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Yvonne Pangelinan

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Walden University
2018

Abstract

Understanding the Perceptions of High School Dropouts with Disabilities in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands

by

Yvonne R. Pangelinan

M.A., University of Guam, 2000

B.A., University of Guam, 1996

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

August 2018

Abstract

Over the last 5 years, high school students with disabilities in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) have experienced a higher rate of dropout compared to their peers, adding to an ever-widening gap in learning and graduation rates. The rationale for this study was the growing numbers of dropouts among students with disabilities that contribute to high rates of poor performing schools and create a burden on the local and federal government as the CNMI employment rates decline and reliance on the U.S. government for support increases. The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of students with disabilities who drop out of high school, their perceptions of the learning environment, and the factors that contributed to their decisions to drop out. The conceptual framework was the constructivist theory. To answer what influenced high school students with disabilities to drop out of school and to what extent their perceptions of the constructivist element of belonging, engagement, or advocacy contributed to their decision to drop out, a qualitative case study design was used. Interviews were conducted with 10 former students who dropped out between 2013 and 2016 school years from high schools in the CNMI. Thematic analysis was used for emergent themes. Findings included that students do not receive their high school diploma because school policies prevented them due to age and lack of credits. Poor learning environments hindered students' engagement. Poor teachers' advocacy also hindered students' graduation. The findings can be used by school district leaders and staff in the implementation of effective interventions for improving graduation outcomes for students with disabilities in order for these students to become contributing members of society through gainful employment and enhanced quality of life.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my children Tony, Hope, Peyton and Sommer and my family. Without their support I would never have attempted such an endeavor, if not for their sacrifice I would never have finished, and with them I can do anything.

To my husband Wayne, who shares my love for late night talks but had to settle for late night TV while I romanced my study, thank you for your patience. You eased my guilt for all the weekends, family events and celebrations I missed by encouraging me to stay focused so that I could return to them sooner. You see only the best in me and believe I am capable of great things even when I am doubtful; I love you a hundred minus 1. To my girls who couldn't understand why I buried my nose is this study for so long but never questioned me for wanting to do it. Thank you for being curious about my research every now and then and for saying it was cool what I was doing. You're pretty close, but truly, the coolest thing I have ever done is have you as my children.

To my father Pete P. Reyes, who saw in me the potential for great things from the time I opened my eyes and each day after. You laid the foundation for my dreams by believing in me before I even had any. You are my hero and my forever love. This is dedicated to my little sibling-child Yvette, my best friend and strongest ally, who is infinitely smarter than I am and who now must address me as Dr.

To my colleagues who so passionately work to ensure that all students can thrive and live meaningful lives, thank you for your words of encouragement in this journey. Finally, to Dr. Peter Kiriakidis, my inspiring chair, thank you for always having an upbeat and optimistic view and for constantly reminding me that I had it in me to finish strong.

Acknowledgments

In all things, I give praise to God who has given me the faith and endurance to complete the plans He has for my life.

I am not alone in this quest for equity in education. I stand on the shoulders of great scholars and practitioners who deserve recognition for all the works they've influenced, including mine. To my colleagues in education who never stop believing that all kids can succeed and who make it their life mission to clear the brush so that their paths are more clearly marked for the journey, I am honored to be in your company.

The world was a pretty satisfying place to live until I met students who made me want to rattle it up and make it better for and because of them. I have learned immensely more than I have ever taught, gained more than I could give and loved more than I imagined I could because of you.

Nothing pushed me to stay the course more than the support of Dr. Peter Kiriakidis, my inspiring chair. Every student should have as fierce an advocate as he. Thank you for always calming my anxiety with encouragement, answering my Skype messages at all hours and time zones and for constantly reminding me that I had it in me to finish strong.

Finally, I want to give credit to the Walden Doctoral Tool for instilling panic in me with its exaggerated estimate of how long it would take to complete my study. I have always appreciated a good challenge.

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Section 1: The Problem

Because a high school diploma is a predictor of future success for students and the community in which they live, dropout intervention in secondary schools has been a longstanding concern for educators and policymakers (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016). The Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) Office of Special Education has implemented accountability measures for schools by tracking graduation and holding school districts responsible for improving the rate of high school completion (senior school district administrator, personal communication, December 1, 2017). The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) of 2004 has mandated that all schools provide transition services for special needs students entering high school. Over the last 5 years, high school students with disabilities in the CNMI have experienced a higher rate of dropout compared to their peers, adding to the ever-widening gap in learning and graduation rates. The rationale for this study was the growing numbers of dropouts among students with disabilities that contribute to high rates of poor performing schools and burden on the local and federal government as the CNMI's employment rates decline and reliance on the U.S. government for support increases. The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of students with disabilities who drop out of high school, their perceptions of the learning environment, and the factors that contributed to their decisions to drop out.

Definition of the Problem

The rate of high school dropouts among students with disabilities in the CNMI has increased over the last 5 years, widening the already troublesome gap in graduation

rates between special needs students and their general education peers (Lizama, 2016). According to the Lizama (2016), the dropout rate for students with disabilities in CNMI high schools has increased from 2% in the school year 2013 to 9% in the school year 2016. The general education dropout rate in the CNMI for the same school year was 2%. In the school year 2015-2016, special education high school students made up 9% of the total student population and were leaving school at significantly higher rates than their peers (CNMI, 2017).

The research site for this doctoral project study was a public school district that consists of five high schools and one alternative high school program. Although the CNMI school district, along with schools in the United States, under policies in IDEA, have implemented initiatives to track student progress, aid in the transition from middle school to high school, and provide specially designed instruction for students with disabilities, the number of high school dropouts has continued to increase each year (Zablocki & Kesmen, 2012). Alarming data from the U.S. Department of Education (2010) indicated the dropout rate for students with disabilities as 50%, or double that of their nondisabled peers.

Evidence of the Problem Within the Greater Community

High school dropout has been linked to poor outcomes that include unemployment and lower living standards for all students in the U.S. mainland (Wood, Kiperman, Esch, Leroux, & Truscott, 2017). For students with disabilities who are among the more vulnerable of at-risk students, the need to address the declining graduation rate is critical to their future livelihood and job attainment as well as the

prosperity of the communities in which they live. Advocacy agencies in the CNMI such as the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation and the Council for Developmental Disabilities support the education of students with special needs as a key factor in whether individuals with disabilities experience success and productivity after high school (Council on Developmental Disabilities Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, 2017). The Council on Developmental Disabilities (2017) reported that between 2012 and 2016, 66% of adults with disabilities who applied for services through vocational rehabilitation were unemployed. Thus, increasing the graduation rates for this population could potentially have a significant impact on job attainment for individuals and overall employment rates in the CNMI (senior school district administrator, personal communication, December 1, 2017).

Based on the CNMI Special Education Annual Performance Report (CNMI, 2016), the dropout rate of students with disabilities has increased from 2% in the school year 2012-2013 to 9% in the school year 2015-2016. The CNMI identified students who dropped out as having met the following criteria: (a) other hearing impaired, (b) intellectual disability, (c) specific learning disability, (d) hearing impaired, and (e) orthopedically impaired. Students with specific learning disabilities represented the largest group of high school dropouts (CNMI, 2016). Furthermore, of the 60% of students with specific learning disabilities who dropped out, more than 83% of them left high school in the ninth and tenth grades (senior school district administrator, personal communication, December 1, 2017). Students with disabilities are less likely to seek

employment and are more likely to depend on government assistance such as welfare (Zablocki & Krezmen, 2013).

I conducted a qualitative case study to examine why CNMI high school students with disabilities do not graduate. The high school rate of dropouts with disabilities is cause for great concern, considering that between the 2013-2014 and 2015-2016 school years, more than 60% of the dropouts were between 17 and 19 years old, in their freshman and sophomore years, and were classified under the category of specific learning disorder (senior school district administrator, personal communication, December 1, 2017). Stakeholders such as parents, the education board, lawmakers, and the community must be made aware of the data reported by the CNMI in order to be engaged in creating solutions (special education administrator, personal communication, December 5, 2017).

The dropout problem in the CNMI is a much greater issue that not only affects the state performance reports but also the entire community (special education administrator, personal communication, December 5, 2017). Examining the factors that influence special education high school students' decisions to drop out of school can help schools develop effective prevention and intervention programs (special education administrator, personal communication, December 5, 2017). Prevention and intervention programs may increase positive outcomes for students with disabilities and their communities as a whole, because students with a high school diploma could have a greater likelihood of finding employment, participating in society, and contributing to the economy in the CNMI (senior school district administrator, personal communication, December 1, 2017).

Rationale

Justification for Problem Choice at the Local Level

In the CNMI, a member of the U.S. political family, graduation rates have steadily risen; however, the number of students with disabilities who leave high school without a diploma has also risen. The U.S. national data reflect the CNMI findings that although dropout rates for general education students have declined, students with disabilities continue to leave high school at increasing numbers (Gonzalez & Cramer, 2013).

For a small community of three islands with close-knit families and strong cultural bonds, exploring the reasons why students decide to leave high school could have a significant impact on both the students and society. Educators in the CNMI are held accountable at the district level and by the Office of Special Education for the dropout rate among disabled students (senior school district administrator, personal communication, December 1, 2017). There is little research on early leaving of students with disabilities (Vaughn et al., 2015). Special Education Director for the CNMI Public School System, commented that the academic data of student with disabilities entering ninth grade show that the majority of these students are already far behind their peers in reading and math proficiency; however, every student is expected to successfully complete Board of Education mandated graduation requirements (special education administrator, personal communication, December 5, 2017). Because students with disabilities are not successful in academics, they might find it easier to drop out of school and find an entry-level job that does not require high levels of proficiency in reading or

math (special education administrator, personal communication, December 5, 2017). According to special education program consultant with the University of Guam Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education Research and Service, students with disabilities experience continued failures in high school courses as a result of poor foundational skills in reading and math (special education administrator, personal communication, December 5, 2017). Along with catching students before they drop out, it is equally important to help students with disabilities find value and worth in going to high school, especially those who might consider a part-time job with a salary much more motivating than going to school and failing at everything (special education administrator, personal communication, December 5, 2017). Similarly, O'Keefe (2013) stated that students who continue to experience academic failure over long periods have difficulty learning, which puts them at risk for noncompletion of high school requirements.

Support from Data and Personal Communications Affirming Problem Choice

The CNMI, like other high schools in the nation, has made efforts to address the dropout problem by implementing programs and initiatives that mitigate dropout risk (senior school district administrator, personal communication, December 1, 2017). The Marianas Province Public School District is exploring alternate graduation routes for students with disabilities in an effort to assist in creating career pathways for students who wish to pursue jobs post-high-school and to provide alternative and specially designed courses that meet learning standards as well as graduation requirements (school principal, personal communication, September 12, 2017). Related efforts in the United

States include strengthening leadership in schools by hiring teachers and principals to engage school district stakeholders in the endeavor to increase high school graduation rates as well as creating alternative schools where teachers tailor instruction specifically for at-risk students (T. M. Brown, 2012).

Evidence of the Problem from Research Literature

Researchers who study the dropout dilemma, including those of students with disabilities, agree that noncompletion of high school puts individuals at risk for lower living standards associated with poverty. The median income for dropouts, is approximately $450 per week, and dropouts also have the highest unemployment rates in the nation (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Over the course of their adult lives, students who leave school before obtaining a high school diploma earn $630,000 less than their peers who complete school (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016.) According to Zablocki and Krezmen (2013), students with disabilities who leave school early face even greater challenges with employment and job security than their nondisabled peers. Special needs students who dropped out of school were arrested more often, did not participate in voting, and were, compared to their nondisabled counterparts, less able to maintain a steady job (Zablocki & Krezmen, 2013). In addition to the negative outcomes for employment, special education students who are at risk for dropping out of high school face other challenges that include poor mental health, lower life expectancy, and engaging in risky behaviors (Johnson, Morris, Rew, & Simonton, 2016) and were less likely to become actively involved in their communities (Sullivan & Sadeh, 2016). Conversely, students who successfully complete high school have better chances of

becoming and remaining employed due to the fact that a high school diploma is often the minimum qualification for securing work (O'Keefe, 2013).

Intent for the Study

This study was the first of its kind in the Pacific region focused directly on the educational experiences of students with disabilities that contribute to their decision to leave high school early. Understanding the factors that influenced students with disabilities to drop out would provide the school district administrators, teachers, and policymakers with first-hand information about how students with disabilities perceive their education. Interviews with students with disabilities who have dropped out led to findings that provide insight as to what actions school leaders and teachers can take to change the educational trajectory for students with disabilities.

Definition of Terms

Advocacy: The act of committing to the overall welfare of students by speaking up for them and engaging them in mentoring activities that require one-to-one assistance (Dougherty & Sharkey, 2017).

At-risk: Term used for students who are less likely to graduate or who have high academic failure rates (Dougherty & Sharkey, 2017).

Annual performance report (APR): Annual report submitted to the Office of Special Education Program by schools receiving funds for students with disabilities (Dougherty & Sharkey, 2017)

Dropout: High school students who have withdrawn from school before obtaining a diploma and have not re-enrolled in other secondary schools (Barrat et al., 2014).

Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA): Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) of 2004, referred to as the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (Telfer & Howley, 2014).

Learning disorder: According to IDEA (2004), the inability to process and understand language in spoken or written form that prevents students from being able to "listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or solve mathematical problems" (Harðardóttir, Júlíusdóttir, & Guðmundsson, 2015, p. 2).

School engagement: The level of connectedness with the school environment as perceived by students, which contributes to their motivation to achieve (Moreira et al., 2015).

Students with disabilities: Students enrolled in special education and who have been provided an individualized education program (Barrat et al. 2014).

Resilience: The process of building internal and external protections that mitigate psychosocial risks (Harðardóttir, Júlíusdóttir, & Guðmundsson, 2015).

Significance of the Study

According to CNMI Special Education APR (n. d.), 28% of special education dropouts in 2015-2016 were 17 to 19 years old freshmen and sophomores. Of the 292 students with disabilities in the CNMI Public School System in 2014-2015, 4% dropped out of high school. In 2015-2016, the dropout rate increased to 9%. While there are interventions that provide students with disabilities support for academic achievement as well as district-wide initiatives that target results-driven accountability, the number of students with disabilities who drop out of school has continued to rise in the CNMI over

the past 3 consecutive years. According to Wandrei (2017), there are several negative outcomes associated with dropping out of high school such as reduced income potential, an increase in incarcerations, an increase in single motherhood, and a reduction in public resources. Wandrei (2017) noted that since 1971, males who drop out of high school experience 35% less income than males with a high school diploma. Students who drop out of high earn less than $20,000 annually compared to students who earn a high school diploma who earn over $27,000 annually (Wandrei, 2017). The Center of Labor Market Studies indicated that 6.3% of high school dropouts experienced incarceration compared to 1% of high school graduates (Wandrei, 2017). Single motherhood was most likely to occur among female high school dropouts between the ages of 16 and 24, and the issues associated with single motherhood lead to an increased use of over $4.9 billion in public resources (Wandrei, 2017). In addition to negatively impacting the students, dropping out of high school costs the community billions of dollars in public resources.

Impact of Study on Local Educational Setting

Exploring the reasons behind students' decisions to leave school before obtaining a high school diploma would offer stakeholders and decision makers in the CNMI critical information that may lead to more effective interventions and supports for students with disabilities. A better understanding of this problem would also give school leaders and teachers insight into the elements that contribute to the issue of noncompletion. By exploring the factors that might influence students with disabilities to leave high school and the school practices that contribute to their decisions, administrators and teachers may be able to develop teaching and learning strategies to support at-risk students. Many

students with disabilities require specially designed instruction and individualized services to succeed in school (Doren, Murray, & Gau, 2014). Doren et al. (2014) also stated that understanding and supporting students with disabilities who are at risk of dropping out could help teachers and administrators provide targeted academic and social/emotional supports that address the specific needs of these students.

Students could benefit from the findings of this study by making their voices heard and bringing awareness to the experiences that lead to dropping out. Former high school students' perceptions about dropping out of school could provide school administrators, teachers, policymakers, and the community with an understanding of the inequities that may be present in their educational environment. The shared perceptions of students with disabilities contribute to building a greater sense of belonging in the school system that is integral to motivating students to stay in school (Wilkins et al., 2014).

Increasing graduation rates for students with disabilities translates to increased opportunities to secure future employment. Occupational readiness is associated with better living outcomes and improved financial security (Sullivan & Sadeh, 2016). For a small community made up of three main islands that are less than 180 square miles, helping students with disabilities graduate from high school means less government dependence for an already struggling economy (World Factbook, 2017).

In schools with identified groups of at-risk students, documented, first-hand accounts of student struggles provide schools with information to plan purposeful intervention. Administrators and teachers who have implemented district accountability

initiatives for students with disabilities benefit by being able to incorporate findings that address gaps in practice. Understanding the unique needs of students with disabilities who struggle in high school and are at risk for dropping out help school staff create dropout prevention programs that tailor instruction to the needs of students with disabilities. The CNMI school district could benefit from the findings of this study by better understanding the factors that prevent students with disabilities from graduating on time and using the information to implement dropout intervention programs based on research-based findings that are culturally relevant and derived from students from the school district. The findings may be used by district administrators to strengthen policies that improve outcomes for high school graduation.

The findings of this study may contribute to awareness for the CNMI Public School System's Board of Education and lawmakers who advocate for local funding of schools and programs. The more cognizant of the problem decision makers at the policy level are, the more responsive they may be to change that fosters success for students with disabilities and their families, especially when success for students with disabilities contributes to the betterment of both society and the economy. High school diplomas for students with disabilities is a win-win for all stakeholders as these students may be better prepared to be productive citizens.

Research Questions

In this qualitative case study, I examined how special education students perceived their learning environment and how their experiences contributed to their motivation and persistence to graduate. To understand why students with disabilities

have been dropping out from high school at increased rates and what influenced them to leave, I framed my research questions around ideas that included belonging, engagement, resilience, and advocacy. The guiding questions for this study were:

RQ1: What influenced high school students with disabilities in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands to drop out of high school?

RQ2: To what extent did students' perceptions of the constructivist element of belonging, engagement, or advocacy contribute to their decision to drop out of high school?

Review of the Literature Addressing the Problem

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this qualitative case study was the constructivist theory, which incorporates concepts of cognitive and social learning (Ültanir, 2012). Dewey believed that students should learn based on real-world experiences and not via repetition or rote memorization (Ültanir, 2012). From Dewey's approach, Jean Piaget formulated the theory relating to the cognitive construct of constructivism in 1972 (Psychology Notes HQ, 2015) and Lev Vygotsky formulated the theory relating to the social construct of constructivism in 1978 (Kim, 2014). Piaget, as cited in Psychology Notes HQ (2015), believed that learning is a process of sequential stages of the learners' reality where learners construct knowledge by developing and testing their own understanding of the world. Vygotsky (1978) believed that it was important to understand how individuals internalize the learning process and how their experiences affect their acquisition of knowledge.

