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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO  
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN MARCOS

Increased Academic Success and College Attendance in Continuation High School

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of

Education

in

Educational Leadership

by

Daniel E. Barajas

Committee in charge:

California State University San Marcos

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Christopher P. Halter

2021

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Chair

University of California San Diego  
California State University, San Marcos

2021

## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my wife, Melissa and children, Cristian, Marissa, and Joel. They gave me the space, time, and support to be able to complete my study. This would not have been possible without their support. This work is also dedicated to Jesus and Monica Barajas and Raul and Susana Rodriguez, my grandparents. They did not have the opportunity to complete their formal education but were always supportive of all their grandchildren completing their education.

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Lastly, I would like to acknowledge my Father, Francisco Barajas. He has supported me in all that I have accomplished. When I was twenty-one, I almost dropped out of college to pursue a position in full-time ministry and my dad convinced me to stay in college. He said in Spanish, “I always thought you would finish”. Those six words stuck with and helped me to change my mind and finished my bachelor’s degree, becoming the first in my family to graduate from college.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Increased Academic Success and College Attendance in Continuation High School

by

Daniel E. Barajas

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

University of California San Diego, 2021  
California State University, San Marcos, 2021

Professor Manuel Vargas, Chair

Continuation high schools serve students for multiple reasons. Among them are low credit attainment, excessive absences, probation status, and discipline problems. Students in these programs often have many educational gaps. In the state of California, continuation high schools have been an educational option for this vulnerable student population since 1919. This

segment of the school system seeks to offer students with diverse educational challenges and obstacles a second opportunity to complete their education. Presently, there is little research connected to the success of continuation high school graduates' level of persistence in any type of higher education. This study examined the influence teacher-student relationships had on a particular group of continuation high school students who, in spite of challenges associated with continuation-education deficit mindset, were able to attain academic success in higher education. The study sought to explore how the practices of comprehensive high school sites intersected with those of a specific continuation high school. Social Capital and Critical Race Theory provided the conceptual lens to analyze teacher-student relationships. The researcher captured students' and teachers' perceptions in order to analyze how their interactions and relationships could be strengthened to ensure student academic success and provide continuation high school students with options upon high school graduation.

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

In the United States, one in three students drops out of high school every year (Smith & Thomson, 2014). Research demonstrates that high school student drop-out numbers continue to rise because of economic and social challenges. The increased numbers of students not completing comprehensive high school have created a critical need for continuation education programs. Researchers use the terms alternative education and continuation interchangeably. For the purposes of this study, I will refer to such programs as continuation high school. While there are many different kinds of continuation schools and programs, they are often characterized by their flexible schedules, smaller student-teacher ratios, relevant and career-oriented themes, and modified curricula (Aron, 2006). Continuation high schools are public secondary alternative education programs designed to return youths, who have dropped out of high school, to mainstream high schools, assist in credit recovery for youths who are behind in academic credits, or to facilitate the attainment of alternative educational credentials. This type of modified program allows these schools to meet the educational needs of students who often find themselves in situations that make it difficult for them to attend traditional, comprehensive high school programs (Smith & Thomson, 2014).

The California Department of Education (CDE) defines Continuation Education as an alternative high school diploma program (CDE, 2017). Continuation high schools are for students who are sixteen years of age or older, have not graduated from high school, are still required to attend school, and who are at risk of not graduating (CDE, 2017). In some cases, continuation programs may serve students that Aron (2006) calls vulnerable and not part of a traditional school program. Furthermore, and according to this same author, urban school districts and high minority student populations, and districts with high poverty rates were more

likely than other districts to have such programs. The rationale for continuation education programs is based on the premise that some students may learn better in a program structured differently than the traditional program (Kim & Taylor, 2008).

Continuation high schools have been an alternative educational option since 1919 (CDE, 2017). The California Education code makes allowances for these schools to operate using more flexible methods than traditional comprehensive high school programs (CDE, 2017).

Continuation schools offer students the possibility to pursue their enrollment beyond the end of their senior year to ensure the attainment of a diploma. Continuation high schools serve a very specific population of students throughout the state of California for various reasons. For instance, the programs provide quality and caring personnel that create opportunities for academic achievement and personal well-being. In addition, continuation education programs also provide opportunities for students to remediate their coursework. Programs that are successful create meaningful educational experiences for students (Smith & Thomson, 2014).

There is a lack of opportunity for students to be successful in some traditional high school programs because the educational landscape is not currently designed to support all students (Aron, 2006; Malagon, 2010a; Munoz, 2004). Continuation high schools seek to level the field for the students they serve and help this population recover credits and either graduate on time or complete the fifth year of high school if necessary. Through the use of Critical Race Theory and Social Capital Theory, I will explore how teacher-student relationships may influence student academic achievement and educational attainment.

Through the lens of Critical Race Theory, I will attempt to demonstrate how transfer practices—those that take place when students move from the traditional to continuation high school programs—have influenced the racial demographics of the students that attend



continuation high schools. The ethnic and racial demographic population of continuation high schools in California is predominantly Latino, followed by African-American students. Two marginalized groups make up the majority of the students who attend these schools. The school where the study will take place is over 90% Latino, with a total population of about 300 students, and where less than 1% of students matriculate to community college or four-year programs upon graduation.

Social Capital Theory will allow me to examine how teacher-student relationships influence decisions students make about their education, specifically in the continuation high school setting. Through the use of individual interviews, I will collect data to capture how their interactions with teachers shape their educational trajectory. I will be working with students from continuation high school who are post-graduates enrolled in college or have completed an undergraduate degree and current graduating seniors. Additionally, the school where the study will take place will be entering into Tier II Differentiated Assistance, California's new accountability system. This means that the new accountability system requires that the school district work strategically with the school site to ensure that all students graduate from high school and become college and career ready. In addition, the new accountability system also requires the school site to create a Comprehensive School Improvement Plan that aligns with the School's Plan for Student Achievement, which must be implemented and monitored during the school year. Through the data collection of these interactions, the study will seek to inform the vast gaps in the literature that currently exist on the topic of continuation high school students' matriculation to college upon graduation. Additionally, the study seeks to capture the best practices that create efficacy and a sense of agency for students that successfully matriculate to college upon high school graduation.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Continuation High Schools have been serving the students of California for over 100 years. The specific purpose of continuation schools is to meet the educational needs of some of the most academically disadvantaged students in California. However, according to existing research (Aron 2006), continuation education is not successfully reconnecting students to school and propelling them to become adults that will be able to integrate into adulthood successfully. Furthermore, students are graduating from continuation high schools without the requirements and skills to be eligible for two- or four-year program college matriculation. At present, there is little research that shows the success of continuation high school graduates in college or persistence level in any type of higher education. Further studies in the efficacy of the academic programs of continuation high school will serve to create systemic change that will facilitate the increase in academic rigor to allow continuation high school students access to an education that prepares them for college and career readiness upon graduation.

Initially, this type of academic setting was designed to help students recover credits and return them to their traditional comprehensive school site. The changes in “No Child Left Behind” legislation and “Every Student Succeeds Act” (ESSA) in recent years have elevated academic accountability for all types of K-12 academic institutions. During the 2018-2019 school year, the California Schools Dashboard was introduced for continuation high schools—also known as the Dashboard Alternative School Status (DASS)—, where schools and the public can see how continuation high schools are meeting the specific state indicators for equity and academic accountability. The new system was created to ensure that students have more equitable academic outcomes. Schools and districts that do not meet the thresholds for accountability receive differentiated assistance and are provided with support to meet the states

equity and academic indicators. The continuation high school programs in the state of California were initially left out of the accountability system until California could initiate the new Dashboard system for reporting accountability data. The DASS was formed to report how schools meet the indicators created by the California Department of Education that are specific to continuation schools and other alternative education programs. This new reporting system has created a need for research and literature associated with the measurement of students' public data regarding meeting the demands of the state's content standards. Other factors contribute to a challenging environment in continuation high schools.

The lack of positive role models and adults that take interest in the lives of continuation high school students makes it difficult for these students to make the transition from high school to college. Continuation high school students are often the first in their families to matriculate to any type of post-secondary education program and may also be the first in their families to graduate from high school. Caring adult relationships can make the difference in students' academic achievement. If teachers can foster positive caring relationships with students, there is potential for social capital to develop allowing students to navigate the school system and build relationships that will foster academic success and persistence in school (Coleman, 1988; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Muller, 2001). Unfortunately, caring teacher-student relationships are often absent in some students' high school experience. As students begin to transfer to continuation high school, academic expectations do not mirror traditional comprehensive high school experiences (Malagon, 2010; Muñoz, 2004). When teachers and administrators reinforce the belief that students do not care about their education, it causes students to break rules and disconnect from school (Noguera, 2003; Valenzuela, 2005). This disconnection bolsters the belief that the students' investment in their education is not going to lead them into a career that

will improve their life or pay well (Noguera, 2003). When teachers provide education and career options for students and a culture of education, their chances of setting high educational goals increase (Flores, Ojeda, Huang, Gee, & Lee, 2006). Learning should be focused on students with caring adults that have the students' best interest in mind (Valenzuela, 2005).

### **Conceptual Framework**

In California, many students that attend continuation high schools are Latino and African American, with Latino students representing the larger group (de Velasco & McLaughlin, 2012). For this reason, it seems appropriate to examine student-teacher relationships and interactions for this particular student population in continuation education through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Social Capital. CRT assumes that racism is normalized in American Society (Ladson-Billings, 1998). The use of CRT can also demonstrate how the use of racialized epistemologies has marginalized these populations in continuation schools (Malagon, 2010b). On the other hand, Social Capital addresses the relationship that key actors—teachers, school principals, counselors—have on influencing outcomes for individuals (Coleman, 1988). Continuation high schools serve a population of marginalized students that have had to participate in substandard education in some settings (de Velasco & McLaughlin, 2012; Malagon, 2010; Muñoz, 2004).

For this reason, this study will examine continuation high school students through the lens of Social Capital and CRT, seeking to determine how these two frameworks intersect in the continuation high school context. The lens of CRT and Social Capital becomes an important driving force as the two intersect to reveal the influence that actors with social capital and CRT awareness can have on the educational opportunity gap and the students' educational trajectory. Stanton-Salazar (2011) states that institutional agents—individuals who hold positions of high

status and authority—when situated in the social networks of youths can use their status and influence to transfer their highly valued resources to young adolescents. Additionally, how young people interact with individuals outside of the family context is contingent on the types of relationships they have with authority figures, social experiences, and institutional experiences, which can manifest itself in the form of different types of resources, privileges, and rewards. Therefore, in order for a young person to navigate these non-familial sociocultural worlds, to prepare for adulthood, there must be active engagement with different individuals with high leverage to be able to gain access to these worlds. When the disparity in the distribution of economic, cultural, and social capital overlap in schools, inequality is created and perpetuated without the use of discriminatory laws or practices (Anyon et al., 2018). On the other hand, Social Capital in relationships can play a significant role in the academic achievement of students, especially for those in the continuation high school context since they already may lack strong relationships and may belong to a family with limited education. This supports the hypothesis that social capital can create a sense of agency for continuation high school students and aide them in realizing their full educational potential.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Continuation high schools have operated in the state of California since 1919 to help students, behind in academic credits, recover their credits and graduate high school. This segment of the K-12 school system serves students that often have large gaps in their education caused by life circumstances that frequently create high absenteeism. Additionally, the often substandard school experiences that continuation high school students experience throughout their formative school years contribute to their disengagement in school and an educational trajectory that leads to continuation high school (Malagon, 2010b). This study seeks to fill the

knowledge gap in the literature on how caring adult relationships can influence academic achievement and matriculation to college upon completing high school in the continuation system. At present, very little research exists on best practices that educators may employ to prepare continuation high school students for college.

### **Research Questions**

The overarching research question guiding this study follows: How do teacher-students relationships influence student achievement and college matriculation among continuation high school students? The study focusing on a large continuation high school explored the following sub-questions: (1) In what ways, if any, do student-teacher relationships shape student participation in academic courses? (2) What influence do student-teacher relationships have on continuation high school students' educational options after high school? (3) In what ways do continuation high school students' experiences shape their level of educational attainment as it pertains to community college and four-year university attendance? (4) In what way do continuation high school students' overall K-12 experiences shape the demographic make-up of the continuation high school? (5) To what extent, if any, do race and school discipline history influence students' educational pathways and options?

Therefore, the research questions seek to capture the experiences that will inform how teacher-student relationships add to their social capital and shape or influence their educational trajectory and academic achievement. The questions are also based on the hypothesis that social capital can create a sense of agency and efficacy for continuation high school students when the teacher cares and believes in the students' capacity to learn and be successful in the future. Additionally, the latter question, (5), hypothesizes the influences that educational experiences and school discipline histories have on the options, which students will have to attend and persist

in their comprehensive school. Students who have earned multiple referrals for negative behavior, expulsion, suspension, or truancy can be involuntarily transferred to continuation high school; unfortunately, many of the students who have these discipline histories have been on continuation high school trajectory for many years.

The need for quality educational programs for continuation high school students is a high priority when considering college access and career attainment. Furthermore, young individuals' transitions, sense of agency, resistance, and accommodation are created by the evolution and adaptation of students' characteristics and their systems of social capital, instead of a set of social characteristics alone (Raffo & Reeves, 2000). The research questions sought to uncover the stories that may point to a system that is underserving minority students regarding college enrollment and on the heels of new legislation that has the potential to create equitable education outcomes for continuation high school students.

### **Overview of Methodology**

This study used case study, an ethnographic qualitative method, as a main methodological approach. The case study represents a two-phase approach to data collection, including individual interviews of students and their teachers in a local continuation high school. The school serves a large population of Latino students and offers, two sections of Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) elective, which serves approximately forty students who desire to matriculate to a community college upon graduation. I selected a case study approach for the study to explore the students' experiences as they attended continuation high school and navigated community college and four-year university. The lens of Social Capital and Critical Race Theory (CRT) was used to analyze how school experiences, especially the teacher-student relationships, shape their educational trajectory. A case study allows the researcher to see how

participants experience the culture within the context of continuation high school. I, therefore utilized intrinsic case study, this form of case study allows the researcher to describe a specific problem or concern within a system or group of individuals. (Creswell & Creswell, 2007). The researcher explored the inequalities and inequities that may exist among this population using this specific method of case study.

Student participants were invited to take part in the study by stratified and convenience sampling. Stratified Sampling as part of the Simple Random Sampling allows the researcher to choose the individual in the population based on specific characteristics to create a sample of randomly chosen subject sets (Creswell, 2008). Convenience sampling allows the researcher to choose the participants that will participate in the study (Creswell, 2008). In addition, teacher participants were also chosen using convenience sampling (Creswell, 2008).

Students and teachers who agreed to participate were scheduled for individual interviews once they returned their Informed Consent and Assent forms for a total of seven participants from the school site, seven post-graduate students, and seven teachers for a total of fourteen students and seven teachers. Although a total of twenty-one participants were invited to participate in the study, a total of thirteen individuals participated in the study, six post-graduate students, three current students, and four continuation high school teachers. Upon completion of interviews, all data were transcribed and coded according to Creswell (2007) methods.

Data collection sources included individual interviews where continuation students and teachers were asked the research questions for the study. The individual interviews were recorded digitally and later transcribed verbatim and coded for data analysis.



## **The Significance of the Study**

The study seeks to add to the body of research and literature as it pertains to student achievement and college matriculation for continuation high school students. Continuation high school programs provided by school districts across the state of California implement their programs very inconsistently, even continuation schools in the same district do not have parity (de Velasco & McLaughlin, 2012). There is a need to research best practices among programs that are meeting graduation requirements and transition students to two-year community college programs. In addition, programs that help increase attendance in college like TRIO, Gear-Up, and AVID can be useful to continuation high school students desiring to attend college. Furthermore, there is a need for more research on the impact of college readiness for students in continuation since the implementation of the Common Core Standards and in light of new state accountability measures.

