

Article

Exploring Sense of Belonging Among Students Enrolled in an Alternative Urban Charter School

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Abstract

Students who disengage from high school often face academic, social, and relational barriers to re-enrollment and persistence. Alternative high schools designed for dropout recovery frequently seek to address these barriers through smaller school environments, flexible programming, and intensified adult support. This two-year qualitative case study explores how students at an urban alternative charter school describe their experiences of belonging and re-engagement after previously leaving school. Data were drawn from 47 semi-structured interviews with 14 students and 2 graduates (ages 18–21; 10 of 16 male) supplemented by school observations, staff focus groups, and school documents. Using a constant comparison approach to thematic analysis, the study examines how students described differences between their alternative charter high school and their previous schooling experiences, the extent to which they perceived a sense of belonging within the school community, and how they connected these experiences to their engagement and persistence in school. Participants frequently described feeling known, supported, and socially integrated, particularly through relationships with adults, relevant curriculum, vocational programming, and community service opportunities. Students often associated these experiences with increased motivation to attend school, greater academic confidence, and a stronger sense of educational purpose. Findings suggest that belonging-related experiences may play an important role in how students interpret their re-engagement in school, while also highlighting the importance of institutional structures that support relational connection in dropout recovery settings.

Keywords: charter school; sense of belonging; dropout; graduation; alternative school; high school



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1. Introduction

Students who do not complete high school are likely to earn substantially less income, are less likely to vote, have shorter life spans, and live in poorer health, and are more likely to engage in crime and become incarcerated than those who earn a diploma (Orfield, 2006; Rumberger, 2011). The good news is that graduation rates have been rising for decades. Only four decades ago, three in ten students failed to graduate from high school. According to the [National Center for Education Statistics](https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/data/gradrates/) (2024), 87% of students graduated from high school across the United States in the 2021–2022 school year¹. However, disparities persist in major cities and among racial groups. For example, only about three out of five students in major cities graduate, and large disparities between urban and suburban district graduation rates persist (Burtrymowicz, 2015). Racial disparities also exist, with White

students graduating at a higher rate (90%) than Black (81%) or Hispanic (83%) students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

These persistent gaps help explain why dropout recovery and re-engagement efforts remain an important part of the secondary education landscape. One approach has been the development of alternative high schools designed to re-engage students who have previously dropped out or are at risk of leaving school prematurely (Rumberger, 2011). In practice, alternative high schools often emphasize personalized education and offer flexible scheduling, smaller class sizes, individualized academic support, and vocational or career-focused curricula (Aron, 2006; Wilson et al., 2011). Models range from district-administered programs to independently operated charter schools, each designed to address the unique needs and life circumstances of disengaged students.

Over the past quarter of a century, charter schools have typically been seen as a vehicle for school choice (Pendergrass & Kern, 2017), and they often represent educational alternatives for families without the means to relocate to a preferred school zone (Marshall, 2017). Ample research has explored charter schools (Bradley-Dorsey & Kingsbury, 2024; Bulkley & Fisler, 2003; Jabbar, 2015; Maranto et al., 2001; Nathan, 1996; Wohlstetter et al., 2013). However, a smaller body of work has explored nontraditional uses of the charter school framework, including charter schools that have a mission of re-engaging students who have previously dropped out of school (Lewis & Basford, 2020). Alternative charter schools oriented toward dropout recovery also tend to combine academic coursework with structures intended to support re-entry, such as intensified adult-student support, flexible pathways towards credit attainment, and opportunities for vocational preparation that connect schooling to near-term goals (Iachini et al., 2013). In many such settings, the design assumption is that students' re-engagement depends not only on instructional access, but also on whether students experience school as a place where they are known, supported, and able to envision a viable route to completion (Goodenow, 1993; Iachini et al., 2013; Lewis & Basford, 2020).

Existing research has documented relationships among school belonging, student engagement, and dropout risk (Allen et al., 2018; Goodenow, 1993; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009), while separate bodies of literature have examined alternative schools and dropout recovery models (Aron, 2006; Iachini et al., 2013; Lewis & Basford, 2020; Wilson et al., 2011). However, comparatively little qualitative research has explored how students who previously disengaged from school describe belonging-related experiences within alternative charter school settings specifically designed for re-engagement. In particular, limited attention has been paid to how students interpret relationships among belonging, relational support, school engagement, and emerging academic identity after returning to school. This study addresses this gap through a longitudinal qualitative case study of students enrolled in an urban alternative charter high school serving former dropouts and is guided by the following questions:

1. To what extent do students perceive their experiences at an alternative charter school as being different from their previous schooling experiences?
2. To what extent do students attending an alternative charter school report feeling a sense of belonging?
3. How do students describe the relationship between belonging-related experiences, school engagement, and persistence?

2. Literature Review

The current study was informed by a review of the literature on the factors associated with urban student dropout, student sense of belonging, and alternative high schools as a dropout recovery intervention. For the purposes of this paper, the term *alternative high*

school will represent a school that seeks to re-engage students who have either dropped out of school or are at risk of dropping out of school.