The underlying concept of constructivism from the theorists is that learners gain knowledge best through experiencing the world and then creating meaning from their encounters (Miller-First & Ballard, 2017). Constructivism consists of five basic tenets of learning: (a) learning is shaped by the meaning learners attribute to their experiences; (b) problem solving is an opportunity for learning; (c) learning occurs as a social activity in which learners actively participate; (d) as learners engage in activities they are also reflecting, assessing, and providing feedback about their learning; and (e) the responsibility for learning rests on the learner. Constructivist theorists posit that students who perceive their learning as positive have a greater level of engagement and motivation to learn (Alt, 2015).

Another key concept in constructivist theory is that students take their experiences, assign meaning to them, and, depending on the quality of those experiences, set personal goals for themselves (Miller-First & Ballard, 2017). Students construct knowledge and interpret their learning experiences based on the quality of their relationships with peers, teachers, and individuals they interact with throughout their educational journey. The value of these relationships may influence their perceptions and subsequently their motivation to complete high school. Constructivists theorize that students who perceive their learning as positive have a greater level of engagement and persistence to graduate (Miller-First & Ballard, 2017).

The Search Process

The concepts covered in this doctoral study include literature regarding dropouts and students with disabilities. I searched peer reviewed scholarly literature with key

terms specifically to include *dropout among special education high school students* and included items in my search for *interventions, belonging, engagement, advocacy, case study,* and *qualitative data*. In addition, I searched terms related to *constructivist theory* and *constructivism* in order to align my conceptual framework to my research questions. To gather information, I used Walden University library to access all the education and multidisciplinary databases. I also searched references within peer-reviewed articles to locate other scholarly works between 2013 and 2018. These works provided a larger scope of reference for this study on dropouts.

Special Education and Dropout Phenomenon

The underlying phenomenon that grounded this study was the dropout problem among high school students with disabilities. Understanding why students with special needs in the CNMI left school before they graduated was critical to the success of students, schools, and the island community. Furthermore, Morningstar, Lombardi, and Fowler (2015) stated that supporting the social and emotional development of students are critical factors in mitigating the risk for dropping out. Because dropout rates have increased in the Marianas Province Public School System over the last 5 consecutive years, the need to examine the factors that negatively impact graduation for students with disabilities has been urgent (Special Education Training and Technical Advisor, personal communication, September 16, 2017).

Connection Among Dropout Behaviors and Constructivism

Students construct knowledge and interpret their learning experiences based on their relationships with peers, teachers, and individuals they interact with throughout their

educational journey (Steffe, 2009). The quality of these relationships can influence their perceptions and subsequently their motivation to complete high school. According to Jones et al. (2015), as students gain mastery over new tasks through engagement in activities their skill levels increase and their engagement enhances enjoyment and interest in learning. Effective teaching practices that involve student engagement, result in cognitive development and relationship building (Miller & Ballard, 2017).

This study explored the dropout problem for students with disabilities through constructivism. Understanding the perceptions of students with disabilities, in regards to belonging, engagement, and advocacy, can help educators understand how to create an effective learning environment that will contribute to student retention (Loyens, Rikers, & Schmidt, 2007). Constructivist theory in learning, according to Miller-First and Ballard (2017), means that educators find a way to implement practices that increase the likelihood that students are motivated to learn.

A sense of belonging can be impacted by feelings of worth or self-efficacy. According to Alt (2015), a strong sense of self-efficacy is created when learners feel confident about their decisions. Students with special needs who are challenged with academics have difficulty in social situations that may affect their sense of belonging. Gonzalez and Cramer (2013) stated that the challenges of navigating social situations puts students with disabilities at a greater disadvantage academically than their peers.

School engagement, according to Moreira et al. (2015), is constructed of many different factors that include behavioral and emotional components. These components shape students' experiences and depending on the quality, either decrease or increase the

level of commitment students allocate to staying in school. According to Moreirra et al. (2015), the perceptions of students with disabilities about their learning environment can be predictors of their dropping out. According to Armstrong (2015), a constructivist view of engagement includes the necessity to create positive interactions with others in order to encourage the learner to reach beyond what they perceive themselves to be able to do.

A constructivist approach to advocacy includes interactions in which individuals engage in social situations in order to internalize their learning (Kim, 2014) and involves creating deeper learning experiences through participation in social opportunities that draw in the learner through relationship building. Chou et al. (2015) stated that relationship building with teachers and peers is a critical factor in helping at risk students remain in school.

How the Research Framework Relates to the Study

To explore student perceptions in this doctoral study, I created an interview protocol to gather information on what has influenced the students' decisions to leave high school. Open ended interview questions helped me understand how students' interactions with staff, peers, and their learning environment affected their choice to drop out of high school. Gathering this input helped me answer the research questions about whether or not student perceptions of belonging, engagement, and advocacy impact their decisions of dropping out of school.

Overview of Key Topics in Review

The issue of high school dropout dilemma is multi-faceted and finding solutions, especially for students with disabilities, may involve many approaches (Dougherty & Sharkey, 2017). In order for school administrators and teachers to address learning deficits, they must first adequately provide a learning environment where students with disabilities feel safe and welcomed (Şahin, Arseven, & Kılıç, 2016). The following topics relate to constructivist traditions of creating rich learning experiences that support social development are presented next.

The Idea of Belonging

Students with special needs face academic challenges that set them apart from their peers. This difference is exacerbated by their inability to successfully navigate some social environments (Gonzalez & Cramer, 2013). According to Doll, Eslam, and Walters (2013), disconnection of special needs students from peers and teachers was reported to have contributed to the decision to drop out. Students with learning disabilities who perceive their relationships in the school setting as supportive are likely to stay in school because of these positive social bonds (Doren et al., 2014). For students with emotional disturbance, the probability of dropping out is even higher than their disabled peers (Barrat et al., 2014). This idea of belonging is also a predictor of post-secondary success for at-risk students (Hakkarainen, Holopainen, & Savolainen, 2013). According Kim (2014), artist participants and researchers practiced dialogical interactions that lead the two groups to create a shared experience based on individual and shared perspectives that lead to a sense of belonging. The participants in the study

made a distinction between attachment and a connection to separate themselves from the habitual forms of learning. The social constructivist approach between the researchers and the artist participants involved active prolonged social interaction and extensive engagement (Kim, 2014).

School Engagement and Resilience

According to Moreira et al. (2015) and Kim (2014), school engagement is about the concept of belonging and is a predictor of motivation to achieve a stronger connection with others. Students who do not feel that their emotional or psychological needs are being met become less engaged with their learning and at risk for dropping out (Moreira et al., 2015). Social interactions are important to the development of the human condition (Kim, 2014) and educators who lean towards engagement as a predictor of graduation success have implemented efforts to create a sense of connection with the learning environment and customized intervention to address the dropout problem (Heppen et al., 2015). According to Armstrong (2015), Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development can identify competences that learners continue to refine through learner-peer interactions that enhance teaching and learning for sustainability and a solid foundation based on understanding.

Sanghvi and Kadkol (2016) argued that students with disabilities are given limited opportunities to practice making decisions. Sanghvi and Kadkol (2016) stated that developing critical decision-making skills are essential to building a sense of self-determination and resilience. The concept of resilience, as related to dropout prevention, highlights the relationship between psychosocial well-being in the face of crisis and

positive academic outcomes (Lessard, Butler-Kisber, Fortin, & Marcotte, 2014), because engagement plays an important role in the academic success of children with disabilities (Chou et al., 2015). In a study of the internal and external factors that contribute to resilience as a predictor of dropout, Harðardóttir, Júlíusdóttir, and Guðmundsson (2015) found that the less support students receive from teachers, the less resilient they became; therefore, the less willing they are to persevere in their learning. Jones, Flohr, and Martin (2015) believed that students could continue to progress when they can ask thoughtful and purposeful questions to enhance their creativity and motivation. Jones et al. (2015) also noted that students can decide to actively participate in learning or they could decide to not participate, yet with proper nurturing students who may not desire to participate in learning could become more curious, which is the center of learning. Hence, students construct knowledge by engaging with others while making sense out of the world (Miller & Ballard, 2017). When students believe in their capabilities they can manage their own level of learning, motivation, and academic achievement (Alt, 2015)

Keamy (2015) noted that engaging is important to the development of a curious and motivated mind, yet student engagement, in any form, may not always be an easy task for teachers. Williams, Ernst, and Kaui (2015) studied students with learning disabilities who were placed in non-core subjects in lieu of required science and math courses due to low academic performance. Williams et al. (2015) found that learning disabled students who completed their required science and math courses in the classrooms with teachers who focused on technology continued to make learning gains. Technology, according to Williams et al. (2015), provides a balance between the

academic skills students need to succeed in school and hands on learning that gives students with disabilities active engagement in learning. Williams et al. (2015) reported that teachers in technology courses were more accommodating to students with disabilities than regular core subject teachers. According to ideas from Wyn (as cited in Keamy, 2014), the relationships built between teacher and student is at the core of students' learning identities and a determinant as to whether students actively engage in learning or alienate themselves from schooling. According to Kim (2014), student participants heightened their awareness, understanding, and enjoyment of the learning environment by engaging in active communication with teachers, parents, and peers, which further resulted in the student participants developing stronger connections with others.

Family and School Advocates

For students with learning disorders, parent involvement in school is also a predictor of student success (Doren et al., 2014). In disengaged families, where relationships were poor and expectations low, student outcomes were similarly low and contributed to dropout risk (Lessard, Butler-Kisber, Fortin, & Marcotte, 2014). Wilkins et al. (2014) noted that implementing supports that included academic intervention and parent involvement contributed to improved attendance and performance in students with disabilities. Wilkins et al. (2014) attributed the positive student outcomes to the idea that families who understand school expectations are empowered to support their children achieve goals.

Relationships that show equal importance to student retention are those formed with teachers and advocates within the school setting (Keamy, 2015; Nairz-Wirth & Feldmann, 2016). Keamy (2015) noted that teacher advocates in the school interact with students and gain an understanding of the students through their life stories allowing others to respect the students' positions and points of view as important. Furthermore, teacher advocates in the study took on the responsibility as supporters and refused to give up on students they engaged with (Keamy, 2015). Students who did not feel that they had the support of teachers or authority in their schools, according to Doll, Eslami, and Walters (2013), did not merely choose to drop out; however, felt they were pushed out. Therefore, intervening in the dropout problem requires efforts by the school to strengthen relationships between students and advocates.

The Broader Problem in Relation to the Local Issue

Creswell (2014 stated that the themes that emerge from qualitative studies add value in other research with similar problems. The studies on how belonging, engagement, and advocacy affect students with disabilities and their success in school can be applied to the local problem in the CNMI. Because there is little research done in the Pacific Region on special needs dropouts, replicating some of the procedures for examining the problem provides a framework for this study. The broader problem of students with disabilities who choose to leave school early are discussed in more detail in the following literature review.

Interventions for Dropout Prevention. Prevention and intervention strategies/programs help identify what educators and practitioners are doing to increase

the rate of graduation for students with disabilities. These intervention strategies may shed light on practices that are successful in addressing the support needed to keep students with disabilities from dropping out in high school. The quality of or lack of interventions to support the academic and social-emotional needs of students with disabilities and their emotional well-being are predictors of dropout (Sullivan & Sadeh, 2016). In a study of effective intervention practices, Wexler, Pyle, and Fall (2015) emphasized the need to identify at-risk students early in their educational career in order for interventions to improve students' engagement in learning and to support success throughout high school.

According to Steffe and Gale (2009), constructing knowledge depends on the several critical factors. Students' depth of understanding, opportunities for cooperative learning, meta-cognitive skills, and practice identifying and confronting real life problems all form a basis of how they value experiences. In studying student perceptions, this doctoral study focused on how students view the quality of their experiences in regards to belonging, engagement, and advocacy, and whether or not those interactions influenced their decision to drop out.

Wilkins and Bost (2015) explored effective school-based interventions to support students with disabilities who were at risk for dropping out of high school. The best practices include (a) early warning systems, (b) mentoring, (c) family engagement, (d) academic interventions, (e) transition to high school, (f) student engagement, (g) career-focused/vocational curricula, (h) interpersonal skills, and (i) class/school restructuring (Wilkins & Bost, 2015). In understanding the practices by administrators and teachers

that might contribute to students with disabilities and their successful high school completion, these examples of interventions are useful in determining whether or not there are similar supports within the CNMI Public School System as perceived by students who dropped out.

Hakkarainen, Holopainen, and Savolainen (2013) used a longitudinal study to examine the supports provided to incoming high school students with learning difficulties. Hakkarainen et al. (2013) examined if interventions for students in Grade 9 decreased their risk for dropping out in the eleventh to twelfth grades. The participants were adolescents in ninth grade Finnish schools. There were 595 participants, of whom 302 were female and 293 were male Finnish speaking teenagers (Hakkarainen et al., 2013). Hakkarainen et al. (2013) conducted a 5-year longitudinal study and collected annual data on reading and math achievement as measured by basic assessments administered at the school. Struggling students who were not proficient in reading and math skills were more likely to drop out of school; however, supports for reading and math skills alone did not prevent students from not graduating. Hakkarainen et al. (2013) stressed that other factors such as motivation and behavior were issues that needed to be explored.

Ecker-Lyster and Niileksela (2016) examined the role that school-level interventions played in dropout prevention. Among the interventions studied were program evaluations that addressed risk factors for dropping out such as early warning systems, diagnostic efforts to identify and track students, targeted interventions to provide advocates and behavioral/social skills, and school-wide reform policies that

focused on quality instruction and personalized learning. School level characteristics were studied to determine the effectiveness of interventions, pointing out that organizations had a responsibility to address the issue and that student characteristics alone were not to blame for non-completion of high school (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016).

Sullivan and Sadeh (2016) conducted a review of research related to interventions for students with disabilities with an emphasis on the response from researchers to a call for more in-depth exploration of school-level characteristics to prevent dropout. The Check and Connect intervention research reported benefits for students with disabilities who participated in the program. Sullivan and Sadeh (2016) reported that students who participated had better attendance, stayed in school more, and were less likely to move from school to school. Policies adopted by school districts to engage learners and provide targeted services to at-risk students are critical in responding to the problem of dropouts.

Pyle and Wexler (2011) studied dropout prevention practices and the research-based intervention strategies in schools. Evidence-based practices were found to be most effective including systems for identifying students at risk for dropping out and school-wide reforms to address the issue. Interventions aid in the discovery of practices by schools and teachers that contribute to decisions of students with disabilities to leave school early as they form a basis for exploring supports within schools.

A discrete-time analysis study was conducted to examine the graduation probability for students with disabilities (Schifter, 2016). First time 9th graders between 2005 and 2007 studied using discrete-survival analysis and regression discontinuity

approach in order to search for patterns based on school characteristics. Schifter (2016) aimed to find out what the probability of graduating from high school was for students with disabilities who stayed in school for up to 5 years. Schifter (2016) examined students with disabilities and their classroom setting to determine whether students who were fully included had a greater likelihood of graduating high school. Schifter (2016) found that students with disabilities who remained in school for 4 years had a 70% chance of graduating, while those who were in school for 5 years had a 25% chance of graduating. Other findings were that the probability of graduation for students who were fully included was 60% as compared to 35% for students who were segregated.

Genao (2014) conducted a qualitative study to determine whether there is a link between alternative education programs provided to at-risk students and dropout prevention. The grades of students who participated in an alternative education program were collected and an analysis was done to determine whether or not student performance was significantly higher than those of students attending traditional schools (Genao, 2014). Genao (2014) confirmed that students who enrolled in alternative programs performed better and stayed in school longer. Genoa (2014) included implications for interventions that relate to my doctoral study that there are practices schools can put in place to decrease the likelihood that students with disabilities will drop out of high school.

Doren et al. (2014) studied predictors for dropout of students with learning disabilities, providing information on factors that may have an influence on the decision to drop out of high school. The factors included students, school, family, and

sociodemographic factors which are aligned with my research questions investigating the issues that contribute to students with disabilities and the increasing dropout rate in the CNMI. Among the factors in the study that contributed to the risk for dropping out were relationships in school, accommodations for learning, and inclusion in the general education classroom.

This quantitative study of predictive validity investigated the cognitive and affective domains of students with disabilities and how they relate to student engagement. In terms of dropout data, the study utilized a Student Engagement Instrument (SEI) to measure whether or not student SEI scores in the 9th grade affected their graduation four years later (Lovelace, Reschly, Appleton, & Lutz, 2014). Lovelace et al. (2014) included a cohort of 9th graders through their fourth year of high school and found that student self-reporting on the SEI in the 9th grade gave educators critical information on ways to intervene in order to increase the probability of graduation for these students.

Gonzalez and Cramer (2013) investigated variables for students with disabilities that contributed to their "graduation potential." Gonzalez and Cramer (2013) included 573 minority students in the 11-12th grades and examined whether factors such as gender, race, academic performance, and behavior were related to graduation rates. Gonzalez and Cramer (2013) found that low academic performance greatly affected graduation rates for students with disabilities and Black and Hispanic students. Additionally, teacher training in the areas of individualizing instruction and best practices made an impact on student graduation rate.

Understanding the policies implemented in schools that affect students with disabilities is helpful in identifying the barriers and supports available to students. Researchers in the area of dropout suggest that general demographic characteristics alone are not predictors of dropout risk. Policies and practices that influence dropout must also be investigated (Lee & Burkam, 2003). Telfer and Howley (2014) conducted a qualitative case study of two rural school districts that face similar challenges of providing quality education to students with disabilities. Telfer and Howley (2014) aimed to identify the practices of the school districts that contributed to closing the achievement gap for students with disabilities and used interviews, observations, and visits to each of the two school districts. Telfer and Howley (2014) focused on three main research questions regarding district wide reform for providing equitable educational services to students with disabilities. Telfer and Howley (2014) showed that even small school districts that experienced demographic and economic hardship have the ability to provide equitable educational services to students with disabilities. The specific findings related to practices implemented by these two school districts in the area of (a) using data intentionally, (b) establishing and maintaining focus, (c) selecting and implementing shared instructional practices, (d) implementing deeply, (e) monitoring and providing feedback and support, and (f) inquiring and learning (Telfer & Howley, 2014).

According to Elbaum, Rodriguez, and Sharpe (2014), administrators can influence policy makers to utilize data such as graduation rates to inform action. Elbaum et al. (2014) examined the rates of graduation of students with disabilities in 67 school districts in Florida to determine whether the characteristics of the school population had any effect

on the graduation rate. Elbaum et al. (2014) examined at district size, population of students with disabilities, poverty levels, and other factors such as the ethnicity of special needs students. Although my study did not focus on these characteristics, one key finding from this study is the leadership factor. Another finding was that administrators had a great impact on the rate of graduation for students with disabilities (Elbaum et al., 2014).

In Brown's (2012) study of federal and school policies, how exclusionary discipline policies affected students with disabilities' schooling experiences was examined. Eleventh and twelfth grade students were interviewed about their experiences with discipline and transition services. School policies and the implementation of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) were examined to find out how they contributed to student engagement. Brown (2012) stated that it is important to understand the policies put in place by administrators and how they are interpreted according to IDEA so that students with disabilities are not isolated or excluded from the learning environment causing them to have negative experiences of school and eventually dropping out.