Through qualitative research methods, the study sought to capture experiences of thirteen continuation high school students as they navigate the continuation high school program, as well as the perceptions of four continuation teachers. These experiences were analyzed to reflect how the students' relationships shape their academic achievement and the choices they make about their educational trajectory after high school, specifically, college matriculation. The results of the study could be used by school leaders in this type of setting to inform how the culture and social interactions of continuation schools could be strengthened to ensure student academic success and provide continuation high school students with options upon high school graduation.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

This literature review focused on three areas that empower students to succeed in their educational attainment: (a) Teacher-student relationships, (b) parental involvement, (c) and academic rigor. Examination of these three factors highlighted best practices in the K-12 educational system that have been successful in providing students with the necessary skills for college attendance, readiness, persistence, and four-year degree attainment. The literature review linked the research of these themes to alternative education programs. Specifically, the role of Social Capital on the influence of students' educational trajectory and how Social Capital can create efficacy in continuation and increase college attendance for marginalized high school students. This review also brought to light the lack of research in the area of alternative education as it pertains to continuation high school and the development of structures that provide opportunities to increase college attendance for these students.

### Teacher-Student Relationships

***Social capital.*** The Social Capital Framework is particularly important because social networks that include high leverage individuals can help schools to create interventions that can empower racial minority students and agents—key players in an organization. The power of this relationship lies in the ability of institutional agents to manage their social networks and their ability to leverage their networks (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). The ability to navigate educational systems is not necessarily something that comes naturally to all students. This ability manifests itself in the form of Social Capital—the value of the social structure resources actors can use to achieve their interests (Coleman, 1988). Students navigating through the school system will leave if they do not see a natural progression for the next steps through the learning material (Muller, 2001). More specifically, if students do not find value in what they are learning, and do

not believe that learning is going to lead to better jobs or higher wages, they are going to drop out or stop out of school (Muller, 2001). Actors in the school system are those individuals within the institution who hold power and influence over their student population within their institutional context. Social Capital pertains to student-teacher relationships; in this case, the teacher is the actor. Essential to this relationship is the trustworthiness of the social environment between the two parties to ensure that obligations in the relationship between the teacher and student will be upheld. Actors, in this instance—teachers—may have access to information that otherwise may be out of reach to their students or the cost of the information would be too great, and norms are a social structure that greatly affects actors' decisions to impart the information (Coleman, 1988). Therefore, teachers may withhold information that could greatly benefit the student because social norms prohibit the exchange of information between the two parties. Thus, teacher and student expect a positive outcome in exchange for the investment in the relationship (Muller, 2001).

In larger contexts, Social Capital addresses the power the school has to effect norms, traditions, and behavior patterns as these develop the goals that students pursue and the opportunities they have to carry them out (Lee & Burkam, 2003). Students' positive connections to adults allow them to develop a sense of competency that will prepare them to have mastery over worldly tasks. The opposite occurs when students' adult relationships lack connection; then, students are less likely to develop the learning and social skills they will need to be successful. In turn, the student-teacher relationship can impact a student's potential to achieve academically (Valenzuela, 2005).

Social Capital plays an important role in parental relationships just as it does in teacher-student relationships. The lack of Social Capital in the family can create different educational

outcomes. It is also important to recognize the impact that parental involvement has on children's lives. Parental involvement is irrelevant if its influence is employed at work or somewhere else because of time constraints; for example, spending long hours in work commitments hinders parent's ability to be more involved in the schooling aspects of the child. Additionally, the development of a young person's Social Capital does not only develop in the home, but through the social and institutional relationships that parents foster within the home. Evidence of the social capital gained from these relationships demonstrated value in reducing the chance of students dropping out of high school (Coleman, 1988).

Valenzuela (2005) conducted a study at Seguin High School, a comprehensive high school of more than 3,000 students, where the majority of the student body was Mexican American, and the majority of teachers were non-Latino. The school had a high ninth-grade failure rate and an annual graduating rate of only 400–500 students. Over 1,500 of the student population was made up of ninth graders. Except for a few students of privilege that had access to honors programs, magnet school programs, and Career Technical Educational Programs, most students did not have access to rigorous instruction. Many of the adults in the school system believed that the students' lack of academic progress was due to the absence of family support, cultural differences, and their community. The reinforcement of the teachers' and school leaders' beliefs about the students' educational aspirations manifested in the students breaking school rules and overwhelming the discipline system of the school.

Valenzuela's study used quantitative and qualitative methods; an example of the latter included participant observations and open-ended interviews with individuals and groups of students. Through the use of these interviews, she was able to observe the peer-group culture, the social, cultural, and linguistic divisions that existed among the student population. One of her

findings in her ethnographic study described that immigrant Mexican students perceived their teachers to be more caring than did their Mexican-American counterparts. Mexican immigrant students also saw the overall climate of the school as positive (Valenzuela, 2005). Additionally, Valenzuela found that the Mexican immigrant students had a pro-school mindset that became a variable of social capital for the students. The study further concluded that the Mexican immigrant's previous schooling experiences added to their pro-school mindset versus the mindset of Mexican-American students that were more disconnected due to their informal social groups or ties. Mexican-American students had social ties that did not have social capital that was academically inclined. On the other hand, the quantitative data demonstrated that the Mexican immigrant students' academic achievement was significantly higher than the Mexican-American students at Seguin High School. Valenzuela's findings around social capital and the influence of adult beliefs and relationships are consistent with other research (Noguera, 2003).

***Caring adult relationships.*** Research shows a correlation between teacher-student relationships and educational outcomes, including dropout rates, test scores, grades, and behavior. Many teachers in traditional comprehensive settings choose to create distance in their relationships to help students become more independent, responsible, and mature. The lack of connection to a caring adult at school has been cited as a reason for student alienation, academic failure, and disaffection with school which can eventually cause a student to drop out. If relationships with teachers are positive, students are less likely to drop out (Lee & Burkam, 2003). Students expect a reciprocal caring relationship before they will care about school, while the teacher's expectation is that students will care about the technical aspects of school before the teacher has a caring investment in the student. The greatest evidence of the student-teacher

relationship impact is the large number of students that will ditch multiple classes but will attend one class where they find interest (Valenzuela, 2005).

Social interactions teach individuals about themselves and how they may fit into groups. As a result, individuals develop personal beliefs that are consistent with their group associations. This also transfers to academic settings. Student beliefs are developed consistently with their academic environment. Those structures and values may manifest themselves in enhanced persistence, goal accomplishment, and self-discipline. In an academic setting, when there is a positive relationship with a teacher, students internalize the teacher's beliefs and values, especially as it pertains to school and schoolwork. In performance-based situations, students perceive positive relationships as supportive paths to achievement (Martin & Dowson, 2009).

Garcia and Guerra's (2004) study on the need for caring adult relationships illustrates how some teachers' deficit thinking influence culturally/diverse linguistic (CDL) students' learning. They also capture the mindset shifts that take place once teachers are provided with professional learning to develop pedagogy to teach CDL students. This is especially important to consider since many continuation students are deficient in academic credits and are also CDL. When teachers working with CDL students believe that their parents were unsupportive, some teachers were more willing to take responsibility to make sure their students had a safe and caring environment. In addition, in some cases for CDL students, this caring relationship took form in lowered expectations and it seemed as if teachers had disregarded the ability that these CDL students possessed. When teachers became aware of their assumptions and expectations through professional learning, they struggled with what they learned about themselves and their own long-held personal beliefs (García & Guerra, 2004). Over time, it became apparent that the caring relationship students were offered came at the cost of their academic instruction and

elicited the question of whether their academic achievement on state exams was based on their lack of access to instruction or the student's academic ability. Teachers that participated in the professional learning who were willing to reflect on their practice were able to recognize their role in the students' learning process. This new thinking caused teachers to be more willing to explore their instructional practices (García & Guerra, 2004).

When at-risk students see that their teacher cares about them, they will see their teacher's effort towards school in the same way that non-at-risk students view their teacher's effort. For example, Muller (2001) identified students who were at risk of dropping out, but had teachers who cared about them, experienced test growth in mathematics, and had higher levels of mathematical proficiency. Thus, suggesting that if at-risk students have social capital, their relationship with teachers can be correlated to their perception that teachers will work in the students' best interests. How much students may learn can be attributed to the perception of a caring relationship with their teacher. Whether or not a student believes that a teacher cares may be a function of learning. Teachers could become an obstacle to learning for at-risk students depending on how the student-teacher interactions are perceived by the student. If students are at risk of dropping out, teachers who provide access to learning may be viewed as caring and a deterrent to dropping out of high school (Muller, 2001). When teacher-student relationships were examined by age, the results showed that teacher-student relationships were more important for academic growth in older children. Conceivably, because students in secondary education have fewer contacts with their teachers and a perceived lack of support, this makes students more sensitive to the amount of support they receive from teachers (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). For adolescents to meet successfully the developmental and academic challenges, they require resourceful relationships comprised of natural or informal mentors, pro-academic peers,

and institutional agents that are dispersed across the extended family, school, neighborhood, community, and society (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

*Educational pay-off.* At-risk students have opportunities to engage in negative activity outside of school and are more likely to do so if they believe their education will not pay off (Muller, 2001; Noguera, 2003). Teachers' reinforcement and school administrators' beliefs that students "don't care" about school create and perpetuate students' proficiency in breaking of school rules (Valenzuela, 2005). The structures in place to entice students and teachers to engage in the student-teacher relationship could have great consequences for the student perceived to be at risk of dropping out of high school (Muller, 2001). In Seguin High School, where Valenzuela (2005) conducted her study, she found that administrators could not keep up with the number of discipline infractions, so they could not take mass action to change behavior.

Research conducted in single-sex schools demonstrated that strong positive relationships between teachers and students are critical to the success of students from low-income and disadvantaged neighborhoods. Additionally, these students need strong mentorship programs, counseling, personalized learning, and other supports that provide effective interventions to find success (Noguera, 2012). This author also points out that it is important to recognize that it does not matter whom educators serve, but how well students are served.

Bozick's (2010) research demonstrates that students who participated in his study opted out of college if they believed their education would not have positive outcomes for their future. According to the same author, when students were asked why they opted out of college, most responded that it was the need to work and lack of financial resources. Some students view school as a connection to the adult world, so they believe that staying in school longer increases their success, while others are reminded everyday of how unsuccessful they are in the academic



world. When professionals intervene to provide examples of post-secondary opportunities, career options and the culture of education, students are more likely to set high educational goals (Flores et al., 2006). Students who attended schools with strong support, but had low academic standards learned almost nothing; in contrast, students who had moderate support but attended schools with high-academic standards learned more (Lee & Burkam, 2003). Learning should be focused on caring relations between adults and students who have the whole students' best interests in mind (Valenzuela, 2005).

Nygreen (2010) conducted an ethnographic study at a continuation high school where she had once served as a teacher. Nygreen and three former continuation high school students developed a public policy course that was a supplement to a civic course all students were required to take. The former students led discussions and activities that current students considered engaging because current students perceived the activities led by the former students were non-traditional and non-academic. The former students attempted to create opportunities for discussion that were more egalitarian—consequently, the current students were able to build trust and equality—instead of the unequal paradigm that generally exists between students and teachers. The former student-educators taught from the belief that current students should have the freedom to challenge academic authority within the classroom if they are expected to challenge political thought outside of school. This belief is consistent with the antithesis banking concept that the teacher is the depositor of information and the student is the repository of the information available for the teacher to request at a moment's notice (Freire, 2000).

Nygreen's (2010) research supports the notion that multiple answers are possible when questions pertaining to policy are posed; for example, the author emphasizes the importance of student voices in guiding the direction of the civics course that the high school graduate students

had developed. In the continuation education learning environment students tend to reject traditional assignments, which they view as schoolwork that a classroom teacher mandates, such as writing assignments. In contrast, activities that were more dialogue-based and elicited student voice and where no written evidence was required were more palatable to students. Students in this learning environment were encouraged to share their opinions. However, the loose classroom structure for students in this study failed to provide them with the necessary skills they needed to support their claims using evidence beyond their own experiences. They were not able to make the leap to use research or data available to them to support their claims. Opportunities to present in front of an audience of their peers gave students the arena to share their knowledge and experience, but low teacher expectations did not allow for the students to use proper evidence to support their claims. Thus increasing the need to ensure that rigorous protocols are in place so that students still have autonomy in their learning but can cite evidence to strengthen their arguments (Phillips & Wong, 2010).

*Educational implications in continuation high schools.* Muñoz (2004) conducted a study in a continuation high school where he examined the ideological and structural effects on students in a school that was attended by Chicana students. He points out that these schools serve a high proportion of marginalized groups, which is also consistent with de Velasco and McLaughlin's (2012) report. Providing quality instruction also becomes challenging because it is believed, by some, that scarce resources should not be wasted on students who are not likely to take advantage or benefit from what is being offered. Since students who attend these schools tend to have behavioral problems, such as truancy, poor academic performance, pregnancy, or probation status, the program is designed to provide special instruction for this population. Recent changes in educational legislation have increased the need to provide more a rigorous

curriculum and have required districts to look at continuation high school and alternative education more closely (de Velasco & McLaughlin, 2012). The combination of low standards and ineffective instructional practices create student outcomes that raise questions about the efficacy of continuation high schools (Muñoz, 2004).

***Educational instability.*** Students in continuation high school need an alternative education for various reasons, including low academic credit completion, pregnancy, and discipline problems (Foley & Pang, 2006). Malagón (2010) examined continuation high school through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT), which also informs this research. For this research, CRT supports the argument that racism has been normalized in American society and that whites have benefited from civil rights legislation. According to Ladson-Billings (1998), CRT helps us to understand the inequity that exists in education. Using CRT, Malagón (2010) studied the experiences of Chicano/a students in continuation alternative programs and how racialized epistemologies have oppressed this marginalized population by perpetuating euro-centric beliefs that ignore their cultural histories and experiences. Huber and Solorzano (2015) argue that “racial epistemologies are perpetuated through the use of visual microaggressions, ...non-verbal, visual racist ideas and beliefs about people of color” (p. 24). These representations can manifest themselves across many media such as textbooks, children’s books, advertisements, film, and television.

Utilizing the CRT framework to examine teacher-student relationships, continuation high school students believe that the school system is hostile to them, that their teacher expectations of them are low, and that they are not given much encouragement to do well. For instance, students in Malagón’s (2010) study chose to disengage from school as a form of resistance.

Students tend to disconnect from their educational trajectory in resistance to their experiences of neglect, disrespect, substandard schooling conditions, and closed opportunity structures.

Reiterating what other research has demonstrated, when students realize that the education they participate in will not lead to a hopeful future, they will disengage, disconnect, or drop out from school (Crosnoe, 2001; Malagón, 2010; Noguera, 2003). There is a vast difference between the moment that students disengage from school and when they actually make the decision to leave school (Lee & Burkam, 2003). An example cited by Malagón (2010), which he traced back to the early years, demonstrated how a male student in continuation high school began to disengage because of lack of teacher consistency in one of his classes that carried into his high school years. This lack of instruction occurred during the transition from fourth to fifth grade leaving him feeling unprepared to enter the fifth grade. When the student asked for assistance the teacher refused. At one point the teacher questioned why his parents could not help him with the assignment, implying that the concept was simple enough for his parent to have the capacity to help him. This is the point where the student believes his disengagement began. Others in the study pointed to similar experiences and would be punished when they acted out but were neglected when they asked for help on school work (Malagón, 2010). These students do not possess the appropriate social capital to be able to act to improve their educational outcomes. However, it is important to keep in mind that all social relations have some form of social capital and actors decide if they will continue with the relationship if they find benefit in the relationship (Coleman, 1988).

