# Dispelling Stereotypes of Young People Who Leave School Before Graduation

Introduction

Lazy, unmotivated, deficient. There are many words society places on the young people who are labeled "dropouts." Very seldom do you hear *nurturing, determined, resourceful, resilient.*

The number of young people who leave school before graduation continues to be a problem in the United States, with approximately 485,000 young people leaving school each year.[1] Not graduating translates to substantial individual and societal economic, civic and social costs.[2] Understanding the factors that lead young people to leave school can have significant benefits for these young people and society as a whole.[3] Considerable research on students who leave high school before graduation examines the risk factors in their lives, including the characteristics or skills they lack. However, our 2014 research report, *Don't Call Them Dropouts*, found that these young people often demonstrate great strengths in their ability to overcome adversity. Using the principles of Positive Youth Development (PYD) theory as a guide, this brief seeks to identify aspects of PYD among young people who have left high school before graduation. PYD is a theoretical perspective (see Figure 1) that focuses on the strengths of young people and their surrounding environment.

Figure 1. Positive Youth Development Process

Supportive Youth System

Positive Developmental Outcomes
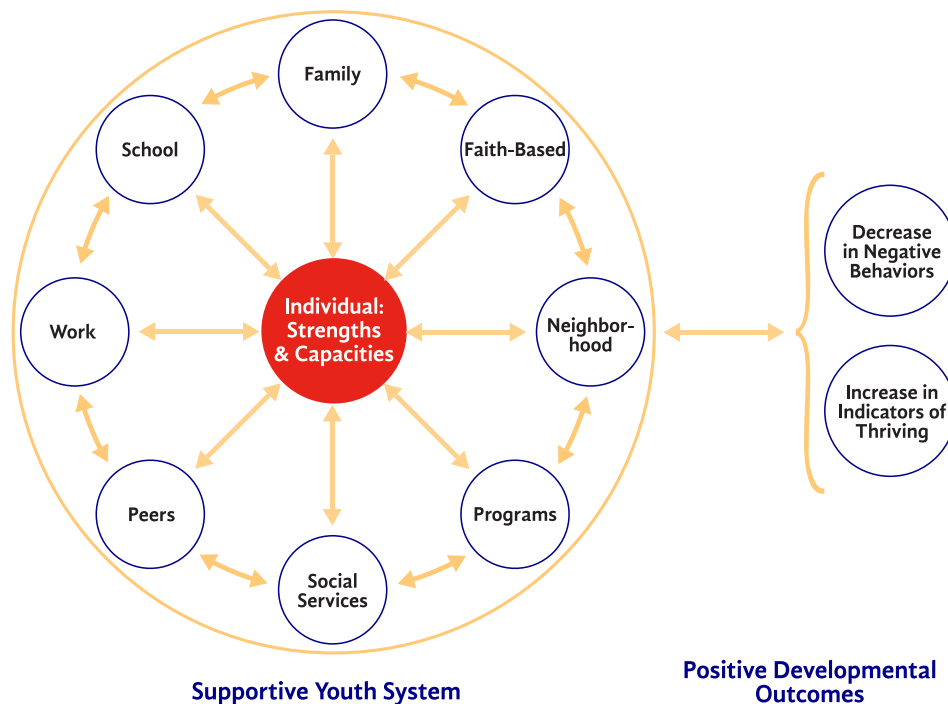
Note: Adapted from Zaff et al., in press

PYD theorists posit that:[4]

1. All young people have strengths.

2. Young people are embedded within a multi-layered ecology (or a Youth System).

3. All contexts within this ecology (family, school and all aspects of a community) have assets.

4. The developmental process is bidirectional and dynamic, with youth as active agents who help to shape their surrounding ecology, which in turn, influences their development.