Zablock and Kresmien (2012) examined the results from the National Longitudinal and Transitional Study 2 (NLTS2) and compare the risk factors for dropping out of school with those associated with students with disabilities who drop out of high school. Data from the NLTS2 were collected to answer questions relating to the disability categories of students who drop out, socio-economic factors associated with students with disabilities who drop out, perceptions of school engagement and the

likelihood that students with disabilities who are struggling academically or retained would leave school early. My project study focused on factors for students with disabilities in the CNMI who have dropped out of high school that are comparable to the data collected this study.

Dougherty and Sharkey (2017) examined the Reconnecting Youth Dropout prevention program to find out if students who participated showed gains in their academic proficiencies. Dougherty and Sharkey (2017) hypothesized that building social skills in students would contribute to increased gains. Their findings showed that prevention programs, even those with social emotional components built in, are not predictors of school success and that in order to address the dropout risk, schools would have to individualize their intervention to the specific needs of students.

Engagement with Peers and School Staff. Piji, Frostad, and Mjaavatn (2013) explored the relationships students with disabilities had with peers, family and other social groups and how it impacted high school completion. The sample for this quantitative study was 1,873 students, of whom 132 were students with disabilities. A Likert scale was used to determine whether peer support was a variable in the high school completion rates (Piji et al., 2013). Piji et al. (2013) suggested that support from teachers and relationships with friends contribute to the likelihood that students with disabilities in secondary school will remain in school until completion.

Nairz-Wirth and Feldmann (2016) used interviews in a qualitative research design to investigate the relationship between teacher perceptions of inclusion in secondary school. Nairz-Wirth and Feldmann (2016) surveyed teachers on their training

in special education inclusion to determine whether this factor affected engagement with students with disabilities. Student experiences, according to Nairz-Wirth and Feldmann (2016), affect how engaged students are in their learning and impact their decision to either stay or drop out.

O'Keefe (2013) explored the possible solutions to student attrition in terms of student perceptions regarding relationships that supported their emotional well-being and contributed to their decisions to remain in school. O'Keefe (2013) stated that students who felt that faculty cared about them and acted as advocates for them helped to build a sense of belonging that in turn resulted in a more positive school experience. I investigated student perceptions of their learning environment in order to understand whether or not the decision to stay in school is impacted by such factors as social or emotional well-being.

Harðardóttir, Júlíusdóttir and Guðmundsson (2015) surveyed 270 students, in a purposeful sampling method, to determine what factors were associated with academic success. A portion of the interviews focused on ten learning disabled students who graduated despite their problems in school. The students shared practices by school and family that contributed both positively and negatively to their issues with learning disabilities. The finding that most relates to my project study is that support from advocates helped to increase students with disabilities thoughts of self-worth and their ability to cope and stay in school.

In a narrative inquiry research, Ward (2014) examined how student voice lends itself to the transformative practices of the school. Participants included four students

from high school, administrators, and families. Interviews were conducted were designed to provide students with an opportunity to use their stories to empower their lives. Boyle, Topping, and Jindai-Snape (2013) explored secondary teachers' perceptions of inclusive education for students with disabilities and general and special education teachers were surveyed on their attitudes towards inclusion. The survey instrument included a Likert scale on statements about items such as training, curriculum, learning culture, cognition, and inclusion (Boyle et al., 2013, p. 532). Female teachers and novice teachers had a better attitude about inclusion of students with disabilities (Boyle et al., 2013). This was important to my project study as it sheds light on the influence teachers have on students' decision to leave school, particularly students with disabilities.

Sahin, Arseven and Kılıç (2016) examined absenteeism as a factor for dropping out. In this study, researchers stated the importance of providing students with a safe and nurturing learning environment. According to the Sahin et al. (2016), students spend the majority of their lives in school; however, students may not commit to staying enrolled if the learning environment disrupts their sense of peace and security.

The way that school staff and teachers perceive students with disabilities and their capacity to learn has an impact on the dropout factor. Ottar Ottosen, Bjørnskov Goll, and Sørlie (2017) examined the perceptions of teachers and principals to determine what they believed contributed to the dropout risk. Through focus groups, Ottar Ottosen et al. (2017) found that school staff attributed many factors to dropout risk, including political interference, low student engagement, poor academic performance, and transient families.

Critical Analysis of the Body of Literature

The literature associated with dropout research and students with disabilities has provided a scaffold for this project study. Three major areas of research underpin the conceptual framework of constructivism in relation to student dropout risk. Interventions created by the ability to engage have been found to be predictors of students' success by supporting the academic and social-emotional needs that build student resilience and sense of belonging (Steffe & Gale, 2009; Sullivan & Sadeh, 2016; Wexler, Pyle, & Fall, 2015). Effective school interventions provide the advocacy students need to remain engaged in learning (Wilkins & Bost, 2015). Furthermore, Wilkins and Bost (2015) stated that when schools implement policies that target at risk students and engage them in the curriculum, where students can actively participate in their own learning.

The relationships related to the sense of belonging that students build with peers, staff, and principals have an impact on high school completion (Piji, Frostad, & Mjaavatn, 2013). Student engagement with key staff improve student's opinions on the value of education. When students feel that they are cared for and that they are welcome by faculty, a sense of belonging is nurtured (O'Keefe, 2013).

Resilience, related to a sense of advocacy, is a predictor of positive school outcomes and the ability to overcome academic challenges (Kozleski, 2017). Waitoller and Kozleski (2013) found that students who believed they had the support of their peers and teachers perceived their learning environment more positively. When students are more positive they are better able to develop academically and emotionally (Sanghvi & Kadkol, 2016).

The sense of belonging, engagement and advocacy all contribute to psychosocial well-being for students with disabilities. Incorporating the findings from the literature into this project study guided the research questions. The internal and external factors from the research collected can be used to understand the dropout risk.

Implications

Direction Based on Anticipated Findings

The implications for this study will be significant to the students themselves by honoring their shared experiences in the educational setting. The findings will help teachers to better plan instruction and interventions for the needs of students with disabilities in high school. Interactions between students who are at risk and their teachers and peers influence a sense of self-efficacy and therefore affect whether or not students feel that they belong (Alt, 2015). Chou et al. (2015) stated that the type of support needed to help students succeed in school include the ability of teachers and peers to create relationships that develop social skills and a sense of advocacy. For marginalized students, such as those with disabilities, effective school reform must include addressing both academics and student perceptions of engagement (Chou et al., 2015). Student engagement requires effort from others in their learning environment to identify, intervene, and support intellectual stimulation (Armstrong, 2015). Armstrong (2015) reported that the level of engagement provided to students determines how effectively students can progress from their present level of performance to the next.

The information gathered from students can be a resource for administrators to understand the needs of students with disabilities with regard to implementing school-

wide programs of support that increase the likelihood that students with disabilities will graduate. School administrators and staff who commit to advocating for their students send a powerful message that those in authority will not abandon them (Keamy, 2014). The implications to the school district will be reflected in greater understanding of systems reform for students with disabilities and provide the special education program with critical data that will assist in the creation of practices and programs that address the individual and collective needs of students with disabilities.

Tentative Direction for Project Deliverable

A much greater implication of this study will be the contribution of findings to the educational community in the CNMI. Possible project deliverables could include the implementation of "(a) early warning systems, (b) mentoring, (c) family engagement, (d) academic interventions, (e) transition to high school, (f) student engagement, (g) career-focused/vocational curricula, (h) interpersonal skills, and (i) class/school restructuring" (Wilkins & Bost, 2015, para 3). However, the findings from this study may determine what approach will best answer the research questions and whether or not other approaches based on literature should be considered. At the forefront of the deliverables is the potential to create an environment for students with disabilities that addresses the challenges with data relevant to the CNMI culture and school setting.

Summary

Section 1 is about the local problem, specifically, the increased rate of dropout among students with disabilities between 2012 and 2017. The purpose of this study was to examine student perceptions of their learning environment and experiences that led

them to exit school before graduation. In the literature in Section 1, I described studies conducted in the area of dropout prevention and intervention in the U.S. and internationally. I also discussed research findings in relation to advocacy, resilience and connectedness as predictors of positive school outcomes for students with disabilities. Understanding why students with disabilities in the CNMI drop out of high school has significant implications for their future livelihood, employment potential and positive contribution to society.

In the following section, I describe the qualitative research model and the reasons for selecting the methodology. Additionally, I describe how the participants were selected, my role as the researcher, and the limitations to the study. Section 2 contains an explanation of the data collection tools and method of data collection and analysis.

Section 2: The Methodology

Over the last 5 years, high school students with disabilities in the CNMI have experienced a higher rate of dropout compared to their peers. The rationale for this study was the growing numbers of dropouts among students with disabilities that contribute to high rates of poor performing schools and the burden on the local and federal government as the CNMI's employment rates decline and reliance on the U.S. government for support increases. The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of students with disabilities who drop out of high school, their perceptions of the learning environment, and the factors that contributed to their decisions to drop out. In this qualitative case study, I examined how special education students perceived their learning environment and how their experiences contributed to their motivation and persistence to graduate. To understand why students with disabilities have been dropping out from high school at increased rates and what influenced them to leave, I framed my research questions around ideas that include belonging, engagement, resilience, and advocacy. The guiding questions for this study were:

RQ1: What influenced high school students with disabilities in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands to drop out of high school?

RQ2: To what extent did students' perceptions of the constructivist element of belonging, engagement, or advocacy contribute to their decision to drop out of high school?

Research Design and Approach

The research design for this study was a qualitative case study. Kozleski (2017) stated that qualitative methods help researchers in education explain the activities occurring in learning settings and how and why participants are affected by those activities. Studying the complex reasons that students with disabilities drop out required a research method for collecting data in order to make generalizations about specific experiences from the viewpoint of students (Rule & John, 2015). I used quantitative design to understand the experiences of students that lead them to exit school without a diploma.

Sutton and Austin (2015) described qualitative research as a method to gain understanding of the thoughts and feelings of participants, the meaning associated with those experiences, and, subsequently, the behaviors that occur as a result. I chose to conduct a case study in order help me to bring an awareness to schools and the educational organization of the possible interventions needed to help students with disabilities become successful. Case study design enabled me to gather information from the students who were the central focus of my research questions (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative design also allowed me to collect data aligned with the research questions to examine factors that cannot be measured by statistical quantitative means because they involve perceptions and feelings (Yin, 2009). Kozleski (2017) stated building resilience in students is a factor to overcome the academic struggles. Understanding how students perceived their learning environment and whether or not they felt they received adequate

support from their school can help address the gaps in intervention (Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013).

Grounded theory was considered and rejected because I did not attempt to originate a general theory (Creswell, 2014). Grounded theory was not deemed suitable for this study. The narrative design was also considered and rejected because I was not interested in chronological life stories of the participants (Creswell, 2014). The phenomenological design was considered and rejected because I was not concerned with describing the human experience of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). The ethnographic design was considered and rejected because I was not interested in studying the participants over an extended period of time (Merriam, 2014).

Participants

Population and Setting

Over the last 5 years, high school students with disabilities in the CNMI have experienced a higher rate of dropout compared to their peers. The dropout rate for students with disabilities in CNMI high schools has increased from 2% in the school year 2013 to 9% in the school year 2016. The general education dropout rate in the CNMI for the same school year was 2%. In the school year 2015-2016, special education high school students made up 9% of the total student population and were leaving school at significantly higher rates than their peers (CNMI, 2016). The setting for this doctoral project study was a public school district that consists of five high schools and one alternative high school program. The student population was over 10,000 students. The enrollment included 678 high school students with disabilities.

Criteria for Selection of Participants

Creswell (2014) stated that identifying participants in qualitative research involves purposefully selecting groups or individuals who will help answer the research questions. The participants of this study were former students with disabilities who dropped out of high school. As a bounded system, students' perceptions of the learning environment and their experiences that shaped their decision to leave school affect them substantially more than any other stakeholder. Former students who had dropped out of school for longer than 6 months could have been less hesitant to share their experiences because they were not in the school setting where they could have felt they would be judged or disciplined. The participant selection criteria were: (a) high school dropouts with disabilities who were 18 years or older during the interviews, (b) students who had dropped out of school for more than 6 months, (c) students who were identified as having a specific learning disability at the time of dropping out, and (d) students who were formerly enrolled in the Marianas Province Public School District.

Sample Justification for Depth of Inquiry

Purposeful sampling was used to help identify participants who had direct experience with the dropout issue in the CNMI school system. Creswell (2014) stated that purposeful sampling is used to gain greater understanding from participants who have information that is of value to the study and to others. I interviewed the participants in order to collect information that provided extensive and rich data with a smaller sample size (Creswell, 2012). The interviews were conducted to understand the experiences that shaped the former students' decisions to drop out, specifically, how this

group of former students perceived their learning environment and how their experiences contributed to their early leaving (Kozleski, 2017).

Gaining Access to Participants

Upon Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (12-14-17-0513786), I created a procedure to gain access to the participants. In order to create a participant pool, I sought permission from the Commissioner of Education to contact the special education data manager. I provided the data manager with the details of this doctoral project study. Because of the limited access to technology in the CNMI, I requested that the Special Education Department contact former students with disabilities by phone who have dropped out of school between 2013 and 2016 academic years in order to solicit participants for the study who met the selection criteria.

Methods for Establishing Researcher-Participant Working Relationship

Participants who met the selection criteria for the study were contacted by phone and scheduled for face-to-face interviews. Before I began the interviews, I provided the participants with information about this study and reviewed the informed consent form with them. I also obtained written permission from each participant to conduct the interviews before proceeding. The participants were informed that the interview would be audiotaped. I used a recording instrument during the interviews with the participants' permission.

Participant Protection, Informed Consent, and Confidentiality

In adherence with Walden University's procedures for conducting research, I applied to the IRB for permission to conduct research with former students with

disabilities who have dropped out of school. In my application, I divulged the nature of my study, location, the possible risks to participants, and any bias I may have brought to the study.

Upon approval by the IRB, I began communication with key authorities in the Marianas Province Public School District to obtain permission to conduct the study. I requested written approval from the commissioner through a letter detailing the purpose of the study and the intended outcomes. All participants signed a consent form to be interviewed and were informed of the purpose of the study, conflicts that may arise, and confidentiality rights.

All participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that overall protection, well-being, and discretion were priorities throughout the duration of this study. I used my knowledge from the completion of a Web-based training *Protecting Human Research Participants* to assure this. The participants did not know me, and as a result, this research study had minimal risk level to the participants. I randomly assigned a number to each participant prior to conducting the interviews to primarily protect the participants' identities prior to, during, and after data collection when the findings of the project study were reported (Creswell, 2014). Only I had knowledge of the true identities of each participant in the project study (Merriam, 2014).

Data Collection

According to Creswell (2014), collecting qualitative data involves using strategies that result in gathering information about perceptions and opinions. One of the instruments useful in the collection of deep perception data is the interview. Interviews

consist of a set of open ended questions that help to draw out personal views regarding specific topics or situations. Upon approval of Walden University IRB and CNMI Commissioner of Education, I began preparing consent forms and obtaining access to participants.

Data Collection Methods and Sources

Data collected via interviews provide important sources of information (Yin, 2014). During the interviews, the researcher is able to control and structure the information gathered (Creswell, 2014). The interviews were scheduled via e-mail and telephone at a mutually agreeable date, time, and location for each participant. I conducted one-on-one interviews with the participants in a private room at the public library at time agreed upon. I conducted the semistructured one-on-one interviews and asked open-ended questions based on the interview protocol. My doctoral study committee and educational experts on the topic were asked to review my interview protocol and to provide me with feedback concerning the quality of my interview questions in seeking answers to the research questions of this project study. Using an expert review panel to review my interview protocol increased the validity and reliability of the findings (Yin, 2014). The expert review panel did not have any revisions for the interview questions.

To answer the research question about the experiences of students with special needs in high school and how those experiences contributed to the decision to drop out, I collected data through face-to-face interviews with individual participants using both closed and open-ended questions. I used questions from an interview protocol developed

by the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities and developed other questions based on belonging, engagement, and advocacy in order to answer the research questions. Although I audio recorded each interview, I also wrote notes on a separate journal to record my own thoughts and any additional information throughout the study. I created a protocol with instructions for interviewing participants in order to standardize the process. In order to put the participants at ease, I began the questions with ice breakers and then proceed to follow the interview protocol. As the sole researcher, I was the primary source of data.

Data Tracking and Record Keeping

In addition to conducting the interviews and keeping a researcher journal, I collected archival data documents from the research site. The archival documents provided a richer source of information that increased validity of the data. Documents included policies and procedures set forth by the school district regarding students with disabilities. The archival documents were in electronic form. I read the archival documents in order to compare them to the interview transcripts for completeness and usefulness (Yin, 2014). The triangulation of data included interviews, researcher journal, and archival documents to determine consistency in the findings. Within 24 hours after each interview, I transcribed, verbatim, all interview data. I used this method to create an electronic case study database for the data to be coded, analyzed, and stored or retrieved post research (Merriam, 2014). All interview transcripts are in electronic form and are stored in my house in a password-protected file on my personal computer. All electronic files are encrypted. All nonelectronic data were stored securely in a secure desk located

in my home office and will be kept for 5 years. My journal notes have been scanned and will be kept for 5 years. Thus, I organized all my data, including interviews and notes in a Google Excel file labeled with individual folders for each interview and assigned them letters such as "P" for participant and a number for each interview.

Data Gathering Process and Procedures for Gaining Access to Participants

I created a PowerPoint Presentation of the purpose of the study, all necessary consent forms, and a paper copy of the description of the study to the Commissioner of Education for the Marianas Province Public School District. I requested permission to conduct the study in the five high schools within the CNMI and a letter from the Commissioner approving my study. I then contacted the Special Education department of the school district and requested to have each of the potential participants who met the selection criteria contacted by phone. Not many people in the CNMI have Internet access so the participant pool was contacted by phone and provided information about the study. The protect the identity of each participant prior to scheduling of the interviews, Special Education department officer made initial contact with the students and then provided me with list of students who volunteered to participate. After receiving a list of students who agree to be interviewed, I called them by phone and set up a date to conduct the interviews.

Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher in this study was to collect data to understand the current phenomenon. Although I have worked for the Marianas Province Public School District for over 24 years in various school-based and leadership roles and because of the

small island community, I was not familiar with potential participants or their families. Additionally, as a strong advocate for students with disabilities, I controlled my bias to the results of the study. I did not supervise school principals or evaluated their teaching staff. I built trust and transparency by providing information to participants about the purpose of the study and by contacting and interviewing only those who signed the consent forms. I interpreted, coded, and analyzed the interview transcripts accurately and objectively.

Data Analysis

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis involves the process of organizing data collection instruments and materials in order to produce findings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Sutton and Austin (2015) stated that a process of seeing through the eyes of participants and authenticating their experiences. For this study, I used interviews as the primary source of data collection. According to Yin (2003), interviews are critical sources of information for case study design. While conducting interviews, I audiotaped the interviews after gaining written permission by each participant. The audio recording allowed me to carefully transcribe and analyze the interview data to ensure quality of data (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

The data from the interviews and my research journal were analyzed to identify emergent themes from former students' experiences during the face-to-face interviews (Creswell, 2014). I hand transcribed the interviews verbatim and used a system of color

coding to categorize patterns. I used Creswell's (2014) approach for qualitative research analysis, which included:

1. Organizing the interview data and journal notes.
2. Reading the interview data to ascertain what story the participants are telling or what meaning is being conveyed.
3. Using a coding procedure with labels that describe patterns of terms used by the participants.
4. Creating a description of the setting, participants, and themes for analysis using the coded words.
5. Writing a narrative that depicts what the themes represent.
6. Interpreting the findings (pp. 197-200)

Coding Procedure

After hand transcribing the interviews verbatim, I color coded data by reading carefully and identifying words or phrases that participants used frequently, or that appeared to be shared ideas. Reflecting on the meaning of repeated words or phrases assisted me in open coding my transcribed interviews (Rule & John, 2015). These identified patterns were highlighted using color code for each set and categorized by a label (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In addition to coding emerging patterns, I paid close attention to words or phrases that were unclear to me and categorized them as items that may need to be explored further. All codes were assigned a number and entered into an Excel spreadsheet on Google sheets.