More than ever before, academic preparation is the cornerstone in combating the impact of social background on the transfer to college (Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006). Duncan-Andrade (2009) argues that urban students are at the bottom of the social gradient and that the control of

their destiny is out of reach for most of them. This population of students has a constant need for safety. For some students, life outside of school is in a state of flux and instability. When teacher pedagogy does not reflect this reality, educators neglect the opportunity to offer hope for these students. Students will begin to see the gap between their needs and the education they are offered. Quality teaching is the most significant resource that can be offered to these students to give them hope, only after the stressors in their lives have been acknowledged. Once the teacher-student relationship reaches this level, the students are more likely to perform in ways that they are not aware of themselves (Duncan-Andrade, 2009).

In light of ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity, it is required that schools and practitioners think about how they meet the academic needs of a diverse student body (Howard, Navarro, & Ave, 2016). Students of color are expected to learn in environments that are hostile in content, instruction, school culture, and assessment that often become obstacles for them to find success in school (Ladson-Billings, 1995). New teachers will remain racially and ethnically homogenous, so it is important that teacher preparation programs aid pre-service teachers to understand race and racism and how they—new teachers—shape learning (Howard et al., 2016). Critical Race Theory can be used as a tool to identify how race and racism manifest throughout K-12 education. In addition, this research may equip practitioners to engage with issues of race and racism in the classroom, in the context of policy, and the work of the community. Furthermore, the use of counter-narratives can begin to uncover stories that have not been part of the dominant culture. CRT is centered on the knowledge of experience of the community of color through storytelling as it pertains to curricular and pedagogical research. Therefore practitioners must be mindful of how counter-narratives are used critically (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015).

## **Parental Involvement**

*Impact on educational attainment.* Parental involvement can leverage students to achieve and propel them into educational attainment. In 2014 Hall and Quinn conducted a study that demonstrated that when parental involvement was examined through the parents' lens, parents who participated in the study wanted to help their children succeed in high school but needed better information and tools to enable them to meet their children's goals. This required access to technology training and improved communication between teachers and parents. The researchers focused their study on nine high school parents' descriptions of their parental involvement experiences (Hall & Quinn, 2014). Involvement is generally defined by parents' participation in course selection, active assistance, encouragement of career goals, and attendance at school events (Muller, 1995). Parents often need to make choices between missing work and lost wages versus attending their children's functions. All parents expressed strong desire to attend their child's events but were conflicted with trying to make ends meet (Hall & Quinn, 2014).

The social pathways that students follow are closely tied to their parents and the structure that they find within their school (Crosnoe, 2001). This study sought to find an intersection between students' perceived academic orientation and parental involvement. When parents are involved, they drive the message home to their child that they value education. Parental involvement also demonstrates the interdependence of the child and parent relationship and is important to the educational trajectory of the child. Students in college preparation programs tend to have higher academic orientation. In addition, students in the aforementioned group also tend to have parents with higher educational attainment (Crosnoe, 2001).

When examining students whose parents did not attend college, there are many factors that impact college-going chances; among them are lower levels of academic preparation, lower educational aspirations, less encouragement and support to attend college, less knowledge about the application process, and lack of resources to pay for college. Parents who did not have college degrees were less likely to participate in information sessions about college (Engle, 2007). Parental education is one of the strongest predictors for college attainment. Students whose parents did not attend post-secondary education are less likely to remain enrolled in college compared to students whose parents graduated from college; they are twice more likely to remain enrolled (Adelman, 2006). In addition, parents who are college educated are two to four times more likely to have a student with continuous enrollment or transfer from a two-year to a four-year institution. Evidence has shown that students' persistence in college is related to the characteristics of the family make-up (Tinto, 1975).

***Parental advantage.*** The choice that parents make, as it pertains to education persistence, is based on the quantity and quality of information available to them. Parental knowledge of the cost of going to college factors into the decision-making process for their child as to how much effort their child will put into the post-secondary educational pursuits. Additionally, parents who perceive the costs of college attendance to be too high may not encourage their children to take courses that will lead to college or even save to prepare for the costs of college attendance. Parental social networks may contribute to the lack of college information that is reliable (Grotsky & Jones, 2007). Tinto (1975) also argues that the quality of family relationships and the interest and expectations are predictors for their child's college persistence. Other research findings have also demonstrated that class advantage is transferred to students with higher socioeconomic status for college preparation and educational pursuits

(Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006). Parents and students who are economically disadvantaged may have beliefs about the cost of tuition that are inconsistent with the actual cost of college attendance. Disadvantaged parents may have to work harder to get better college information compared to their advantaged counterparts (Grodsky & Jones, 2007). Families can have the capacity of passing on advantages to their children regarding social position through the development of expectations for their children's education. In this regard, parents lead their children to higher status backgrounds compared to those from lower-status backgrounds where these expectations are not reinforced (Tinto, 1975). White families are more likely to be aware of the cost of college compared to parents from Latino or Black families. However, differences between Latinos and Blacks may be associated with parental education and income (Grodsky & Jones, 2007).

***Building parent capacity.*** In order to improve Latino families' awareness about college attendance, schools should provide opportunities to these families through social work professionals and Latino based-community organizations. These groups could augment high school guidance counselors' understanding of specific needs that these families have and provide information in the language and format suited to the parents in order to reach a greater number of individuals (Becerra, 2010). Furthermore, schools that are successful with Black and Latino males demonstrate that educators can overcome obstacles when they work in conjunction with parents and communities to develop learning programs that meet the needs of the students they serve (Noguera, 2012).

The literature shows that college knowledge has not been associated with college readiness; consequently, this may account for the differences in college readiness among low-income, racial, and ethnic students, an area in need of reform in high school. In addition, low-



income and minority students need more education and guidance around the college application process, financial aid application, and post-secondary education options as this knowledge deficit becomes a barrier to college access. In order for educators to address college readiness and college access, they must incorporate academic college skills with college-access information, so underrepresented students may navigate the college-going culture more effectively. Parents and students are more likely to participate in programs if the expectations about the pay-off of college attainment are made clear (Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009).

### **Rigorous College Preparation Programs**

*First-generation college students.* The amount of support that first-generation college students receive during high school, especially in academic experiences, is paramount to their college success. The manner in which first-generation students arrive in college, including their goals throughout college and lack of family support become issues that most first-generation college students encounter. When compared to non-first-generation students, these difficulties are unique to first-generation college students (Woosley & Shepler, 2011). In order to address these students' needs, several programs have been developed such as the TRIO program—The Education Talent Research, Upward Bound, and Students Support Services. The three programs were designed by President Lyndon Johnson's administration in 1964 as part of the War on Poverty and Economic Opportunity Act. The aim of the three programs is to provide equal educational opportunities for all U.S. citizens, including low income, first-generation, and ethnic/racial minority students, for college readiness and access. Without the TRIO program, college attainment numbers for this population would be much lower. While the challenges to increase educational opportunities after high school continue, the TRIO program has made available federal dollars to create capacity for school leaders and educators to help prepare

students for college after high school. The purpose of TRIO is to create opportunities for higher education to break the cycle of poverty (Pitre & Pitre, 2009).

Upward Bound helps students with tutoring and academic assistance to complete the requirements for college acceptance. Upward Bound also offers students an opportunity, during the summer, to stay on a college campus, experience college life, and participate in academic college courses. The Educational Talent Search allows students to learn about options available to them after high school via academic, career, and financial aid counseling services. Since many of the TRIO programs are located on college campuses, students are able to form connections to the post-secondary experience after spending time to participate in the program offerings (Pitre & Pitre, 2009). These programs need to be expanded nationally and be continuously evaluated through research to measure their effectiveness (Becerra, 2010).

*Course rigor.* The general expectation, from colleges and families, is for students to complete college in four years. However, the economic composition of a students' high school could be a determining factor in college persistence and completion (Niu & Tienda, 2013). The demographics of first-generation college students are more likely to be female, older, Black or Latina, have dependent children, and come from low socioeconomic background, compared to students whose parents completed a college degree. As a result, these characteristics create an environment that decreases the chances for first-generation college students to complete college. The curriculum rigor that a high school offers in mathematics, for example, can improve the chances of first-generation college students to attend college. In addition, and considering academic integration, first-generation college students are less likely to connect with faculty and other students for study groups in and outside of class (Engle, 2007). Furthermore, the implementation of the common core content standards in mathematics has created a shift from

procedural to conceptual knowledge, resulting in higher academic rigor. Students must be able to know how to analyze data versus just knowing advanced algebra. In turn, assessments used will be able to gauge, through performance tasks, what students actually know. Such assessment results are able to give teachers formative data to plan instruction as well as to measure students' preparedness for college (Phillips & Wong, 2010).

Two measures of academic preparation were found to be positively correlated to college persistence. One was completion of pre-calculus, a higher order math course, which increases the chances of remaining in college, instead of dropping out compared to students that only completed lower level math courses. The other measure of academic preparation found to be positively correlated to college persistence was participation in a college orientation (Niu & Tienda, 2013). Institutional mechanisms, such as tracking, have always created disparity among student achievement. Most minority students are not placed in courses that will lead to college attendance; consequently, the significance of these low-academic placements should be recognized. It is in those college preparation courses that minority students will develop the skills that will allow them to have upward mobility in schools and in society (Valenzuela, 2005). Demographically, Black, Latino/a, and Native American students are more likely to be tracked into lower level, general, or vocational courses (Kao & Thompson, 2003). These students could view certain academic or extracurricular contexts as places where they find belonging in their school. Thus, students find community in these educational places and adopt them as their social group (Carter, 2010).

High school students' desire to attend college has increased; however, gaps in educational aspiration have declined when considering race and ethnicity; consequently, income has intensely declined. Additionally, gaps exist in college readiness, access, and success for this

student population. High school students who graduate with higher test scores, grades, and more rigorous coursework are more likely to attend a four-year college and complete a degree. A recent emphasis on college readiness from the district, state, and federal stakeholders requires high schools to be able to evaluate students' level of college readiness. Students must be prepared with content knowledge that can be applied across multiple disciplines in the way of core academic skills, such as analytic skills and writing. This has put forth the need for high school students to engage in deeper thinking around content knowledge rather than rote memorization of facts or procedures. Colleges assess these skills by student test scores, grade point average, and the coursework while the students are still in high school. The examination of this coursework allows colleges to predict if prospective college students will succeed in introductory courses (Melissa Roderick et al., 2009). In English Language Arts, the Common Core Content Standards in high school focus on the college-ready skills across multiple text types and writing that requires students to develop and defend their arguments. The literacy also extends beyond English classes across multiple disciplines requiring all content areas to share in the teaching of literacy standards (Phillips & Wong, 2010). There is a gap in access to rigorous courses, such as Advanced Placement (AP) courses, advanced mathematics, and college preparatory courses for minority and low-income students in comparison to their White counterparts (Melissa Roderick et al., 2009). The assumption is that achievement test scores measure some sort of academic intelligence regardless of how imperfect the assessment may be. When racial and ethnic differences persist after accounting for socioeconomic background, sociologists often blame the quality of schooling and other differences that have not been measured. Research has shown that parental socioeconomic status accounts for much of the variation in student grades (Kao & Thompson, 2003).

Some students are not eligible to attend college for many reasons, including low test scores on standardized exams and low academic achievement during their K-12 experience (Becerra, 2010). Students and schools have little control over social risk factors—SES, race/ethnicity, gender, family circumstances—, but school interventions can be developed by school personnel to address areas of absenteeism, grade retention, special education placement, and low performance (Lee & Burkam, 2003). Many schools that serve low income students lack access to advanced placement courses (Niu & Tienda, 2013). Demographically, Latinos/as are underrepresented in college enrollment and four-year degree attainment. If not addressed, this phenomenon will tax the social work profession in the future as Latinos will remain in poverty and unable to increase their socioeconomic status (Becerra, 2010). A way to remedy this problem could be for universities to offer courses to high school students to give them exposure through summer programs and provide professional learning for teachers to build capacity in these areas (Niu & Tienda, 2013).

High schools have been tasked with increasing standards by aligning college entrance expectations to high school graduation requirements and curricular standards to college level work (Melissa Roderick et al., 2009). While increasing rigor is important in comprehensive high schools, it becomes a challenge for administrators of continuation high school programs, especially when they need to create the same structures given teacher capacity and shorter times to accomplish student learning and graduation goals. In a report on California continuation high schools, the researchers found that these schools needed to increase access to professional learning for teachers to build capacity. Additionally, researchers found that the academic needs of students for direct and independent instruction were very different when compared to

continuation high school students and their comprehensive high school student counterparts (de Velasco & McLaughlin, 2012).

***Building teacher capacity.*** The introduction of the Common Core Standards has increased academic rigor and has come to require instruction to go deeper across disciplines, including teaching literacy skills to stretch across multiple academic disciplines. The standards were developed to ensure that all students were prepared with the requisite skills necessary to perform in college and professional careers (McKinstry, 2015). When de Velasco and McLaughlin (2012) published their report, they did so as sweeping changes in educational accountability and finance were coming to fruition. According to these authors, this renewed focus on college and career would reshape policy for lower performing schools. The common core standards require students to research information and provide evidence using multi-media to support their claims (McKinstry, 2015). In addition, the standards were designed for teachers to be able to manage them more easily and emphasize college preparation. Thus, students would graduate high school ready to enter two-year and four-year colleges, prepared to access freshman level college courses successfully. However, creating higher standards does not mean that student workload will increase in their high school classes; instead, they will be able to transfer their knowledge across multiple contexts and disciplines (Phillips & Wong, 2010).

Research has identified low academic and social skills to be among the causes for students to drop out of higher education. Two of the withdrawal symptoms of higher education include insufficient academic preparation and the lack of the established social skills necessary to navigate college. A student could possess one of the two skills and still not be successful. For example, a student could have high scholastic achievement, but lack the necessary social skills to navigate college, finding it difficult to thrive in that environment (Tinto, 1975).

## Summary

In order for students to find success in school and education, they need to develop social capital that will connect them to the resources that lead to educational attainment. This requires trustworthiness in the educational system to carry out the services the students and families need, and additionally, that students and their families will also engage in and participate (Coleman, 1988). Unfortunately, the educational setting is not set up in its current structure to increase college attendance for all. It is a system that perpetuates inconsistent learning environments (Muñoz, 2004).

Continuation high school priorities were never about college attainment or persistence beyond high school diploma completion. The goal of continuation high schools was to be an alternative education setting to prevent students from dropping out of high school. They were meant to be a voluntary placement for high school students who were behind in academic credits, but now they may have been allowed to become holding places for students with discipline challenges and, in some cases, to prevent students from expulsion (Aron, 2006; de Velasco & McLaughlin, 2012; Foley & Pang, 2006). While the three themes in the literature review—teacher-student relationships, parent involvement, and curriculum rigor—still need examination in the continuation settings, there still exists compelling evidence that these areas create positive outcomes for students coming from comprehensive high school settings. The development of the common core content standards has created an opportunity to dive deep into uncharted research regarding the effects of the infusion of the standards across the forty-eight states that have adopted the standards. Texas and Alaska did not adopt common core standards and are, therefore, excluded. The new standards require rigor to be increased in all K-12 environments and to date must be applied uniformly across all educational settings (Phillips & Wong, 2010).

Since all educational programs must teach from the common core standards, this means continuation high school students must also graduate from high school, college, and be career ready. In terms of social justice, the standards have the potential to raise the efficacy of continuation education programs provided that continuation programs are afforded opportunities for professional learning that gives teachers in the setting the tools and protocols necessary to provide for the rigor and instructional shifts of the Common Core Standards. The intersection of the content, the teacher-student relationship, and parent involvement are crucial to the success of students in high school and persistence in college regardless of the educational setting.



## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

This chapter presents the methodology used to describe how teacher-student relationships influence the educational landscape for continuation high school students. Included in this chapter are the research questions that guided the study and an overview of the research design. In addition, it also includes descriptions of participant recruitment, data collection, instrumentation, and data analysis methods.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to determine the influence of student-teacher relationships on the academic achievement and college attendance for continuation high school students. The overarching research question guiding this study follows: How do caring adult relationships influence student achievement and college matriculation among continuation high school students? The current research on teacher-student relationships and the conceptual frameworks of Critical Race Theory and Social Capital helped to formulate the following research sub-questions:

1. In what ways, if any, do student-teacher relationships shape student participation in academic courses?
2. What influence do student-teacher relationships have on continuation high school students' educational options after high school?
3. In what ways do continuation high school students' experiences shape their level of educational attainment as it pertains to community college and four-year university attendance?
4. In what way do continuation high school students' overall K-12 experiences shape the demographic make-up of the continuation high school?

5. To what extent, if any, do race and school discipline history influence students' educational pathways and options?

## **Research Design**

This study used an ethnographic intrinsic case study method to capture the authentic experiences of how teacher relationships influence student academic trajectories in continuation high schools. The researcher conducted a two-phase study which included individual interviews with continuation high school students and teachers. The first phase consisted of individual interviews with currently enrolled students and post-graduate participants. During phase two, individual interviews were scheduled with continuation high school teachers. This process allowed the researcher to record how the participants lead their daily lives and routines from the inside (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). The intrinsic case study also provided the opportunity for the researcher to study behavior, language, and interactions of the culture group specific to the continuation high school setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2007). During this process, the researcher immersed himself in the world of the participants and recorded what was meaningful and important during the course of the interview with each individual. Taking care to capture interview responses as they happened and made meaning of fieldnotes as it pertains to CRT and Social Capital Theory (Emerson et al., 2011).

## **Participants**

***Site selection.*** The researcher used pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of all participants and site locations for this study. Grapevine High School (GHS) is part of the Grape Valley Union High School District (GVUHSD) and serves as the district's only continuation high school. In 2018-2019 the school was comprised of approximately 284 of the district's estimated 7,190 students (cde.ca.gov). This school site was selected because it offers an active

Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program, the University of California and California State University A-G required courses, and has entered into Tier II Differentiated Assistance, the state's new system of accountability aimed at helping schools increase their academic outcomes. Moreover, GHS students are primarily credit deficient, from low socioeconomic families, and have faced many academic challenges such as language barriers or attendance challenges.

In 2018-2019 the student demographics by ethnicity included 88.5% Latino, 6.7% White, and 2.5% African American. Student subgroups included: 13% Homeless, 7.7% students with disabilities, and 33.5% English Language Learners (cde.ca.gov). In addition, the teaching staff at GHS consists of fifteen full-time fully credentialed teachers. GHS is also a Provision II school; this means that all students receive free lunch, because of the high percentage of students from low socioeconomic households.

GHS offers a continuum of college preparation courses and operates on an open-entry, open-exit trimester system. Students are scheduled for five 55-minute classes each day and have the option of taking a 6th period course. A unique aspect of GHS is that all new students must complete a six-week orientation course, which serves as a prerequisite before transitioning to the full-day program.

***Population selection.*** A total of twenty-one participants—seven current students, seven post-graduates and seven continuation teachers—were asked to participate in the study which targeted students of Latino/a or African American demographic. Although twenty-one individuals were invited to participate, only thirteen agreed to participate, three current students, six post-graduates, and four current teachers. The students from the school site were chosen via Stratified Sampling. Stratified Sampling, as part of the sampling procedures, was employed to

allow the researcher to choose GHS individuals in the population who met demographic criteria and who were working towards college matriculation upon high school graduation (Creswell, 2008). The seven post-graduates were selected via the Convenience Sampling Data collection method. This method was chosen to allow flexibility in the selection of participants since the participants have already graduated from GHS. The post-graduate participant experiences are important since they are currently enrolled in college or have received their undergraduate degree (Creswell, 2008). Additionally, the seven continuation high school teachers were chosen to capture the perceptions of teacher-student relationship influence as it pertains to college matriculation and educational attainment. Convenience Sampling was used to select educators and to allow flexibility in choosing participants because of external time commitments and outside obligations (Creswell, 2008).

### **Procedures: Phase One**

In Phase One, individual interviews were scheduled with each student participant. Each student participant was asked the five sub-questions to examine how student-teacher relationships influenced student achievement and college attendance for continuation high school students. Three current GHS students were selected by asking teachers to provide the names of students who met the demographic criteria of Latino or African American. Teachers from various disciplines were asked to volunteer the names of potential participants to be invited to an informational meeting via the Zoom virtual meeting platform. Additionally, in this phase, six post-graduate GHS students who are currently enrolled in an undergraduate, graduate program, or had completed an undergraduate degree, were invited to participate in individual interviews.

## **Procedures: Phase Two**

In Phase Two, individual interviews were scheduled with high school teachers. Each teacher participant was asked the five sub-questions to examine how teachers perceived the influence their relationship with students had on student achievement and college attendance. The selected teachers were invited to participate in a Zoom virtual meeting for the interview.

At the time of the interview for both Phase One and Two, the researcher reminded participants they had the option to withdraw or refuse to answer specific questions during the interview without any penalty. Each interview was scheduled for 60-minute sessions with a total of five questions. Each session was recorded; notes were taken on a password-protected personal recording device. Since the interviews were recorded participants were informed that the recording could be stopped at any time and portions, or the entire audio recording, could be erased upon request. Safeguards were in place to minimize any risk to participants. Pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality of all the participants in the study. After the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed by a professional transcription service.

## **Data collection**

Data collection began in July 2020 and concluded in November 2020. Phase One of the study, student interviews, was conducted over four months between July 13, 2020, and November 3, 2020. Phase two began on September 14, 2020, and concluded on October 8, 2020.

After receiving approval to conduct the study at Grapevine High School from Grape Valley Union High School District, the students were invited to participate using the procedures described in Phase One. Once students and teachers agreed to participate in the study, the study was described to all participants, including parents or guardians, and they were given their Informed Consent and Assent forms as it applied to each participant. Once the Informed

Consent and Assent Forms were returned, student and teacher participants were given a copy of the forms for their records. The next step was to schedule individual interviews for a total of three participants from the school site, six post-graduate students, and four teachers for a total of thirteen participants. A total of twenty-one participants were invited to participate; however, only thirteen agreed to participate.

### **Data Analysis**

The qualitative data of the interview transcripts were coded manually. In the first coding cycle, the researcher analytically coded interviews to create specific categories (Emerson et al., 2011). Open coding was used because it allowed the researcher to implement a combination of purposeful first-coding methods to identify common themes within the interview notes (Emerson et al., 2011). Based on the topics and themes identified through open coding, focused coding was used to narrow the common themes of the study's focus (Emerson et al., 2011).

### **Limitations**

**Generalizability.** This study focused on a medium-sized continuation high school undergoing the Comprehensive School Improvement process of differentiated assistance, which is the new system of state intervention to assist schools in improving academic and equity accountability outcomes. Since the study was conducted at one continuation high school, the sample size was limited. However, all schools in the state of California are required to implement the California Common Core Standards regardless of the type of educational setting and are also held to the same accountability standards. Since the State accountability measures are implemented equally across the state, this study could be generalized among similarly sized school settings that might be useful to policy-makers, researchers, and educational leaders.

***Positionality.*** Since I am, as the researcher, the former Principal of Grapevine High School, positionality may have some limitations. I had very positive relationships with students while serving as the site administrator; this may have affected student participants' willingness to become part of the study. Student participants, with whom I have an established relationship, may not share their true feelings protect their teachers' images and preserve their student-teacher relationship. Grapevine High School has a high transient rate of attendance and by the time the study was conducted many of the students with whom I had a personal connection, may have already left the program. Additionally, each one of the post-graduate students was either a former student or attended the school while I was a site administrator. I planned to minimize the students' relational bias by using the Simple Random Selection process and reminding participants of the confidentiality and privacy safeguards during the study.

### **Summary**

A two-phase ethnography was chosen to capture the experiences of nine continuation high school students and four continuation high school teachers to answer the research questions for this study. The research methodology was designed through the review of the literature on Social Capital Theory, Critical Race Theory, and college preparation practices implemented at the comprehensive high school level. The purpose of this study was to find any influences teacher-student relationships may have had on student achievement and college matriculation for continuation high school students by examining the following questions: (1) In what ways, if any, do student-teacher relationships shape student participation in academic courses? (2) What influence do student-teacher relationships have on continuation high school students' educational options after high school? (3) In what ways do continuation high school students' experiences shape their educational decisions about college matriculation? (4) In what way do continuation

high school students' overall K-12 experiences shape the demographic make-up of the continuation high school? and (5) To what extent, if any, do race and school discipline history influence students' educational pathways and options? By implementing this qualitative method of data collection, the researcher had a deeper understanding of how these interactions and relationships influenced students' decisions about their academic achievement and educational trajectory upon graduating from a continuation high school.



## **Chapter Four: Results**

This chapter presents the findings of a qualitative study using a two-phase approach. The two phases consisted of thirteen individual interviews. Nine interviews in phase one and four interviews in phase two. Phase One included interviews with six post-graduate Grapevine High School (GHS) students and three current GHS students. It is important to note that because of the COVID pandemic, the three current Grapevine students were interviewed post-graduation since the researcher could not gain access to those participants given the campus closures. All current students were members of the 2019-2020 school year when the interviews were originally scheduled. The research questions which guided this study are:

1. In what ways, if any, do student-teacher relationships shape student participation in academic courses?
2. What influence do student-teacher relationships have on continuation high school students' educational options after high school?
3. In what ways do continuation high school students' experiences shape their level of educational attainment as it pertains to community college and four-year university attendance?
4. In what way do continuation high school students' overall K-12 experiences shape the demographic make-up of the continuation high school?
5. To what extent, if any, do race and school discipline history influence students' educational pathways and options?

### **Introduction of Student Participants**

During Phase One, six post-graduate and three current GHS students were interviewed to construct the narrative that seeks to discover the influence of student-teacher relationships on

academic achievement and college attendance for continuation high school students. Each of the post-graduate GHS students was in a different place in their educational journey. The following is a background narrative of each of the post-graduate students and the place where they are presently on their college and university journey.

Claudia graduated from GHS in 2019 and is attending a local community college majoring in Liberal Studies. She is also currently employed at GHS as an AVID tutor. Claudia did not attend her previous high school regularly. She arrived at GHS primarily for lack of attendance, one of the criteria for involuntary transfer to a continuation high school. She felt very disconnected at her previous school because she did not have any point of connection. Claudia described that she lost her passion for learning and believed teachers noticed she was absent but did not have the time for her and thus she fell through the cracks.

Alex is a GHS graduate of the class of 2016 and attending a local community college majoring in Mathematics. Alex will transfer to UCSD next fall to continue his studies in Mathematics, including a career as a high school teacher at continuation education schools. Additionally, Alex is currently employed by GHS as an AVID tutor. Alex was a transfer student from the Community Day School (CDS) in the district, a school for students on a suspended expulsion. Community Day Schools allow districts to retain a small number of expelled students on a case-by-case basis. He was forced to attend GHS because the CDS school closed based on lack of funding. He was very disconnected from school and was not interested in participating when he enrolled at GHS. He had explained during his comprehensive site experience that he was involved in “streets” activities late at night and came to school very tired whenever he attended. He often arrived at school after ten or eleven o’clock in the morning. His class periods were two-hour long at his comprehensive site and it was just too difficult for him to sit in a

classroom for that length of time. Once he had reached his time limit, he could not bear being in class and would find a way to get into trouble so teachers would kick him out of class or send him to the school principal's office.

Christina graduated from GHS in 2009 and attended a local community college; earned an Associate of Arts degree in Sociology; and transferred to CSU Northridge where she earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Chicano/a Studies. Christina went on to attend graduate school at UCLA and earned a Master of Arts in Education with a Teaching Credential. Christina is currently teaching at a continuation high school in the Los Angeles area. When Christina arrived at GHS, she was behind in credits and failing her academic classes. She had family challenges at home which were interfering with her ability to focus on schoolwork. She believes teachers saw her lack of focus as disinterest in the curriculum. She felt they never took the time to find out what was really occurring in her life outside of school. There was an assumption made that she did not care about school or her education.

Oscar graduated in 2012 and attended a local community college and earned an Associate of Arts degree in World Languages and General Studies. Oscar transferred to CSU Long Beach and earned a degree in Chicano Studies with a minor in Sociology. In 2020, Oscar completed a Master of Arts degree at Columbia University in New York and is currently conducting research at the university and applying to a Ph.D. program. Oscar struggled with anxiety as a young student and because of this he missed a lot of school time which caused him to fall behind and fail. When he arrived at GHS, he did the majority of his classes online through a learning management system program that students could enroll in one period per day. Students were given the opportunity to access the courses from home and if they did so, they could finish a semester course in as little as four weeks. Oscar found lots of success in the online platform and

was able to recover all of his credits in one year and graduate on time. However, in addition to his anxiety, he also had close family members who were gang-involved and who also caused challenges for him and deterred him from focusing fully on his schoolwork.

Luis graduated in 2013 and attended a local community college where he earned an Associate of Arts degree in Social Studies before transferring to CSU San Marcos. At this institution, Luis will receive a Bachelor of Arts degree in Criminology and Social Justice with a minor in Sociology in the Spring of 2021. Luis came to GHS on a suspended expulsion. His parents were given the choice of having Luis attend GHS or attend school in a community court school run by the county office. His parents opted for GHS, but Luis's father never liked the idea of Luis attending a continuation high school. Luis had to move out of his father's house and live with one of his cousins while he attended Valley (what school is this?). In addition, his father did not support the idea of Luis attending college once he had been expelled from his comprehensive high school site. Luis struggled academically while at GHS because he lacked self-confidence which also made it difficult for him to consider attending college after high school.

Regina graduated in 2010 and is currently attending a local community college majoring in Sociology and close to transferring to CSU San Marcos. Regina is also currently employed at GHS as an Office Clerk. Regina had a very tenuous home life when he transferred to GHS. She struggled with her relationship with her mother. Mother and daughter struggled to get along and at times made life for Regina very difficult. She had a younger brother she often cared for so that her mother could work to support her the family. Regina hardly spoke to any other students and would often keep to herself when on campus. During nutrition breaks and lunch, she would

sit by herself when she was at school. Little by little she built relationships with some of the adults on campus and was able to graduate.

The three current student participants were part of the 2019-2020 school year. All three were seniors and graduated from GHS in May of 2020. The following is a background narrative for each one of the current student participants.

Gilberto attended GHS because he was moving into our district from a neighboring school district. When he tried to enroll at his comprehensive site, he was not allowed to enroll because he was too deficient in credits to be able to earn a diploma by the end of his twelfth-grade year. GHS was offered as a placement where he would be able to graduate on time. Once Gilberto started classes at GHS, he was highly motivated and interested in school leadership. Gilberto was selected by the school board and cabinet to be one of two students to serve on the Grape Valley Union School District's (GVUSD) Governing Board as a student representative. In addition, Gilberto was also selected to be part of a pilot program to include continuation high school students in Upward Bound, a program to support students in college and university.

Emilio, a senior at GHS, graduated in April of 2020. When Emilio began to attend GHS, he was credit-deficient and getting to trouble at his comprehensive high school site. However, he was determined to graduate from high school on time. He had very supportive parents who were involved and trying to make sure he was staying on a good path. Emilio was required to enroll in mentorship program which pairs middle and high school-aged students with an adult who can take them on outings and help them think differently about their future. This program was mandated because of some of the trouble he had been in. He successfully completed this program just before graduating from GHS.