2.1. Dropout Factors in Urban Education

Dropping out of high school in urban education systems typically results from a complicated combination of individual and family circumstances, as well as students' day-to-day engagement with school. Prior work suggests that attendance, behavior, and course performance are strong indicators of whether students will complete high school (e.g., Neild et al., 2008). Rumberger (2011) describes student attendance as “one of the most direct and visible indicators of engagement” (p. 169). Students who miss fewer days of school are more likely to graduate (Cratty, 2012; Mac Iver & Messel, 2013; Neild et al., 2008; Parr & Bonitz, 2015; Soland, 2013), while attendance is often one of the more challenging hurdles for students who drop out and attempt to re-engage in school (Feldman et al., 2017; Marshall, 2024; Rumberger, 2011).

Disengagement is frequently gradual rather than abrupt, with increasingly infrequent attendance preceding a formal exit. Similarly, students who miss school due to behavioral issues also tend to graduate at lower rates (Cratty, 2012; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Jimerson et al., 2000; Mac Iver & Messel, 2013; Piscitello et al., 2022). Finally, while the literature is mixed on the predictive ability of standardized test scores, course grades have been more reliable predictors of high school graduation (Doren et al., 2014; Faria et al., 2017; Hughes et al., 2017; Landaud et al., 2026; Marshall, 2022a; Roderick et al., 2014). Failing grades, especially in core subjects such as Math and English, lead to diminished odds of graduation.

Several outside-of-school factors also contribute to dropout risk, including financial hardships, divorce, frequent moving, and parent disengagement (Rumberger, 2011), as well as undiagnosed learning disabilities, criminal behavior, early sexual activity, mental health issues, including anxiety and depression, and substance use (Baylis et al., 2011; DePaoli et al., 2018; Henry et al., 2012; Maynard et al., 2015; Rumberger, 2011). Peer contexts also matter; students surrounded by peers who undervalue education are more likely to discontinue schooling (Rumberger, 2011).

School- and organization-level conditions can also shape dropout risk, especially in urban contexts. District-level constraints, including inadequate funding, overcrowded classrooms, and limited access to high-quality instructional resources, can influence students' opportunities and experiences (Glennie et al., 2012). Concentrated student poverty, often measured by the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, has been consistently associated with dropout risk (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005; Werblow & Duesbery, 2009). Schoolwide patterns of retention, attendance, suspension, and dropout rates are likewise associated with an increased likelihood of student dropout (Christle et al., 2007; Zvoch, 2006). Neighborhood-level factors, including concentrated economic disadvantage, community violence, and insufficient local support services, can further shape attendance and retention (Rumberger, 2011). For students who have already left school, re-engagement carries additional hurdles. Time away can weaken connections to peers, teachers, and school environments, creating a mental barrier to returning (Ramsdal & Wynn, 2022). Past academic struggles may also undermine confidence and contribute to internalized perceptions of being a ‘failing student,’ further discouraging re-entry.

Overall, this literature underscores that dropout and re-engagement are shaped not only by individual risk factors, but also by the quality of students' relationships to school—whether they experience school as a place where they are known, supported, and able to see a viable path forward. This points to belonging and the design of school experiences as

a useful analytic lens for understanding how alternative schools seek to re-engage students who previously disengaged.

2.2. Sense of Belonging

The concept of a *sense of belonging* in educational contexts refers to students' perceptions of being accepted, valued, and supported within their school community (Allen et al., 2018). Anant (1966) defines belongingness as a "sense of personal involvement in a social system so that persons feel themselves to be an indispensable and integral part of the system" (p. 21). According to Goodenow (1993), psychological membership or belonging involves feeling personally respected and included, which significantly influences students' academic motivation and social integration. Maslow's hierarchy of needs similarly identifies belonging as a fundamental psychological need, asserting that unmet belongingness can lead to negative emotional outcomes and diminished motivation for academic achievement (Maslow, 1943).

Social identity theory suggests individuals derive part of their self-concept from group affiliations, including those within a school (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Schools fostering a positive group identity encourage students to align their behaviors with supportive academic and social norms, leading to improved motivation and academic outcomes (Haslam et al., 2009). Conversely, students lacking a sense of belonging often experience lower academic motivation, increased absenteeism, and a greater dropout risk (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). When students experience a sense of belonging at school, they are more apt to report that they like school, have a more positive self-image, and are more likely to interact with other students and adults at school (Osterman, 2023). Respectful and caring interactions with teachers and other adults in the school building are often important cornerstones of a student's sense of belonging at school (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

In this study, 'sense of belonging' is conceptualized as students' perceived experiences of being known, accepted, valued, and socially integrated within the school community (Allen et al., 2018; Goodenow, 1993). Belonging is treated as analytically distinct from related constructs such as engagement, motivation, emotional support, or school climate, although participants often described these experiences as interconnected. Rather than assuming that belonging independently determines educational outcomes, this study examines how students themselves described belonging-related experiences in relation to their engagement, attendance, persistence, and emerging academic identities within an alternative school setting.

2.3. Sense of Belonging & Academic Motivation

Several theoretical perspectives suggest that motivation is more likely to develop when students' needs for emotional connection and relatedness are met. Empirical work similarly indicates that students' valuing of education and sense of efficacy are higher when they experience comfort, familiarity, and supportive relationships within school settings (Cemalcilar, 2010; Osterman, 2023). In turn, belonging has been linked to more adaptive forms of motivation (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).

