot be attributed merely to a single factor when trying to determine how delivery mode affects student success. Studies claiming greater success for either online or face-to-face learning need to account for other factors, such as teacher quality, content coverage, grading procedures, and student pacing and progression. However, research has demonstrated the challenges of online learning, including difficulty gaining access to the technology, limited literacy, social isolation, and lack of time management skills.

Students of Color

Since schools were expanded across the U.S. in the early twentieth century, teachers have been taught and encouraged to standardize education and assimilate all students to White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant principles (Gerstle, 2001; Jacobson, 1998 & 2006; Banks, 1993). Students are taught from a curriculum that continues to promote Eurocentric perspectives (Huber, Johnson, & Kohli, 2006; Banks, 1993). Bernal (2002) stated, “The insidious nature of a Eurocentric epistemological perspective allows it to subtly (and not so subtly) shape the belief system and practices of researchers, educators, and the school curriculum” (p. 111). Having only the dominant perspective in education ignores the learning styles and needs of students of color. Educators should learn about the experiences of students of color so they can impact students in a positive way (Smith-Maddox & Solórzano, 2002). Gillborn (2005) argues that what is considered best practice should depend on context and the purpose of education. Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman,

(2011) share that the K-12 school system strives for race-neutrality, which denies racism and structural oppression.

Margolis (2001) explained that people must be aware of what is being taught but more important what is being unintentionally taught. Zamudio et al. (2011) gave an example of how the unintentional curriculum or implicit curriculum can negatively affect students. In a science class, a teacher's objective might be to teach a science lesson but that teacher may not realize a female student in the class noticed that only male students were consistently called on. The lesson may be about science, but the female student has learned that boys are better than girls in science. This is the implicit curriculum that a teacher may unintentionally teach by calling on male students only. This gender example applies to race as well. Huber et al. (2006) stated, "The constant bombardment of messages embedded in the curriculum about the superiority of white and inferiority of non-whites (which can be explicit or implicit) can indoctrinate students about their placement in the racial hierarchy in relation to their race" (p. 193).

The use of a curriculum is a way to enforce cultural assimilation (Bennett, 2001; Yosso, 2002). An example is classroom history books that often teach students about African Americans through the lens of slavery. Rarely do history books dedicate space to African American members of the military or African American political activists (Margaret et al., 2011). When African Americans are mentioned in mainstream history books, they are often framed in a passive way. Take, for instance, African American antiracist advocates who worked to abolish slavery. If they are mentioned at all, it is passively through boxed inserts or picture captions on a page. Instead, Abraham Lincoln is given credit for creating the movement of ending slavery, perpetuating the myth that the end of slavery was due

solely to him (Margaret et al., 2011). Thus, students of color operate in a context of racism in schools that can have a negative impact on their intellectual development.

Students of Color in an Online Environment

Both the brick-and-mortar and online classroom consist of a diverse student body in terms of race, culture, language, abilities, and learning styles (Nieto, 2004). Despite this knowledge, many online classrooms are not set up to address or acknowledge the rich diversity students bring into the classroom. When Yeboah et al. (2017) looked at factors that constrain online learning experiences for students of color, they revealed that lack of socialization opportunities and lack of cultural inclusion in the curriculum affected student's success rate.

A review of the literature, conducted in the United States and Canada, revealed that much of the research into the benefits and challenges of online learning has been based on adult learners and generalized for the K-12 school system with little around students of color and their educational experiences (Yeboah et al., 2017). A K-12 study looking at 47 schools in Arizona that offered a full-time online or blended method found the dropout rates for Latino students were reduced if students attended a full-time online option versus a blended learning option (Corry, 2016). However, the same study also looked at student graduation rates and found that Latino students participating in a full-time online or blended model option did equally well. The author suggested that students who are at risk of dropping out of high school have multifaceted needs and may require more support than what a blended or face-to-face course may offer. Thus, the research on online learning with K-12 students of color is multilayered and limited, and many scholars are continuing to advocate for more

research (Beck, Maranto & Tuchman, 2017; Corry, 2016; Palacios & Wood, 2016; Yeboah et al., 2017).

Credit Retrieval with Online Learning

The number of studies of online learning as a means by which to address the opportunity gap is limited (Cavanaugh et al., 2013; Liu & Cavanaugh, 2011), but even less research has focused on the effectiveness of online credit retrieval (Heppen et al., 2017; Rickles et al., 2018). Means et al. (2010) analyzed 45 online and blended learning studies and found that out of the 45 studies, seven looked at K-12 online education but none considered online learning for the use of credit retrieval; yet for students who have failed a face-to-face course, an online recovery course offers a different format by which they might be able to recover credit (Archambault et al., 2010). On the other hand, a study looking at online credit recovery for ninth graders who failed Algebra 1 over four years of high school found that the online recovery classes were more challenging to pass than the traditional face-to-face class. The study concluded that there was no evidence suggesting that face-to-face courses were better or worse than online credit retrieval courses (Rickles et al., 2018). Heppen et al. (2017) conducted a study involving 1,224 high school students. He compared an online Algebra 1 credit retrieval course with a face-to-face course of the same type. Heppen found that students are more likely to recover credit and learn more in a face-to-face course. Thus, as research has demonstrated contradictory findings about the effectiveness of online learning as a method of credit recovery, both Rickles et al. (2018) and Heppen et al. (2017) call for more rigorous research to evaluate the effectiveness of online credit retrieval programs.

Proponents of online learning in the K-12 school system agree that much of the research has centered on the teacher's or administrator's voice when it comes to online learning in primary and intermediate grades, thus suggesting a need for more research on student perceptions and experiences (Borup & Stevens, 2017).

To summarize, existing research on K-12 online learning shows that students benefit from not being limited by time or location; however, some of the challenges with such freedom are time management and lack of face-to-face interaction. Studies looking at students of color in online environments found that the lack of socialization and cultural inclusion in the curriculum affect student success rate. Lastly, researchers have called for further study to meet the needs of students who are behind in credit and needing credit retrieval. To address these gaps in research, I next clarify the Adolescent Community Engagement (ACE) framework that looks at best practices in online learning for adolescents to provide a global picture of what is further needed to improve the success of K-12 students of color in online environments.

Theoretical Framework

The present research was based upon the ACE framework, which identified best practices for students who participated in online learning (Borup, West, Graham, & Davis, 2014). ACE has four main components: student engagement, teacher engagement, peer engagement, and parent engagement. Students learning online who benefitted from all four components of ACE displayed increased engagement and success (Borup et al., 2014), and thus, I used these four components as a framework to guide the proposed research design to ensure that methods appropriately identify student perceptions of how to attain goals and how to improve online learning. As research into the online learning of students of color is

limited, in this study the ACE framework was applied specifically to center on an under-researched population.