Evidence of Quality

To protect the quality of my findings, I first acknowledged my own bias as a researcher and strived to be honest when confronting it during the study. Yin (2003) stated the focus shall be on the research questions in order to avoid the demands of interpreting the data on the researcher. By using phenomenological reduction (Merriam, 2002), I remained focused on understanding the experiences of students with disabilities and their stories, not my prejudices, opinions, or biases. Interpretive phenomenological analysis was used to understand the meaning of what participants share by how they convey and interpret their experiences. This involved not merely describing the experiences for analysis but understanding them through the eyes of the interviewee (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded by common code names and code categories for analysis. I kept a researcher journal. I also collected archival data documents such as policies and procedures set forth by the school district regarding students with disabilities. The triangulation of data included interviews, researcher journal, and archival documents to determine consistency in the findings. Thus, a method used to increase overall credibility and validity of the findings was triangulation (Creswell, 2014). Data triangulation allowed me to check interview data against relevant district data to this project study's central phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). Member checking was used to validate the accurateness of the findings.

Procedure to Ensure Accuracy and Credibility of Findings

In order to make sure that my research is valid, I consistently reviewed my notes and interview transcripts for errors. I created inter-coder agreement by providing a professional colleague with my transcriptions to discuss whether the codes I had assigned were accurate and would be used by another researcher (Sutton & Austin, 2015). I used peer debriefing to ensure validity of my findings by providing a copy of my findings to a colleague in order to obtain another perspective of the research (Creswell, 2014).

Member checking was used to validate the accuracy of my interview data and findings (Yin, 2003). I invited each participant to review the transcribed copy of their interview. I wanted to ensure that my interpretations of the participants' personal reflections and views were accurately portrayed within the final report of the project study (Yin, 2003). The participants reviewed the transcribed copy of their interview and had no revisions.

Discrepant Cases

As the researcher, I maintained the goal of being as transparent as possible when discrepant data emerged from the interviews or my notes. I identified discrepant data and included them in my analysis in order to avoid bias in my analysis (Creswell, 2009). Discrepant data may contradict the themes; however, they are still valuable perspectives that will maintain the credibility of my study (Creswell, 2014).

Limitations

I interviewed students with limited cognitive ability, which may have affected their perceptions of the school environment because they were somewhat isolated from

their general education peers for part of the instructional day. Although the language of instruction in the CNMI is English, it was conceivable that there may have been a language barrier for some participants who did not speak fluent English that inhibited comprehension of some terms in the interview questions due to limited English proficiency or language deficits. Additionally, while the community is supportive of individuals with disabilities, there could exist a stigma associated with persons who are disabled, which could discourage dropouts from volunteering to be interviewed. For former students who may have been persuaded by their families to drop out due to negative experiences with the school district, it was difficult to build trust and solicit involvement in the study.

One delimitation is that very few research studies have been conducted in the Pacific Region regarding the dropout phenomenon, especially for students with disabilities who leave school without a high school diploma. The CNMI is an interconnected culture where most families operate on the concept of mutual responsibility for the care and welfare of the individuals within the community. The stigma related to individuals with disabilities is an academic label introduced with institutionalized schooling. Because families believe in the value of education, there may be interest in and eagerness to participate in a study that will bring understanding of the issues faced by students with disabilities.

Data Analysis Results

The process of generating, collecting, and recording data included multiple steps. After contacting a list of volunteers who responded to the invitation to participate in the

study, interviews were conducted face-to-face in a location chosen by the participants. Each interview was audiotaped and notes were taken in a journal to record important information that came from non-verbal gestures. The interviews were hand transcribed using a F5 software to control speed and volume in order to accurately collect responses verbatim. Interpreting the data accurately and without bias depended on my ability to separate my personal opinions from interfering with my analysis. In order to do this, I read through each interview transcript at least three times to ensure that I was focusing on participants' responses and not looking for ways to justify my views or personal experiences. After transcribing the interviews, I read each interview transcript in order to familiarize myself with the responses of each participant and to heart their "voice" clearly. My second reading was used to create a summary of individual participants' responses, carefully noting any statement that contributed to the problem of dropping out in regards to the themes of belonging, engagement, and advocacy grounded in the conceptual framework. After summarizing each response, I was able to read through my transcripts a third time to identify patterns and look for subtle messages that I might have overlooked in the first two readings. In this way, I could be fairly certain that I had coded patterns accurately for interpretation.

My coding procedure consisted of assigning colors to common responses that supported three main themes of belonging, engagement, and advocacy. Under these three themes, I color categorized school enrollment problems in blue, academic difficulty in pink, motivational issues in green, and family or other obligations in orange. I then created a coding tree, which provided details under each of the themes. The details or

sub-categories contained statements or responses that were similar in nature. These specific responses provided a means to identify possible interventions.

After transcribing, reading, and coding all 10 interviews, I proceeded with peer debriefing to validate my findings and provided a copy of the summary of my interviews to a colleague. By having a colleague review my coded transcriptions for accuracy, I was able to create intercoder agreement (Sutton & Austin, 2015). The following sections describe the themes and findings from the data.

Specific Learning Disorder Dropout Findings

I interviewed 10 participants who were eligible for special education services under the category of Specific Learning Disorder. I wanted to understand how their experiences in school influenced their decision to leave without graduating. Their perceptions of belonging, school engagement, and resilience and advocacy are described next.

The idea of belonging. Related to the theme of belonging, participants who responded shared that first lost interest in school during the sophomore and junior years. From the interviews, six out of 10 participants indicated that there was not at least one staff member or teacher who they could talk to about their problems. When asked if there was at least one staff member or teacher who personally cared about their success, six out of 10 also stated no or they were unsure.

Participants who were asked about the reasons they left school provided the following statements. P1 stated, “The vice principal didn’t want me to continue going back to school. So, I stopped.” Three out of 10 attributed lack of credits and the school’s

reluctance to re-enroll them as contributing to their decision to leave. Although these students attempted to enroll in school year-after-year, they felt that their lack of credits and being off track to graduate made it easier for school authorities to discourage their continuing enrollment. Faced with resistance from school authorities, these students built a pattern of non-attendance that became a permanent absence. P3 said, "They made me leave school".

All dropouts interviewed acknowledge their learning difficulties as reasons for leaving school and further shared that they felt teachers, for various reasons, did not have time to help them catch up, which left them academically neglected. P3 mentioned, "They move on from the lesson while I was still trying, while I'm still trying to learn". Many shared examples of teachers who were inundated with large class sizes and multiple ability levels and feeling as if they were not given the attention they needed.

P4 stated,

> I feel like um, you know, there are a lot of students and not enough teachers. So, with you know, all the big numbers of students in class it was very difficult for the teacher to focus on one student at a time. So, when the teacher like kind of overlooked my, you know my, request for help, it made me feel like they didn't care. First there was one teacher, you know, who, who did care but that teacher just wasn't the subject I need help.

P9 added,

> It's just the environment wasn't good for me. Ah. Being in the classroom for pretty much eight hours of the day didn't really, didn't help me even though they're pushing or teaching you. Ah, teaching can be hard to ah, kind of focus when you have so many other people there and there's all this other noise and it's just hard for me to focus there. And, you know it's very easy to fly by and uh get away with things there when there's so many other people in ah, kind of in front of you.

Academic difficulty and a sense that they were invisible impacted the students' motivation to continue going to school and graduating. P2 stated, "I left school because I wasn't comfortable". P7 added, "So, like a back and forth thing, you know, like, I felt like things broke apart and I didn't really care about school". Realizing that they were not getting the help they needed and that they were invisible in crowded classrooms, these students chose to leave and avoid growing feelings of neglect.

P9 stated,

> It's easy to slide by grade wise you know, if you can uh do something that you can pass along without learning anything and after a while I just kind of felt like I wasn't really learning much. And just for me, just personally I wasn't really learning much and it just for me, just for me, the the whole school system is not really a great atmosphere for me. I just wasn't succeeding, if I would have stayed there I would have, taken you know, ten years to graduate high school. So, I think that's why I left. (P9)

Two of the 10 former students reported reasons for dropping out that were related to being a caregiver of a family member or having to contribute to family obligations. Not surprisingly, participants stated strong feelings of belonging within a family unit. When asked if there was at least one family member who they could talk to about things, eight out of 10 said yes. Additionally, nine out of 10 said that there was at least one family member who encouraged them to stay in school. In contrast to their low feelings of belonging within the school, these students chose to family over schooling. P1 said that leaving school was necessary to accompany an uncle to a medical procedure. P7 added that helping a parent in the middle of a divorce was the main reason for dropping out.

School Engagement and Resilience. Engagement and resilience are tied to feelings that a positive learning environment in turn increases student engagement and therefore willingness to learn (Alt, 2015). Students with disabilities who experience emotional and behavioral connectedness are likely to remain in school longer and graduate. Of the 10 participants interviewed, most shared feelings that they were disconnected from learning because they had difficulty navigating the learning environment. P8 stated, "When I was in school I slack of and be behind then started staying in the same grade so I always cut class". P9 added, "I just wasn't succeeding, if I would have stayed there I would have, taken you know, ten years to graduate high school".

Participants shared a lack of positive interactions with others, attributing to their poor perception of their own abilities to persevere in school. Some of the participants

shared that although they were surrounded with many peers, the degree of positive relationships with classmates and teachers made it difficult to stay focused. They described their classroom environment as being chaotic and without structure.

> Yeah, if there wasn't like, like, like the classes, there's like different groups right, like, the different age, like how, like, like they're just different like, in many ways but, you're not expecting to gain those people, like you can't learn much, like people, like, they're crazy, wild, like, you don't put much effort in, like they just rather like, talk down to the teacher like, or just talk to each other. (P2)

When asked if there was anything their school could have done to make them stay enrolled, participants mentioned needing more time from their teachers. P4 shared, "If like they, they help out the students if they're struggling on what they're trying to learn instead of like, just proceeding on with the lesson. If they took the time to make sure that they really understand what they're learning". Others stated that they would have liked for teachers to show they cared about their learning by getting to know them personally. P6 stated, "they could have just at least try to understand I wa, I was trying to get through".

Despite their challenges in the classroom environment, most of the interviewees reported that they participated in extra-curricular activities at school. Of the three that did not engage in extra-curricular activities, each had their own distinct reason. P3 shared that anger issues prevented involvement in group activities. P9 was not interested in joining any school activities that would mean more time on campus and P10 reported not having many opportunities to choose from.

Family and School Advocates. Having a teacher or family member advocate is a strong indicator for student success (Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013). In the interviews, former students shared that they perceived more support from family members than school staff. Only three out of 10 participants stated that there was at least one teacher or staff member who they could talk to about school problems as compared to eight out of 10 who said there was at least one family member who they could confide in.

Participants rated schools in terms of advocacy lowest for not doing enough to keep students from skipping class, not doing enough to help students with problems outside the classroom that affected their schoolwork, not doing enough to help students when they had trouble learning or understanding the material being taught in their class and not doing enough to help students believe they could succeed. Students rated school advocacy highest for doing enough to help students feel safe from violence. Four out of 10 said yes, half said no and one responded they were not sure. Responses were equal for advocacy in terms of schools doing enough to maintain discipline in the classroom, making school interesting and relevant, and helping students pass from grade to grade.

Table 1

Perceptions of School Advocacy

Did the school do enough or not enough to?	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	Level of advocacy
Keep students from skipping class?	E	NE	NE	NS	NE	NE	NE	NA	NS	NE	Low
Maintain discipline in the classroom?	NE	NE	NE	NE	NS	NE	E	E	NS	E	Medium
Make school interesting and relevant?	E	NE	E	NE	NE	NE	NS	NS	NE	E	Medium
Help students feel safe from violence?	E	NE	NE	NE	E	NE	E	NS	NE	E	Medium
Help students with problems outside the classroom that affected their schoolwork?	NE	NE	E	NE	NE	NE	NE	NS	NE	NE	Low
Help students when they had trouble learning or understanding the material being taught in their classes?	E	NE	E	NE	NE	NE	NE	NE	NS	NE	Low
Help students pass from grade to grade?	E	E	E	NE	NE	NE	NE	NS	NS	NE	Medium
Help students believe they could succeed?	E	NE	NE	NS	NS	NE	E	NE	NE	NE	Low

Conclusion

The data from interviews of dropouts with disabilities allowed me to understand the lived experiences of former students who chose to leave school without a diploma. The responses of the 10 former students provided insight into the factors that impacted their decision. The questions were focused on three main areas tied to the research question of how dropouts' perceptions of belonging, engagement and advocacy contribute to their early leaving.

From the interviews, I was able to gather students' input on their sense of belonging while in high school. Although many participants shared that they felt their family was supportive and encouraged them to finish high school, they were unable to identify at least one teacher or staff member who they felt cared about their success enough to help them stay in school. Other factors tied to a sense of belonging include policies in the school district that prevented them from re-enrolling due to their age and lack of credits to graduate. Participants shared that although they desired to obtain a high school diploma, many of them felt that they were so far behind that dropping out seemed easier than catching up to their peers.

In terms of engagement and resilience, participants shared that they felt no strong connection with teachers and staff. Many alluded to overcrowded classrooms where they felt teachers were unable to attend to their individual needs. Respondents also shared that the learning environment was not conducive to their needs and that although they were

being promoted to the next grade, they felt they had not learned what they needed to in order to pass.

From the interviews conducted, participants conveyed strong family bonds, some having left school to care for family members. Respondents also shared that they felt encouraged from family members to get a high school diploma and that their parents or guardians were aware of the struggles they faced. The advocacy they lacked happened on school grounds where they felt little connection with staff or teachers. Participants shared that schools did not do enough to help them with problems occurring outside of school that affected their academic performance.

Constructivist theory, according to Dewey (Ültanir, 2012), held the notion that learning occurred more effectively when it was contextual, based on real experiences instead of drill and memorization. These experiences are then used to make sense of their world, and when positively attained, lay the foundation for personalized goals (Alt, 2015). Learners who have positive experiences and build connections that are engaging and authentic are then motivated to pursue other goals that fulfill them (Miller-First & Ballard, 2017).

The findings from this study are most useful to practitioners who can effect change within the school system. In order to create positive social change for students with disabilities, the most appropriate project would be professional development (PD) for key stakeholders such as special education advocate groups, school administrators, general education teachers and special education teachers. The outcome that would be the most meaningful as a result of PD would be the creation of an action plan that

addresses the findings from the study in order to implement intentional interventions that have the potential to change the trajectory for students with disabilities. Additionally, in order to effect change, PD must include key elements such as content knowledge, embedded coaching, and team collaboration over time which will enable teachers to build upon their skills (Holzberge, Clark, & Morningstar, 2018).

In Section 3 of this study, a project based on the study findings is presented. The project is PD training that serves as a possible solution to the research problem under study. Section 3 will also provide a literature review, a project evaluation plan, and project implementations. Section 4 is an outline of reflections and conclusions of this doctoral project study.

Section 3: The Project

Section 1 described the problem and purpose of the project study. The purpose of the qualitative project study was to understand the experiences of students with disabilities who drop out of high school, their perceptions of the learning environment, and the factors that contributed to their decisions to drop out. The dropout rate for students with disabilities has been rising in the Marianas Province Public School District over the past 5 years since school year 2011, from 2% to 9% in school year 2016. This high rate of dropout constituted the problem of a graduation gap between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers.

In Section 2, I proposed a qualitative research design to find out how the learning setting affected former students with disabilities' perceptions and how those experiences in turn contributed to their decision to leave school. Data were gathered through interviews of former students who had been out of school for at least 6 months. The results of the study will be used to propose policies that address drop out risk factors and guide district officials in the implementation of interventions to mitigate dropout risk.

I describe the project goals and rationale in this section. Support for the development of the project around the themes of belonging, engagement, and advocacy are described in the review of literature. Additionally, Section 3 includes the identification of needed resources, supports, and anticipated barriers to solutions as well as the proposed implementation timeline.

The Project: Professional Development

This study examined the lived experiences of high school students with disabilities and the factors that contributed to their decision to drop out of high school. The interviewed participants revealed that they lost interest in school during the 10th and 11th grade due to factors linked to feelings of belonging, engagement, and advocacy.

Although these dropouts had strong support and connection with family members who were aware of the struggles they faced with attendance and grades, the decision to leave school without a diploma stemmed from existing policies that prevented them from enrolling in school due to their age or lack of credits. These former students also cited reasons such as poor learning environments that hindered engagement, in which they felt their needs were not being met by teachers who were themselves pressured to address multiple learning needs and classrooms that were overcrowded.

The participants also noted that their schools prevented them from feeling as though they had advocates for their learning because their schools did not do enough to keep students from skipping school or to keep them safe from violence within the school. Of the most significant response, 8 out of 10 interviewed shared that they felt their school did not do enough to help students with problems outside the school that affected their learning.

PD was chosen as a project in order to address the findings from former students who felt that schools could have prevented them from dropping out by creating flexible learning environments and strengthening the policies to allow students who are over age and lacking graduation credits to enroll past the age of mandatory schooling. The

interviewed dropouts expressed their desire to complete their high school diploma in order to become gainfully employed in jobs that would support their families.

Project Goals

The goals of the training with stakeholders are to build an understanding of the problems faced by special education students that impact their graduation potential (Appendix A). In order to build awareness among advocacy groups, district leaders and school practitioners, findings of the study will be shared and evidence-based programs will be disseminated so that school and district leaders can collaborate to build an action plan that addresses students with disabilities who are at risk for dropping out.

Rationale

Engaging in long term, experience-embedded PD will help to build a systemic culture that addresses the needs of students with disabilities (Rauf Ali, Aluwi, & Noor, 2014). The PD plan will consist of 3 days of discussions based on research findings from this study, review of evidence-based practice, and opportunity to collaborate that will be focused on the school sites where teachers work. This will target policymakers as well as district leaders in charge of the implementation, monitoring, and accountability of programs. It will be focused on addressing the need to provide support to students who are older than their same grade peers, students who require greater one-to-one assistance, and students who lack credits to graduate on time after freshman year.

Project Outline

The PD will consist of three sessions scheduled over 3 days. The intended target audience for the PD will be Special Education Focus Group on dropout rates, principals

of the 5 CNMI high schools, and one teacher representative from general education and special education from each of the five high schools. The session will occur in the following sequence:

- Session 1: Introduction to the Dropout Problem for Students with Disabilities.
- Session 2: A Closer Look at Local and School Level Data.
- Session 3: Action Planning for Intervention and Policy Recommendation.