Furrer and Skinner (2003) found that students who experience belonging in learning environments report greater happiness, interest, and confidence during academic activities, whereas students who feel isolated report more anxiety, frustration, and sadness. Connell and Wellborn (1991) likewise suggested that, even when traditional motivational constructs predict achievement, belonging-related factors account for substantial variation in motivation. Students' perceived social support has also been associated with adaptive motivation and has been shown to predict grades (Roesser et al., 1996; Wentzel, 1998). Goodenow (1993) reported that perceived belonging accounted for more than one-third of the variance

in students' interest in, importance of, and value placed on academic work. This work suggests that belonging is closely linked with motivation and engagement and may help illuminate one pathway through which school experiences relate to academic functioning.

Academic identity refers to how individuals perceive themselves as learners and the extent to which educational success is incorporated into their self-concept. Prior research also suggests that school experiences can shape students' academic identities, including how they perceive themselves as learners and whether they view academic success as attainable (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Roesser et al., 1996; Wentzel, 1998). For students who have previously disengaged from school, returning to educational settings may involve reconstructing identities shaped by prior academic failure, stigma, or disconnection (Ramsdal & Wynn, 2022). For students who have experienced academic failure or disengagement, academic identities may become characterized by perceptions that success is unattainable or that school is not a place where they belong. By contrast, positive educational experiences can contribute to the development of more adaptive academic identities in which students begin to view themselves as capable learners and future graduates. In the current study, academic identity is conceptualized as participants' self-perceptions in terms of their ability to succeed in school and their emerging view of themselves as students capable of completing high school.

2.4. Alternative High Schools

Alternative schools constitute a distinct context for examining student belonging because they are typically organized to intentionally reshape the social conditions of schooling for young people who have disengaged from traditional settings (Aron, 2006; Wilson et al., 2011). Models range from district-administered programs to independently operated charter schools, each designed to address the unique needs and life circumstances of disengaged students (Wilson et al., 2011). In alternative high schools oriented toward re-engagement and dropout recovery, smaller enrollments and staffing structures can increase relational density and make it more feasible for adults to know students well, respond rapidly to emerging needs, and establish routines that convey care and accountability (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). These settings also tend to provide greater flexibility in scheduling, pacing, and curricular pathways—including vocational options and work- or service-based learning—which may increase perceived relevance and reduce the perceived mismatch students experienced in prior schools (Aron, 2006; Wilson et al., 2011). At the same time, although belonging is frequently associated with engagement, persistence, and academic functioning (Allen et al., 2018; Cemalcilar, 2010; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009), it should not be treated as a singular explanation for academic outcomes. Instead, belonging is more appropriately conceptualized as one of several interrelated processes through which school experiences may shape students' willingness to attend, participate, seek support, and sustain effort over time, especially for students for whom returning to school can pose meaningful hurdles (Ramsdal & Wynn, 2022).

The recent literature on alternative charter schools is sparse. In a pair of papers investigating an arts-based alternative school, findings suggest that the following were catalysts for student success: (1) purposeful staff recruitment and training centered on case and flexibility; (2) creating a family-like atmosphere that fosters belonging; and (3) extensive wraparound services available to all students (Basford et al., 2021; Basford & Lewis, 2020). They also highlight the school's innovative curriculum, focused on the arts, hip-hop, and creative media, creating a culturally relevant learning environment to empower students who have historically been underserved by traditional schools.

According to a 2023 report from the [National Alliance for Public Charter Schools \(2023\)](#), alternative charter schools served almost 115,000 students during the 2021–2022 school year. Approximately half of the students are female, almost three-fourths are students of color, with almost half reported as Hispanic or Latino/a, and approximately two-thirds are qualified as low-income. Compared to non-charter alternative school settings, students attending alternative charters performed better in math and English/language arts. Arizona, notably, has been at the forefront of utilizing charter schools specifically for dropout recovery. As many as one in five charter schools in that state is an alternative school that targets at-risk students who have either dropped out or are over-age and under-credited ([Arizona Charter School Association, 2017](#)). These schools provide flexible scheduling, individualized instruction, and supportive services tailored to students' varied life circumstances. However, challenges persist, such as high student mobility, limited resources, and accountability systems that do not always reflect the nuanced successes of alternative educational models ([Maranto et al., 2001](#)). Nationally, alternative high schools have demonstrated the ability to significantly increase graduation rates for their target population, though these outcomes vary widely from one context to another based on school quality, student engagement, and systematic support ([DePaoli et al., 2018](#)). The current study seeks to understand how one alternative charter school fostered a sense of belonging in its population of students who previously dropped out of school.

3. Context

This study explores student perspectives at Northeast Charter School (NCS; a pseudonym). NCS is an alternative charter school located in a large, high-poverty city in the northeast region of the United States that exclusively enrolls students who have previously dropped out of school. Students attending NCS have both academic and vocational requirements². Those who attend through completion earn a high school diploma, are paired with a trade, and earn professionally recognized certifications. The vocational tracks include childcare, environmentally-conscious construction, and health care. The school enrolls fewer than 250 students each year and has a low teacher-to-pupil ratio. Each morning, students attend what the school refers to as a “village meeting,” which is often led by the dean of students. The village meeting is a place where important announcements are made, students and faculty alike give each other shoutouts, and students share how they are feeling each morning. Students are also AmeriCorps members and are required to accrue service hours as a part of their program of study. NCS represents an interesting case worth studying as one of the few outlets where students who previously dropped out can earn both a diploma and exit school with job-ready skills.