Student Engagement

Universal acceptance of the term *engagement* has not been established, even though the work around student engagement in the K-12 field is commonly understood (Borup et al., 2014). Christenson, Reschly, and Wylie (2012) define *engagement* as meaning that students are actively involved in learning activities. Borup et al., (2014) describe three types of student engagement: affective, behavioral, and cognitive. Affective engagement is the student's emotional reaction to the learning activity. Behavioral engagement is the student's active response to the learning activity. Cognitive engagement is "the expenditure of thoughtful energy needed to comprehend complex ideas in order to go beyond the minimal requirements" (Finn & Zimmer, 2012, p. 102). The ACE framework is based on the idea that student engagement will increase if the teacher, peer, and parent are all engaged (Borup et al., 2014; Curtis & Werth, 2015).

Teacher Engagement

The ACE framework defines teacher engagement as a way to positively influence student engagement through facilitating interactions, course materials, and instruction (Borup et al., 2014). Teaching engagement is also known as *teaching presence*, which emerged from higher education and is applied to students in the K-12 school systems (Garrison et al., 2010). Teacher presence was mostly known in the work of student engagement through discussion boards. However, some generalizations were needed because of the differences between adult and adolescent learners (Cavanaugh, 2004).

The first element in teacher engagement is interacting with students. Picciano, Seaman, and Allan (2010) looked at the role of the teacher as the nurturer, as well as the role of staff members, to provide social and emotional support for the student. Kennedy et al. (2013) found that one online school understood the importance of teacher engagement and required teachers to work on forming meaningful relationships with their students. Another way the ACE framework looks at teacher interactions is through teacher- to-student motivation. DiPietro et al. (2008) found that student motivation is affected by instructors' immediate feedback. Cavanaugh et al. (2004) also found that positive feedback increased student motivation online.

The second element consists of the course materials and the way lessons are organized and designed (Borup et al., 2014). Tunison and Noonan (2001) explained that students are more likely to procrastinate if the course is not organized and designed well. Cavanaugh et al. (2014) stress the importance for teachers of K-12 online learners to know the cognitive, social, and development stages of their students in order to better organize lessons for them. Barbour (2007) suggested students benefit from visual and interactive elements in the design of online lessons.

The third element in teacher engagement is instruction. Boulton (2008) found that students taking online classes needed instruction on how to access the online materials and how to develop independent learning skills.

Peer Engagement

The next component of the ACE framework is peer engagement. Peers impact other students' engagement through motivating and collaborating (Borup et al., 2013). According to Gunawardena, Lowe, and Anderson (1998), peers become an extra instructor for

classmates. Peer-to-peer learning happens when previous knowledge obtained is shared and understood (Borup et al., 2013). Classmates can also help student engagement by providing peer motivation. According to Arbaugh (2001) and Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, and Archer (1999), online courses can lack the nonverbal signals people give to one another, such as the smiling, eye contact, and laughter that is present in face-to-face courses. These nonverbal signals help with student engagement and building a learning community, which is needed for student success (Shea, 2006). Thus, there are a variety of ways classmates can help to engage one another, such as providing encouragement and social connection. According to Moore (1989) peer-to-peer interaction helps to motivate the student learner.

Parent Engagement

The ACE framework and many online researchers acknowledge the lack of research into parental involvement in the online learning of children (Borup et al., 2014; Rice, 2009; Black, 2009; Curtis & Werth, 2015). The role of the parent can be fulfilled by multiple people who may or may not be the biological or legal guardian (Borup et al., 2014). Research has found that parent engagement can positively impact student engagement (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). The ACE framework looks at parent engagement through three different lenses: monitoring, motivating, and volunteering.

As an increasing number of students are taking online courses at home (Clark, 2001), the students need to be monitored to prevent distraction, plagiarizing, and falling behind (Harms et al., 2010). Stalker (2011) explains that schools depend on parents to meet the basic needs of their children, including social and emotional aspects. This trend is shifting the responsibility of monitoring the students and their learning more to the parent (Sorensen, 2012). Murphy and Rodríguez-Manzanares (2009) found that parents need to play an active

role in motivating and encouraging their students to stay on top of their online courses in order to be successful. Borup et al. (2013) found that if teachers help parents see the value of their involvement, parents are more likely to participate in their student learning.

The last lens in the ACE framework of parent engagement is volunteering. Currently, there is little research into parents volunteering in an online environment; however, according to Epstein (2002) there are different ways parents can be involved. Volunteering is more than just physically showing up to a PTA meeting or helping out at a school event. Parents can involve themselves in their children's online experience by helping to create a daily schedule, reading the teacher's assignment directions, and knowing and understanding school policies and procedures (Lee & Figueroa, 2012).

The ACE framework was built from existing research in higher education and traditional face-to-face classroom settings. The framework fits into the larger context of this study as a means of examining the online experiences of students of color, and, through the four types of engagement, to examine the role the student, teacher, parent, and peer play in successful online learning.

Methods and Design

In order to understand the experiences of students of color in an OD program, this project posed the following research questions as the basis of a qualitative study:

RQ1. What are OD students' completion goals and life goals?

RQ2. What aspects of an online OD program do students of color think are barriers to meeting their high school completion goals?

RQ3. What aspects of an online OD program do students of color think helps them meet their high school completion goals?

RQ4: What do students of color in an online OD program wish they were learning?

OD programs are designed to facilitate completion of high school through a variety of ways, including obtaining a GED diploma or certificate. Thus, for the purposes of these research questions, completing high school is defined as meeting student-defined high school completion goals.

Martella, Nelson, Morgan, and Marchand-Martella (2013) explained that qualitative research looks at how people make sense of the world. To accomplish that purpose, as Creswell (2015) pointed out there are several ways to collect qualitative data, such as interviews, observations, and the use of documents and audiovisuals. This study focused on qualitative interviews. Warren and Karner (2015) describe interviewing as an interaction based on a conversation. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) describe an interview where “knowledge is constructed in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee” (p. 4). In this qualitative study, semistructured interviews were conducted to investigate the experiences of students of color in an OD program.

Giroux (2001) explained that marginalized students, such as students of color, are rarely asked to participate in educational discourse about their learning. In the present study, participants were thus asked to give feedback about their learning through 13 open-ended questions adapted from the ACE framework and two previous studies (see Appendix A for guiding questions). A seven-question interview tool that captured the perspectives of students of color about their learning was used at an alternative high school site (Kim & Taylor, 2008). The last six of the 13 questions were adapted from a 17-question interview tool that examined factors that promote the online learning and academic self-concept of minority high school students (Yeboah et al., 2017).