Finally, Santiago, a senior at GHS, graduated in May 2020. Santiago was also selected to participate in the Upward Bound Program. He, like Luis, also came to GHS as transfer student from a neighboring school district. He was also credit-deficient and was offered GHS as an option to graduate from high school on time. He got behind at his previous school because he really did not care about school. He was more interested in hanging out with friends and participating in negative behaviors. He shared that he only thought about the present. Santiago never really thought about how he might struggle in the future until he began attending GHS.

### **Phase One Findings**

Each of the six post-graduate and three current students were invited to a one-hour interview session recorded using Zoom. Upon completion of all the interviews, the audio recordings were uploaded to rev.com (a transcription service) and transcribed. Once the researcher received the transcriptions of the interview sessions, he converted them to Microsoft Word documents and read through each transcript in search of common themes throughout the post-graduate student and current-student transcripts. In addition, the researcher used the word search feature in Microsoft Word to find out how many times key words occurred in the transcripts to help create the themes for the data reporting. For example, the word graduate was mentioned twenty-six times throughout the six transcripts. Figure 1 and Figure 2 below illustrate the frequency in which key research and related words appeared in the interview transcript for the Post-graduate and Current students, respectively. I have also included Table 2 and 3 below which contain the frequency for all the words that appeared in the student transcripts used to develop figures 1 and 2. The researcher only selected words that appeared in the document ten or more times for post-graduate students, as well as other words the researcher deemed significant but with far less frequency across all transcript documents. These selected words

continued to be mentioned across the six post-graduate transcripts and appeared to be part of many of the post-graduate student responses and contributed to the theme development as part of the open coding process (Emmerson et al., 2011). When the researcher applied the word frequency criteria for the current students, the search yielded far fewer words as shown in figure 2.

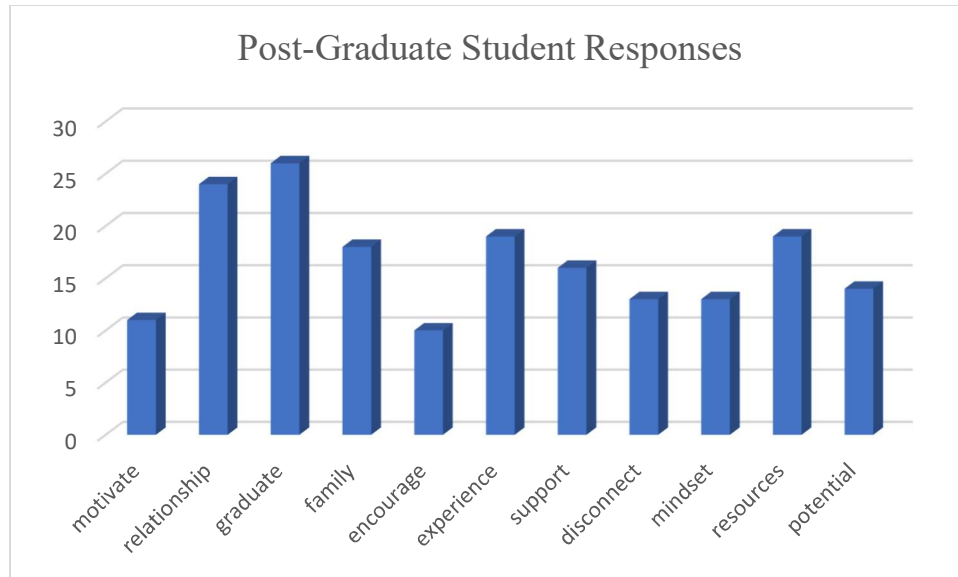


Figure 1. Post-Graduate Student Responses

Table 1. Post-Graduate Students

Word	Frequency
Motivate	11
Relationship	24
Graduate	26
Family	18
Succeed	8
Encourage	10
Environment	5
Culture	8
Attendance	9
Responsibility	2
Connections	3
Experience	19
Goals	3
Accountable	5
Small school	2
Academic	7
Invest	3
Support	16
Disconnect	13
Mindset	13
Restorative justice	2
Resources	19
Potential	14



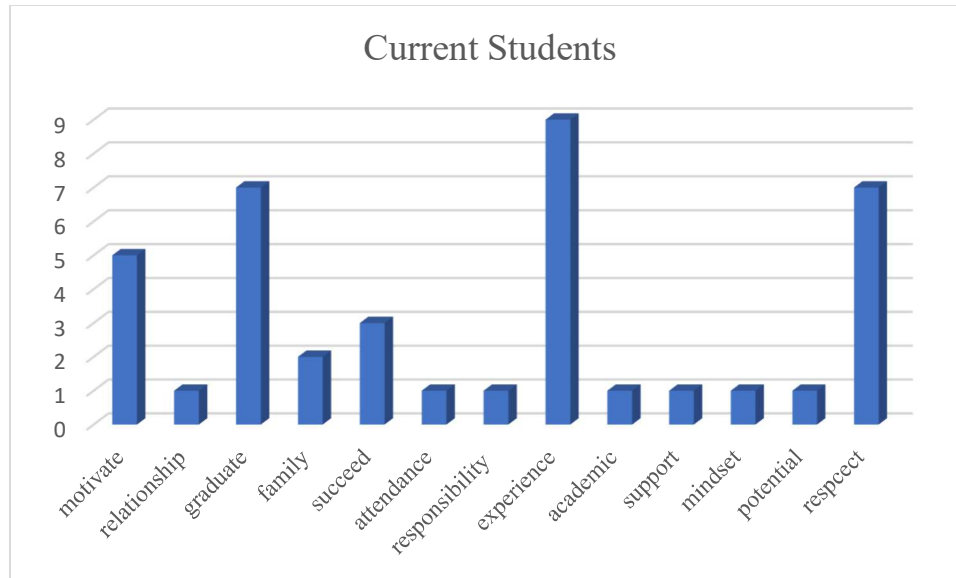


Figure 2. Current Student

Table 2. Current Students

Word	Frequency
Motivate	5
Relationship	1
Graduate	7
Family	2
Succeed	3
Encourage	0
Environment	0
Culture	0
Attendance	1
Responsibility	1
Connections	0
Experience	9
Goals	0
Accountable	9
Small school	0
Academic	1
Invest	0
Support	1
Disconnect	0
Mindset	1
Resources	0
Potential	1
Respect	7

*Self-Perceptions.* Phase One participant descriptions of themselves were not ones of academic excellence. Some even described the school as having a stigma. It was also very apparent in their description that there was not a lot of diversity at their school. Words like people of color, Mexican, Latino, and brown skin were among the descriptors used by participants. As participants spoke about their school, there was a definite positive and proud tone, especially as participants spoke of their academic achievements. As mentioned in the introduction of participants, many of the Post-graduate students have already completed a degree or were close to transferring to a four-year university.

The following narrative will describe how Phase One participants viewed themselves and fellow continuation high school peers. When continuation high school students transfer from their comprehensive site to the continuation high school, their perception of self is one of doubt or lack of confidence in their academic ability. Their presence on the continuation site caused continuation high school students to diminish their skills and stifle their potential as evidenced by Claudia's answer to when responding to relationships influence on educational options: "I feel like at my site, a lot of my friends or a lot of fellow students that I didn't really know really well, they were always kind of like downplaying their own skills and downplaying their own potential because they were at that site." Luis continued to battle the stigma associated with continuation and described his inner turmoil as he responded to how continuation shaped his level of educational attainment (below in indented block). The thought that he had graduated from a continuation school was constantly at the forefront of his mind as he navigated his college experience. He equates his participation in continuation high school as an education program less than possible for preparing him for college. It was not until the high school counselor

invited Luis to take a course, she offered through a community college that he began to find confidence in his ability to participate in college. As he engaged more in college and took more classes, he began to gain confidence in his academic capacity and become aware of his own potential to be successful in college. The achievement he began to find in college motivated him to become an individual that, in his estimation, would break educational attainment statistics for minority students as evidenced by the following interview excerpt:

I graduated from continuation high school. It's not regular high school. Then after I passed the counselor's class and I kept going and kept going, I kept passing. Eventually, that thought went away and then I could tell myself, "I like the education that I'm getting and I really like that I reached my potential and I feel I could keep going." I could keep reaching higher education, doesn't matter if I graduated from Grapevine. I feel like I can be one of those people, especially being of a minority, I feel like I want to be one of that low percentage of minority to want to reach higher education.

The encouragement that students received from the continuation high school staff propelled students to keep progressing. Two of the participants in the study made a point to say that GHS had not prepared them for college. The researcher shares this here because the study participants overwhelmingly expressed their gratitude and pride for GHS. The narrative is another aspect of the development and self-awareness the participants have. While answering how the influence of relationship on educational options, Oscar recalled his experience and shared that since he had not graduated from a comprehensive high school, he knew he would not be eligible for a four-year university upon graduation. GHS only offered the minimum graduation requirements, which in Grape Valley Unified School District, are not aligned with the course requirements for four-year university admission. Therefore, he had to begin his university journey at the community college level. He was conflicted about having to attend community college because he had heard that students did not always transfer to four-year universities from these types of institutions. He believed he was not prepared for college since

he had not planned to attend, and his decision to attend had been a last-minute decision. However, Oscar recalled that many teachers had encouraged him to attend college while at GHS, citing that he had a lot of potential as confirmed in the following quote: “I do remember a lot of teachers telling me, you have the potential to really go to community college and transfer, you have that potential. I remember my peers even telling me, Are you going to go to college? But them not knowing themselves what it was about, but also mentioning, yeah! I think you'd do good, continuing school.”

Santiago spoke about his college preparation while responding to how K-12 experiences shape educational options after high school by indicating that a continuation high school education is insufficient to be successful in college. Continuation high school students believe the education they receive is less than the education they would receive at their comprehensive high school site. In Santiago’s experience, he did not believe the education he was receiving was sufficient because he did not believe the academic challenge would match what would be expected in community college as validated by the following statement: “I knew that college was going to be way different than community college. I mean than continuation school, which is why I was kind of worried because I didn't feel like I was getting enough. And yeah. Like I feel like it just kind of affected me how, I didn't really push myself as much the last two years then how a normal school would have like pushed me.”

Santiago was asked to explain what he meant by “enough.” The student continued, “Yeah! Well, it wasn't really as challenging in continuation compared to, we were saying enough to prepare you for community college.” This topic only came up during the interviews for these two participants. The fact that it did not come up in the other interviews does not mean that it was not a factor for the other participants, it just never came up as a topic of

discussion. Most of the participants focused on how they were feeling about their innate abilities and participation in a continuation program, not as much on how the course content prepared them academically to attend college. The focus of their responses to interview questions was more related to the direct motivation teacher-student relationships fostered on work completion and progressing towards graduating from high school.

***Adult Relationships.*** Each of the current and post-graduate students had a shared value of the student-teacher relationship. These relationships appeared to solidify their success and drive as post-graduate students recall why they progressed through school. Consistent among many of the students' responses was the belief that teachers cared about them as students and individuals. They felt that teachers were invested in their future and success. Santiago explains his experience this way: "They kind of had sympathy towards your future and they actually cared, they wanted me to succeed or whatever. So, they kind of always were reminding [me], telling me, get this done."

Claudia explained the relationship with teachers at GHS saying that the school "really makes you want to succeed." This was especially true after hearing the stories other continuation high school students' success motivated Claudia to move forward in her education. The stigma associated with continuation high school students is that they are a failure or that they are not meant for anything good. The encouragement continuation high school students receive from their teachers propelled them to thrive and reach their potential as Claudia described in the following statement: "But, when you hear from your own teachers validating you and saying, Hey, that's not really what determines what makes you a good person or a person of value or if you're going to be a successful person." Emphasizing that past failures or their current situations do not necessarily determine their educational attainment or accomplishments. These

encouraging conversations teachers had with their students helped students feel validated and gave them a sense of responsibility to continue. Furthermore, Alex shared by knowing his teacher and the teacher knowing him, this interaction created approachability that was not present when the teacher and student are strangers. He further explains the relationship while answering the influence of student-teacher relationships had on academic participation:

Her telling me was just like... I feel like if I said no, or if I didn't try at least, I'd be letting her down. It was only because we built that relationship throughout the time, you know? Whereas teachers who don't build relationships with every student, it feels like they don't really know you, feels uncomfortable to even answer a question or even ask, because it feels like a stranger, like you're asking a stranger.

Additionally, students at GHS shared the importance of being respected by teachers. When students and teachers entered into a relationship that was respectful, students felt more compelled to participate in class. This relationship added value and importance to the education they were receiving. Students felt that teachers were taking a genuine interest in them. Alex explains when responding to a research question asking how relationships influence academic participation: “[For example, if you need to ask] a question if you have one. So, I feel like it helps a lot. For me, it helped a lot because I knew my teacher, so it just made it easier for me to even talk to her because she would always try to have a relationship with me, talk with me, just make me feel more comfortable to even ask anything if I needed to.” Emilio also shared that students were more responsible for exhibiting respect as evidenced in his response to the influence of student-teacher responses on academic participation in which he shared the belief teachers at GHS were friendly and respectful; this should be shared reciprocally. However, according to this student, it was the student’s responsibility to demonstrate more respect in class so that when the students needed something from the teacher, they would be willing to meet the students’ needs as evidenced by the following: “So... it’s mostly, most of the job of the student

to be more respectful in class. And so that way, the teacher could have the same respect for him. So that way when he [student] needs something, she's [teacher] there for him too."

Students put a high value on the relationship, as it was corroborated by the high frequency of the word usage throughout the transcripts among all students. Christina cited the relationship and conversation she had with her teachers as the main reason for attending college. She remembers the conversation this way while responding to the influence student-teacher relationships have on academic participation:

And I think that the teachers pushing me to do my work, I didn't take it in a bad way. I think that I wasn't like, Who are you to tell me what to do? I think that I understood where it was coming from, because it wasn't like.... Oh! Do your work because I just expect you to do it. It's like, do your work because this is actually [what] you need to graduate. It was just always graduation, graduation, graduation, constantly. And I was like, Yeah, okay. Yeah, I need to do it.

The bond of the relationship was so strong among this post-graduate student, that there was a sense of letting down the teacher if he did not live up to his full potential. Many of the responses from the current and post-graduate students affirmed the reciprocal relationship between teacher and student, where there was mutual respect and care for each other. Phase One participants believed that certain teachers truly believed their students could have educational success.

***Educational Experiences.*** During the interview process, many of the participants shared their experiences from their previous schools. One of the comments both current and post-graduate students shared was about the opportunity that the smaller continuation school offered to get to know them as individuals. Claudia shared her comprehensive high school site experience while replying to the influence of student-teacher relationships on educational options; the student described his comprehensive site experience as superficial in the following manner: "They knew my name and they knew my face, but that's all they knew really. I was just a name on a roster." She goes on to say that it was not that teachers at the comprehensive site

did not want to know more about her. It was that the time to build better relationships simply did not exist. On the other hand, in a continuation school, the small environment made it possible for the teacher to focus on the student's needs as evidenced by Claudia's comment:

It was not that they [comprehensive high school teachers] were out to ignore me, but it was just that, that's what the situation could give you. What could they have done? But at this type of site [continuation], it's kind of hard to get overlooked, and it's pretty hard to avoid questions throughout the lecture, because everyone has a chance to come say, Hey, did you understand the topic? It's really hard to hide yourself, even if you do or don't want to, in class.

Emilio also shared his experience at the comprehensive high school site when responding to the influence of student-teacher relationships on academic participation. This student explained that he did experience care from his comprehensive site teachers; however, once a student fails in that environment, the teacher loses interest in helping the student catch up. In addition, once the teacher knew that the student was transferring to GHS, the teacher encouraged the student to give up. And when the transfer decision was made, the teacher saw no reason to continue in the class since the student would no longer continue in the teacher's course. This caused the student to agree with his teacher and give up. The following confirms this reality:

They don't try to keep motivating you. I was there and then I even had a teacher that told me, What's the point of you doing the work? You're not going to come here anymore. And that was when I was already almost going to move to Grapevine. And that's when I'm like, Okay. And then that's...I just stopped doing the work right there.