5. When young people's strengths are aligned with sufficient supports from these contexts, they are embedded within a *supportive youth system*, and there is an increased likelihood of expressing positive outcomes and a lower likelihood of expressing negative outcomes.[5]

Five Core Competencies of Social and Emotional Learning

For this study, we focused on individual strengths, using as our framework the five core competencies of social and emotional learning (SEL) developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL).[6] We chose to use this model, because these competencies have been identified as skills that positively influence multiple outcomes for young people, including academics, social behavior, mental health and engagement in risky behaviors.[7]

The CASEL framework includes:

• **Responsible decision-making:** the ability to make decisions based on one's needs or goals;

• **Self-management:** the ability to regulate emotions so that one can meet his/her needs and goals;

• **Relationship skills:** the ability to have relationships and use specific skills (e.g., communication, conflict resolution) to maintain or discontinue these relationships;

• **Social awareness:** the ability to understand the thoughts, motives and beliefs of others and how these emotions may conflict with their own;

• **Self-awareness:** the ability to understand one's emotions and feelings, and how these emotions and feelings may influence actions and decisions.[8]

The purpose of this research brief is to determine:

1. *If* these socio-emotional competencies are expressed by young people who have left school before graduation, and

2. *How* these competencies are expressed by these young people.

We believe this information will provide insights for policymakers and practitioners about how to leverage strengths to help improve the academic and life prospects for young people who have left school before graduating.

Method

We analyzed 27 personal narratives from a larger sample of 283 young people who participated in group interviews about why they left high school without graduating. The 27 narratives represented the scope of the varied life experiences of the young people. These life experiences include multiple adverse events, such as physical and emotional abuse at the hands of parents and significant others; personal medical issues or those of a close family member; neglect from adults in their lives (e.g., parents, teachers, coaches, counselors, other adults in their neighborhoods); negative experiences in the foster care system; high rates of mobility; and being victims of, or bearing witness to, violence. The 27 youth came from 13 cities in the United States, were between the ages of 18 and 21, and were primarily African-American (48 percent) or Hispanic (26 percent). The majority were male (56 percent).

Using the SEL competencies, we coded transcripts from these 27 interviews. First, three personal narratives were coded by three researchers to determine agreement regarding the use and applicability of the SEL competencies to the narratives of these young people. Once agreement for how to code for each competency was established, the remaining interviews were coded. Next, researchers identified several themes that emerged from these codes about how SEL competencies are expressed in the lives of young people who have left school without graduating.

Findings

Our analyses show that young people who have left school expressed the same competencies that have been previously identified among school-going youth as prerequisites for academic success. These competencies enabled the youth to pursue and successfully reach goals that, while not always legal or socially acceptable, were salient to their immediate circumstances. These circumstances, such as caring for ailing family members, surviving violent and/or abusive situations, and financially providing for themselves and their families, were often not consonant with staying in school.

Moreover, the young people in our study noted how they used these competencies to find the resources necessary to re-engage academically later in life. Although we are not surprised by these findings, since we come to this study with the evidence-based assumption that all young people have strengths, we also recognize that there is a prevailing national opinion that young people who leave school without graduating do not, in fact, express these capacities.[9]

Our findings support the idea that these young people possess the abilities to succeed, if provided with opportunities to engage positively.[10] **Therefore, our findings challenge the stereotypical beliefs that young people who leave school without graduating are deficient in these competencies. Our findings also encourage the idea that these competencies can be leveraged by aligning the context with young people's strengths to encourage positive outcomes in their lives.** Through the voices of young people, we can see the expression of the social and emotional competencies that comprise the CASEL framework.

CORE COMPETENCY
Responsible Decision Making and Self-Management

Within these narratives, young people demonstrated *responsible decision making*. Although young people's decisions were primarily related to leaving school, these decisions were focused on their immediate needs and goals, such as taking care of themselves and their families, which superseded their academic goals. Furthermore, these responsible decision making skills, combined with *self-management skills*, allowed young people to work toward their short-term goals.

The goals and strategies used to reach these goals were not typically consonant with staying in school but with needing to financially support and take care of siblings, other family members or themselves. Young people adjusted their goals and strategies based on the resources, opportunities and constraints within their communities.

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

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

Moreover, we heard young people describe engaging in illegal activities for pro-social and goal-oriented purposes. For example, although young people knew the risks associated with selling drugs, drug dealing was still seen as a viable option to earn money quickly to support their families. Sam describes his decision to turn to drug dealing as a way to pay for his grandmother's medicine.