Setting and Participants

The Northwest Open Door (NOD) program is situated in one of the larger school districts in the Pacific Northwest, serving over 20,000 students. Within the same building as the OD program, an Online Alternative Learning Experience (ALE) program is housed, serving students in grades 6–12. The OD program has one administrator (the researcher), nine certificated staff members, and two OD counselors. There are several paraeducators and secretarial staff. Some of the staff are shared between the OD program and the ALE program. Annual enrollment fluctuates between 90 and 150 students, on average, with most being 11th or 12th graders. The majority of the students range in age between 17 and 20 years of age, and most are low-income. Forty percent of the OD population are students of color, with Latino students being the largest subgroup.

Homogeneous sampling strategy was used in this study to identify a variety of participants that meet the Open-Door program eligibility and ages, including a variety of races such as African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Pacific Islanders. Creswell (2015) recommends selecting participants who will best help the researcher understand the central problem of understanding the experiences of students of color in an OD program. Creswell (2015) goes on to recommend for qualitative sampling the use of previously published research to back up the number of participants in a study. Examples of two previously published research studies in the field provided support for using a limited number of participants as a means of data collection. One, a two-part study looking at the impact of online instruction on the Latino-White achievement gap at a local community college, used 10 student participants for the student interview portion of their study (Ray, 2012). Another qualitative study, at an alternative school looking at how disenfranchised

students were being served, used eight student participants who represented a variety of gender and ethnicity (Kim & Taylor, 2008).

The NOD program, which used online learning as its primary teaching method, was chosen as the site of an in-depth study that invited 10 enrolled students of color to participate. Initial screening for those students was from the NOD program database, which confirmed race and enrollment status. Once identified through the database, the prospective participants' interest in participation was determined via emails, follow-up phone calls, and face-to-face requests. The University of Washington's Institutional Review Board (IRB) determined that this research does not require exempt status or IRB review, thus obviating the need for a consent form. Interviews took place at the NOD site and were digitally recorded. Recordings were then transcribed by a paid service that has a professional confidentiality agreement in place. To protect student, staff, and program identity, pseudonyms were used for all participants and for geographic and personal referents. Table 1 summarizes demographic information, while the following profiles introduce the participants.

Table 1

Study Participants

Participant pseudonym	Age	Grade Level	Self-Identified Ethnicity	Years in Program
Easton	17	11	Chicano	1
Aria	16	10	African American	1
Issac	17	11	African American	2
Roman	16	10	Mixed, Black and White	6 months
Louisa	18	12	Black	2
Owen	18	11	Black and Filipino	1
Wyatt	16	10	Black	6 months
Claire	16	11	Hispanic	1
Scarlett	17	12	Hispanic	1
Isaiah	12	17	Black	3

Note: Participant data represents self-reported information at the time of the study.

Easton

Easton, a 17-year-old, 11th-grade Chicano male student, was in his first year of attendance in the program during the study. Easton enrolled in the NOD program because he was dropped from his old school for nonattendance. Schools are mandated by the state to drop students after 20 consecutive school days of absence. Easton also reported that “teachers had a lot of issues with the way I dressed, and I had a sticker poker on my hand that they didn’t really approve of. They kept calling me out. So my mom thought this school was the best choice for me.”

Aria

Aria, a 16-year-old, 10th-grade African American female student, was also in her first year of attendance. She came to NOD because her family felt that other schools were unsafe for her, which Aria clarified was based on the fights and shootings at her old school.

Isaac

Isaac, a 17-year-old, 11th-grade African American male student, was in his second year of attendance. He came to the NOD program because he kept getting into school fights over female students and was not getting along with other male students. After his last suspension, his family brought him to the NOD program.

Roman

Roman, a 16-year-old, 10th-grade mixed African American and White male student, was in his first year of attendance. He came to the NOD program because he was asked to leave his old school due to his fights with peers. Roman described his pathway into the NOD program, “When somebody used to get on my nerves, I used to go off. It really wasn’t my choice to come here. I’ve gotten into fights, and all they see is someone harmful.”

Despite how others see him, as “Someone that can just pop off at any time,” Roman argued that “if you really get to know me that’s not what I am about.”

Louisa

Louisa, an 18-year-old, 12th-grade Black female student, was in her second year of attendance. She came to NOD because her relationships with her teachers were not helping her graduate. Louisa explained that at her old school she was wasting her time relearning concepts over and over again even after she had mastered them. She said that she became frustrated and stopped trying: “The way I study is different, and some of the teachers didn’t like that or didn’t appreciate that and just kept saying that ‘You won’t make it in life’ and ‘Go get your GED’.”

Owen

Owen, an 18-year-old, 11th-grade mixed Black and Filipino male student, was in his first year of attendance. He came to NOD because he was behind in credits and did not want to be in school five days a week. He wanted more free time to do his hobbies, such as playing the guitar, and did not want to spend all his time in school.

Wyatt

Wyatt, a 16-year-old, 10th-grade Black male student, also was in his first year of attendance. He came to the NOD program because he had failed four out of his six classes at the local high school. Wyatt explained that his family made him enroll in the NOD program in the hope that he will get back on track and avoid some of his friends that are distracting him.

Claire

Claire, a 16-year-old, 11th-grade Hispanic female student, was also in her first year of attendance. She came to the NOD program after dropping out of her old high school because she was pregnant. The NOD Dropout and Recovery Department called Claire and convinced her to return to school by enrolling in the program. Claire explains, “I decided to attend because the program was easier for me because I have my baby.” Claire stated that “I did not want to come back, but I know I need to learn more to do better for my baby,” and so she enrolled in the NOD program.

Scarlett

Scarlett, a 17-year-old, 11th-grade Hispanic female student, was also in her first year of attendance. She came to the NOD program because she had dropped out of her old high school. After two months of not being in school, Scarlett received a phone call from the Dropout and Recovery Department asking her to enroll in the program. Scarlett was hesitant to enroll back into school as she had become pregnant with her second baby and did not feel like she could manage both school and being pregnant while taking care of her first baby.

Isaiah

Isaiah, an 18-year-old, 12th-grade mixed Black and White male student, was in his second year of attendance. He came to the NOD program because there “was more drama between students and even teachers” at his last school. Isaiah has gotten into trouble at several schools, so his family decided to try an online school.