In contrast, Emilio's first day at GHS, he felt welcomed. The continuation teachers showed care for him. This caring experience equated to the continuation teachers' willingness to help him meet his needs as he later on confirmed: "And then there was a way different experience in Grapevine because on the first day you already feel really welcomed. You just see every teacher with a smile on their face, they look positive every day. And just when you get to know them, they're really helpful and they're actually there for you." The notion that someone is there for



students was important to them. It was this positive influence for continuation school students which motivated them to attend college. While answering how K-12 experiences shape demographics in continuation high schools, he explains how he changed his mind about college attendance:

It [teacher relationships] did influence me to keep continuing my education journey because before I would always think like, 'No, I'm not going to college.' And now that I see myself in college, I'm just like, 'Oh, I didn't think I was actually going to be here.' It was just a good feeling, when you're somewhere where you wouldn't think you would be.

Claudia described her comprehensive site experience when responding to the influence of student-teacher relationships on academic participation, explaining the academic difficulty at that school site. The teachers in continuation high school laid a foundation that would help Claudia be successful even though the teacher would not necessarily be available to help her in the future while attending college. In this case, teachers helped her realize a new opportunity for her education. She remembered the counselor at the comprehensive school site inviting other students to participate in college presentations but excluding her from those invitations. At GHS, all students were treated as if they were going to go to college regardless of their future plans as Claudia affirmed:

Because when I was at the comprehensive site, I remember students would get pulled out for college, like, oh! This college counselor is here and there's this presentation, but I would never get called to go. And I feel when I was at Grapevine it was, everybody's going. Even if you think you don't want to go, you're still going to go. So, I think that played a really, really big role.

In contrast, other continuation school students also agree. For example, Christina was provided options and invited to participate in presentations to help make decisions for her future. The smaller environment and more intimate setting for students at the continuation high school allowed students to get individualized attention to help them meet their educational needs. Not

only were students met with academic support but also social-emotional support to provide the motivation to keep moving them towards high school graduation and beyond.

Continuation high schools in California lack diversity in their demographics (de Velasco & McLaughlin, 2012). GHS is no exception; the school continues to have a high Latino and low socioeconomic population. The school's demographic is primarily made up of students of color. Many of the students pointed to the lack of diversity in the school. Emilio described the demographic while responding to how K-12 experiences shape the demographic make-up of continuation high schools, by explaining the belief that the majority of students were Mexican, and because of that, he felt there were no student influences for a positive direction. They were all following the same path. He lamented to see his race making decisions that would negatively influence their lives. However, Emilio was able to see this as a reason to turn his life around and make better decisions for himself as evidence by the following statement: "like let's say it's sad seeing your own race, and seeing a lot of them, trying to mess up their life. Since I have personal experience, but then since I thought about it, thought twice, and that's when I decided that it's a good idea to try turning your life around because there are more beautiful things than just being in the streets."

While Emilio could see many of the students were brown, it served to help him make better choices and seek out new educational opportunities for himself. While there is a contradiction in his statement, I think that he was trying to say that many of the students were making poor choices and Emilio did not want to follow the same path as those making poor decisions. Christina and Oscar were able to point out some inequalities that exist in the school system related to race while answering how K-12 experiences shape the demographics of continuation high schools. The participants had attained the highest level of education, both had

graduate degrees. Christina is employed as a continuation high school teacher and Oscar is a university researcher. Both participants also have degrees in Sociology. Christina framed the influence of the educational system on the continuation demographic by focusing on the design of schooling. Essentially, she claimed the education system was not designed for students of color during our discussion on the influence of demographics on educational attainment. She currently teaches in continuation high school in LAUSD and shares a dual perspective as a former continuation high school student and current continuation high school teacher. She works in a school where there are many teachers of color, juxtaposed to her high school experience where most teachers were white. She did not have a teacher of color until she transferred to GHS. She shared not having teachers of color, the pedagogy and content standards being taught does not reflect the students in continuation. She believes education was designed to serve the upper white class, middle class, and male students. Additionally, she believed the educational system had not addressed the deficit perspective that teachers carry. According to Christina, these conversations around the educational bias are harming marginalized students and perpetuating a cycle of non-education for these students as her statement confirms:

I think that those conversations haven't been had, and they're really difficult conversations to have. It's really, really difficult because it's like, people's feelings get hurt, but it's, if people's feelings don't get hurt, then what is the consequence of that? And the consequences of that is students being so marginalized throughout their schooling experience that they end up behind on credits, not graduating, being kicked out of school.

She goes on to describe the lack of this conversation contributing to the large population of students of color in continuation. Blame for the lack of academic progress is placed on external factors like lack of parents' interest in their child's education. Instead of examining the resources that are being provided for continuation students, she believes it is easier to ignore what is occurring as she explains: "It's like, where is the support? Everybody is kind of just like,

oh! Again, it's like they don't care, or their parents just don't care and it's just like, What's really happening. What resources are you actually providing? Because it's so much easier to not deal with it.” While discussing continuation demographics Oscar described the demographics by explaining that the K-12 experience definitely shapes the make-up of continuation high school. He believes that students of color are expelled and suspended at higher rates than White students for similar offenses. In addition, the supports that are offered to intervene for certain students of color are not available. The transfer decisions and how students are transferred are based on how they are perceived by those in power such as administrators as validated by the following statement:

All of those things definitely shape your experience and the makeup of, it's not a secret that students of color tend to get more suspended, expelled, at higher rates for very similar behaviors than white students do. So, I think it really goes deep into how students of color are perceived. Certain behaviors they are put up for suspension, expulsion, and they might end up. at those [schools] How they handle certain situations with certain students of color and not with others, of what steps they might help to intervene or try to support individuals.

Both descriptions of the demographics raise questions about the efficacy of education programs and how continuation high school students are being served prior to their transfer. Specifically, how students of color are being engaged in the curriculum, classroom pedagogy, and discipline practices that lead to referrals to continuation school programs.

***Social capital.*** The Social Capital individuals may or may not possess can influence opportunities as they progress through their K-12 educational experiences, especially as it pertains to the continuation high school demographic. The students’ social network and experiences the individuals in that network have could influence what educational decisions students might make. This is especially true for the current and post-graduate student participants in this study. Each of these participants is or will be the first in their families to attend college.

The relationships they had with their teachers helped to influence their educational trajectory. The narrative contained within this section will illuminate how the student-teacher relationship added to the Social Capital for these students.

The family dynamic can create barriers for students to continue their education. At times it can be a barrier to completing a high school diploma, making it difficult to even consider matriculating to a post-high school graduate program at a community college or university. When answering how K-12 experiences shape demographics in continuation high schools, Alex provided this description of the family dynamic, citing home life as a reason for not focusing on their schooling. Many of the students come from single-parent households or are living with extended family members. There is not anyone encouraging them to pursue their education. He also cited lack of finances to pay for college as a barrier to attendance as described here: “It wasn't a typical family that we all came from. I think a lot [of] Hispanic people like myself, they push more towards just working as soon as you're done with high school. [College is] not really an option, because I don't believe there are many different ways for somebody to pay for college, financially or something like that.” The emphasis on finding employment after high school made more sense than trying to figure out how to pay for college. Lack of knowledge on financial aid options rendered college out of reach for some continuation students.

Many of the continuation high school student's parents do not have experience navigating the college system making it difficult for them to know how to support their child. Christina shared her experience with their parent during her response to the influence of student-teacher relationships on academic participation: “I had this idea of going to college and my mom would tell me all the time, but she didn't know how to help me or guide me at all. So, I feel she was trying to motivate me and provide the best support that she could.” Her mom had a sense that

college attendance was possible for Christina but did not know how to support her in the process of attending. Claudia shared this example of the family dynamic when answering how K-12 experiences shape demographics in continuation, she explained some students never had any of the post-high school graduation options shared with them. They had other responsibilities that occupied their time and focus. Many of them took care of extended family members. They had larger issues to contend with that made it difficult for them to focus on learning. This was why Claudia believed many continuation high school students were overlooked as evidenced by the following statement: “They never really had the opportunity to gain that link to their education. So, I understand why it was so easy for them to fall in the cracks, and not really succeed academically. Their life was more than just grades or school or diploma. There were bigger matters where, sometimes they didn't have food on the table.” Additionally, Luis gives another example of the family dynamic while answering to what extent, if any do race and discipline influence educational options and pathways: “My parents didn't finish high school, so that's one thing. They don't really believe in school. All they believe in is just working.” His parents had not finished high school and because of that, he believed that his parents did not find value in education. In his case, his parents placed a higher value on gaining employment. Despite the different examples of the family dynamic, these students were able to find a pathway to higher education

During the interviews, current and post-graduate students described how their experiences contributed to their decision to attend college after high school. Some of the participants had college aspirations prior to attending GHS but had abandoned the idea of attending colleges. When answering the influence student-teacher relationships have on academic participation, Luis explains the relationship influence from the school counselor that

was offering a community college class when Luis was a student at GHS. The comments about his academic abilities from continuation high school teachers made a huge impression on his thoughts about his capacity to attend college upon graduating from high school. He started to believe his teachers and realize that he had the potential teachers had told him he possessed. The high school guidance counselor kept encouraging him to continue his college education. Despite his parents being unwilling to share their finances so he could apply for financial aid, he enrolled in his first college class at the request of the guidance counselor. That initial class was taught by the GHS guidance counselor and allowed him to experience college with a familiar instructor. He believed that when teachers encouraged him about his academic potential, their comments were genuine. The success Luis found in that initial course became a catalyst for him to continue his college education as evidenced by:

Then after I went in and I took that class and I realized that I was doing well, she [the guidance counselor] pushed me like, Come on, I know you can do this. Come on. I know you can. I'm like, Okay, well yeah, I'll do it. Eventually, when I took that class and I saw that I was doing well in it, that pretty much sparked something in my head, in my thoughts like, Maybe, I could do this. Maybe I can.

Claudia shared her story about the preparation for college preparation when responding to how continuation high school experiences shape their level of educational attainment as it pertains to college or four-year university, she described the opportunity to participate in AVID at GHS and, via this program, received help and encouragement to take college classes while still enrolled in high school. She credited this involvement in AVID with defining her college experience. She felt that the help from the course allowed her to gain the requisite skills that have assisted her with the ability to find success in college as confirmed by:

As well as my AVID and college and career center staff, also both my AVID teacher and both the staff there, have encouraged me to take classes while I was still in high school. I think that also made a huge difference. I took two classes and that really defined, I feel like my whole experience in college now. Because, I

got a sense of what the platform, the college platform from campus was about, how to maneuver it and how it worked.

The guidance the GHS staff provided for students while in high school allowed them to access community college courses and be supported while still in high school. This infusion of Social Capital for the students allowed them to experience college to build their capacity in navigating the community college system.

### **Summary of Phase One Findings**

The Phase One student interview responses focused on all 5 research questions. Part of the original study, which was to take place before the COVID-19 pandemic, was centered completely on the student experiences to capture student perceptions of the influence teacher relationships had on continuation high school students' educational trajectory. The researcher discovered the students had a keen understanding of the influence such teacher-student relationships have. The students acknowledged the value the relationships added to their future success. Research Questions 1-3 focused on uncovering how the relationships influenced their educational decisions, participation in academic courses, as well as the social capital influences stemming from student interactions with their teachers.

In Addition, research questions 4-5 focused on revealing practices and interactions which determine how race, school discipline, and life experiences shape high school students' transfer to continuation high school. Additionally, research questions 4-5 also sought to discover how race, school discipline, and life experiences influence the demographics of students who attend continuation high schools. While students had perspectives that aligned across research questions 4 and 5, only two of the nine continuation high school students saw a connection to race and inequality in shaping the demographic and educational options for continuation high school students. All the Phase One student participants appeared to be so grateful to GHS in



their responses, that the researcher had to lead the questioning to get to race or inequality for other participants. Most of the Phase One participants viewed the school as a place that inspired them to reach their educational goals; this was mainly due to the positive relationships they formed at GHS and therefore did not see race at the school beyond anything more than just Latinos being the majority of the population.

Additionally, Phase One participants saw the lack of diversity among continuation school students in their school. Only Christina and Oscar offered a reason for the lack of diversity as explained below. It was interesting that all the Phase One participants spoke about the demographic and lack of diversity, but only Christina and Oscar had a dialogue with this researcher about this topic. Christina is a continuation high school teacher in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and offered her perspective about the lack of teachers of color, student representation in the curriculum, and conversations about White-teacher bias. Oscar also saw how the punitive system of suspensions and expulsions were contributing to referrals to transfer students from comprehensive to continuation high school. The interviews with post-graduate and current students facilitated a discussion which let the researcher construct a narrative to expose the influence teacher-student relationships have on educational attainment and overall academic achievement. The post-graduate and current student participants place a high value on the relationships they had with their teachers. Each of the participants named specific teachers or counselors who made an impression on them as students and individuals. The participants found teachers who they believed genuinely cared for them and who took a real interest in their lives. All participants cited examples of teachers having invested time and resources in them to make sure they had what was needed to be successful. Some of the

participants even named significant teachers from their early years in education, including primary school, middle school, and their own comprehensive high school.

The consensus among all Phase One participants was that the comprehensive school sites were too big to meet their needs once they were failing. Once these students realized teachers were not going to invest in them or appear to care that they were in class, the student participants did not see the need to participate in their education anymore. In addition, external factors happening in their homes or “in the streets” outside of school became insurmountable distractions that would not let them focus on academics. Among these factors were vandalism, drug use, and family strife due to socioeconomics that led to an inability to keep up with school. One current student participant mentioned that once his comprehensive high school teacher knew he was transferring to Grapevine, the teacher told him there was no point in trying to catch up, something with which the current student agreed.

Finally, an aspect of the study the researcher found interesting was that the current students did not have as much to say about how GHS had helped them get to college. Perhaps because they did not have a chance to experience college fully yet and because many of them were just beginning college during the COVID pandemic virtual environment. Another reason might be that the current student participants got their senior year cut short and did not get to work as closely with their teachers at the end of the year college process. The current students did not have the benefits of the Summer Bridge transition program either and full access to the college and career center. Each of the Post-graduate students had at least one year of college completed and had the benefit of the support of GHS while in college. Besides, each of the Post-graduate students maintained a connection with GHS at different times during their college journey.

## **Introduction of Teacher Participants**

During phase two of the study, four GHS teachers were invited to participate in a one-hour interview through Zoom. Teacher participants went through the same process as described in the Phase One introduction. This means that each of the teachers selected to participate in the interview was selected using convenience sampling. Convenience sampling was appropriate for identifying participants given the teachers' busy schedules during the school year. This became even more complicated with the shift from in-person instruction to online instruction because of COVID-19. The teacher component was included in this study to replace the original classroom observations, which were initially proposed as a data-gathering source. This change was necessary because of school closures caused by the pandemic. Consequently, the shift from classroom to remote learning made it difficult to conduct the observations. At the time of this research, students were held harmless if they could not connect to their classes and therefore many chose not to engage virtually with their classes in hopes that they would be allowed back to school in the fall of 2020. GHS currently remains in distance learning modality through February 6, 2021.

The following narrative represents the results of the interview of four members of the teaching staff at GHS. The narrative will seek to describe the influence student-teacher relationships have on the academic achievement and college matriculation of continuation high school students. When appropriate, the teacher's testimony will be supported by post-graduate and current student voices. These teachers have taught at GHS for a period ranging from four years to twenty-one years. Each of the teachers offers instruction in a way that connects to the students.