The PD consists of five major areas:

1. means to identify and support students at risk for dropping out, which include early warning systems;
2. academic interventions for struggling students that include creating alternate pathways to a high school diploma and career education;
3. behavioral supports for students who are at risk to increase resiliency, motivation to persist, and provide advocacy;
4. teacher support for general and special education staff that includes training on how to provide instruction that is relevant to increase student engagement and belonging by strengthening teacher preparation, PD, and collaboration; and
5. policy recommendations that address the barriers to completing a high school diploma for students who may take more than 4 years to graduate. (Owen 2017)

Review of the Literature

In this review, I narrowed my search for literature to research that corresponded with my findings. Specifically, I sought to justify interventions that would support district policy reform, student support, and teacher quality. With these main themes, I researched evidence-based practices and programs, implementation of policies that strengthen student supports, and teacher preparation.

I utilized the Walden library to begin my search for literature, using key terms such as *intervention, early warning systems, teacher training, dropout prevention* and *special education reform*. I limited my search to peer-reviewed education articles published within the last 5 years. I used the EBSCO, ERIC and SAGE Publications databases to collect my literature. I was able to find 41 articles for this review.

Dropping out of school results in poor outcomes related to employment, lower living standards, health related problems, and societal burden (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). Students with disabilities who do not obtain a high school diploma are at even greater risk for incarceration, mental health issues, and continued reliance on government assistance (Wandrei, 2017). Researchers have also found that the process of dropping out is not spontaneous, but a gradual decision based on a number of negative experiences (Ritchotte & Graefe, 2017).

The reasons that students drop out are likely to stem from various internal and external factors that push, pull, or cause students to fall out (Ritchotte & Graefe, 2017). Factors that push students out include school level problems that decrease student motivation to persevere to graduation. They include poor grades and a series of behavior

consequences meted out by schools. Students who are pulled out of school experience internal trauma from outside of the educational environment that influence their decision to leave. Finally, falling out of school speaks to the gradual disengagement students face resulting from chronic failure and lack of progress that discourage students from remaining in school.

My findings included all of the above factors in students' experiences from the feeling of being invisible in large overcrowded classrooms to steady decline in grades that caused a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness to complete school. Marginalized students have perspectives regarding their education and how to support them that are worth considering when planning interventions (Banks, 2017). Of the most salient factors that contributed to dropping out of school, student belonging tied to attendance, engagement tied to academic supports, and advocacy tied to behavioral supports stand out (Maynard, Kjellstrand, & Thompson, 2014).

The interventions from research address specific findings in the three main areas aligned with my research question on belonging, engagement, and advocacy. Evidence-based and promising practices from research are discussed further. Recommendations that researchers have noted to effectively address dropout problem are warning systems, advocacy measures, and academic and behavior support, all tied to feelings of belonging and engagement in school (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). Therefore, interventions that mitigate risk factors also need to be infused throughout high school and must be viewed as a system goal rather than a school problem.

Early Warning Systems for Advocacy

The findings included information that students felt schools did not do enough to keep students from skipping school or to help students succeed. Research findings support the implementation of programs that identify, monitor, and track students early and follow them through their schooling as effective interventions to combat dropout. Research shows that students who face challenges in school do not merely decide to drop out as a result of one incident, but that they slowly disengage (Knowles, 2015). It might then behoove the Marianas school district to implement an early warning system that will capture struggling students and re-engage them.

Early warning systems are based on indicators that school staff flag at different points throughout high school. They require commitment from a multidisciplinary team to design, implement, and monitor. To be effective, they must include a clear set of indicators that raise red flags for such things as attendance, behavior, and academic progress (Frazelle et al., 2015). Many programs such as Check & Connect include early warning signs, offering ways to monitor and providing students with real life experiences as a preventative measure (Maynard et al., 2013). Therefore, interventions that mitigate risk factors also need to be infused throughout high school and must be viewed as a system goal rather than a school problem.

Student Academic Support for Belonging

As important as it is to address the cognitive domain, it is also crucial to build interpersonal skills and emotional supports which directly impact intellectual growth (Pagani, Briere, & Janosz, 2017). Students who are positively engaged in school build

skills that help them later in life. Engagement skill building strengthens individual students who then contribute to a healthier school climate (Jennifer et al., 2015). High schools who implement multi-dimensional approaches to engagement target several issues at once and create solutions that are systemic therefore impacting the entire school.

Studies of special education teacher programs have shown that not enough training is given to teachers to enable them to effectively help students transition. Additionally, schools have implemented programs that address student behavioral support, but leave out special education staff who may have a wealth of knowledge that can benefit program implementation for all kids, including students with disabilities (Shuster et al., 2017). IDEA (2004) provided guidance for transition by emphasizing that schools should also prepare students for life post high school. Most teachers have maintained a focus on instruction and assessment of district mandates but are not well prepared to take student individual needs into account, especially those that include the student in planning for their interventions (Williams-Diehm, Rowe, Johnson, & Guilmeus, 2018). Carter et al. (2015) stated that the high school principal plays an integral role in establishing priorities for teachers. School administrators should create a vision for learning that includes support for teacher growth and collaboration. Although many principals see their schools as already addressing teacher in-service needs, research has provided evidence that there is much variability in terms of training, quality instruction and support.

Though many studies point to cognitive engagement as a key factor, few examine the role that emotional engagement plays (Palmgreen, Pyhältö, Soini, & Pietarinen,

2017). Adolescents are social beings and their level of engagement with others has been shown to peak during high school. Schools that leverage that understanding must build connections to effectively intervene with at-risk youth. Differentiating and culturally relevant instruction is not just good practice for teachers, it is instrumental in providing social justice lessons to students who have learning difficulties or who have been otherwise neglected (Banks, 2017).

Resiliency training build traits that help students solve problems, build independence, relate to others and provide motivation and purpose in life (Parker & Folkman, 2015). Students who have unstable home lives benefit from mentorship far beyond school. As teachers strive to deliver evidence-based practices, they should also create relationships that model positive social traits. These traits help to build protective factors for youth and carry them well into their adult lives.

Just as good teaching requires training and PD, so does building supportive classroom environments (Mulholland & O'Conner, 2015). Providing teachers with opportunities to collaborate mirrors the values of community and interdependence. Principals play a large role in setting the tone for the school and instilling ethical responsibilities in staff (Mann & Witworth, 2017). They are the bridge between the general education and special education teacher and collaborate with district leaders to create standards for inclusion of students with disabilities. Research has shown that despite their integral role, not many teacher preparation programs include them as part of the dynamic for teacher credentialing (Klehr, 2015).

If education is to succeed in producing successful adults, change at the systemic level that incorporates a holistic approach must also be made. Just as engagement for students is crucial to their learning, teacher engagement is likely to improve commitment to the profession (Jungert, 2014). PD must include other areas of teacher growth related to social and emotional skills, resiliency building and social skills that augment academic rigor. Teachers must also be provided the opportunity to collaborate and use a research-based approach to teaching which allows them to adjust their practice based on theory and experience (Lampi, Dimino, & Taylor, 2015). If teachers are to make improvements in the delivery of instruction in real situations, PD cannot be isolated to single events or one-shot workshops (Margolis, Durbin, & Doring, 2017). In order learning to be authentic, teachers must have the opportunity to practice, reflect and adjust in an environment with real students and real challenges (Zehetmeier et al., 2015). PD focused on students with disabilities must mean more than just placement and identification (Naraian & Oyler, 2014). It must be systematic and systemic and relevant to the 21st century (Rock et al., 2016).

Student Behavior Support for Belong and Advocacy

In order to increase student academic engagement, they must first build positive engaging relationships with their peers and teachers. Emotional engagement enhances positive behaviors, which then support academic progress. A sense of belonging comes from interactions with classmates and teachers but is also a by-product of a healthy school culture that provides opportunities for students to build relationships and positive experiences (Palmgreen, Soini, & Pietarinen, 2017). Administrators can promote a sense

of belonging by infusing deliberate opportunities for students to connect with others within school.

For students with disabilities, the need to belong is even more critical since many tend to have fewer positive relationships with peers and limited avenues for participating in inclusively social events sponsored by their schools. Espelage, Rose and Polanin (2016) found that promoting social skills and allowing students with disabilities to effectively learn relationship skills has the potential to build a sense of belonging and encourage students to persevere to graduations.

Behavioral supports implemented early and consistently have been evidenced to improve the chances that students complete their high school (Jennifer et al., 2015). Special education providers who help students learn how to advocate for themselves and who actively seek out opportunities where they can practice sharing their voices more effectively change the trajectory for students with disabilities (Fox, 2015). Researchers suggest that educational psychologists who employ social justice practices are even more effective change agents than those who participate in policy making. According to Fox (2015), students with disabilities benefit from being included in the decisions that affect their education, especially when teachers model social justice practices that help them to navigate their social environments in school and in their lives.

Havik, Bru, and Ertesvåg (2015) noted that absenteeism alone is a poor indicator of risk for drop out. Non-attendance occurs as a result of many factors stemming from anxiety and lack of social skills to selective avoidance in pursuit of more satisfying relationships. Some cases of truancy might be related to students' decisions that there are

more fulfilling ways to spend their days than in a classroom where they feel they don't belong. For students with disabilities, the constant lack of progress and poor school connections may be the push they need to drop out.

Researchers continue to try and understand the dropout problem at many levels, but the most can agree that the most significant factors include academics, engagement and behavioral issues. Engagement itself is tied to many other issues such as truancy and cognitive ability. Findings support programs that identify, monitor and track students early and follow them through their schooling as effective interventions to combat dropout. Check & Connect is one such program that includes early warning signs, monitoring and providing students with real life experiences as a preventative measure (Maynard et al., 2013).

In addition to cognitive ability, how students perceive themselves and their learning environment affect them in school (Korhonen, Linnanmäki, & Aunio, 2014). Self-concept, especially as it relates to the belief that one can learn, has been found by researchers to be an indicator of success in school. It is also associated with health and general well-being. Therefore, schools who make support resources available to students with learning difficulties not only help them pass classes but raise their physical and mental health outcomes. Korhonen, Linnanmäki, and Aunio (2014) stated that it is the balance of academic intervention with emotional support that provides the most gain to students with learning disabilities. Schools that operate in traditional structures with no means of adapting to the needs of struggling learners beget more struggling learners (McGee & Lin, 2017).

Alternative learning situations have been examined as answers to the dropout problem by providing alternate routes to graduation. Some strategies in alternative learning environments include smaller class sizes, but the outcomes are not always positive. Alternative settings must provide other supports to engage students such as high expectations, resiliency training, behavioral skills training and academic rigor.

McGee and Lin (2017) noted that social skills and resiliency training allow students who might have little exposure to positive relationships with the tools to interact appropriately to people and situations. Academic supports that meet individual students' and offer career education while maintaining rigor positively impact student performance growth.

Teachers who are highly effective in their instructional delivery of content and who also care about their students' well-being help at-risk students meaningfully engage and builds motivation to persist. Positive relationships become protective factors for students who have little or no safe haven in their lives. Research and the findings from this study show that parent engagement plays a major role in student self-concept and feeling of belonging. Partnerships between parents and the school can help to close the gap by providing parallel expectations at home and at school.

Policy Recommendations for Advocacy and Engagement

Policy plays a critical role in helping address the dropout problem for students with disabilities. Increasing graduation rates is a priority for legislators as much of a government's funding is allocated to education (Pagani, Briere, & Janosz, 2017). Therefore, to be good stewards of resources, it is important to create learning

environments that protect students from risks of non-completion. Compulsory education policies must take into account the need for supports for students who are struggling (Palmgreen, Phyältö, 2017).

Education advocates and policy makers have increasingly drawn attention to skills that enable students to not only survive academically but thrive emotionally. According to Carter et al. (2015), curriculum priorities for students with disabilities in schools that acknowledge the need to reform practice emphasize a holistic approach to student progress which includes self-determination in order to improve outcomes.

Roderick et al. (2014) found that the transition period to high school includes struggles arising from attendance, engagement and academics. Early warning systems that start as early as freshman year assist students in this transition show progress in bringing students to graduation on time. Research shows that students who are kept on track to graduate, that is, who are monitored as they transition to tenth grade, have better chances of graduating. Although many schools have created alternate diplomas, employability is low for students who don't hold a traditional diploma. For students with disabilities, the chances of getting into a university or obtaining work is further decreased with alternate certification (Rubin, 2016).

Research supports the discussion at the policy level about increasing the reporting of graduation to six years for students who need more time to complete a high school diploma (Barrat & Berliner, 2016). Additionally, re-enrolling students who wish to return to school should be considered as a protective factor in addressing the dropout problem.

Recapturing students who desire to obtain a high school diploma take careful planning to address specific needs of this population. Learning styles, engagement strategies and work training are some of the factors that need to be addressed. Findings from the study have shown that participants viewed providing support for work and study would keep them from dropping out (Litzau & Rice, 2017). Designing appropriate and effective intervention programs must include key components that address academic and behavioral supports as well as teacher training. Litzau and Rice also noted that career focused curriculums have been successful in reengaging students because of the fact that older students already have family obligations. Providing job experience and internships while students are in high school meet both the desire to finish school and the demands of the real world in which they live. Programs that incorporate relevant learning opportunities for students benefit students, the economy and the community as a whole.

Policy reform and interventions at the school level are indicative of a systems approach to addressing the dropout problem (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). Tracking students to ensure that they are on track can be done with the help of school counselors who are able to build relationships and model appropriate behaviors (Fish & Smith-Augustine, 2015). Because school counselors already work with students to plan post-secondary and career goals.

According to McMahon et al. (2016), inclusive practices should not just be a mandate of IDEA (2004) but should be a goal for schools and districts who want to effectuate change for students with disabilities. Organizational inclusion, which is the

shared vision by leaders, practitioners and school communities, convey optimism and a culture of belonging for at risk students with learning disabilities.

As reported in the study findings and supported by research from Southward and Kyzar (2017), vocational skills training is an effective method to keeping students enrolled. Successful disability inclusive schools take early warning systems, support for behavior and academics, teacher training and policy strengthening into account (Sharma, Forlin, Sprunt, & Merumeru, 2016). Systems must reflect the collective desire to address all students by way of meeting each student's needs (Woodcock & Hardy, 2017). This change requires careful attention to policies that protect at risk students, support school teacher PD and build positive environments that advocate for students. Students can gain independence and a sense of belonging by being made a part of their learning goals and the decisions that affect them (Collier, Griffin, & Wei, 2017).

Though many schools implement policies to address truancy by way of changes made in disciplinary and attendance measures, the schools that have had more success not only changed their policies but they changed their culture (Rinka, Robertson, & Smith, 2015). The responsibility to change the trajectory for students with disabilities falls on each of the stakeholders who play a role in their lives.

Project Description

The goals of the training with stakeholders are to build an understanding of the problem faced by special education students that impact their graduation potential. In order to build awareness among advocacy groups, district leaders and school practitioners, findings of the study will be shared and evidence-based programs will be

disseminated so that school and district leaders can collaborate to build an action plan that addresses students with disabilities who are at risk for dropping out.

Project Resources and Existing Supports

The resources required to conduct PD include a collaborative effort from all stakeholders to engage in discussion and planning. Time is the most precious resource and the most critical to address the problem of dropouts in special education. It is also a potential barrier in regards to participation since school staff have other competing priorities and convening all the needed stakeholders might take very careful planning. In order to properly provide training, the special education focus group, principals and teachers will have to commit to 3 days of PD. School level data regarding students with disabilities who have dropped out between 2011 and 2016 is an important resource in planning and will be required of each school who attends. Other materials that will be needed during the PD are equipment for display of PowerPoint, chart paper, markers, and handouts. To address the issue of scheduling, I will consult the school calendar and send emails to build a consensus on the most appropriate time to conduct the training.

I will also need funding support to establish a venue that is conducive to group dialogue and work sessions. With limited budgets in the school district, I will need to approach the commissioner of education for support to secure a venue. An established collaborative group for special education which consists of representatives from different community advocacy groups already exists and could support this.

Materials that will be used during the PD in work sessions include:

1. Articles from peer reviewed sources with examples of effective interventions.

2. Chart paper and markers, pens and paper for note taking.
3. Theory of Action forms
4. Logic Model templates
5. Evaluation forms for each day

Potential Barriers and Solutions

A potential barrier could be the process to schedule training for administrators and teachers over the summer. With limited budgets in the school district, a barrier is the need for funding to offer the training. A potential solution would be to request funding from the special education department or to apply for a federal government grant.

Project Implementation and Timetable

Implementing this professional develop will require 3 days of training with the first day being reserved to lay the foundation for the work sessions that will follow. Day 1, which will be scheduled for a full 6 hours with lunch provided will consist of setting the environment for learning, understanding the dropout problem at the national and local level and discussing the findings of the study. Day 2 which will last four hours in the morning, will include reviewing school level data, evidence-based practices and suggesting policy changes. Day 3 will also be four hours long and will focus on action planning for implementation at the school and district level as well as monitoring and evaluation. Each day will commence with an evaluation of the work sessions. This PD will be scheduled for the last PD days of the school year, which is already committed to training by the district so as not to impede the daily operations of schools.

PDPD will be conducted to present the findings of the study. Ongoing implementation will occur in the schools with quarterly core team meetings for monitoring and evaluation and monthly meetings to engage staff in continued training, coaching, and support. The project will be implemented over a course of 3 years, based on action plans created by each of the participating high schools and will be evaluated annually by the core team of principals, special education leaders and district leaders.

Roles and Responsibilities

The roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder participant are as follows:

1. Special Education Collaborative Team: to discuss the research and information presented from the findings of the study and support school teams in the implementation and planning to address the dropout problem for students with disabilities. The support will be demonstrated by advocacy in the community and efforts to increase school collaboration by providing funding and training resources.
2. School administrators: to lead school teachers in the data gathering, analysis and planning for interventions at the building level based on student data.
3. General education and special education teachers: to build a culture of decision making for student needs based on data and research and supported by administrators.

My responsibility will be to meet with senior district administrators to present my findings and to ask for permission to schedule and facilitate the training. I will oversee the facilitation of the training, schedule the dates, gather materials, and book the

conference room. I will provide the content curriculum needed to facilitate each training session.

Project Evaluation Plan

The project will be evaluated based on the action plan created by the school teams. Outcome-based evaluation allows stakeholders to measure the impact of project implementation by monitoring the deliverables and responsible parties. Short term goals will be monitored more frequently by core team members at the school level and long term goals will be evaluated by a group established to measure fidelity based on the theory of action and action plans.

Short term goals will be monitored by the core team at the school level on a monthly basis and will consist of small professional learning circles. Long term goals will be tracked by administrators and district leaders on a quarterly basis and will also be adjusted as needed based on improvements made. The professional learning circle will use the logic models from the PD to track and monitor implementation and progress of goals.

Summative evaluations will be used to evaluate this project. Project evaluation is need to assess the weaknesses and strengths of the PD program. The feedback from the stakeholders will assist in making necessary adjustments to the PD content. Participants will complete evaluation forms at the close of each PD session. Feedback from the PD evaluations will be shared with all stakeholders.