Coding and Analysis

Once the student interviews were complete, the data were transcribed using an online transcription service. Transcriptions were read for accuracy and quotes were highlighted that spoke directly to the research questions around what aspects of the NOD program do

students of color think are barriers or aids to meeting the student's life goals. Once the first reading and highlighting of quotes were done, I moved onto coding each line according to themes. I began with coding participants' self-identified age, race, gender, and how long they have been in the NOD program. Lastly, I coded for broader themes, such as goals and barriers. Within these broader categories, I identified more specific themes and rearranged the data into more specific subthemes until the major themes developed.

Findings

Three major themes developed from the analysis of the qualitative data, including (a) student goals, with a subtheme of family support; (b) barriers to students, with subthemes of institutional socialization, transitioning as an online student, and school-based racism; and (c) benefits of a flexible online program. Both themes and subthemes are presented within student participants' commentary and quotes.

All of the student participants were excited to share their thoughts about themselves and the program, except for the two Latina students, who were timid at first. However, once we started talking about their babies, these participants perked up and felt more comfortable with the interview. All of the students interviewed shared both critical and favorable remarks regarding their personal and school experiences. Overall, the students acknowledged being happy with the flexibility the program allowed them in doing schoolwork. On the other hand, all participants felt that the online learning was isolating and hindered their progress toward reaching their goals.

Students' Goals

Each of the participants interviewed had goals of getting their high school diploma or GED so they could begin working right away, go to a trade school, or attend university.

Some of the students' goals had to do with what they wanted to learn at the NOD program. Other students spoke about careers they wished they could pursue but felt as if those careers were too difficult to achieve.

This was the case with Aria, the 16-year-old, 10th-grade African American female student. She wanted to work in the criminal justice field but felt the amount of work it would take to graduate with a degree in criminal justice made it too difficult for her.

I took a criminal justice class online, but it was nothing like the class my mom is taking at the community college. In the online class, all you do is read. My mom got to do hands-on projects and work in teams to figure out crimes. When I was a little girl, I wanted to be a lawyer who helped people that were wrongly accused. Now I still want to do that, but it's too hard. My mom is still trying to finish school.

Aria was inspired to follow in her mother's footsteps but found the criminal justice class she took to be discouraging. She had assumed that her online class would have more than just reading components. Aria shared that reading was not her best subject. She sees her mother working hard to navigate her college classes and feels she will not accomplish what her mother has been able to do.

Unlike Aria, Isaac, the 17-year-old, 11th-grade African American male student, feels what he is currently learning is doable and is helping him prepare to one day go into a communications job, such as media planning. However, Isaac's interests go beyond just communication, and he shared what other areas he is interested in.

I always had the dream of playing football as long as I can remember, but the communications and media are my plan B. I wanna also learn about East Asian

studies so I can pick up a little bit of Japanese as well, but this school does not offer Japanese.

Even though Isaac shared that the NOD program had helped him with his future goals, he also spoke about how it does not offer sports and Japanese foreign language classes, which are important to him.

Similar to Isaac, Easton the 17-year-old, 11th-grade Chicano male student knows what he wants to do when he finishes the NOD program. Easton wants to follow in his father's footsteps and work with his hands. Since he was in middle school, his dad has taken him during the weekends to cut trees, clean up branches, and tend to customers' yards. Easton explained:

My dad taught me what hard work is. I have been doing labor jobs since I was in sixth grade. Even though I am making money and can make more money if I quit school right now, my dad won't let me. He told me that once I finish high school, he is going to help me get a union job. Union jobs pay a lot of money.

Easton shared that he is motivated by money and is only staying in school because of his dad's promise to help him make more money once he is done with school. Easton is fortunate enough to have a parent who is guiding and supporting him toward his life goals.

As with Easton and Isaac, three of the 10 students interviewed knew what they want to do when they finish the program: They want to enroll in a trade school to learn how to cut hair. Wyatt the 16-year-old, 10th-grade Black male student shared that he already knows that he wants to be a barber but finds himself often distracted watching videos on YouTube on how to cut hair. Unlike the previous participants mentioned, Wyatt shared several times

that the learning he is getting at the NOD program is a waste of his time and is not helping him get to his goal of being a barber.

If you want to help me, get some clippers, put up a chair in the room, and teach people how to cut some hair. Add some more electives in there so people can do more things, like they would do at other schools. Maybe put like a culinary class where people can actually learn useful things they will use in life. The stuff that I want to do, I don't need to know how to find the area of a triangle or do all that stuff, like it just doesn't apply to me, and so I feel like it's just a waste of my time. I do want to go to a trade school because I want to be a barber, and so I want to cut hair and run my own business. I cut my friend's hair now, and I am teaching myself through YouTube. I am ready to be done now. I want to start cutting hair.

Wyatt was forthcoming on how he felt about the NOD program and what the program could be doing better to engage him and other students. He brings up the importance of listening to students' voices when program decisions are made to meet the needs of the students better.

Similar to Wyatt, both Claire, the 16-year-old, 11th-grade Hispanic female student, and Scarlett, the 17-year-old, 11th-grade Hispanic female student, could not wait to finish school so they could begin their next chapter in life—attending a beauty school. Of the other participants, Isaiah, the 18-year-old, 12th-grade mixed Black and White male student, wanted to go into business so that he can be independent, and Owen, the 18-year-old, 11th-grade mixed Black and Filipino male student wanted to eventually go to a university to learn more about the sea, and he hopes to get a job as a deep-sea diver. Louisa, the 18-year-old, 12th-grade Black female student, wanted to join the military, while Roman, the 16-year-old,

10th-grade mixed African American and White male student was unsure; however, he said that he would be happy playing football if he could get a contract with the NFL.

Each of the students interviewed had goals they were working toward. Some of the students felt that the NOD program helped them move toward their goals while others did not. In the next section, participants describe how family support played a role in reaching those life goals.

While examining the participant's goals, a subtheme around family participation kept coming up throughout five of the 10 conversations. Four of the five students who spoke about their families thought they were supportive in helping them achieve their goals. For example, Roman shared that his family is the only reason he is still in school.

My stepdad is my biggest fan. He tells me he's like, "You might not think school is important, but it is." He said, "If you wanna make it to college, you are gonna wanna push for it, you wanna do this, you wanna do that you're gonna need school to fall behind you." He said, "I'm cheering for you. I'm like your number one fan." His encouragement helps me. He tries to keep me out of trouble.

Roman explained that his relationship with his real dad was horrible and that he is glad he has a supportive stepdad who believes in him.