Ms. Rodriguez (not her real name) has taught English at GHS for five years but has been a teacher for fourteen years, all in alternative education. She taught at GVUHSD's Community Day School for expelled and suspended students previously and was a teacher in an Independent Study Program for a local charter school that helped students recover credits and graduate from high school. Her whole professional teaching career has been dedicated to students in alternative educations. When she began teaching at GHS, she held a Single Subject Teaching Credential in Social Studies. When GHS needed a tenth-grade English teacher, she volunteered to add an English Credential so she could teach the tenth-grade classes.

Ms. Montaña (pseudonym) has taught History at GHS for ten years. Prior to teaching at GHS, she worked for private non-profit which provided mentoring for youth. She worked in that role while looking for employment as a teacher. She had just lost a teaching job due to workforce reduction. The teaching position she had lost provided her with training in restorative practices—an alternative to punitive discipline. Her previous work in the two different programs offered GHS a unique skill set that many of her colleagues at the time did not have.

Mrs. Cervantes (pseudonym) has been a teacher at GHS for seven years and currently teaches the orientation course Response-Ability Training Program (RTP). She also coordinates AVID and is the Lead Instructor for the online learning platform students are offered at GHS. She began working at GHS as an intern and was the resident substitute once she completed her teaching credential. When the previous RTP teacher retired seven years ago, she was hired to replace the retiree.

Ms. Weeks (also a pseudonym) has taught Math at GHS for twenty-one years and is the coordinator of the Twentieth Century Assets Grant which provides federal funds for before and after school programs. She was also a former student of GHS in the 1980s. In addition, she was

able to student teach at GHS to meet her practicum hours for her credential. Upon completing her credential, she interviewed for a mathematics position and was offered the job. She is a staple of the school and one of the keepers of the culture.

### **Phase Two Findings**

Figure 3 below illustrates the frequency with which key research terms appeared in the interview transcripts. While the researcher specifically looked for words that came up in the post-graduate and current student interview transcripts, he also found different words that had a frequency higher than ten. Table 3 below also shows the frequency of all the key research words that appeared in the transcript used to develop figure 3. This is significant because teachers used the word relationship with higher frequency suggesting that such relationships are important to participants. Additionally, the terms graduate and connection were also suggesting that these terms were important to participants. Relationships, connections, and graduate were not surprisingly high-frequency words since teacher participants spoke highly of building relationships and connections with students. Additionally, graduation appeared to be a big focus for the teachers, as their main goal is to help students recover credits so they may graduate on time.

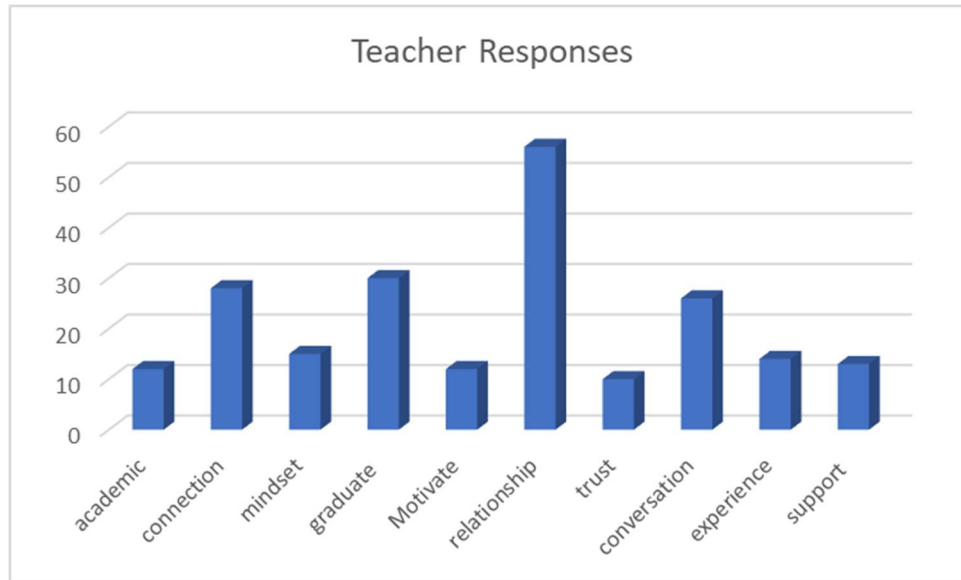


Figure 3. Teacher Responses

Table 3. Teacher Responses

Word	Frequency
Trauma	9
Comfortable	8
Academic	12
Connection	28
Mindset	15
Graduate	30
Motivate	12
Relationship	56
Goal	3
Engage	6
Trust	10
Safe	8
Conversation	26
Restorative	7
Attention	9
Family	5
Experience	14
Support	13
Resources	2
Potential	1

*Educational Supports and Relationship Building.* Teachers pointed out the programs the students received; namely, Response-Ability Training Program (RTP), Connections, and Summer Bridge. The researcher is including Advancement Via Individual determination (AVID) since it is not commonly found in continuation high schools; however, it was not mentioned during the interviews much, other than to reference that student graduates were employed by the program. Each of these courses or programs provide students with opportunities to build relationships with teachers at different times during their tenure at GHS. Whether or not a student participates in AVID is decided during the orientation class—RTP. Every student who attends GHS must participate and complete the school’s RTP class. Students are scheduled into the course before they are allowed to start a full academic course load with the other students. Ms. Weeks is a former student of GHS and briefly explained RTP and some of the evolution over the last 30 years when responding to how student-teacher relationships shape educational options after high school. Ms. Weeks shared the changes over the years, which have increased the length of the orientation to support the students’ transition from comprehensive to continuation high school. Specifically, RTP helps with socio-emotional skills, relationship building, and a belief in themselves as Ms. Weeks described here:

These kids go through the course work and it helps them work on socio-emotional skills, it helps them with their mindset, it helps with organizational skills, it helps them with anger, with relationships, with asking for help. And these kids come to us like wearing this mask. And through this program, they’re able to take off that mask and learn to be themselves and to like themselves, and to believe in themselves.

The course helps them to become acclimated to their new instructional setting at GHS.

Mrs. Cervantes, who is responsible for the instruction of the new student orientation program, describes one of the assignments students complete to learn more about themselves.

This teacher’s account also demonstrates how the teacher creates opportunities to connect and

build relationships with students when discussing how K-12 experiences shape the demographics of continuation high school. Mrs. Cervantes explained she provides her own trauma story as a model to begin to relate to students and be vulnerable in front of them and encourage them to do the same. One of the pivotal assignments Mrs. Cervantes conducts with students is the stress timeline where students have the opportunity to examine their life experiences as she explains in the following statement:

One of the things that I know that I do with the students that gives me an idea of what their K-8 experience was like, before they get to us, they do a stress timeline assignment and I have them tell their stresses that they had, that they can remember, their traumas, that they remember...just what they've had in their life. And I model it for them.

Through this process, this teacher discovers that many of the students have had a significant amount of trauma in their lives and almost all have experienced bullying during their K-12 schooling. She further describes: "...and almost always more than half the students, almost always, to this day, when I do this assignment, they've all been bullied in some way, shape, or form at school; Or they've had some kind of heavy trauma." This orientation course, as previously mentioned, helps students acclimate to their new school as students from four high schools in the district are referred to GHS. Here, all referred students meet in RTP for the first time when they begin their educational journey at this continuation school. This will be the last opportunity for many of the students to complete a high school diploma before becoming 18 years old and aging out of the K-12 compensatory educational system.

Connections is an advisory course every student takes at GHS. Upon completion of RTP, Mrs. Cervantes assigns each student to one of the GHS classroom teachers. The students will remain with their Connections teacher until they complete a fifth year of high school, transfer back to their comprehensive high school site, drop out, or graduate from high school. All four



teachers spoke about the Connections course offered at GHS at different times during their interviews. The course is aptly titled as it seems to do exactly what its title suggests. The Connections course allows GHS students to form connections with a significant adult on campus who can help students become aware of their options after high school vocational or other higher education option. While responding to how student-teacher relationships shape academic participation, that it is important for students to think about life beyond high school. Having these conversations with students is important as well as embedding such conversations in the Connections class and other disciplines. One of the teacher participants described it as follows here:

Well, what are you planning on doing? What are you interested in? And then looking into the fact that this is the type of education you need in order to achieve that. And I think a lot of it has to do with pushing students to understand that graduating high school is one step, but if you want to keep moving up, you have to continue your education.

These conversations keep the thought of their students' futures at the forefront of their thinking and planning as they progress toward graduating from high school.

According to Ms. Montaña, during the current school year, the Connections class had changed from meeting daily, to a class that only met 30 minutes twice per week. The aim of the Connections course, from the onset of the school year, is to focus on mindset. The aim here is to start with this unit to help build resiliency in the students. Within the context of this course, in addition to building resiliency, it is also where relationship-building continues and restorative practice strategies are reinforced—strategies used as an alternative to traditional punitive discipline practices that bring together harmed individuals with the perpetrator to develop an agreement to repair harm. In the Connections class, students also participate in weekly circles; these weekly circles help students in the Connections class get to know their teachers and their

fellow students. Ms. Weeks describes Connections class as the heart of the school because the teacher gets to build relationships with not just the student, but also with the student's family. Thus, Connections becomes an extension of RTP building on the work begun with students during the RTP orientation.

The AVID program is presented to students during RTP and those who wished to participate were invited to apply, be interviewed, and if accepted, became part of the program. One of the AVID teachers interviewed prospective students before they completed RTP. At present, GHS is only offering one class period of the AVID program. While AVID did not seem to have a significant influence on student participants in this research, the researcher decided to include it here because it is a rarity in continuation education programs and may be a contributing factor to the development of teacher-student relationships. The researcher's last school year—2018-2019 school year—as GHS principal, participated in an AVID workshop in Riverside County hosted by the AVID Center. This program aims to expand the reach of AVID into continuation education schools and other types of alternative education programs. There were only a few programs that offered AVID at alternative education school sites at that time. AVID has been offered at GHS since 2000. GHS was categorized as an AVID-affiliate site until 2006, thereafter becoming a certified program. During that time, it was the only certified AVID program in continuation education in the county. It is important to note that GHS employs many of its graduates who are attending college as AVID tutors. This is another way that the school stays connected to its graduates. In addition, the GHS graduates serve as role models to other students.

Finally, the Summer Bridge Program is offered to GHS students the summer after they graduate. Two of the teacher participants mentioned the influence the program had on one of the

post-graduate students. This program provides GHS graduates an opportunity to explore local college programs, as Ms. Weeks and the ASSETs Program Team help students complete their community college applications. Additionally, this team helps students connect with Student Services on college campuses before their first semester begins. Students who participate in this program have a college class schedule by the time they finish the summer program. The Summer Bridge program is an extension of the College and Career Center which runs during the school year. Many of the GHS graduates begin college applications through the College and Career Center and are invited to participate in Summer Bridge as a result of their connection to the center. The program is open to any GHS student or recent GHS graduates.

***Teacher-Student Relationships.*** As teachers shared their perceptions during the interviews, the following narrative around teacher-student relationships began to unfold. Teachers at GHS shared many common examples of how teacher-student relationships influence participation in academic courses. Among the responses teachers shared in common was the need to provide trust and safety for students. Teachers also stated the need for students to be able to get to know them and the need for a reciprocal relationship. Ms. Rodriguez explained: “What’s more important to me is that they feel comfortable and that they feel safe in my classroom and that they are connected to me as a person.” In addition, positive interactions are also necessary to create buy-in for students in the classroom. Teachers stressed the necessity to make connections with the students. GHS’s Connections course also facilitates relationship-building as was described in the previous section. Answering how student-teacher relationships influence academic participation, Ms. Rodriguez explained the how she connects with students: “I try to connect with them because I feel that they’re not going to care...they don’t care about

what you know until they know you care.” Again, this is reinforcing the idea that students need to know that their teacher is invested in them.

On the themes of trust and relationship, Ms. Montaña shared her answer to research question 1 in the following way: “I think it’s a level of trust. I think part of it is them knowing that you are working to try and build that relationship. You’re acknowledging them. You’re having conversations with them. And I think students feel that.” When Ms. Montaña was asked, “What do you think creates that trust”? She explained it this way:

I think it’s just talking to them, having a conversation with them on a daily basis. Like me, I mess around with the kids a lot. Like we’re always joking around or just talking. And it’s not necessarily talking academic wise, it just talking like, How was your weekend? Or what are you planning on doing after school, or whatever it might be. Or just talking about something that I know you’re interested in.

Making these relational connections with students helps to build the relationships that demonstrate to continuation high school students that their teachers cared for them.

These types of conversations are the typical an individual might have with a friend. Students resonated with these types of conversations. For example, Christina explained that (responding to question 1 about academic participation). She felt so closely connected to her teacher via their conversations that she was able to speak freely with the teacher. This developed into a reciprocal relationship between teacher and the student as Christina further explained: “So, you really get to know your teacher and I think from those conversations I just really felt like there was an invitation to open up and I felt teachers were also opening up. So, then I felt like I could do the same, and actually try to show that like, oh! I’m trying to graduate, so I need to do my work.”

On the other hand, and according to Mrs. Cervantes, the lack of relationship will cause a student to disconnect from the teacher or coursework which is consistent with Noguera’s (2003)

research. Mrs. Cervantes further reinforced this point when addressing the influence student-teacher relationships have on academic participation:

A lot of them will turn off and shut off if they can't relate to you [teacher] or if they feel that you don't care about them. I've had students tell me, personally, Oh yeah, I stopped going to class because I didn't like the teacher. I said, But you needed the class to graduate, didn't you? Yeah, but I didn't like the teacher. The teacher was mean to me, so I would just ditch class.

The experiences of not knowing their teachers at the comprehensive high school site were very difficult to overcome for continuation high school students. For example, Luis explained while answering how student-teacher relationships influence academic participation, that when he attended comprehensive high school, he did not have a relationship with his teacher. On the other hand, the smaller environment at GHS allowed him to form closer bonds with teachers as Luis further explained: "I valued those smaller groups of students in the class. I feel the teachers there had a chance to build a closer relationship with their students. Some of my teachers right there at Grapevine High School, I built a relationship with them and they honestly encouraged me to do better." As a result of these bonds, the student developed a sense of accomplishment.

The disconnect topic at the larger comprehensive high school site was a recurring theme across the teacher and student interviews. Teachers commented on the large numbers of students who attended the comprehensive high school site and the inability of teachers in those programs to know their students well. For example, referring to the large number of students at the comprehensive site, Ms. Weeks stated while discussing how student-teacher relationships influence academic participation: "The kids get lost there." There can be anywhere from 1,700 to 2,200 students at the three large comprehensive high school sites compared to the 269 students currently attending GHS. Ms. Weeks also talked about making content accessible to students so they want to participate. When addressing how student-teacher relationships influence academic

participation, she explained that if the content is not presented in a way that is appealing to students, they will not engage in learning. If teachers provide relevance or make the tasks enjoyable, then it will entice the student to participate as she described here:

So, another thing about participation is, we need to make our lessons accessible to kids and in a way that they want to participate. So, I mean, if we just give them something boring, they might not want to participate. If we make it meaningful to them or relevant to them, and we put a fun spin on it, then we can get them to want to participate.

It was important to teachers that students know they matter to them. They all spoke about the importance of students knowing that their classroom space was safe, trusting, and positive. Students should also feel cared for so that they could focus on their learning.