4. Method

This study employs a case study design ([Yin, 2014](#)), using multiple sources of data to understand why students discontinued attending other schools, as well as their perceptions of how these reasons were (or were not) addressed at NCS. Interviews with students (described below) were the primary source of data. However, data derived from focus groups with faculty and staff, and a review of school documents, were used for triangulation purposes. Additionally, in-person observations were also conducted at the school for 20 days over the course of two school years, and extensive field notes were taken ([Emerson et al., 2011](#)). This study was approved by Auburn University's Institutional Review Board (protocol #18-230 EP 1807) before the start of research activities.

4.1. Participants

A total of 14 students were interviewed up to four times each between September 2018 and June 2020. Seven students were interviewed up to four times during each of the two school years in which the study was conducted. One student dropped out of NCS midway through the year and only participated in the first two interviews. Additionally, two graduates from the previous year agreed to be interviewed while visiting the school. One of these graduates completed two interviews—one in September 2018 and one in March 2019; the other completed a single interview in October 2019. In total, 47 interviews were conducted with 16 participants. Interviews ranged from 20 to 45 min in length, and were audio recorded and transcribed. Individualized interview protocols were generated for each participant based on the previous interview conducted. Participants completed an informed consent form prior to being interviewed. In addition, focus groups with teachers and staff indicated that the students participating in the study were representative of the range of students served by NCS. Semi-structured interviews were conducted over two years.

Most of the students included in this study identified as Black or African American, and 10 of the 16 participants were male. Nine students attended more than one high school prior to enrolling at NCS. For about half of the students who participated in this study, poor academic performance was associated with dropping out, and three students were expelled for extreme behavior. See Table 1 for a description of the 16 participants. Focus groups were conducted with a panel of faculty and staff at each school visit as well. Though the contents of those conversations are not the subject of this paper, they were used to triangulate claims students made in interviews. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the identity of the study's participants.

Table 1. Previous schooling experiences of study participants.

Name *	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Previous High School(s) Attended	Reason for Dropping Out	Data Collection Year
Jason	Black	Male	Charter; neighborhood	Expelled for behavior	2018–2019
Lamar	Black	Male	Online; neighborhood; GED	Family reasons	2018–2019
Michael	Black	Male	Charter; online	Academics	2018–2019
Michelle	Black	Female	Neighborhood; GED	Pregnancy	2018–2019
Scott	White	Male	High school in suburbs **	Uninterested, got a job	2018–2019
Sharonda	Black	Female	Neighborhood (x2)	Academics	2018–2019
Tyreke	Black	Male	Open enrollment; online	Expelled for behavior	2018–2019
Juan #	Hispanic	Male	Neighborhood	Expelled for behavior	2018–2019
Alex	Black	Male	Open enrollment	Academics	2019–2020
Andrea	Black	Female	Conversion charter	Academics	2019–2020
Tyrell	Black	Male	Conversion charter; charter	Academics	2019–2020
Nate	Black	Male	Charter	Academics	2019–2020
Jayla #	Black	Female	Charter	Unhealthy relationship, depression	2019–2020
Tara	Black	Female	Neighborhood	Academics, needed to work	2019–2020
DeAndre	Black	Male	Neighborhood; vocational	Arrested, sentenced to jail	2019–2020
Aaliyah	Black	Female	Neighborhood (x2)	Academics	2019–2020

Note: * All participant names are pseudonyms; ** Scott previously attended elementary and middle school in the city; # Graduate; Charter = Charter school; Conversion charter = Neighborhood school that had recently converted to a charter school; Neighborhood = Neighborhood, or zoned, school; Open enrollment = Open enrollment school within the District; Online = Online school; GED = GED program; Vocational = Vocational school.

All but one participant completed all four interviews during the first year of data collection. Participation varied across interview waves due to student attrition and disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Five students opted not to complete the final two interviews after the pandemic forced schools to transition to emergency remote instruction in March 2020, including NCS. See Table 2 for a breakdown of participants by interview round.

Table 2. Participants by Interview Round.

Data Collection	No. of Participants
September 2018	8 *
December 2018	7
March 2019	7 *
June 2019	6
October 2019	8 **
December 2019	7
March 2020 ***	2
May 2020 ***	1

Note: * Includes a graduate from the previous year; ** Includes one student who graduated in November 2019; *** The COVID-19 pandemic canceled the last two data collection trips. The school was closed for in-person learning from March 2020 until September 2021. Students were invited to participate via Zoom; five students declined to continue to participate during this time.

4.2. Data Analysis

All interview data were transcribed by hand by the first author. No transcription software or artificial intelligence was used. A constant comparison approach (Saldaña, 2015) was used to identify emerging patterns in the data. Memos were drafted by the first author after each round of interviews as a first step in the analytical process. The study's first author coded each of the interviews using ATLAS.ti version 24. The second author independently coded two-thirds of the interviews as well. Initial codes were informed by the first author's memos and the study's conceptual framework and then expanded based on transcripts and researcher memos (Maxwell, 2013). Initial open coding was followed by iterative grouping of related codes into broader thematic categories informed by analytic memos and ongoing comparison across interviews. Emerging themes were refined collaboratively through repeated discussions between authors regarding conceptual overlap, divergence, and interpretation. Trustworthiness procedures, including member checking, observational triangulation, and collaborative coding discussions, informed both the refinement of themes and the interpretation of findings. See Table 3 for example codes, definitions, and uses in the data. For example, one code was created (PC_VM; program components, village meeting) for when participants referenced the village meeting. An example of when this code was used was when one participant shared, "It gets everybody hyped. . . it's alright because it's like in the mornings when everybody just waking up, coming to school, and going to village meeting. It just gets us all hyped up [for school]."