As with Roman, Claire shared that she is very thankful for her mom. She said that her mom has helped her toward her life goals by encouraging her to stay in school and helping her with her baby while she worked on classwork. "There is no way I can do school and take care of my baby. My mom is my rock, and I am lost without her," explains Claire. She believed that her mom was a role model for her as her mother was attending community college, and they often sat in the living room doing school work at the same time. "My mom

is amazing; she works, supports all of us kids, and goes to school. I watch my mom and see how she struggles and that motivates me to do better so I can one day help her out. Claire's mother took care of Claire's baby when she did schoolwork or came into the center. Claire explained that if this were not so she would have had to stop going to school and put all her efforts into raising her baby.

My mom's always like, "You can do this." She's also always telling me to do it for my baby and stuff. You know it'd be like I just want to quit. She always tells me that I just have two more years left, and that's it. I can't wait until I am done. I just want to stay home with my baby.

Despite not wanting to attend school, Claire had decided, with the support of her mom, to continue her education. Claire could have made her baby an excuse to drop out of school, but instead, she had made her baby her inspiration to finish school.

Unlike Claire, Wyatt did not feel that he had the support he needed from his family. "I hate my stepdad, he gets on my nerves. I don't know why people like him. Him and my mom both get on my case. I wish they would just let me stop going to school and start letting me live my life. Wyatt had nothing positive to share about his family and felt he would be a lot more successful if they were not in his life.

Student Barriers

The second theme students identified was barriers that hindered their progress at the NOD program. Some of the barriers were directly related to services at the program, and others were personal barriers the students were facing. The most significant barrier all 10 participants shared was the lack of socialization within their learning management system or the NOD center. Even though students are allowed to attend the NOD center more often,

when other peers and teachers are present, participants still reported feelings of being isolated. Four out of the 10 students shared that another barrier was that they didn't know how to navigate an online platform and had to figure it out on their own. Three of the participants shared that another barrier was racism at their old schools and that they currently see racism at the NOD program.

Students reported a lack of socialization, such as Isaiah, who shared that loneliness has been a problem for him at the NOD center. Isaiah spoke about how the program is like a library where students cannot talk to each other without getting into trouble with a teacher.

We should have a group where students can join and do things together. Kind of like they do at all the other schools. Where they elect a president, and you can join in all the activities that are planned. We can't stare at computers all day. We need to talk to other students and not just teachers all the time. I mean there are rooms where you can talk, but the teachers don't like it. They want it quiet in the rooms. Not everyone likes it quiet.

Some students also reported a lack of socialization when working online away from the NOD center. Aria shared that at her old online school students would interact with teachers and other students via online tools, such as Skype or Zoom classroom meetings. Students could ask questions and engage in conversation during the lesson. However, within the NOD platform, students do not have an opportunity to speak with peers or teachers. The program is set up for students to watch videos and answer questions with no teacher or peer interaction. Aria went on to say that sometimes their NOD teachers are virtual and not living in the area, creating more of an isolating feeling because she had to email the teacher if she had a question and could not come on-site to ask.

Sometimes you just want to talk to a live person. You get tired of emailing people and waiting for their response. I like the fact that some of the teachers work at the center. We can come in to get help, but it's still pretty lonely. I don't have a problem with online school necessarily but just the social part of it. Since it's online, you don't necessarily have that human interaction as much.

The lack of socialization within the NOD program is not limited to an individual issue. It is a bigger systemic problem in the world of online learning and an institutional issue within schools such as the NOD program. Participants describe the setup of the program as isolating in nature, which points to how the program was structured and created.

Just as isolation was a barrier to student success in the NOD program, navigating an online platform was another barrier shared by four of the 10 students. Owen described his online experience as having to teach himself how to be successful. He spent many hours on YouTube trying to figure out the best ways to take notes and study the concepts being taught through the videos, and one day things started clicking and making sense. The other three students who had problems navigating the online platform said they didn't know what to do or where to start. Similar to Owen, Louisa shared that when she first arrived at the NOD program, she had to figure things out on her own.

It was kind of hard because I didn't really have a lot of support. I had support from my family, so that was okay, but from the teachers at first, I didn't really know like what I was supposed to be doing, and nobody told me what I was supposed to be doing. I did go to the orientation stuff, but it was kind of very vague. They told you what you could do in the building, but they didn't show me how to do the

coursework and stuff, so that was really confusing. So I had to figure it out on my own.

Even though the NOD program provides students with an orientation to the program, clearly, the orientation is not enough. More support is needed for students new to online learning to help them access classes, understand where to begin, and how to be a successful online student.

In addition to the barrier of navigating an online school, another barrier surfaced from the analysis. Three out of the 10 students talked about racism at their old schools and how the NOD program was different, yet the students still expressed similar feelings of being discriminated against within the program. For example, Louisa described her old school as a place where the teachers treated her differently because of her race.

At my old school, some teachers liked you and others did not [depending on your race]. I had an English teacher who told me I would not graduate and to go get my GED. Just because I did not want to do her classwork she assigned. She treated me like I was always doing something wrong. Some of the other Black girls in the class gave her a hard time, and she probably thought I was the same way.

Louisa felt that she was being treated differently because she was Black and that her teacher was assuming that she must be like the other Black girls in her class. Louisa went on to say, “If she took the time to ask why, I would have told her that I knew all the material she was teaching us. I did it at my other school. I did one time try to tell her, and she told me school was like a job, sometimes you have to do things you don’t like. If she did not like her job, then she should have looked for another job instead of making me suffer.”

Louisa also felt that her teacher dismissed the knowledge she already had coming into the class and thought the best she could do was get a GED. Louisa believed the teacher had biases against her because of her race and assumed she did not do her work because she wanted to upset the teacher like the other Black girls in the class. Louisa gave up on the class and the school and decided to enroll in the NOD program once a second teacher told her she should put all her efforts into getting a GED. Two years into the NOD program, Louisa raised the importance of seeing teachers of color.

At this school, the teachers keep to themselves. If you have a question, you have to go up to them. At least that's what it's like for me and the other Black kids. The teachers choose who they want to talk with. I was so glad when you started hiring other teachers of color. I built a strong relationship with Coach Jes. She looks like me, talks like me, and understands me.

Louisa went on to share that she would like to learn more about her cultural history in the NOD program.

I really do like history, but I just don't like the way it happened. I like knowing about history, but sometimes I wish I could change it. What happened to Black people is wrong. This school does not even talk about it. We read about slavery and just move on. Schools can do a better job teaching about it.

Similar to Louisa's advocacy of more realistic racialized history, Easton spoke about the lack of a cultural connection within the NOD program and how it compared to his old school.

At one of my old schools, there was a Latino club and a Black and Brown Student Union. These groups and events helped me meet new people and be culturally

aware—meeting new people that you can connect with that were like you. My girlfriend goes here, and she is half Black and does not know anything about her culture. This place does not teach her anything about her culture. It's not just here, it's all the schools in this district.

