

# Positive Youth Development Among Young People Who Leave High School Without Graduating

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## KEYWORDS

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

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## RESEARCH SUMMARY

### DESCRIPTION

The researchers who conducted this study sought to understand the extent to which youth who leave school early exhibit competencies necessary for positive developmental outcomes. The study shows that focusing on deficits of young people who leave school without obtaining a diploma offers an incomplete and limited understanding of their capacities and strengths. When these capacities are recognized and well understood they can help provide both policy and practice supports to re-engage non-graduates in working towards educational outcomes. The findings demonstrate that youth who leave school early should not be viewed as deficient. Young people who do not complete high school possess skills and competencies that are typically associated with academically successful high school graduates. These competencies help them achieve goals that are meaningful to them and salient in their immediate contexts.

### METHODOLOGY

Participants were recruited from organizations supporting youth in urban American neighbourhoods with high levels of poverty. Youth were invited to participate if they were under 25, had left school without graduating, and had stayed unengaged for some period of time. The amount of risk factors in their lives was not considered. A total of 203 youth between the ages of 18 and 25 participated. The participants were primarily African American and Hispanic, and re-engaged on a path towards getting their GED.

27 group interviews were conducted, with each group having between 3 and 12 participants and two facilitators. The facilitators first established rapport and built trust, then asked each participant to share their personal narrative, including their reasons for leaving school, reasons for returning if they had since returned, and the barriers and opportunities they experienced. 27 personal narratives were selected for final analysis.

The researchers analyzed the data using a three-stage interpretive phenomenological approach: description (coding with consideration of the full narrative), thematization (determining the themes emerging from the codes), and interpretation (organizing and interpreting the themes). When developing the codes, the

authors utilized the 5 core competencies of social and emotional learning of the CASEL framework (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making).

The limitations of this study are as follows: a) the study focused only on youth who had re-engaged, b) the list of competencies in the CASEL framework is not comprehensive, c) the study only included low-income, urban, re-engaged youth and thus the results are not generalizable to other cohorts of youth, and d) relying on retrospective accounts prevents the authors from knowing if the competencies discussed were present at the time of leaving school or developed later.

### KEY FINDINGS

Despite adverse life experiences and the decision not to stay in school, participants' narratives exhibited evidence of social and emotional competencies. Evidence of self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making was present in 100% of the narratives. 95.6% of the narratives demonstrated evidence of social awareness, 88.9% showed relationship skills, and 81.5% exhibited goal-setting. While the youth in this study did not use these competencies in pursuit of academic goals, they used them effectively in navigating their immediate and often toxic and highly challenging contexts in order to achieve important personal goals. This demonstrates that youth who have left school without graduating exhibit social and emotional competencies which have typically only been identified in school-going youth. These results are consistent with prior research on youth resourcefulness in situations of risk.

### WHY THIS MATTERS

Using a Positive Youth Development perspective, the study examines the strengths of youth who leave school without graduating. It demonstrates that despite not finishing high school, the students possess key competencies necessary for positive development.

The findings support the idea that youth who leave school early have the ability to succeed if they are given opportunities to engage positively. They demonstrate that negative stereotypes often applied to early school leavers that portray them as lazy, lacking motivation, skills, or key competencies are unfair and inaccurate. Knowing that youth who chose not to stay in school also possess strengths and competencies associated with high school graduates may help catalyze social and financial capital to support youth who are considering leaving or who have already left school without graduating.

## ABOUT THIS SUMMARY

The study analyzes narratives of youth who had left school without graduating in order to determine if they exhibit social and emotional competencies. The researchers found that youth who have left school early displayed multiple competencies necessary for positive development.

The authors advise that programs and policies related to youth who leave school early should not focus only on remediation; they should recognize and build on young people's innate strengths. Programs could seek to guide youth competencies towards educational, social, or vocational goals. Interventions should also help to ameliorate the presence and effects of adverse life experiences, such as abusive relationships, taking on a caregiver role, homelessness, or community violence.

“Youth who have left school without graduating express competencies related to PYD that enable them to pursue their goals.”

Zaff, Aasland, McDermott, Carvalho, Joseph, & Pufall Jones, 2016

### RECAP

Youth who left school without graduating exhibited competencies associated with Positive Youth Development. This suggests that practitioners and policy makers can capitalize on these strengths to improve the academic and life prospects of these young people.

### APA CITATION

Zaff, J. F., Aasland, K., McDermott, E., Carvalho, A., Joseph, P., & Pufall Jones, E. (2016). Exploring positive youth development among young people who leave school without graduating high school: A focus on social and emotional competencies. *Qualitative Psychology*, 3(1), 26-45.