We jointly coded two interviews at a time and subsequently met on five separate occasions until we arrived at a final codebook and a shared understanding of it, which was demonstrated by an interrater agreement exceeding 0.80. Interrater agreement was not used as a test of objectivity, but rather as a mechanism to enhance coding consistency, promote discussion of divergent interpretations, and strengthen the credibility of thematic development. Member checking was used to confirm the accuracy of participants' descriptions and to identify any misinterpretations of their experiences. Observational field notes, school documents, and staff focus groups were used to corroborate, contextualize, and occasionally challenge patterns emerging from student interviews. We met to discuss emerging themes and resolve discrepancies.

Table 3. Example Codes Used in Analysis.

Code	Definition	Example in Data
PC_VM	Used when participants referenced the morning village meeting	"It gets everybody hyped. . . it's alright because it's like in the mornings when everybody just waking up, coming to school, and going to village meeting. It just gets us all hyped up."
SCH_Past	Used when participants referenced past schools attended	"[The school] was ok, like, the people there were ok. The teachers there were ok. But the work just wasn't for me, and like, the school just wasn't for me."
SOB	Used when participants described having a sense of belonging at NCS	"I would say, yeah. Everyone here fits in, no matter what gender, race, or anything they are. Everyone fits in here. I would say it's kind of like a family here."
TEA_Past	Used when participants referenced experiences with teachers at previous schools.	"You know, the teachers never really actually care about their students. They would just kind of give you a notebook for like Social Studies, for instance. They'd write the page number on the board, give you the book, and say. . . do this work."
PC_Voc_GC	Used when participants referenced experiences in the Green Construction vocational track	"Yeah, we were doing [installing] solar over there. . . We had two sites."
Energy	Used when participants referenced the positive energy (school climate) at NCS	". . . being in here. . . like, it's just so much energy and positive. . . like, you would want to be here."

4.3. Reflexivity Statement

The first author entered this study with a longstanding scholarly interest in charter schools, student dropout, and interventions designed to improve high school graduation outcomes. This background may have influenced the aspects of participants' experiences that appeared most salient during data collection and analysis. In particular, organizational features commonly associated with student re-engagement, such as adult mentoring, personalization, and flexible programming, may have been more readily recognized as meaningful. At the same time, the first author's familiarity with the literature on dropout and re-engagement may have facilitated rapport-building with participants and deeper exploration of their educational experiences. He also spent approximately 20 days on-site across two years, creating opportunities to build relationships with students and staff while increasing the possibility that familiarity with the setting could shape interpretation.

To broaden the interpretive lens applied to the data, the second author joined the research team and brought a different professional background rooted in mental health counseling and the belonging literature. Throughout the study, efforts were made to remain attentive to both confirming and disconfirming evidence and to privilege participants' interpretations of their experiences rather than evaluate the effectiveness of the school itself.

5. Findings

This study sought to understand three overarching aspects about the experiences of students who attend an alternative charter school that re-engages students who previously dropped out: (1) how their NCS experiences differed from previous schooling experiences; (2) the extent to which they believed they 'belonged' at their current school; and (3) how their perceived belonging contributed to their academic identity. The findings will be presented to correspond with the study's trio of aims.

5.1. NCS Experiences Differed from Previous Schooling Experiences

The findings reveal that students at NCS frequently described their experiences at the alternative charter school as distinctly different from previous schools they attended. Par-

ticipants were asked in the first interview to share about their previous schools and explain why they quit attending, which is important to fully understand their NCS experiences.

5.1.1. Reasons for Dropping Out

The students with whom we spoke cited feeling overlooked and disconnected, negative peer influence, and exposure to an inadequate curriculum as reasons they ultimately did not find value in attending school. Although they cited a web of issues, every student interviewed identified a lack of connection with their teachers as a reason for dropping out of school. Participants described low expectations that were established, work that was redundant, not challenging or too difficult, and a general feeling of not being seen by their teachers. Michelle described a feeling of “being overlooked by teachers.” Michael described his former teachers this way: “They didn’t really treat us as people. They treated us as paychecks.” Several participants shared the same sentiment, similarly, invoking the term ‘paycheck’ to describe the teachers with whom they did not feel connected. In this context, ‘paycheck’ was used as a pejorative term to describe teachers who did not care about their students and were only there for the money they earned. Scott described being hesitant and often unwilling to engage in class and rarely encouraged to do so. He said: “Teachers would give up five minutes into class. They’d give you a notebook and tell you to turn to this page, often with little explanation beyond that.” Across interviews, participants often used relational language to describe disengagement from prior schools, suggesting that students interpreted academic disconnection not only in instructional terms but also as a broader absence of recognition and care within prior school environments.

Andrea shared that she did not feel that the curriculum was preparing her for real-world challenges, leading to a sense of futility about school. She shared, “I felt like I was being taught the same stuff over and over and over with just different names. . . not knowing what I really need to know out in the real world.” Those enrolled in GED programs or online schools shared similar sentiments about their teachers. Scott described his GED program this way: “All you have to do is show up and you pass.” Michael described his online program similarly; while teachers kept office hours when they were available to discuss the work that was assigned, they often seemed to be at a time that was not convenient for him. Overall, participants sensed that teachers at their previous schools did not meet their academic needs.