Both Easton and Louisa called out the lack of cultural awareness and respect within the program, and how this lack extends beyond the NOD program to the district as a whole.

Easton continued to describe the racism he experienced at his previous schools, and how the district would not accept how he wanted to represent himself.

My attendance was really bad at my old school. The teachers had a lot of issues with the way I dressed, and I had a sticker poker on my hand that they didn't really approve of. The school would not let me go back until I got rid of it. So, I took it off with a razor. My old school was nothing like my school when I was a freshman. My mom took me out because there was a lot of racism between students and teachers. Over there, the racism was in your face, and they were malicious about it. Over here in this district, the teachers don't know better [about racism]. Here at NOD, no one talks to each other. They just stare at computers and leave.

Easton drew attention to “in your face racism” versus what he described as “teachers not knowing better” about racism. At his previous school, Easton saw racism as tangible, whereas in the NOD program, he argued that staff do not even speak to students of color. Part of this lack of teacher engagement is normalized by the way the NOD program is framed with independent learning, where students are expected to work quietly without talking. Thus, Easton argued that staff not speaking to students of color is a form of racism.

Isaiah also identified racism as commonplace in both his previous and current schools. Isaiah, a senior, has stopped going to the local comprehensive high school since his freshman year. He has been in and out of online programs, mostly due to his family moving.

I won't ever go back to a regular school. I have seen too much racism between students and teachers. It's everywhere. Including here. It's just not as noticeable and it's harder to describe. For example, last year at this school, a teacher kept picking on me. At first, I thought it was because I was a talker. I kept talking to people. But I stopped, and she kept picking on me for the dumbest things. I knew her issue was more than just me talking. She has an issue with kids who can't sit in their seats, be quiet, and just do their work. Basically, all the Black kids. I finally got fed up, and I called her out. She got mad and called my mom. We had to have a big meeting, and I told her how I felt. She denied everything, and it never got fixed. I just stay away from her now.

Isaiah had a hard time articulating what had happened in the program but knew what he experienced was a form of racism. He called out the teacher, believing the teacher had an issue not only with him but all of the Black students in the program. Isaiah captured the racism at NOD program as being "covert and under the radar."

Some participants spoke about how their relationships with their families impacted their life goals, while others voiced concerns around barriers, which included feeling isolated, making the transition as an online student, and experiencing school-based racism.

Benefits of a Flexible Online Program

The last major theme from the analysis was echoed by all 10 students interviewed. They all talked about enjoying the fact that they could choose when to do school. For

example, Isaac appreciated being able to start school later in the day and not having to get up so early. Similar to Isaac, Roman shared that the schoolwork was less at the NOD program than at his old school, because he could go as fast or slow as he wanted or needed to. Roman described his experience when he first got to the NOD program and how he has progressed.

Sometimes I work at home, and sometimes I work here. It's just whatever fits my schedule. Like I said, you wake up in your own time, when you're ready to come in, put in—what?— two, three, four hours of work in a day. It's not like a brick-and-mortar school where you have to sit eight hours a day in a classroom, and you only have lunch, and you have PE. I mean, that's about it. Here all you gotta do is sit down and do your work like literally on the computer. You can take breaks as much as you want. At the beginning, I'm not even gonna lie, I was doing no work. And then I remember my coach and she was like "I'm your coach." I was like "Okay, what am I supposed to do with you." She's like "Everything." So, she checked out I wasn't doing the work and she asked why and I was like I really wasn't that ambitious to do it. I wasn't really that excited to do it. But then she helped me realize if you wanna do sports and finish school you got to. My coach did a plan for me. We started off doing 30 minutes of a course a day. And now I'm pushing it up to an hour, of the course, a day. So, she's really pushing me to work harder, work better, work a little bit quicker. I kind of like that.

Roman enjoyed the flexibility of the program but soon realized that all the freedom of choosing when to work and how long caused him to procrastinate and eventually stop working. As with Roman, Owen shared that he likes the program because he could still

work at his job and do his schoolwork. Similarly, Scarlett liked the program because of the flexibility that resulted from her feeling welcome to bring her baby in when she did not have anyone to watch her child, so she could get her schoolwork done.

Any other school wouldn't allow people who have kids to come, and so here is way better, because like today and Monday, I had to bring my daughter, and you guys don't mind that because it's like a parent school. So way better than my old school in California.

Exactly like Scarlett, Claire also appreciated the flexibility of the program in allowing her child to attend the center as well.

I am glad I can bring my daughter here. If my mom can't take her, I can bring her to my coach to watch her. My daughter likes my coach, and she will watch my baby while I do my test and assignments in the center.

Another feature of the program is the flexible hours of the center. Both Aria and Roman commented about the late-night hours, which helped give them more flexibility in meeting their required time at the center. Aria also attributed passing some of her classes to the flexibility of the hybrid courses started at the NOD program.

I try to do my work at home, but I'm like busy a lot at home. So, I go to my art class, which is more hands-on and better for me. I am passing that class, and I get to talk to other people. The teacher is very helpful and works with me if I have to miss class.

Both Aria and Roman were regular attendees at the late-night lab hours. Aria found herself only working on her subject areas while in her hybrid class or doing her online portion while at the center. For the same reason that Aria was taking hybrid courses, Isaac also felt that the hybrids were a better match for his learning style.

I don't think online learning is for me. I was excited when I first got here. But I slacked off and got too far behind. I need to have someone with me holding me accountable. I want to go back to my old school if they will take me back. Right now, I am taking the hybrid art class, and it is better for me. You can actually talk to people. I think you guys should make more hybrids. Not everyone can do online all day.

Isaac was in an online program yet felt that online learning is not for him. Just like Isaac, some of the students also enjoyed the flexibility in time, location, and how quickly or slowly a student can progress through a class and felt that this is a benefit of the NOD program. However, the students agreed that the danger comes when having too much flexibility can lead to students procrastinating and not doing their schoolwork, especially when online learning does not fit their learning style.

In the next section, the ACE framework is applied and discussed in relation to family support with student goals, student barriers, and benefits of a flexible online program.

Discussion

In applying the ACE framework to this research, all four main components—student engagement, teacher engagement, peer engagement, and parent engagement—impacted whether students felt the program helped or hindered their progress toward their life goals. According to the ACE framework, if all four components are present, students are more likely to increase engagement and success in their online learning (Borup et al., 2014). Intentional planning and purposeful placement of best practices learned through the framework provide opportunities for access to NOD students.