Project Implications

Addressing the dropout problem for students with disabilities at the building and district level will impact the graduation rates for special education students and close the gap between students with disabilities and their general education peers. Research showed that shared responsibility for student learning is an important element of PD for all teachers, but most especially special education teachers (Bettini et al., 2017). This PD project will bring key stakeholders from the community, district and school leadership and teaching staff together to collaborate on evidence-based programs that target the needs of struggling students in high school. Increasing graduation rates for at risk students such as those with disabilities translates to a more robust community. The long-term wins for the CNMI that can be achieved would be increasing employment rates for persons with disabilities, alleviating reliance on government assistance, greater participation in society, improved health outcomes and better living standards. Of the most promising social implications are a healthy and thriving community that values persons with disabilities and works together to improve interventions at early stages in education so that individuals graduate with diplomas and are prepared for post-secondary education and the workforce. This project impacts stakeholders at many levels, but most notably, builds on the strengths of an already interpersonal culture that embraces diversity and values human potential.

This project was built on the findings. Based on the findings, it was evident that the teachers and administrators at the research site needed additional PD. As a solution to the research problem, this project was developed to meet the needs of teachers and

administrators to improve the quality of education and enhance academic success at the study site. This project has implications for social change due to the impact and benefits for teachers, administrators, and students.

PD that focuses on increasing the graduation rate for students with disabilities will have immediate, short term and far reaching implications. Firstly, the study findings will bring awareness of first hand struggles from former students who have left the system. Their experiences will shed light on existing practices that have limited impact and give educators the information they need to reform those practices. The findings will also answer questions that have been raised about the increasing dropout rate that has garnered the attention of local, state and federal authorities.

Short term wins include creating opportunities for special education and general education collaboration. Supporting the delivery instruction and best practices based on data will assist both general and special education teachers to more adequately meet the needs of students with disabilities. With the implementation of early warning systems, these teachers will be able to identify, intervene and guide students to success before they encounter insurmountable challenges that put them at risk for dropout.

The long-term gains for this project include raising the graduation rate for all students which will positively contribute to the economy of a small island community. More graduates equate to more employed citizens who contribute to the economy and lessen the burden on welfare, prisons and taxpayers. The CNMI has long struggled with providing an adequate local labor force. Heavy reliance on outside labor and impending immigration laws put the CNMI at risk for economic disaster and constrained relations

with the U.S. The more students we can help to achieve a high school diploma, the greater chances we have of building a robust and thriving community rich with diversity and productivity.

Conclusion

A 3-day PD was developed based on details from data results. A description the project and its goals, rationale, and evaluation plans were presented in this section. In Section 4, I will discuss project strengths and limitation, as well as alternative considerations. Section 4 will close with reflections on scholarship, project development and evaluation, and leadership and change.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Section 4 provides a review of this study and my reflections on the project strengths, limitations, and recommendations for further research. The findings from my study provided a guide for interventions that could be implemented to address the problem of dropout among students with disabilities in the Marianas Province School District. This qualitative study focused on the perceptions of former students related to their experiences in high school and what factors contributed to their decision to leave school without obtaining a diploma.

Project Strengths and Limitations

Although high schools in the district have implemented interventions to support students with disabilities, none have made concerted efforts to address the dropout problem specifically. Findings from this study provide a guide for the district and schools based on first-hand accounts of the lived experiences of former students. The recommendations for intervention are based on the themes from the research question tied to belonging, engagement, and advocacy.

There is a need to address the inequalities in the learning environment for students with disabilities who are at risk for dropping out (Banks, 2017). These inequalities are tied to supports for both students and teachers. PD for teachers of students with disabilities needs to focus on much more than just the identification and placement of these students, but embrace the whole system (Petersen, 2015). The research tied to findings also revealed that although schools focus on providing academic and behavioral supports to struggling students, real change is effectuated systematically (Rinka et al.,

2015). When all stakeholders come together to work towards a common goal, students benefit and the entire community reaps the positive effects.

The project deliverable, a PD, builds on the already started efforts of schools to adhere to IDEA (2004) mandates that set goals for students with disabilities and guidelines for schools to help transition them into life after school (Williams-Diehm et al., 2018). The PD goals target much of the same concerns with a closer focus on implementing evidence-based practices that address key recommendations from research and are aligned to the findings of this study. These components consist of (a) early warning systems, (b) support for academics, (c) support for behavior, (d) teacher PD, and (e) policy recommendations to advocate for students with disabilities who are at risk to drop out.

The project is a PD program designed to improve the overall quality of learning and teaching at the research site. The PD project was also designed based on research that promotes the PD of teachers and administrators to boost student learning. PD was necessary to promote team building with all educational stakeholders.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

While PD is the project of choice in this study, alternative ways to address the problem of special needs dropout can include policy recommendations in the form of a white paper. Changing policies to advocate for students with disabilities, especially those that can be enforced at the building level, ensure that schools use precious resources to target interventions for students.

In looking at the dropout problem through other lenses, it may be possible to define the problem as a crisis of school culture. Instead of focusing only on individual students, schools could prioritize multitiered approaches to building positive school climate that would in turn benefit students. The problem might also be explored at the teacher level, examining how special education teachers are trained and prepared to address the needs of not only students with disabilities but the various dynamics within school systems (Cameron & Jortveit, 2014).

Scholarship and Project Development and Evaluation

Scholarship involves a structured approach to learning based on questions of practice that emerge from events and experiences. This study involved scholarly research about the phenomena of leaving school early in the Marianas. The study was initiated in order to effect meaningful change in a small island community. My personal experience conducting this study involved understanding the experience of others while maintaining an unbiased stance. I gained valuable insight to research that can be used in my professional role as a practitioner. It has not only broadened my perspective on my research topic but provided me with the tools to replicate a thorough examination of other areas that I might find valuable to education. The skills I have obtained will be an asset to the students I serve and the field of education. The study findings will undoubtedly be of use to the local community that is faced with rising rates of students with disabilities leaving school without a diploma. It will provide critical information that can be used as guideposts for improving the trajectory for all students.

Summative evaluations will be used to evaluate this project. Project evaluation is needed to assess the weaknesses and strengths of the PD program. The feedback from the stakeholders will assist in making necessary adjustments to the PD content. Participants will complete evaluation forms at the close of each PD session. Feedback from the PD evaluations will be shared with all stakeholders.

Leadership and Change

Effective leadership includes personal efficacy and collective vision. My role as a leader began 25 years ago as a teacher's aide and has taken me through many learning opportunities. Understanding that change must occur at every level, from the system to the individual practitioner, I have pursued collective efficacy as a means to making meaningful change for students. Leaders engage other leaders in change and build up leaders who will carry on change. The outcomes that will emerge from my study will be a testament to the passion that I and many of my colleagues in the system have. The vision for a more inclusive community and success for all students is as much a reward as the degree that will be conferred upon me.

Reflection on the Importance of the Work

This doctoral journey has been rewarding in my academic career. I felt I was pushed beyond my limits as a novice scholar. Giving up was never an option. I learned how to collect, code, analyze, and triangulate data, and find solutions to problems. With diligence, persistence, and scholarship, my dream of earing an EdD degree is within reach. Developing the PD project took a substantial amount of planning. The final project is confirmation of my experience as a project developer.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

The qualitative research conducted provided essential information to practitioners of the real experiences of students with disabilities in the school district. It was an exploration of a growing problem that has puzzled district leaders for many years. The perspectives of former dropouts are more valuable than assessment results or assumptions that have been made to explain the issue. In addressing the problem for students, practitioners can change the climate of their schools, the overall performance of the district, and, on a greater scale, the outcomes for individuals, especially those with disabilities, after they leave high school. Healthier, more successful individuals have the potential to be productive citizens in their community and contribute to the collective well-being of society as a whole.

Most studies that investigate dropout students with disabilities focus on attendance and academic performance. Recommendations for further research include evaluation of action plans and multitiered supports. Studying differentiated forms of support and the implementation fidelity of action plans will give researchers a better understanding of the interventions and implementation practices that positively impact students.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative project study was to understand the perspectives of students who dropped out of high school before graduating and to find out what factors related to belonging, engagement, and advocacy contributed to their decision to leave.

The findings from interviews of former students gave first-hand account of how students felt supported or neglected.

The PD project is intended to reveal the findings and create an action plan for the district and individual schools in order to address specific areas of concern. The training offered school leaders and building staff with effective interventions that showed promise in other school districts and initiated efforts to intervene strategically in the Marianas.

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3:: The Project

Professional Development for Teachers and Administrators Regarding Students with Disabilities

by

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May 2018

Project Purpose and Rationale

This study examined the lived experiences of high school students with disabilities and the factors that contributed to their decision to drop out of high school. From the interviewed participants revealed that they lost interest in school during the 10th and 11th grade due to factors linked to feelings of belonging, engagement and advocacy.

Although these dropouts had strong support and connection with family members who were aware of the struggles they faced with attendance and grades, the decision to leave school without a diploma stemmed from existing policies that prevented them from enrolling in school due to their age or lack of credits. These former students also cited reasons such as poor learning environments that hindered engagement, in which they felt their needs were not being met by teachers who were themselves pressured to address multiple learning needs and classrooms that were overcrowded.

The participants also noted that their schools prevented them from feeling as though they had advocates for their learning because their schools did not do enough to keep students from skipping school, or to keep them safe from violence within the school. Of the most significant response, 8 out of 10 interviewed shared that they felt their school did not do enough to help students with problems outside the school that affected their learning.

Professional development was chosen as a project in order to address the findings from former students who felt that schools could have prevented them from dropping out by creating flexible learning environments and strengthening the policies to allow students who are over age and lacking graduation credits to enroll past the age of

mandatory schooling. The interviewed dropouts expressed their desire to complete their high school diploma in order to become gainfully employed in jobs that would support their families.

Project Goals

The goals of the training with stakeholders are to build an understanding of the problem faced by special education students that impact their graduation potential. In order to build awareness among advocacy groups, district leaders and school practitioners, findings of the study will be shared and evidence-based programs will be disseminated so that school and district leaders can collaborate to build an action plan that addresses students with disabilities who are at risk for dropping out.

Project Outline

The Professional Development (PD) will consist of 3-session scheduled over 3 days. The intended target audience for the PD will be Special Education Focus Group on dropout rates, principals of the 5 CNMI high schools, and one teacher representative from general education and special education from each of the 5 high schools. The session will occur in the following sequence:

Session 1: Introduction to the Dropout Problem for Students with Disabilities.

Session 2: A Closer Look at Local and School Level Data

Session 3: Action Planning for Intervention and Policy Recommendation

The professional development consists of five major areas:

1. Means to identify and support students at risk for dropping out, which include early warning systems.
2. Academic interventions for struggling students which include creating alternate pathways to a high school diploma and career education.
3. Behavioral supports for students who are at risk to increase resiliency, motivation to persist and provide advocacy.
4. Teacher support for general and special education staff that includes training on how to provide instruction that is relevant to increase student engagement and belonging by strengthening teacher preparation, professional development and collaboration.
5. Policy recommendations that address the barriers to completing a high school diploma for students who may take more than 4 years to graduate.

Project Materials

The resources required to conduct professional development include a collaborative effort from all stakeholders to engage in discussion and planning. Time is the most precious resource and the most critical to address the problem of dropouts in special education. It is also a potential barrier in regards to participation since school staff have other competing priorities and convening all the needed stakeholders might take very careful planning. In order to properly provide training, the special education focus group, principals and teachers will have to commit to 3 days of professional development. School level data regarding students with disabilities who have dropped

out between 2011 and 2016 is an important resource in planning and will be required of each school who attends. Other materials that will be needed during the professional development are equipment for display of Power Point, chart paper, markers, and handouts. To address the issue of scheduling, I will consult the school calendar and send emails to build a consensus on the most appropriate time to conduct the training.

I will also need funding support to establish a venue that is conducive to group dialogue and work sessions. With limited budgets in the school district, I will need to approach the commissioner of education for support to secure a venue. An established collaborative group for special education which consists of representatives from different community advocacy groups already exists and could support this.

Materials that will be used during the Professional Development in work sessions include:

6. Articles from peer reviewed sources with examples of effective interventions.
7. Chart paper and markers, pens and paper for note taking.
8. Theory of Action forms
9. Logic Model templates
10. Evaluation forms for each day

Implementation and Training Details

Implementing this professional develop will require 3 days of training with the first day being reserved to lay the foundation for the work sessions that will follow. Day 1, which will be scheduled for a full 6 hours with lunch provided will consist of setting

the environment for learning, understanding the dropout problem at the national and local level and discussing the findings of the study. Day 2 which will last four hours in the morning, will include reviewing school level data, evidence-based practices and suggesting policy changes. Day 3 will also be four hours and will focus on action planning for implementation at the school and district level as well as monitoring and evaluation. Each day will commence with an evaluation of the work sessions. This professional development will be scheduled for the last professional development days of the school year which is already committed to training by the district so as not to impede the daily operations of schools.

The roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder participant are as follows:

1. Special Education Collaborative Team: to discuss the research and information presented from the findings of the study and support school teams in the implementation and planning to address the dropout problem for students with disabilities. The support will be demonstrated by advocacy in the community and efforts to increase school collaboration by providing funding and training resources.
2. School administrators: to lead school teachers in the data gathering, analysis and planning for interventions at the building level based on student data.
3. General education and special education teachers: to build a culture of decision making for student needs based on data and research and supported by administrators.

Project Evaluation Plan

The project will be evaluated based on the action plan created by the school teams. Outcome based evaluation allows stakeholders to measure the impact of project implementation by monitoring the deliverables and responsible parties. Short term goals will be monitored more frequently by core team members at the school level and long term goals will be evaluated by a group established to measure fidelity based on the theory of action, and action plans.

Short term goals will be monitored by the core team at the school level on a monthly basis and will consist of small professional learning circles. Long term goals will be tracked by administrators and district leaders on a quarterly basis and will also be adjusted as needed based on improvements made. The professional learning circle will use the logic models from the professional development to track and monitor implementation and progress of goals.

Project Implications

Addressing the dropout problem for students with disabilities at the building and district level will impact the graduation rates for special education students and close the gap between students with disabilities and their general education peers. This professional development project will bring key stakeholders from the community, district and school leadership and teaching staff together to collaborate on evidence-based programs that target the needs of struggling students in high school. Knowledge and skills in using evidence-based practices has been shown to be an effective means of improving instruction for students with disability in high school (Mazzoti et al., 2018).

Increasing graduation rates for at risk students such as those with disabilities translates to a more robust community. The long-term wins for the CNMI that can be achieved would be increasing employment rates for persons with disabilities, alleviating reliance on government assistance, greater participation in society, improved health outcomes and better living standards. Of the most promising social implications are a healthy and thriving community that values persons with disabilities and works together to improve interventions at early stages in education so that individuals graduate with diplomas and are prepared for post-secondary education and the workforce. This project impacts stakeholders at many levels, but most notably, builds on the strengths of an already interpersonal culture that embraces diversity and values human potential.

Detailed Agenda and Presentation

The Professional Development will consist of 3-session scheduled over 3 days. The intended target audience for the PD will be Special Education Focus Group on dropout rates, principals of the 5 CNMI high schools, and one teacher representative from general education and special education from each of the 5 high schools. The session will occur in the following sequence:

Session 1: Introduction to the Dropout Problem for Students with Disabilities.
Session 2: A Closer Look at Local and School Level Data
Session 3: Action Planning for Intervention and Policy Recommendation

Day 1

Session 1: Introduction to the Dropout Problem for Students with Disabilities.

8:00 am – 3:00 pm

I. Session 1: Introduction to the Dropout Problem for Students with Disabilities (2 slides)

- The purpose of the first session is to provide an overview of the problem of high school non-completion for students with disabilities nationwide and locally.
- The goals of the PD will be to:
    - Understand the perceptions of students with disabilities who dropped out of high school.
    - Improve educational services for students with disabilities who are at risk for dropout.
- The objectives of the PD as follows:
    - As a result of the professional development, the focus group will increase understanding of dropout and the impact on students with disabilities.
    - As a result of the professional development, the focus group will be able to identify evidence-based strategies to increase graduation rates for students with disabilities.
    - As a result of the professional development, the focus group will make policy recommendations to address the dropout rate for students with disabilities.
- Outcomes
    - Focus group will demonstrate understanding of the contributing factors that lead to student dropout within subgroup of students with disabilities.

- Focus group will create an action plan for interventions to address the dropout risks at the school level.
- Focus group will create an action plan for policy recommendations to address the dropout risks at the district level.

II. Video: It Makes Us Feel Stupid: School from a Special Education Student Perspective derived from YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3&v=WQ1BjgI55YE

III. Define dropout (1 slide)

- CNMI has no current operationalized definition of dropout.
- Definitions from research.
  - Push: students leave because of factors from within the school that discourage them from continuing.
  - Pull: students leave because of internal factors that happen outside of school.
  - Fall: students disengage from school gradually as supports decline and academic performance decreases.

IV. Dropout Fact & Figures (1 slide)

- Review the dropout rate at the national level.
- Review the dropout rate of CNMI.
- Compare general education and special education dropout rates.

V. Process of Disengagement (1 slide)

- Provide information on the gradual disengagement of student which leads to dropping out of school.
- Activity: Precipitating Factors
  - Participants work in groups to brainstorm factors within school and outside of school that contribute to possible dropout.

VI. Predictors of Dropout (1 slide)

- Low Academic Performance
  - Reading
  - Math

- Attendance & Truancy
- 9th Grade Retention

VII. A Closer Look: Examining dropout phenomena through the conceptual framework of constructivism. (1 slide)

- Examining dropout phenomena through the Constructivist conceptual framework.
- Constructivism consists of five basic tenets to learning: (1) learning is shaped by the meaning learners attribute to their experiences; (2) problem solving is an opportunity for learning; (3) learning occurs as a social activity in which learners actively participate; (4) as learners engage in activities they are also reflecting, assessing and providing feedback on their learning; and (5) the responsibility for learning rests on the learner. Constructivist theorists posit that students who perceive their learning as positive will have a greater level of engagement and motivation to learn (Alt, 2015).

VIII. Findings from the Study (6 Slides)

- Family Vs. School Belonging
    - According to Doll, Eslam, and Walters (2013), disconnection of special needs students from peers and teachers was reported to have contributed to the decision to drop out. Students with learning disabilities who perceive their relationships in the school setting as supportive are likely to stay in school because of these positive social bonds (Doren, Murray, & Gau, 2014).
- Engagement & Resilience
    - Social interactions are important to the development of the human condition (Kim, 2014) and educators who lean towards engagement as a predictor of graduation success have implemented efforts to create a sense of connection with the learning environment and customized intervention to address the dropout problem (Hep

- Sanghvi and Kadkol (2016) argued that students with disabilities are given limited opportunities to practice making decisions or taking chances. Sanghvi and Kadkol (2016) stated that developing critical decision-making skills are essential to building a sense of self-determination and resilience. The concept of resilience as related to dropout prevention highlights the relationship between psychosocial well-being in the face of crisis and positive academic outcomes (Lessard, Butler-Kisber, Fortin, & Marcotte, 2014), since engagement plays such an important role in the academic success of children with disabilities (Chou et al., 2015). pen et al., 2015).