5.1.2. Experiences at NCS

Participants described their experiences at NCS as being quite different from their previous schools. There were smaller teacher-to-student ratios. The school was designed to serve a specific profile of a student—one who had previously quit going to school—instead of trying to serve everyone. Participants specifically named three things that were different from their previous schools: (1) more engaging teachers; (2) curriculum that matched their needs; and (3) opportunities for service.

More Engaging Teachers

Participants described their engagement with and their relationships with teachers at NCS as a primary difference between this educational experience and the ones they had before. Similar to several other participants, Michael described NCS teachers in contrast to his previous teachers who “talked to [him] like they were there for a paycheck.” He described the relationships he had as foundational, noting that “when you engage with [teachers], it’s amazing. You see them as human.” When asked about how NCS compared to his previous schooling experiences, Jason said:

I didn't like school because none of the teachers related to you. They were just here for a paycheck. . . . Take the time. . . to get to know us. A lot of us go through a lot of stuff at home. We go through a lot of stuff in the streets. So, you just sitting here telling us [what to do]—that's just making us mad. We're already stressed out from home stuff. If you just sit down and find out what's going on. . . . As long as they hire staff to just talk to us, for real. You could start off with little conversations, just asking us about our day. . . other than the certifications, just the support I get here. . . the support here, it's different.

DeAndre similarly described his teachers at NCS as being there “to help,” noting, “Here, you have plenty of staff. . . it's like a lot of support for you in here.” He also described feeling comfortable asking for help when he did not understand something, which previously was not the case. In a sharp contrast to the reasons participants gave for quitting their previous schools, their relationships with teachers and staff at NCS were a primary reason for why they persevered in this setting.

Relevant Curriculum

Participants also described the curriculum at NCS as being more relevant than what was taught at their previous schools. DeAndre shared, “It's not just about high school and credits and work. We [are] learning about careers.” Indeed, half of the curriculum was vocational at NCS, and topics like personal finance and understanding credit were also part of the curriculum. DeAndre also worked on a film script in his English/Language Arts class. Andrea shares, “I feel like [NCS] is better than my past schools because they [are] really teaching us how to be young adults and what's out there in the real world.” Nate's sentiments were similar, noting, “They teach you about life.” Whereas almost no one shared anything positive about what was taught at their previous schools, participants almost universally saw the curriculum at NCS as a strength.

Opportunities for Service

Participants also found the community service opportunities at NCS to be a motivating factor. As AmeriCorps members, they had to complete 450 hours of service while attending NCS. Michael discusses this in contrast to his previous school: “There was no motivation [at my previous school]. There was no real community stuff. . . it's nowhere near what [NCS] is doing. . . what we do here is just crazy.” Students earn service hours completing community projects, including repainting a nearby elementary school. Several participants participated in a service trip to Puerto Rico as part of a Hurricane Maria recovery effort. Students helped two families rebuild houses for a week in April 2019. Scott described the experience in the following manner: “I learned [not to] take life for granted. To be able to see what we have here and to be able to go over there to see what they're going through is life changing.” These service opportunities not only fulfill participants' AmeriCorps requirements but also provide invaluable life lessons and a deeper sense of community involvement.

5.2. Student Sense of Belonging at NCS

In each interview conducted for this study, participants were asked the same simple questions: *Do you feel like you belong here? Do you fit in?* Participants described a range of previous high school social experiences. Some students, like Sharonda, had many friends at their previous schools. Other students, like Scott, described themselves as being more reclusive. Regardless of how students described themselves in previous high school settings, almost all of this study's participants often expressed that they felt they belonged at NCS. Sharonda explained that at NCS, “Everyone [fits] in here. We're all in the same boat. Several participants described being unsure of themselves and admitted that a reason

they did not re-enroll in another school prior to NCS was because of the stigma of dropping out. Attending a school where everyone was a former dropout and everyone was working towards the same goal was seen as a motivating factor. Tyreke shared, “Everyone here fits in, no matter what gender, race, or anything [else] they are.” When asked about the most important part of his NCS experience, Scott responded: “I would say it is the bonds I have with everyone here.” He explained that this included students, staff, and even the head of the school, with whom he shares a good relationship. Each participant was asked to identify faculty and staff at the school that they could talk to if they had a problem, and each was able to list several adults in the building with whom they felt comfortable having those conversations.

Michelle’s experience represents a negative case and complicates an otherwise overly uniform interpretation of belonging at NCS. She was a young mother whose pregnancy was the initial reason she left school. Michelle initially described positive experiences at the school. However, by the second interview we conducted with her three months after enrolling, she described a growing uncertainty regarding whether she fully fit within the school community. She described a disconnect between what she hoped to gain from school and her vocational placement, which eventually shaped how she viewed the school as a whole. Her eventual withdrawal highlights that belonging may be uneven, fragile, and insufficient on its own to sustain persistence for all students, particularly when students face additional challenges beyond the school setting. She had dropped out by the time we visited NCS for the third time that year. Michelle stood out as the only one of the 14 active students we interviewed who did not graduate.