One of the ACE components, parent engagement, looks at how families can support their children's progress toward their educational goals. Parent engagement within an online environment, seen through the lens of ACE, has to do with the ways parents nurture, monitor, and motivate their children, and volunteer their time to help with their child's learning (Borup, West, Graham, & Davis, 2014). Within the NOD program, participants shared a variety of ways parents were helping them be successful students. For example, Claire shared that her mother had helped her toward her life goals by encouraging her to stay in school and helping her with her baby while she worked on classwork. On the other hand, Wyatt felt that his family had not helped him toward his life goals and felt that if his family would let him drop out of the program, he could start working toward being a barber: "I wish they would just let me stop going to school and start letting me live my life." Both Claire's and Wyatt's responses showed that there are a variety of degrees whereby parents may or may not support children's school engagement, complicating efforts to provide every student with nurturing, monitoring, and motivation.

Missing from the participant responses were specific examples of how their families might have monitored their work online or helped with school work. However, there is some advice in the literature. Lee and Figueroa (2012), for instance, give specific examples of what families can do to support their children's online learning, such as creating a daily schedule, reading assignment directions from the teacher, and knowing and understanding school policies and procedures.

The two next categories that impacted the participants' learning success were teacher and peer engagement. All the participants expressed a lack of institutional socialization and a lack of student-to-student and student-to-teacher interactions. Nieto (2014) shared that

online classrooms consist of a diverse student body in terms of race, culture, language, abilities, and learning. Despite Nieto's research, many online classrooms are not set up to address or acknowledge the rich diversity students bring into the digital classroom, and they often fail to address the needs of students of color.

Furthermore, the interviews revealed that relationships with the teachers and staff at the NOD program demonstrated the importance of getting help from someone who looks like the student. For example, Louisa was excited that the NOD program was starting to see a shift in who was being hired from an all-White staff to staff of color. For instance, Louisa shared, "I was so glad when you started hiring other teachers of color. I built a strong relationship with Coach Jes. She looks like me, talks like me, and understands me." Louisa went on to share that in her past schools in the district, all the staff members were White, and she felt that the lack of racial connection added to her feeling of isolation.

Another example that surfaced from the interviews regarding relationships between students and teachers was racism within the NOD program. The students reported the feeling of discrimination and isolation because of their experiences within the program. Louisa shared that teachers chose whom they wanted to talk with and often ignored the Black students. Isaiah believes that the NOD program employs a teacher who does not like Black kids, and Easton shared that the teachers do not educate students of color on their cultural heritage. The students' responses are to be expected; as Yeboah et al. (2017) report, the lack of cultural inclusion and socialization opportunities for students of color are factors that constrain student learning in an online program.

Another factor in the ACE framework that influences student engagement is what Christenson, Reschly, and Wylie (2012) refer to as students having active involvement in

learning activities. In the present study, participants shared that problems making the transition to being an online student had a negative effect on their success. Many of the students had to figure out how to navigate the online platform on their own. Owen reported that he had to teach himself how to learn online by taking notes and allocating time to each subject area. Louisa reported that there was an orientation at the NOD center, but it was vague and did not go over how to navigate the courses. Both Owen's and Louisa's concerns with online learning match what the research has reported. Barbour and Reeves (2008) noted that lack of management skills and knowledge of how to access the online platforms create challenges for students in online learning.

Continuing with the ACE framework around student engagement, the last example given by the participants was under the theme of benefits. All 10 students reported liking the flexibility of the program and appreciated that they had the option of when to do school. However, a few of them came to see the flexibility of the program as a hindrance to their progress. For example, Roman shared that he could go as fast or slow as he wanted to as the classes were self-paced. He went on to say, however, that if he goes too slow, he will fall farther behind. Both Aria and Isaac shared Roman's sentiment in liking the flexibility of online learning, but they admitted that online learning was not their learning style and found that they were often distracted and tended to procrastinate in their work, causing them to stop working on their classes as they felt they were too far behind. Caution must be considered for educators and families supporting students, as Isaac reminds the reader, "if you're not careful, you can fall too behind and mess yourself up pretty bad."

These findings are supported by other studies that found students taking only online courses have a higher fail rate and lower academic gain than students in a traditional

classroom (Freidhoff, 2015; Gill et al., 2015). A study by Murphy & Rodríguez-Manzanares (2009), reported that online students have a harder time staying motivated and engaged than students learning in a face-to-face format. Knowledge of these student experiences with online learning should encourage educators, districts, and state leaders to look at whether students of color are being encouraged and supported in their online learning experience.

Lastly, all 10 students reported that they felt isolated while doing their school work, which demonstrates a structural barrier within the NOD program that needs to be addressed in order to promote success for students of color. It is also important for readers to recognize that even though only three students named racism as a barrier in their educational journey, each one of them spoke about instances of discrimination or racism throughout their stories.

Recommendations

Findings in this study suggest that the NOD program would benefit from actions that would increase the success rate of students of color in an online platform. The first action step for NOD staff, district leadership, and stakeholders, as a result of this study, is to actively engage the voices of NOD students in the planning, discussions around curriculum, and class offerings. These discussions are essential to understand where students of color are struggling within the NOD program. The second action step is to promote student success by actively engaging families and NOD students with direction and practice on how to be a successful online student. Lastly, the third action step is to actively engage NOD students in hands-on learning activities leading to graduation credit.

In order to actively engage students, one recommendation is to implement student panels monthly where the NOD counselor is assigned to seek out a variety of student perspectives. The counselor should invite the student group to come together to hear each

other's' stories and discuss how they are impacted by being members in their respective groups. Once the group has met a few times, and a relationship is established, the group members would be invited to share their stories and thoughts with staff and district representatives at the school. Norms would be put into place with staff and district representatives before allowing a student panel to share their story. Norms would include some professional development around experiencing discomfort, staying engaged, allowing students to speak their truth, and accepting nonclosure. Staff would then have the opportunity to engage with the student panel by asking questions and seeking clarification. The panels will allow for more than just student-to-teacher learning but will expose staff to groups of students with whom they would not usually come in contact. The student panels will then be used as a platform to continue professional development with staff. Student panels align with the ACE framework component of student engagement, which captures what is working and what needs to be changed within the NOD program

To actively engage families and NOD students, the next action step is to improve family orientation sessions in which coaches sit down with families and their children to go over and demonstrate what the curriculum looks like, how to access help when needed, and how to master other components of online learning. To engage families with student learning, coaches will help guide the family and child while they build the child's daily academic schedule. Also, during that time, the coach will educate the family on what they can be doing at home, using the ACE framework family engagement component, offering knowledge on activities such as monitoring students' screen time, helping students stick to their class work schedule, and encouraging the child.