- Advocacy
  - For students with learning disorders, parent involvement in school is also a predictor of student success (Doren, Murray, & Gau, 2014). In disengaged families, where relationships were poor and expectations low, student outcomes were similarly low and contributed to dropout risk (Lessard, Butler-Kisber, Fortin, & Marcotte, 2014).
  - Furthermore, the teacher-advocates in the study took on the responsibility as supporters and refused to give up on students they engaged with (Keamy, 2015). Students who did not feel that they had the support of teachers or authority figures in their schools, according to Doll, Eslami and Walters (2013), did not merely choose to drop out, but felt they were pushed out.

IX. CNMI Research Findings (5 slides)

- How special education dropouts in the CNMI perceived their learning experience.

X. Evidence-based Interventions (4 slides)

- Early Warning Systems
  - Identifying students at risk early
  - Providing alternate pathways to graduation

- Support for Teacher PD
    - Strengthening teacher preparation programs
    - Policy Recommendations for Certification of General Education and Special Education Teachers
    - Increasing Collaboration (lessons learned from SSIP)
- Advocacy for Students with Disabilities
    - Alternate Pathways to a Regular Diploma
    - Course offerings and partnerships
    - Resiliency and life skills

XI. Next Steps (1 slide)

- Review of day's work, overview of day two and evaluation

Day 2

Session 2: A Closer Look at Local and School Level Data

8:00 – 12:00 am

I. The purpose of the second session is to provide opportunities for school teams engage in strategies to review and make decision based on student data. (3 slides)

- Outcomes:
    - School teams will review their dropout rates and identify trends.
    - School teams will review findings from study and reflect on school practices.
- The goal for school teams to build a culture of data inquiry.
    - School teams will brainstorm interventions based on findings from study and current practices and policies.
        - Think, Pair, Share: What findings resonate with you? What can you do to address the issue? What resources will you need?
        - Group sharing: Share with whole group to lay foundation for the identification of interventions.
        - From group sharing, facilitator will list down reflections and work with group to identify commonalities which will be used as a launching point for the next activity.

II. Local Data – What the CNMI general and special education data shows about dropout problem (1 slide)

III. Data Inquiry: School level review of specific data over a 3-year span. (9 slides)

- Graduation rates
- Dropout rates
- For all
- For students with disabilities

- Attendance rates
- Discipline rates
- Parent engagement factors
- Math scores
- Reading Scores

IV. Group Discussion: Beginning action planning based on school level data.

V. Homework: Reading articles provided that demonstrate implementation of effective interventions for students with disabilities.

VI. Recap of Day 2: Review day 2 outcomes, overview of day 3 and evaluation.

Day 3

Session 3: Action Planning for Intervention and Policy Recommendation

8:00 – 12:00 am

I. The purpose of the third session is to provide intentional opportunities for school teams to work together in order to create a model of implementation that will address the dropout problem. (1 slide)

- School teams will take a deeper look at the prior day's selected intervention program and create a logic model.
- School teams will identify needs for support at the district level in terms of governance, facility, materials and training.

II. Video: Special Education Programs that Seek to Improve the Dropout Problem YouTube video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JzQh1oaBf1U

III. What Successful Schools Have Done (3 slides)

- Jigsaw activity: Each group will be given an article that explains what schools who have successfully addressed the dropout rate for students with disabilities have done.
    - Each group will list and explain the interventions and programs implemented from their article.
    - Whole group: Whole group will reach consensus of EBPs that could be implemented in the district to address the dropout problem for students with disabilities.

IV. Theory of Action: The goal for the last session is to produce an action plan for the school and district. (3 slides)

- School teams will fill out a handout for theory of action and implementation plan.
    - Identify program for implementation and data tracking
    - Make recommendation for teacher training and supports, including certification policy.
- Outcomes: Action Plan for Intervention

    - Theory of action
- Logic Model (8 slides)
    - Using the Theory of Action as a guide, the group will create a logic model based on five main components:
        - Early warning systems
        - Student academic support
        - Student behavior support
        - Teacher certification and professional development
        - Policy recommendations

V. Monitoring and Evaluation Plans (1 slide)

- In order to effect meaningful change, school teams will identify:
    - Core representative who will work work with an established professional learning circle to monitor progress of goals.
    - School level collaborative teams who will
        - monitor implementation at the building level
        - provide ongoing support to general education and special education teachers and staff

VI. Wrap Up Professional Development: Review 3 day objectives and share reflections.

Daily Evaluation Form

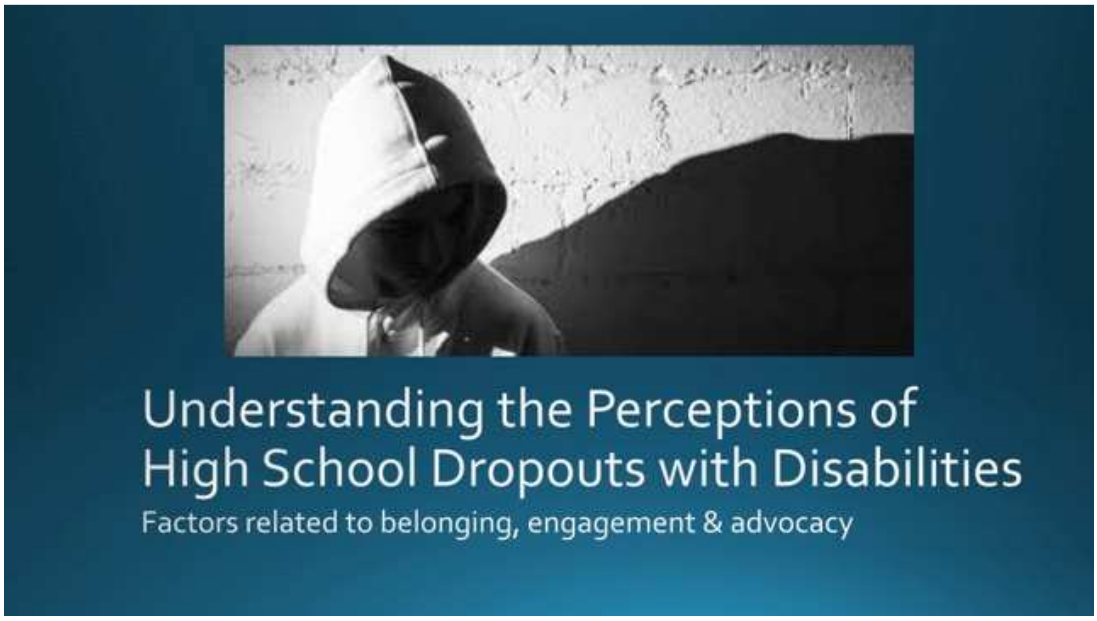
What three things surprised, resonated with or challenged me today?

What two ideas seemed the most promising and realistic?

What is one thing that I can do when I return to my school in order to help students with disabilities feel cared for, be successful and stay on track to graduate?

PowerPoint Slides

The slides that will be used during the presentation are attached below.



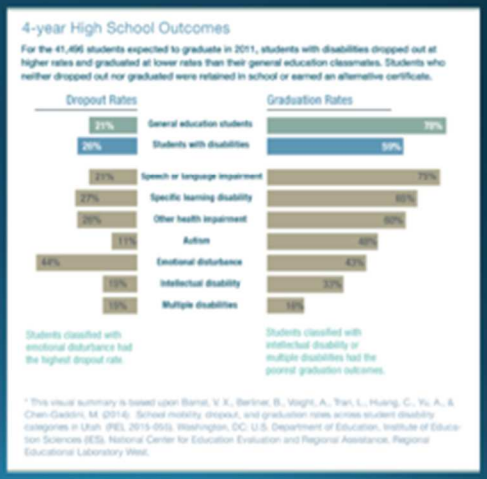
Outcomes

1. Focus group will demonstrate understanding of the contributing factors that lead to student dropout within subgroup of students with disabilities.
2. Focus group will create an action plan for interventions to address the dropout risks at the school level.
3. Focus group will create an action plan for policy recommendations to address the dropout risks at the district level.

From the Voices of Students with Disabilities

Dropout Facts & Figures

- According to the U.S. Department of Education, the dropout rate for students with disabilities is 50% that of their nondisabled peers.
- According the the CNMI Annual Performance Report, the dropout rate for students with disabilities has increased from 2% in 2013 to 9% in SY 2016.
- The general education dropout rate in the same year was 2%.
- Negative outcomes:
  - Reduced income potential
  - Lower standard of living
  - Reliance on government
  - Higher incarceration
- Addressing the dropout crisis would increase employment rates and help create a stronger, more vibrant community.



Process of disengagement

- Disengagement starts in elementary school.
- Not one isolated event but a series of adverse events.

Activity: Precipitating Factors

1. Explain the concept of precipitating factors
2. Brainstorm reasons that students might be affected academically and personally within and outside of school.
3. Have participants work in two groups, one for school factors and one for personal factors.
4. Have each group demonstrate the effects of each precipitating factor using a balloon.

Predictors

- Low Academic Performance
  - Reading
  - Math
- Attendance & Truancy
  - More than 10 days
  - Did not return for 10th grade
  - 9th Grade Retention
- Behavior Issues
  - High rate of discipline referrals
  - Low peer and teacher engagement

Take a Closer Look

Examining dropout phenomena through the Constructivist conceptual framework and the big ideas of belonging, engagement and advocacy.

Constructivism consists of five basic tenets to learning:

(1) learning is shaped by the meaning learners attribute to their experiences;

(2) problem solving is an opportunity for learning;

(3) learning occurs as a social activity in which learners actively participate;

(4) as learners engage in activities they are also reflecting, assessing and providing feedback on their learning; and

(5) the responsibility for learning rests on the learner. Constructivist theorists posit that students who perceive their learning as positive will have a greater level of engagement and motivation to learn

(Alt, 2015).

A Sense of Belonging

According to Doll, Eslam, and Walters (2013), disconnection of special needs students from peers and teachers was reported to have contributed to the decision to drop out. Students with learning disabilities who perceive their relationships in the school setting as supportive are likely to stay in school because of these positive social bonds (Doren, Murray, & Gau, 2014).

Findings from the Study on Belonging

- 6 out of 10 dropouts interviewed could not identify one teacher or staff member who they could talk to about their problems.
- When asked if there was at least one staff member or teacher who personally cared about their success, 6 out of 10 stated no or they were unsure.
- Policies in place made it difficult for students to re-enroll
  - "the vice principal didn't want me to continue going back to school. So, I stopped."
  - "they made me leave school".

Engagement & Resilience

- Social interactions are important to the development of the human condition (Kim, 2014) and educators who lean towards engagement as a predictor of graduation success have implemented efforts to create a sense of connection with the learning environment and customized intervention to address the dropout problem (Hep
- Sanghvi and Kadkol (2016) argued that students with disabilities are given limited opportunities to practice making decisions or taking chances. Sanghvi and Kadkol (2016) stated that developing critical decision-making skills are essential to building a sense of self-determination and resilience. The concept of resilience as related to dropout prevention highlights the relationship between psychosocial well-being in the face of crisis and positive academic outcomes (Lessard, Butler-Kisber, Fortin, & Marcotte, 2014), since engagement plays such an important role in the academic success of children with disabilities (Chou et al., 2015). pen et al., 2015).

Engagement & Resilience

Engagement and resilience are tied to feelings that a positive learning environment in turn increases student engagement and therefore willingness to learn (Alt, 2015). Students with disabilities who experience emotional and behavioral connectedness are likely to remain in school longer and graduate. Of the ten participants interviewed, most shared feelings that they were disconnected from learning because they had difficulty navigating the learning environment.

- "When I was in school I slack of and be behind then started staying in the same grade so I always cut class".
- "I just wasn't succeeding, if I would have stayed there I would have, taken you know, ten years to graduate high school".
- "Yeah, if there wasn't like, like, like the classes, there's like different groups right, like, the different age, like how, like, like they're just different like, in many ways but, you're not expecting to gain those people, like you can't learn much, like people, like, they're crazy, wild, like, you don't put much effort in, like they just rather like, talk down to the teacher like, or just talk to each other. "

Advocacy

- For students with learning disorders, parent involvement in school is also a predictor of student success (Doren, Murray, & Gau, 2014). In disengaged families, where relationships were poor and expectations low, student outcomes were similarly low and contributed to dropout risk (Lessard, Butler-Kisber, Fortin, & Marcotte, 2014).
- Furthermore, the teacher-advocates in the study took on the responsibility as supporters and refused to give up on students they engaged with (Keamy, 2015). Students who did not feel that they had the support of teachers or authority figures in their schools, according to Doll, Eslami and Walters (2013), did not merely choose to drop out, but felt they were pushed out.

Advocacy

Having a teacher or family member advocate is a strong indicator for student success (Doll, Eslami & Walters, 2013). In the interviews, former students shared that they perceived more support from family members than school staff.

- 3 out of 10 participants shared that they perceived more support from family members than school staff.
- Participants shared that they felt the school didn't do enough to
  - Keep kids from skipping class
  - Help students with problems outside of school that affected their learning
  - Make learning relevant to what they would be doing when they left high school.

What is a Dropout?

CNMI Definitions – No formalize definition of dropout.

Definitions from research

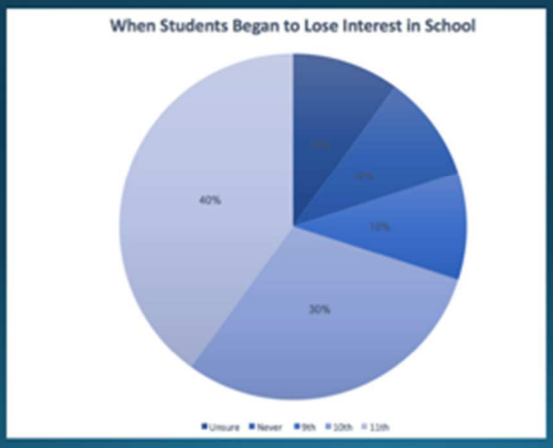
Push : students leave because of factors from within the school that discourage them from continuing.

Pull: students leave because of internal factors that happen outside of school.

Fall: students disengage from school gradually as supports decline and academic performance decreases.

Ritchotte, J. A., & Graefe, A. K. (n.d). An Alternate Path: The Experience of High-Potential Individuals Who Left School. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, *61*(4), 275-289.

CNMI Research Findings



Reasons for Leaving

Open Codes	Enumeration of Open Code Appearance	Sub-theme
Needed to care for a family member or guardian.	2	Obligation to family unit
Needed to stay home and help around household.	1	
School turned student away because of age or lack of credit.	6	Policy prevented enrollment
Believed it would be too hard to catch up.	2	Self-Efficacy
Feelings of low self-esteem.	2	
Instructional Pace was too fast	2	Learning Environment
Overcrowded classrooms	4	
Being overlooked	4	
Was passed even when not learning	2	

Level of Belonging

Interviewee Response	Was there at least one family member or guardian you could confide in and talk to about things?	Was there at least one family member or guardian who encouraged you to go to school and graduate?	Did your parent or guardian's work schedule prevent him or her from knowing about what was happening with you at school?
P1	X	X	-
P2	X	X	-
P3	X	X	-
P4	X	X	-
P5	X	X	-
P6	-	X	-
P7	X	X	X
P8	X	X	-
P9	X	X	-
P10	-	-	X
Level of family belonging	High	High	Low

X= Yes
- = No
n/a = Not sure

The Idea of Belonging

Interviewee Response	Was there any one teacher or staff member in school who personally cared about your success?	Was there any one teacher or staff member at school who you could talk to about your school problems?	Was there any one teacher or staff member at school who you could talk to about your personal issues?
P1	X	X	-
P2	-	-	-
P3	X	-	-
P4	X	-	-
P5	n/a	-	-
P6	X	X	X
P7	X	X	-
P8	-	-	X
P9	X	n/a	X
P10	n/a	-	-
Level of school belonging	High	Low	Low

X= Yes
- = No
n/a = Not sure

What Schools Did and Didn't Do Enough Of

Didn't Do Enough
Keep students from skipping class
Maintain discipline in the classroom
Make school interesting and relevant
Help students feel safe from violence
Help students with problems outside the classroom that affected their schoolwork. (8/10)
Help students when they had trouble learning or understanding the material being taught in their classes
Help students believe they could succeed

- Some students dropped out of school because the family unit was important to them, however most shared that they were not allowed to re-enroll because of policies regarding age and lack of credits.
- 8/10 either did not understand the resources available to them such as study skills class or reported that they were not helpful.
- 50% of participants said that they would still have dropped out of school even after learning about the expectations of the work world.
- 8/10 agreed that a lack of a diploma was preventing them from getting the kind of work they desired.
- 7/10 still desired to obtain a high school diploma after dropping out.

What School Could Do to Make a Difference

Difference	No difference/Not Sure
Providing more apprenticeships, internships and other work-related activities so school becomes more relevant to what students will do they graduate	Making the school schedule more flexible and offering classes in the evenings or at night. (4&4)
Having parents and guardians make sure that kids go to school every. (8/10)	
Having teachers who could make the class material more relevant and interesting. (9/10)	
Having a teacher or other adult to talk to about school, life, or anything else. (6/10)	
Increasing supervision during the school day to ensure that students attend classes instead of hanging out in the hall or leaving school grounds. (7/10)	
Creating rules and enforcing punishments for students who skip school or leave school during the day. (5/10)	
Having smaller classes with more individual instruction from teachers. (6/10)	

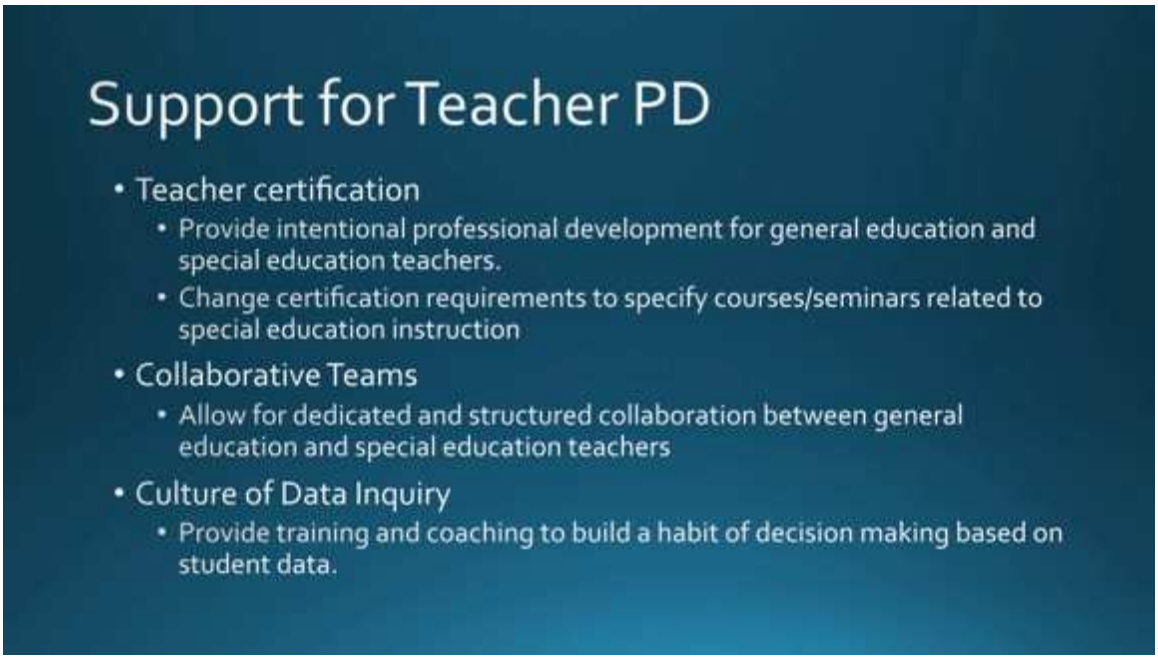
EVIDENCE BASED INTERVENTIONS

Possible Solutions	Strategies that Work	Evidence Based Programs
Alternative Diploma	Utilize data system to identify individual students at risk.	APEX – Achievement in Dropout Prevention and Excellence
Alternative Route to Regular Diploma	Assign adult advocates to at risk students.	Check & Connect
Change course structure to support individual students needs.	Provide targeted academic support and enrichment to improve academic performance.	MTSS – Multi-Tiered Systems of Support
Implement graduation planning software (Naviance)	Implement programs to improve resiliency and social/life skills.	Career Academics
Creating structure to identify, prevent and re-capture dropouts.	Provide relevant instruction to engage students in learning and skills for college and career readiness.	Talent Development High Schools

Early Warning Systems – 9th Grade is critical

Since most students reported losing interest in the 10th & 11th grade, tracking student progress during freshman year is an effective way to monitor progress and keep students "on track" to graduate.