5.3. Sense of Belonging and Academic Identity

Participants often associated their sense of belonging at NCS with greater academic confidence and engagement, including their academic identity, as students with a sense of belonging also shared that they wanted to come to NCS. Given that poor attendance led to many of the participants’ previous academic failure, this was a very different experience for them. Participants often described these experiences as interconnected and mutually reinforcing rather than as a simple linear progression. Institutional features, including the small school environment, adult mentorship, vocational curriculum, village meetings, and service-learning opportunities, helped create belonging-related experiences. Students described feeling known, feeling supported, having a shared re-engagement identity, and reduced stigma. Participants discussed the sense of belonging they had in the school community as motivation to attend school regularly, fostering academic confidence, and creating an emerging positive academic identity that stood in contrast to their previous schooling experiences. The engagement and identity formation, in turn, helped reinforce a sense of belonging. Participants shared that the combination of these led to possible re-engagement outcomes—including persistence toward completion, active participation, and future-oriented aspirations that previously seemed unattainable. Figure 1 presents an interpretive heuristic derived from participant narratives describing how institutional features, belonging-related experiences, and engagement processes were often interconnected.

The bidirectional relationship depicted between belonging-related experiences and engagement/identity processes reflects participants’ descriptions of these experiences as mutually reinforcing. Students often suggested that feeling accepted and supported increased their willingness to attend school, participate in class, and view themselves as capable learners. In turn, successful participation and emerging academic confidence appeared to strengthen feelings of belonging. The heuristic should therefore be interpreted as an illustrative framework derived from participant narratives rather than a causal model.

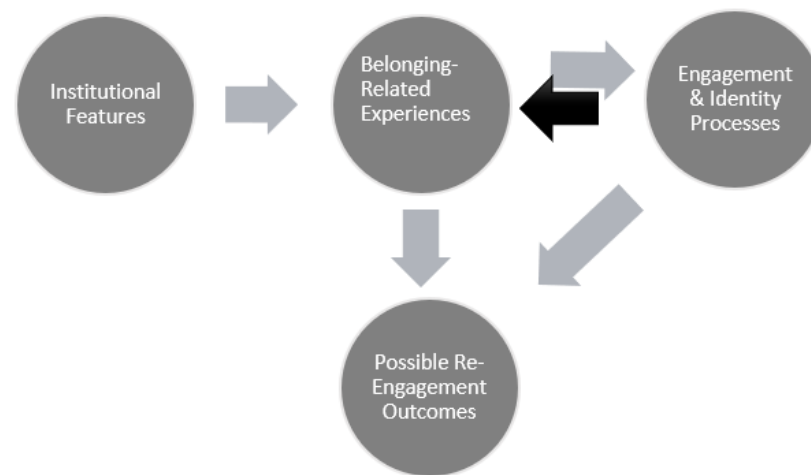


Figure 1. Interpretive Heuristic of Belonging-Related Experiences.

Michael shared, “I feel like I fit in here. That’s why I come here because I feel like it’s a family.” He also shared that he previously never did very well in math, but that was different at NCS. He shared, “I am actually doing well in math. That surprised me! I like being seen as a mathematician.” Nate shared, “I feel like I need to be that one who gets everything that I gotta do. I want to be successful.” Jayla shared that the positive energy made her want to come to school, and that once she was there, she was motivated to engage in academics. She shared, “I want to come to school ‘cause I already know it’s going to be so much energy... so much good energy.” Overall, students felt that the nurturing environment of NCS not only helped them academically but also encouraged them to participate more actively in their education. Most, if not all, of these students previously lacked a positive academic identity, as they previously conceptualized themselves as poor students academically. However, the success they experienced at NCS appeared to contribute to stronger academic confidence and a more positive sense of themselves as learners.

6. Discussion

This study examined student perceptions of belonging-related experiences in an alternative charter high school. Specifically, we sought to understand why students disengaged from their previous schools, what their experiences were at NCS, and what role their sense of belonging (or lack thereof) played in this. The students with whom we spoke described feeling overlooked and disconnected at their previous schools. Conversely, they described their experiences at NCS in positive terms, emphasizing their supportive teachers. NCS is a smaller school setting than participants had previously experienced, enrolling fewer than 250 students, which is consistent with the literature on alternative schools (Aron, 2006).

Most importantly, participants shared that they felt they belonged at NCS. This was confirmed in 46 of the 47 interviews conducted. Similar to what Lewis and Basford (2020) found in their study, participants attributed this sense of belonging to the ‘family-like’ atmosphere that was fostered in the school. Only in the second interview with Michelle did we hear anything on the contrary; before the third interview was to take place, Michelle had quit attending NCS. While her experience is consistent with the possibility that belonging-related experiences may matter for persistence, the data do not permit conclusions regarding why she ultimately withdrew.

Participants described NCS as a space where being “a dropout” shifted from a source of stigma and shame to a shared social experience with peers undergoing similar educational re-engagement. In this sense, students frequently described belonging at NCS not simply as interpersonal support, but also as a form of social recognition and identity

reconstruction (Haslam et al., 2009). Participants often associated these experiences with a greater willingness to attend school, participate academically, and imagine themselves as capable students. At the same time, students also emphasized the importance of institutional features such as small school size, vocational programming, service-learning opportunities, and sustained adult mentorship. Students also credited the school's curriculum, which they found to be more relevant to their lives than they did the curricula at the previous schools they attended (BASFORD & LEWIS, 2020; MARKOWITZ, 2018). These findings suggest that belonging-related experiences at NCS were embedded within broader organizational structures intentionally designed to support re-engagement. At the same time, belonging was not experienced uniformly across participants. While Michelle initially shared that she "fit in" at NCS, belonging-related experiences alone may not be sufficient to sustain persistence.