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

CORE COMPETENCY

Relationship Skills

Relationships played a significant role in the lives of young people in our study, as they helped influence a young person's long-term goals. For example, the relationships young people had with others often influenced their decisions to remain in school or to attend a re-engagement program, which ultimately impacted their academic and life trajectories. The youth did not talk explicitly about relationship skills that they used, but we can infer from their maintenance and strengthening of relationships that they were negotiating conflict in a constructive way and seeking and offering help when needed.

For example, one young person noted that when he was incarcerated the prison administrators would not give him a GED study book because they were only given to inmates who had life sentences. However, he used his relationship skills to negotiate with a fellow inmate to be able to borrow a book to study for the tests.

In addition, Aiden knew how to seek help when he needed it. He was able to identify a program based on his relationship with his brother that would provide him with the support he needed to stay engaged with his education after leaving school.

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

CORE COMPETENCY

Social Awareness Skills

Among the young people in our study, *social awareness skills* enabled them to see the intentions, whether positive or negative, of those around them. They were also better able to understand the impact of their actions on the people around them. For example, Carlos, whose experiences included frequent gang involvement, understood that his grandmother's efforts to get him involved in different extracurricular activities were a means to save him from getting involved in "the streets."

> "My grandma wanted to keep me busy, 'cause I grew up in [name of city] so she wanted to keep me off the streets." —Carlos

We found that young people who left school possessed social awareness skills and understood how their actions affect others around them. For instance, Tara explained the negative impact that her not graduating from middle school had on her parents.

> "I [was] promoted [to] sixth grade but I didn't promote [to] eighth grade, and like, it broke my parents' heart cause I wasn't allowed to [be in] ninth grade." —Tara

These social awareness skills helped the young people understand the world around them, including the social, political and economic factors that impact their lives in both positive and negative ways. For example, after being bussed to a school in the suburbs for many years, Brian returned to school in his own neighborhood, and saw anew the negative social factors that plagued his neighborhood.

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

CORE COMPETENCY

Self-Awareness Skills

Young people in our study demonstrated several types of *self-awareness skills*. They understood that they made decisions based on their emotions. They were also able to reflect on how their actions led them to leave school (e.g., due to expulsion) or to make the decision to leave on their own. Many young people were able to identify the specific moments in their lives that put them on either a positive or negative trajectory. Here Brian refers to the impact his brother's shooting had on his own decisions.

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

Moreover, many of the young people were able to understand how their previous actions contributed to where they are now and where they want to be in the future. Derek explained how he wanted to join the military so that he could learn to manage his temper and gain a sense of self-control.

> "You know what I'm sayin', get out of this mentality that I'm in. Because if I stay in it, I'll be dead or in jail. You know what I'm sayin', I ain't tryin' to see the jail cell and I'm not tryin' to be six feet [under]. So I'm just tryin' to do some things, better myself, and get us out this situation. [Why the military...] I ran into a recruiter and I was talkin' to him, and he's like, "Man, come to the military," and I was like, "What–what does the military got to offer me?" And he was like, "Man, first off, you wanna go to school, they'll pay for it. You get medical benefits, you know what I'm sayin'? Everything you really want, you ain't wantin' for nothing. They pay for your housing, you get a car." Right now, we ain't got no car. My mom, she catch the bus to work and walk in the hot sun...That's how it still is now, that's why I said I'm going to the army to better me, be a better person." —Derek

Implications for Policy and Practice

By recognizing young people's strengths, interventions can be designed to meet young people where they are. Our analysis highlights that young people who have left school expressed the same competencies that have been previously identified among school-going youth. These competencies enabled them to pursue and successfully reach goals that, while not always legal or socially acceptable, were salient to their immediate circumstances. These circumstances, such as caring for ailing family members, surviving violent and/or abusive situations, and financially providing for themselves and their families, were often not consonant with staying in school. **By helping to resolve these adversities, these young people can begin to turn their strengths and capacities toward educational and vocational goals that were superseded by their life circumstances.** As such, our findings counteract negative stereotypes that youth who leave school without graduating are lazy, unmotivated, and deficient compared to youth who did not leave school.[11]

Exemplary re-engagement efforts, such as at Gateway to College, Homeboy Industries, Ujamaa Place, and United Teen Equality Center (UTEC) focus on building on the strengths of the young people and resolving the presence and effects of adverse experiences. These organizations work with the assumption that external factors, such as needing to provide for family, care for ill family members or care for siblings explain why youth may leave at any time. They work with youth to resolve issues of trauma, and circumvent economic and social barriers. In addition, these organizations provide hands-on job training, social justice experiences and educational support.