Families and students will walk away with a better understanding of the role of the student, parent, and teacher in the learning process. Two-week goals will be set with all parties, and a follow-up meeting will be scheduled and tracked by the coaches. During the follow-up, the coaches will set a time to meet with the students at their home, a local coffee shop, or at the center, depending on what is more convenient for the student. Coaches' role during the meeting will be to check in on the student, looking to see if the two-week goal was successful, and set a new monthly goal for the student. Coaches will continue ongoing monthly meetings, which will take place with the student, to set new goals, monitor the student, and keep track of student progress, while keeping open communication with families. Therefore, family orientations and student goal setting are two ways to help the family and child understand what the school is expecting of the student and what role the family member plays in supporting their child.

The final action step is to engage OD students in hands-on learning activities. The recommendation is to create three learning-track options for students to earn high school credit toward graduation. Students choose a maximum of six courses in any of the tracks, for which letter grades or credit is given toward the required 24 credits to graduate.

Track one provides maximum flexibility, requiring full independent learning based on online classes where students choose when and where they do their classwork. Students on this track attend a life success class in which they complete their high school beyond plan, and engage in social and emotional learning and socialization with peers. Students attend the NOD center weekly. The next two tracks encourage student-to-student discourse, which is an essential factor in peer engagement.

Track two combines online and face-to-face classes. Students take their life success course and one or more hybrid courses, depending on preferences and needs. The face-to-face component of the hybrid class would run no more than three days a week for a maximum of two hours at a time.

Track three combines online, hybrid, and hands-on classes. Students take a life success class and choose how many online, hybrid, or hands-on classes to take. Each student in project-based classes is assigned an advisor, who works with a certified teacher. Students create hands-on, cross-content projects to meet state standards in particular content areas, completing multiple credits per project. Projects conclude with a final presentation to both NOD staff and students.

These tracks allow flexibility to meet student learning needs. Each track provides an online component with the option of doing hybrid courses and/or project-based assignments to earn high school credit. Both the face-to-face portion of the hybrid course and project-based class provide for hands-on learning and peer-to-peer engagement.

Hands-on learning activities align with the ACE framework component of teacher and peer engagement, which means that the teacher has an active role with both the students and their learning. Peer engagement connects to the interaction between the students as they are learning. The ACE framework holds that if students and teachers are involved and engaged in class activities, all parties are more likely to be invested in the learning outcomes. Therefore, seen through the ACE lens, hands-on learning is one way to actively engage all parties in advancing student learning and success with the educational standards that need to be mastered.

Some participants in this study spoke about how their relationships with their families impacted their life goals, while others voiced concerns about barriers, which included feelings of isolation, the transition to being an online student, and the experiences of school-based racism. The objective of the tracks is to allow for maximum flexibility to meet the students' learning needs while they navigate the different life situations in which they find themselves. Each track provides an online component with the option of doing hybrid courses and project-based assignments to earn high school credit. Both the face-to-face portion of the hybrid course and project-based class provide for hands-on learning and peer-to-peer engagement.

Lastly, the findings in this study suggest that the NOD program would benefit students by engaging them in school decisions, as well as involving and educating both families and students in online learning and setting student goals, while creating a hybrid online course that has a hands-on component. These are all beneficial practices that can be implemented within the NOD program.

Conclusion

While working with the participants in this study, I was reminded of the struggles that caused me to leave high school. The results of this study revealed that the same problems schools faced serving teen parents are still present for today's youth. For example, one challenge is navigating the school system. During our midyear graduation, one Latino student was told he could not walk because he had not yet completed a required class. The student was devastated. I soon realized after graduation, what held the student back from graduating was one quiz in a class. His teacher would have removed this requirement had she known that was all he needed to graduate. Ultimately, however, the teacher was

dismissive and blamed the student and family for not communicating with the teacher. After speaking with the family, I realized they had limited English speaking ability and did not know how to navigate the online platform to see what was still needed for their son to finish the course.

The program failed that student on many levels. Blaming the family and the student does not give them the tools necessary to navigate the school system. If the educational system had educated the family and student ahead of time on what the student had left to do to graduate, he would have walked with his peers during the ceremony. Instead, that moment was stolen from him because of a lack of oversight, communication, and skill to work with the student and family.

Another challenge I was recently reminded of occurred when I was holding one of the NOD student's one-month-old baby. The student-mother told me that she had recently transferred from one of the local comprehensive high schools because the administration did not allow students to bring their children to class. The student felt that she had no choice and left school. Luckily, she found out about our program from a friend, and the program was able to enroll her. When I had my son at 17, I too left school because students were not permitted to bring their children into school. Not being able to bring your child to school is a barrier that causes many students to leave comprehensive schools. Claire and Scarlett, the participants in this study, both had children and left their comprehensive schools because their children were not permitted to attend with them. Their voices and many other student voices in similar life situations tell a story that educators, administrators, and leaders need to listen to if the NOD program wants to make a difference in the lives of students that are not being successfully served.

In closing, one of the main takeaways I had from the participants' stories was that the school system, including the NOD program, had failed to serve students and take into account their experiences, because leaders are making decisions on programs, curriculum, and courses that impact students without acknowledging and listening to their stories, needs, and opinions. This serves as a reminder that in educating students, especially students of color, the education system still has a long way to go in terms of including the children we are trying to serve in the planning and discussion of our choices for them.

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Appendix

Example of Student Interview Questions

Name: _____ Age: _____

Grade: _____

What ethnicity do you identify as? _____

What gender(s) do you identify as? _____

1. How did you get to this school?
 - a. How long have you been in this school?
 - b. What school did you go to before?
 - c. Why did you choose to come here?
2. What is your school experience like?
3. How do you perceive this school?
4. What are your learning interests/needs?
5. Do you think the school meets/supports your interest/needs? Why or why not?
6. What do you think of the learning materials (curriculum materials)?
7. Tell me about what you think helped to promote your online learning experiences?

8. Tell me about what you think hindered or was not helpful in your online learning experiences?

9. Tell me about your relationships with your teachers in an online learning environment? (Do you feel more comfortable with your teachers in online classes? If yes, why? If no, why?)

10. Tell me about your relationships with your peers in an online learning environment?

11. Tell me about the support you receive or have received from your parents or guardians since attending online high school. (Probe: Describe how your parents or guardian provide support to your online learning experiences. How has this influenced your academic online learning?)

12. If you have a friend who is new to this online school, what advice would you give him or her about how to survive and succeed in online learning?

13. What are your aspirations after school?

a. Is this school helping you to pursue your aspirations?

b. If yes, how? If no, why not?