Interpretation of these findings should also be informed by patterns of participation across interview waves. Participation declined substantially following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and only a small number of students completed the final interviews virtually. It is possible that students who remained engaged enough to continue participating differed in important ways from those who elected not to continue. Given the atypical schooling experience that they received during the pandemic, it is also possible that their trajectories might have been different had they opted to re-enroll in school during a year that was not marked by such a disruptive crisis. As a result, findings related to belonging and persistence in the later stages of the study may disproportionately reflect the experiences who remained highly engaged with NCS.

This work adds to the body of scholarship on high school graduation interventions by examining belonging as one interpretive lens through which students described their re-engagement experiences. Although extant literature exists focusing on charter schools, there exists an opportunity to learn from schools like NCS that employ the charter school framework in alternative ways to re-engage students who are overage and under-credited and/or students who have previously dropped out. While it is important to consider summative outcomes, such as graduation rates and test scores, it is just as important to understand how social aspects of schooling—including whether a student feels they belong or fit in at school—may shape how students experience and interpret success in school settings.

6.1. Implications

Among the more important implications of this study is the importance of supportive relationships between students and adults at school (Fall & Roberts, 2012; Pendergast et al., 2018). At NCS, every adult in the building, whether they were a staff member, teacher, or an administrator, had a small group of students with whom they checked in on a daily basis. As such, every student had at least one adult in the building who intentionally built a relationship with them. This especially matters for students who quit attending school for longer periods of time, as a sense of disconnection—especially from peers, teachers, and school environments—often becomes a psychological barrier to re-engaging with school (Ramsdal & Wynn, 2022). On days when they were absent, the adult mentor would often text or call to see how they were. If the reason they could not get to school was a barrier that could be resolved by the school, efforts were made to do so. This matters because a leading reason students quit coming to school is that they feel that no one would miss them if they quit showing up (Feldman et al., 2017). Most of the students who participated in this study indicated that they felt that way about their previous schooling experiences.

This study took place in a charter school. Charter schools are public schools with the autonomy and flexibility to make local decisions to address the needs of the students

they enroll and the teachers they employ (Marshall & Neugebauer, 2023). However, the relational and organizational features described by participants should not necessarily be understood as unique to charter schools themselves. It should be noted that several of the participants previously attended charter school settings that did not work for them. Many of the practices associated with belonging at NCS—including mentorship structures, smaller learning environments, vocational programming, and community-building routines—could potentially be implemented in traditional public school settings as well, though there exist factors that may limit the feasibility of doing so at scale.

For traditional public schools, the findings suggest that fostering student belonging does not necessarily require replicating every structural feature of an alternative charter school. While smaller enrollment and lower student-to-adult ratios may be difficult to achieve in many comprehensive high schools, schools may be able to adopt targeted practices that promote relational connection. One example is the mentoring that exists at NCS. NCS is a small school, and there may be limitations associated with implementing this type of mentoring system in larger schools with larger teacher-to-student ratios; however, implementing some version of a mentoring system whereby every student in a school building knows at least one adult who cares about their development could have an impact on school completion. And similar to findings from Fall and Roberts (2012), a sense of belonging can positively impact a student's belief in their ability to succeed academically. Other examples include smaller learning communities, systematic attendance outreach, and opportunities for service-learning and career-connected education. Future research should explore whether these practices can foster belonging among students in larger, less specialized educational settings.

6.2. Limitations

There are a few limitations worth noting that are associated with this work. First, while our data collection was longitudinal and robust—with 47 interviews from 14 students and 2 recent graduates—it is possible that the experiences of these students differ in significant ways from those of other students who enrolled at the school but chose not to participate. Second, the project was intended to last two years. And while it did, only two students participated in the final two rounds of interviews (late March and June 2020). Schools closed for in-person instruction (and for outside researchers as well) as part of a wider effort to curb the spread of COVID-19 (Marshall, 2022b; Zweig, 2025). The reduced participation in later interview waves limits the extent to which longitudinal interpretations can be generalized across all participants. It is possible that the students who opted to continue participating during the crisis differed in important ways from those who elected not to continue with the study remotely. Consequently, students who continued participating may disproportionately reflect the perspectives of students who maintained stronger connections to the school, potentially resulting in an overly positive portrayal of persistence and belonging. The findings from this single-site case study should not be interpreted as evidence that alternative charter schools universally foster belonging or re-engagement more effectively than traditional public schools. Future research should consider longitudinal work that examines post-graduation outcomes of students who re-engage in schools like NCS. Finally, findings rely heavily on participant self-report data. Students may have presented their experiences in ways that reflected social desirability or loyalty to the school, particularly given the positive relationships many described with staff and peers. Although triangulation procedures helped mitigate this concern, the possibility of self-report bias remains.

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Notes

- ¹ The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) uses the Current Population Survey to calculate its high school completion rate. Their method relies on self-report data and overestimates graduation rates by excluding prison inmates from their survey samples. This is problematic given that 30–40% of state prison inmates are estimated to be high school dropouts. The NCES also counts those who have earned GEDs as high school graduates (Greene, 2005). Nevertheless, the point remains that graduation outcomes have improved over the past five decades.
- ² NCS's graduation rate was 61% for the 2018–2019 school year and 67% for 2019–2020, according to the school district that serves as the school's charter school authorizer.

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