Programs such as these can be supported by public policies, such as the Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act (WIOA).[12] WIOA, in its current incarnation, is focused more intentionally on the educational, workforce development and life needs of re-engaging youth, with program elements that can be seen in the work of organizations like UTEC, Homeboy and Gateway to College.[13]

Thus, WIOA provides a funding incentive for organizations to leverage young people's strengths while also recognizing the adversity that these young people face. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) does not include specific language on leveraging the competencies of re-engaging youth, but states and districts have flexibility to encourage their schools and partnering community-based organizations to use a strengths-based framework for recovery and re-engagement efforts.

To complement WIOA and ESEA, LIFT was founded on the premise that youth and their families living in economic distress have the competencies to improve their educational, economic and social prospects if systemic barriers are removed. LIFT works with families to connect them to the federal and state programs that promote financial stability

(e.g., Earned Income Tax Credit), food security (e.g., Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), community safety (e.g., programs through the Office of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Program), and health care access (Affordable Care Act). These policies and programs could individually and in concert resolve many of the issues that directed the competencies of the young people in our study toward non-educational goals.

These programs and policies provide support for our contention that young people who leave school without graduating have social and emotional competencies that can be used to their and society's gains. By changing prevention and intervention perspectives from deficit-based to asset-based, the barriers to educational and life success can be tempered and the strengths of all young people can be directed toward improving their and their communities' well-being.

Endnotes

1. Stetser & Stillwell, 2014
2. Caterall, 2011
3. Leffert et al., 1998; Overton, 2014; Scales et al., 2000
4. Durlak et al., 2011; Farrington et al., 2009; Gutman & Schoon, 2013; Sklad et al., 2012; Tough, 2012
5. Payton et al., 2000
6. Benson et al., 2006
7. Taylor et al., 2002
8. Payton et al., 2000
9. Pew Research Centers, 2014
10. Center for Promise, 2014b
11. Pew Research Centers, 2014
12. To learn more about WIOA, visit: http://www.doleta.gov/wioa/
13. Center for Promise, 2014a

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About the Center for Promise

The Center for Promise is the research institute for America's Promise Alliance, housed at Boston University's School of Education, dedicated to understanding what young people need to thrive and how to create the conditions of success for all young people. The Center's work will add to the academic exploration of these issues and help give communities and individuals the tools and knowledge to effectively work together to support young people.

The Five Promises

Caring Adults

Young people need to be surrounded by caring adults providing love, challenge, active support, a vision for a brighter future and opportunities for them to take responsibility for their own lives.

Safe Places

Young people need physical and psychological safety at home, in school, online and in the community.

Healthy Start

Young people need the conditions that make it possible to grow physically, socially and intellectually starting at the earliest ages.

Effective Education

Young people need not only a high school diploma, but a high-quality learning experience that prepares them for college and career.

Opportunity to Serve

Young people need service opportunities to help them develop belonging in their communities, empowerment to be positive contributors and a sense of personal responsibility.

DON'T CALL THEM DROPOUTS

Don't Call Them Dropouts, the Center for Promise research series, includes reports, research briefs and white papers designed to give voice to the young people in the United States who are faced with too much adversity and too little support. Through qualitative and quantitative research, the goal of this series is to change the conversation about these young people, equipping policymakers, community leaders and practitioners with sound research and information to create, promote and implement solutions aligned with these young people's stories and experiences. The series' namesake publication, *Don't Call Them Dropouts: Understanding the Experiences of Young People Who Leave High School Before Graduation,* was released in May 2014. The *Don't Call Them Dropouts* research series is generously supported by Target.