- Academic Indicators
  - Course completion
  - Academic performance and grades
- Engagement
  - Attendance
  - Peer engagement
  - Class engagement
- Advocacy
  - At least one adult to rely on who can support them and advocate for them.
  - Support students who require more than four years to graduate.
  - Build in a variety of interventions which include tutoring, mentorship and extended year offerings


Support for Teacher PD
• Teacher certification
• Provide intentional professional development for general education and special education teachers.
• Change certification requirements to specify courses/seminars related to special education instruction
• Collaborative Teams
• Allow for dedicated and structured collaboration between general education and special education teachers
• Culture of Data Inquiry
• Provide training and coaching to build a habit of decision making based on student data.

Advocacy for Students with Disabilities
• Alternate Pathways to a Regular Diploma
• Counselors and teachers work to build career pathways that are individualized for student needs.
• Build course offerings and/or identify partnerships to build vocational skills
• Teach resiliency and life skills to help students transition to career or post-secondary.

Next Steps

1. Review objectives and outcomes for day 1
2. Overview of Day 2: A closer look at local and school data.
3. Evaluation

What three things surprised, resonated with or challenged me today?
What two ideas seemed the most promising and realistic?
What is one thing that I can do when I return to my school in order to help students with disabilities feel cared for, be successful and stay on track to graduate?

Day Two: A Closer Look at Local and School Data

Purpose: to provide opportunities for school teams engage in strategies to review and make decision based on student data.

Goal: for school teams to build a culture of data inquiry.

Outcomes:

- School teams will review their dropout rates and identify trends.
- School teams will review findings from study and reflect on school practices.

Brainstorm Interventions

- Think, Pair, Share: with a partner from your school, review the findings and the evidence based interventions from the previous day. Ask each other the following questions.

1. What findings resonate with you?
2. What can you do to address the issue?
3. What resources will you need?

- Group sharing: Share with whole group to lay foundation for the identification of interventions.

Identifying Commonalities

- What findings were commonly discussed in all groups?
- What actions did each group propose to take in order to address the findings?
- What resources were identified as needed to carry out interventions?

A Look at the Local Data

- **General Education Dropout Data**
- 1.84% of general education dropout SY 2015-16 (64/3460)
- 1.77% of general education dropout SY 2016-17 (60/3390)
  - 9th Grade: 1% (22)
  - 10th Grade: 1% (18)
  - 11th Grade: 2% (20)
  - 12th Grade: 2% (10)
- **Special Education Dropout Data**
- 8.77% of special education students dropped out of SY 2015-16 (28/319).
- 5.37% of special education students dropped out of SY 2016-17 (18/335).
- Highest percentage of Sped Dropouts in the last five years are freshman and sophomores at over 60%.
- **Active High School SARC cases SY 16-17**
- 30 active cases
- 5 referred for action

Cooperative Education - 202 students enrolled in Fall 2017 (I & II)

Career & Technical Education
- Teacher Academy Academy (current)
- Automotive Technology Academy (current)
- Health Occupancy Academy
- Hospitality & Tourism Academy
- Information Technology Academy
- Culinary Arts Academy

Dropouts now at NMTI

Data Inquiry: School Level

- In your school teams, review your school specific data for the last 3 years:
  - Graduation rates
  - Dropout rates
    - For all
    - For students with disabilities
  - Attendance rates
  - Discipline rates
  - Parent engagement factors
  - Math scores
  - Reading Scores

Discuss: Graduation Data

- What percent of students graduated on time?
- How many early graduates were there?
- How many students with disabilities graduated on time?
- Was there a disparity between your general education and special education graduates?
- Identify patterns in graduation for the last 3 years.

Discuss: Dropout Data

- What percentage of students dropped out in your school?
- Among the total percentage, how many were students with disabilities?
- What were their categories and percentages?
- Is there a gap between your general education and special education dropout rate? What is it?

Data Recording

On the chart paper provided, each school will fill out their graduation and dropout data .

Discuss: Student Performance

- State Assessment
  - What percentage of your students performed at or above target on state assessments?
  - In Math?
  - In Reading?
  - Were the performance between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers consistent?

Discuss: Attendance

- What is your daily average attendance?
  - Is it different for students with disabilities? How so?
- Has it stayed consistent over time?
  - What trends do you see?
- What is your district's attendance policy?
  - How is it enforced?
- What are your district's initiatives to address attendance concerns?
  - Who is responsible?

Discuss: Discipline

- What is the data on discipline referrals in your school?
- What types of disciplinary actions were taken in the last year?
  - Suspensions
  - Expulsions
  - In-school suspensions
  - Other (explain)
- Is there equity in the data between students with disabilities and their general education peers?

Discuss: Student Supports

- What types of behavior supports exist in your district? School?
- What supports exist for students with disabilities?
- What role does your school counselor play?
- Is there a district character development program implemented? School?
- Who conducts functional behavior assessments?
- How are they used by teachers?

Data Recording

On the chart paper provided, each school will fill out their attendance, student performance, discipline and behavior support data .

Activity: Group Discussion

- Based on the data provided by each school, what things stand out in each category?
- What possible actions can the district take to address the identified concerns?
- What possible school actions can be taken to address each category?
- What further information needs to be provided to paint an accurate picture?

Homework

Each school team will be given an article to read to prepare for the next day's work session. They will be expected to read the article and be prepared to share their reflections.

Articles will be based on peer reviewed works of schools who have implemented successful interventions to address the dropout rate of students with disabilities.

Recap of Day Two

1. Review objectives and outcomes for day 1
2. Overview of Day 2: A closer look at local and school data.
3. Evaluation

What three things surprised, resonated with or challenged me today?
What two ideas seemed the most promising and realistic?
What is one thing that I can do when I return to my school in order to help students with disabilities feel cared for, be successful and stay on track to graduate?

Day Three: Action Planning for Intervention and Policy Recommendation

Purpose: is to provide intentional opportunities for school teams to work together in order to create a model of implementation that will address the dropout problem.

- School teams will take a deeper look at the prior day's selected intervention program and create a logic model.
- School teams will identify needs for support at the district level in terms of governance, facility, materials and training.

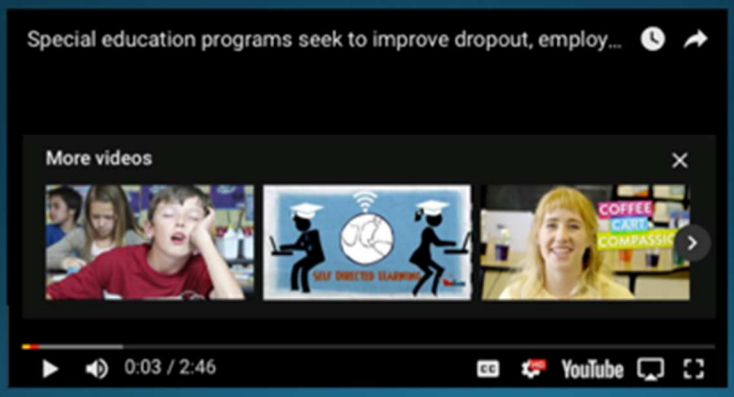
Goal: to produce an action plan for the school and district.

- School teams will fill out a handout for theory of action and implementation plan.
  - Identify program for implementation and data tracking
  - Make recommendation for teacher training and supports, including certification policy.

Outcomes: Action Plan for Intervention

- Theory of action
- Logic Model

Changing the Trajectory for Students with Disabilities



Jigsaw Activity

- Each school team will their assigned article about how districts addressed the special education dropout problem.
- Within the group, each member will be assigned a portion of the reading and will become the "expert".
- Each member will have approximately 20 minutes to review the article and summarize the content.
- After 20 minutes, the group will share their assigned pieces with one another.

Jigsaw Activity

- After each group has had a chance to share their article within their team, each team will select one reporter who will share with the whole group.
- The whole group will discuss the interventions and list them down.
- The group will then identify which interventions could be promising to implement in the school district.

Discussion

- Compare the interventions identified in Day 2 with the interventions implemented in the articles.
  - Were any of the issues in the articles similar to those faced by school teams? Which?
  - Were any of the interventions in the articles similar to what schools proposed? Which?
  - Were any of the resources that schools identified similar to those of the articles? How were resources met?

Creating a Theory of Action

Whole group will create a theory of action based on the following :

1. Early warning systems
2. Student academic support
3. Student behavior support
4. Teacher certification and professional development
5. Policy recommendations

Sample Theory of Action

Using "if" and "then" statements. I do, we do, you do exercise.

Example: I do

IF school counselors worked with all 9th grade teachers to identify students who needed support to stay on track to graduate.

THEN general education and special education teachers could provide intentional academic support to individual students.

We do: Facilitator will start the prompt and members of the group will complete it.

IF teacher preparation program…. THEN ….

You do: Groups will create their own theories of action statements.

Building Consensus

The whole group will reach consensus on a unified theory of action to be used to create a logic model for intervention.

Logic Model

Using the Theory of Action as a guide, the group will create a logic model based on five main components:

1. Early warning systems
2. Student academic support
3. Student behavior support
4. Teacher certification and professional development
5. Policy recommendations

Template: Facilitator will model how to use the template. Groups will then work together to complete an assigned template.

Activities *What actions will be taken?*	Outputs *What are the tangible products of the actions?*	Short Term Outcomes *What changes do we expect in the short term?*	Intermediate Outcomes *What changes do we want to happen as a result of that?*	Long Term Outcomes *What changes do we hope to see over time?*

Logic Model: Early Warning Systems

Team 1 will be assigned to Early Warning Systems and will complete the logic model template taking the following into consideration:

1. Research and local findings
2. Evidence based interventions
3. Group work and theory of action

4. Team will share their completed logic model with the whole group.

Logic Model: Student Academic Support

Team 2 will be assigned to Student Academic Support and will complete the logic model template taking the following into consideration:

1. Research and local findings
2. Evidence based interventions
3. Group work and theory of action

4. Team will share their completed logic model with the whole group.

Logic Model: Student Behavior Support

Team 3 will be assigned to Student Behavior Support and will complete the logic model template taking the following into consideration:

1. Research and local findings
2. Evidence based interventions
3. Group work and theory of action

4. Team will share their completed logic model with the whole group.

Logic Model: Teacher Certification and Professional Development

Team 4 will be assigned Teacher Certification and Professional Development and will complete the logic model template taking the following into consideration:

1. Research and local findings
2. Evidence based interventions
3. Group work and theory of action

4. Team will share their completed logic model with the whole group.

Logic Model : Policy Recommendations

Team 5 will be assigned to Policy Recommendagtions and will complete the logic model template taking the following into consideration:

1. Research and local findings
2. Evidence based interventions
3. Group work and theory of action

4. Team will share their completed logic model with the whole group.

Next Steps: Monitoring & Evaluation

- In order to effect meaningful change, school teams will identify:
  - Core representative who will work work with an established professional learning circle to monitor progress of goals.
  - School level collaborative teams who will
    - monitor implementation at the building level
    - provide ongoing support to general education and special education teachers and staff
- A schedule will be created for on-going professional development to monitor the progress of the action plan/logic model.

Wrap Up Professional Development

1. Review objectives and outcomes for Day 3
2. Share reflections on 3 day professional development.
3. Evaluation

What three things surprised, resonated with or challenged me today?
What two ideas seemed the most promising and realistic?
What is one thing that I can do when I return to my school in order to help students with disabilities feel cared for, be successful and stay on track to graduate?

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Instructions:

1. Introduce yourself to the participant.
2. Review of the purpose of the study and informed consent form.
3. Explain that the interview will be audiotaped.
4. Request written consent to conduct the interview.
5. Begin with an informal question that sets the tone as welcoming.

Accommodations:

1. Provide adequate wait time.
2. Repeat questions as needed or requested by the participant.
3. Define terminology as needed or requested by the participant.
4. Use prompts as needed to assist participants in clarifying their thoughts.

Interview Questions I'm going to read you some questions about some people's high school experiences, and for each one, please tell me whether it applied to you or not when you were at school.

READ EACH ITEM: BELONGING	Yes	No	Not Sure
1. Was there at least one teacher or staff member at school who personally cared about your success?	1	2	99
2. Was there at least one teacher or staff member at school you could talk to about your school problems?	1	2	99
3. Was there at least one teacher or staff member at school you could talk to about your personal issues?	1	2	99
4. Was there at least one family member or guardian you could confide in and talk to about things?	1	2	99
5. Was there at least one family member or guardian who encouraged you to go to school and graduate?	1	2	99
6. Did your parent or guardian's work schedule prevent him or her from knowing about what was happening with you at school?	1	2	99

7. Let's talk about your decision to leave school. In your own words, why did you leave school?

_____

_____

_____

[[Use the statements below, as needed, to help someone clarify their thoughts...]]

I missed too much school and couldn't catch up…
I had to get a job and make money and couldn't attend school at the same time…
My friends didn't care about school. I didn't either…
My classes weren't interesting or relevant to me…
I had to take care of a family member…
I had too much freedom and not enough rules…
I became a parent…
I was failing in school…
I got in trouble at school… disciplinary problems…
I didn't get along with the other students…
I didn't get along with the teachers…
I didn't feel safe at school…
I had a hard time keeping up with the class work and homework…
I got in trouble with the law…

What grade were you in when you started to lose interest in school? **[[… to clarify, when did you stop going to class regularly or caring about how you did in school?]]**

Elementary school.....6
Seventh grade.....7
Eighth grade.....8
Ninth grade/freshman in high school.....9
Tenth grade/sophomore in high school.....10
Eleventh grade/junior in high school.....11
Twelfth grade/senior in high school.....12
Not sure/refused.....99

8. Now I'm going to read you some ideas that people have had to encourage high school students to stay in school. For each one, please tell me whether you think that it would help students' chances of staying in school or would not make much of a difference.

READ EACH ITEM: ENGAGEMENT	Would Improve Students' Chances	Would Not Make Much Difference	Not Sure

A. Making the school schedule more flexible and offering classes in the evenings or at night…	1	2	99
B. Providing more apprenticeships, internships and other work-related activities so school becomes more relevant to what students will do they graduate…	1	2	99
C. Having parents and guardians make sure that kids go to school every day…	1	2	99
D. Having teachers who could make the class material more relevant and interesting…	1	2	99
E. Having a teacher or other adult to talk to about school, life, or anything else…	1	2	99
F. Increasing supervision during the school day to ensure that students attend classes instead of hanging out in the hall or leaving school grounds…	1	2	99
G. Creating rules and enforcing punishments for students who skip school or leave school during the day…	1	2	99
H. Having smaller classes with more individual instruction from teachers…	1	2	99

9. Do you feel that our school did enough to **(READ ITEM)**, or do you feel that the school did not do enough to **(READ ITEM)**?

READ EACH ITEM: ADVOCACY	Yes, School Did Enough	No, School Did Not Do Enough	Not Sure
A. Keep students from skipping class…	1	2	99
B. Maintain discipline in the classroom…	1	2	99
C. Make school interesting and relevant…	1	2	99
D. Help students feel safe from violence…	1	2	99
E. Help students with problems outside the classroom that affected their schoolwork…	1	2	99
F. Help students when they had trouble learning or understanding the material being taught in their classes…	1	2	99
G. Help students pass from grade to grade…	1	2	99
H. Help students believe they could succeed…	1	2	99

10. Was there anything else that our school might have done differently to make you stay enrolled?

_____

_____

OTHER QUESTIONS RELATED TO BELONGING, ENGAGEMENT AND ADVOCACY

11. Did you participate in extracurricular activities such as sports, clubs, band, or other activities at school? (Belonging)

Yes, participated in extracurricular activities 1
No, did not participate in extracurricular activities 2
Not sure.....99

If not, why not?

12. When you were in school, how aware would you say your parents or guardians were about what was going on with things like your school attendance and grades—very aware, fairly aware, just somewhat aware, or not aware at all? (Engagement)

Very aware.....1
Fairly aware 2
Not aware.....3
Not sure.....99

13. Knowing what you know today about the expectations of the work world, if you had it to do over again, would you leave school, or stay in school?

Would leave school.....1
Would stay in school.....2
Not sure.....99

14. Are you currently employed? **(IF "CURRENTLY EMPLOYED," ASK:)** What type of work do you do? **(RECORD BELOW UNDER "OTHER.")**

(IF "NOT CURRENTLY EMPLOYED," ASK:) Are you unemployed and looking for work; are you unemployed because you are taking classes; or are you just not working now?

Unemployed, looking for work.....1
Unemployed, taking classes.....2
Unemployed, other (Voluntary).....3
Not sure.....99

Other:

15. Is your lack of a high school diploma keeping you from getting the kind of work you want?

Yes, lack of diploma is a problem 1
No, lack of diploma is not a problem.....2
Not sure.....99

16. **A** Are you interested in returning to school to finish your diploma or in getting a GED?

Yes, interested in returning to finish a diploma.....1
Yes, interested in getting a GED.....2
No, not interested.....3
Not sure.....99

If "yes" or "not sure" to Question 12, what would it take to get you to come back to school?

[[Use the statements below, as needed, to help someone clarify their thoughts...]]

Transportation to school

Flexible school hours
Child care while I'm in school
Being able to take some classes from home on the computer
A way to go to school and earn money at the same time
Being able to get high school and college credit at the same time

17. Did your study skills (resource) class(es) help you in high school?

Yes 1
No.....2
Didn't have any.....99

If "No," why not?

_____

_____

_____

_____

18. Would having a summer school program or after-school classes to recover credit for failed classes have changed your mind about dropping out of school?

Yes 1
No.....2
Not sure.....99

19. What other types of classes, if they were offered, would have made you want to stay in school?

Yes 1
No.....2
Not sure.....99

END OF INTERVIEW

Thank you for answering these questions for me.