***Social capital.*** Many students who attend GHS, and specifically the students who participated in this study, are the first in their family to attend college. In this learning environment, teachers at GHS and even teachers from previous schooling experiences build and provide social capital for many of these students. Ms. Weeks in addition to being a Mathematics teacher, is also the ASSETs Grant Coordinator for the before-and-after school program offered at GHS. This is perhaps one of the strongest ways this teacher provides social capital to GHS students. One of the programs available through the grant provides funding to run the College and Career Center after school where GHS students can receive academic tutoring, access to a computer lab, secure college application support, and receive financial-aid application support. Also, through that College and Career Center, students are invited to participate in college and vocational school field trips at various times during the year. Another program that spawned the College and Career Center was the Summer Bridge Program which Ms. Weeks and this researcher developed when the researcher was an administrator at GHS. It was a small local program in its inception, but Ms. Weeks and her team have expanded it to include visiting local

businesses, community colleges and universities across their local county and into the Los Angeles area. This program opened the eyes of students. For example, Alex describes how the Summer Bridge allowed him to visit colleges and universities to learn about program offerings. He was able to see first-hand the structure of the college. These visits allowed him to become aware of what he had been missing in school as confirmed by the following statement:

I actually really enjoyed it, because I was able to be at a regular campus again and just have that experience. See all the equipment they had in their science programs. I didn't really know how much I missed it once I was back at a university. I didn't know how much I actually missed seeing all those seats available for me, you know? It was just like a regular classroom.

Ms. Rodriguez, responding to the influence K-12 experiences have on educational options after high school, also described Summer Bridge was designed for graduating seniors. These options made students aware that they were now adults and would need to make decisions about what to do after high school. For many of the students, this was their first time experiencing a college campus as Ms. Rodriguez stated: "They went to a trade school and then we took them to all the community college campuses and to San Marcos and San Diego State so they can see what a college campus is like. And so, I think for a lot of our kids, it's really their first-time stepping foot on a college campus."

All four teachers believed their lived experiences were important to share with the students. Not only their experiences but also positive school setting interactions, as many of the students' previous school interactions had been negative. Ms. Weeks was asked to describe what she meant by the statement, "You have to be genuine." when addressing the influence student-teacher relationships have on academic participation. She explained with the following:

That could look like anywhere from me telling my class that I believe in them. And just...I mean, I do believe that all kids can learn math. And I mean, maybe the that's behind the way I've said it, maybe because I spend 10 minutes explaining why I believe in them, it makes it genuine, but our kids know if we're

just saying something or if we mean it. And so, I believe when we say stuff to kids, it needs to be genuine.

In addition to being genuine, it is important to have an authentic experience with students and transmit genuine beliefs in their abilities. Ms. Rodriguez confirmed her belief in students when addressing how student-teacher relationships influence academic participation. Furthermore—Ms. Rodriguez has also a clear focus on human interaction as she explained in the following statement: “...for me, working at GHS, it’s always been about connections with my kids and the human interactions first so that I can actually get them to pay attention to me when I’m teaching them how to annotate and find literary devices in their fictional story from Ray Bradbury or whatever.” Other teachers appear to be equally focused on the relational part in this environment.

Ms. Montaña provides social capital to her students through the Connections course. In addressing how student-teacher relationships influence academic participation, she explained the importance of exploring options with students after high school and taking the time to look into those based on individual needs. It is important to have a positive relationship with students so they feel that the teacher is approachable to ask questions. The Connections course facilitates this type of relationship as Ms. Montaña describes here:

But I think a lot of that, again comes down to the relationship and the trust and students feeling comfortable approaching me and asking me those questions so that we can have that conversation...I think that really helps because within the Connections course, it’s kind of already facilitating the conversation about them pursuing college or higher education.

On the topic of pursuing college, Ms. Rodriguez believes that there was not a focus on “pushing” college. Mrs. Cervantes also shared a similar perspective, mainly because it appeared that economic necessity outweighed continuing education beyond high school. While all teacher participants believe continuing students’ education was important, barriers such as financial



need, the cost of college, lack of college knowledge options, and other failures could not be overcome without teachers developing a positive caring relationship to help build up the student capacity to succeed.

The connections teachers build with students help students be successful and develop a desire to contribute to their own academic success. Among one of the contributing factors is the development of a growth mindset—the belief that you can improve your station through your efforts, (Dweck, 2006). Three of the four teachers spoke about the growth mind set during their interviews. This was so important that GHS authored a growth mind set unit based on and grounded in the work of Carol Dweck (2006). As we were in the midst of our interviews, the growth mindset unit was fresh on the mind of Ms. Weeks. While responding to the influence K-12 experiences have on educational options after high school, she explained words teachers use with students matter and influence their mindset. Students come with a failure fixed mindset. It is the teacher’s responsibility to choose words which will help students change their mindset as Ms. Weeks explained: “So, they look at it as a failure so they come with a fixed mindset... And so it’s really important, the words we say: that we are choosing words to get them out of a fixed mindset, and into a growth mindset believing that they have the same future as anybody else.”

Consistent with the mindset challenge is the students’ belief in themselves and what their potential might be. Noguera’s (2008) research explains that if students do not believe that participation in education will lead them to where they want to go, then they will reject education. In line with this assertion and addressing the influence K-12 experiences have on educational options after high school, Ms. Weeks explores different options available to students upon graduation. Many students, she contends do not believe they have access to educational options post-high school graduation because of false narratives they have internalized in their

past, which is why the teachers' words matter to the students. Ms. Weeks explains: "And that any of those [schooling] options are open to them. And I think that some of our kids don't believe that they are [available] because people have told them in their past that they're not. And that's why the words that we say and the relationships that we make with them can change that." Thus, the beliefs teachers have in the form of high expectations help students build their ability to find success.

### **Summary of Phase Two Findings**

The Phase Two findings centered around the responses to research questions 1 and 2. The two research questions had a focus on teacher-student relationship. Additionally, the research questions revealed how teachers' beliefs and relationships with their students influenced their student's participation in academic courses and matriculation to community college upon graduation. Teachers had a strong sense that the use of positive statements and genuine relationships demonstrated interest in their students' lives; these factors added value to their students learning experiences. This resulted in developing motivation and desire in their students to engage in the curriculum.

The addition of the teacher interviews due to COVID added an unforeseen window into the intersection of the Social Capital and Critical Race Theory Framework. During the teacher interview phase, the research questions, specifically 4 and 5, sought to reveal the influence of race, school discipline history, and K-12 experiences on educational options for continuation high school students. The questions also sought to discover how those factors influence the demographic make-up of continuation high schools. However, during the interview phase the responses to teachers did not give specific answers to those factors. The teacher responses tended to circle back to the students' circumstances and the relationships teachers had with their

students. The teachers had a good understanding of their students' backgrounds and personal circumstances. This understanding gave teachers the ability to focus on helping the students make progress academically and move past their current circumstance so that students could recover their credits, graduate, and move to the next phase of their lives.

Furthermore, deficit thinking seems to be a common theme among teachers' descriptions of students, something they perceive to be their students' educational reality. However, given the circumstances that bring many students to continuation education programs, this is not surprising. Teachers who participated in this study are positive and hold high expectations for their students. Each teacher shared a high level of aspirations for each of their students and had examples of students who sought out the teacher's guidance to reach academic goals. It is hard to describe the students from an assets-based perspective because many of them have experienced numerous obstacles before arriving at GHS. Teachers acknowledge the obstacles, listen to students, and get to know them in order to assist them in reaching their educational goals.

Teachers at GHS take an authentic interest in their students and invest time and resources in them. The teacher's desire to know students empowers students to give of themselves to make teachers proud. Many of the students maintain relationships with teachers after they have graduated from high school. As mentioned in the Phase One summary each of the nine student participants has remained in contact with the school, teacher, or guidance counselor during their college journey.

RTP, Connections, and the Summer Bridge program were influential in the engagement of students' education and the development of meaningful, lasting relationships. The RTP course lays the foundation by allowing students to learn about themselves and their life

circumstances which brought them to Grapevine. The Connections course continues to help students build relationships with one significant adult on campus and provides a cohort experience for students that create the GHS family during their time at this school. The Summer Bridge program provides a platform to launch students into adulthood and continuing their education.

Finally, the relational connections that student participants made with their teachers was the defining factor that helped them succeed. Teachers provided social capital for their students to be able to access college. Students' desire to make sure they did not let their teacher down provided the motivation to continue their education while in high school. Their relationship and trust in their teacher also helped them to find the capacity within themselves to succeed. The teachers' belief in the Phase One participants was a leading factor in student success. However, it is important to note that each student had the ability and capacity to be successful; expectations just needed to be set for the students. Once the expectations were set each student met the goals and was able to get closer to completing a degree or educational goal.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

### Overview of the Problem

Continuation High Schools have been serving the students of California for over 100 years. The specific purpose of continuation schools is to meet the educational needs of some of the most academically disadvantaged students in California. However, according to existing research (Aron 2006), continuation education is not successfully reconnecting students to school and propelling them to become adults who will be able to integrate into adulthood successfully. Furthermore, students are graduating from continuation high schools without the requirements and skills to be eligible for two- or four-year program college matriculation. At present, there is little research that shows the success of continuation high school graduates in college or persistence level in any type of higher education. Further studies in the efficacy of the academic programs of continuation high school will serve to create systemic change that may facilitate the increase in academic rigor to allow continuation high school students access to an education which prepares them for college and career readiness upon graduation.

Initially, this type of academic setting was designed to help students recover credits and return them to their traditional comprehensive school site. The changes in “No Child Left Behind” legislation and “Every Student Succeeds Act” (ESSA), legislation to increase educational accountability, have elevated academic accountability for all types of K-12 academic institutions. The introduction of the California Schools Dashboard to continuation high schools in the 2018-2019 school year created a space where schools and the public can see how continuation high schools are meeting the specific state indicators for equity and academic accountability. This system allowed continuation schools a public way to monitor and ensure that students have more equitable academic outcomes. While the California Dashboard may help

monitor and track academic and equity outcomes, there needs to be research done in this area to assess the efficacy of the dashboard to determine if the goals for continuation high school students are being met and actually creating more equitable outcomes.

Another area of concern in continuation high school education is the lack of positive role models and adults who take interest in the lives of continuation high school students. This lack of influence makes it difficult for these students to make the transition from high school to college. Continuation high school students are often the first in their families to matriculate to any type of post-secondary education program and may also be the first in their families to graduate from high school. Caring adult relationships can make a difference in students' academic achievement. If teachers can foster positive caring relationships with students, there is potential for social capital to develop allowing students to navigate the school system and build relationships that will foster academic success and persistence in school (Coleman, 1988; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Muller, 2001). Unfortunately, caring teacher-student relationships are often absent in some students' high school experience. As students begin to transfer to continuation high school, academic expectations do not mirror traditional comprehensive high school experiences (Malagon, 2010; Muñoz, 2004). This disconnection bolsters the belief that the students' investment in their education is not going to lead them into a career that will improve their life or pay well (Noguera, 2003). When teachers provide education and career options for students and a culture of education, their chances of setting high educational goals increase (Flores, Ojeda, Huang, Gee, & Lee, 2006). Learning should be focused on students with caring adults that have the students' best interest in mind (Valenzuela, 2005).

## Summary of Findings

This study was conducted using a two-phase approach to capture continuation high school students' and teachers' perceptions of their relationships. This is significant given the connection that such relationships have on academic achievement and college matriculation. The researcher interviewed both groups separately and was able to unearth parallel responses to each of the five research questions among the thirteen study participants. The study participants overwhelmingly confirmed the value of teacher-student relationships and the influence they had on continuation high school students' educational trajectory.

The study revealed five key findings during the two-phase study analysis. Additionally, the researcher took the intersection of the combined study participant responses and synthesized them into the five key findings. The following is the description of each of the findings which were uncovered via individual interviews.

***Battling the stigma.*** Like many other continuation high schools across the state of California, GHS is designed to save students from academic failure and become high school dropouts. However, it comes at a price for many of the students who will find academic recovery there. For many school districts, the comprehensive high school sites use continuation education options as a threat, so students who are falling behind, or getting into trouble, will reform and stay on track. The unstated assumption is to avoid being transferred to a continuation high school where all the troubled students of the district go to continue their education. The description of continuation schools and negative rumors associated with them cloud the minds of prospective students and their families. This makes it difficult for families to decide on the transfer of their son or daughter to such schools.

Current and former students of the continuation high school students described the stigma associated with the school as a barrier as they went through school. The stigma associated with the school created a cumulative effect by reminding students of their failure; this, in turn, led to feelings of inadequacy compared to those students from comprehensive high schools. Furthermore, continuation high school made students believe they did not have the capacity to be successful in school. Even after completing their diploma, students believed since they had not attended a regular school—the comprehensive school site—they would not be prepared to attend college, let alone persist in a higher education academic environment.

Despite the stigma associated with the continuation high school, the teacher-student relationship and support programs GHS offered were able to help students overcome the doubts, lack of preparation, and inadequacy participants described. Teachers in the program provided students with positive encouragement to help them continue pushing through their studies, which is consistent with research. When students believe that their education is going to take them where they want to go, they will buy-in and make positive progress in their education. Students were encouraged to enroll in a college course concurrently while in high school and were provided with tutors to lend academic support. In addition, they were offered support in the form of resources, such as school supplies and financial aid-application support. Students were afforded the opportunity to visit college campuses, so they could gain exposure to the world of college. These experiences made a definitive difference for these students to continue their education in community college and, which resulted in their ability to graduate from university or continue a pathway to a four-year university degree.

***The bond of relationship.*** The most interesting and compelling part of this study included the high value teacher and student participants placed on the bond of relationship.



Students and teachers alike spoke about how important it was to have connections with each other. During the interview, participating teachers explained how important it was to set up an environment to provide trust and safety for their students. Teachers shared it was important they create an environment that was not only about the curriculum. It was of primary importance that the teachers were able to relate to their students by taking a genuine interest in them. Teachers felt that it was essential to have casual conversations with students to get to know and understand them better and thus be able to meet both their academic and social-emotional needs.

Perhaps one of the most important programs offered at GHS that facilitates the relationship-building process among students is the Response-Ability Training Program (RTP); second in importance is the Connections Course. The RTP course is the 9-week orientation course that every student must take before they are allowed to take a full academic schedule at GHS. This foundational program lays the groundwork for the school's culture and atmosphere. The teacher reintegrates students into school and academics by helping them learn about themselves and assist some to become aware of the influence trauma has had on them prior to attending GHS. The first seed of relationship building is sown during this course. The Connections course, every student takes as an advisory class after completing RTP, reinforces the tenets established in RTP and continues as new students begin their academic journey at GHS. The Connections course also aids students in bridging what they learned in RTP to their academics and life after high school.

Students at GHS credited their academic success to the connections they made with teachers. They remembered fondly the way teachers at GHS took an interest in not only them but also their families. Students felt they could have real conversations with their teachers and that they—teachers—invested in them. That belief was so strong that some Phase-One

participants mentioned they felt they would let their teachers down if they did not follow through with their course work. The belief and positivity teachers provided for their students thrust them into academic success. For many students, GHS provided a vehicle for them to realize that they had the capacity to be successful in high school and beyond.

***Small Settings.*** The four comprehensive high schools in the Grape Valley Union High School District (GVUHSD) have from 800-2200 students approximately. Each school has an average class size of 40 students; this is in contrast to GHS's population of 269 students and an average class size of 20 students. The class size at GHS allows students to receive a more individualized and personalized academic experience. The size of the program allows teachers to get to know the students in the classroom in a more personable manner.

The students at GHS described their experiences at the comprehensive high school site as impersonal. Students did not blame the teachers at the comprehensive school sites for not being able to meet their needs or give the appearance of not caring about them. One post-graduate student shared that there were too many students in the class to be able to provide the support that was needed. Essentially, it was not that teachers at the comprehensive school site did not care, but it was simply that they did not have time to care. Teachers had too much to do and too many students so they could not focus on the ones who were getting behind. In contrast, the students at continuation high school site shared that having a smaller class size did not afford them the possibility to hide. Teachers could easily identify their needs and provide support. In addition, the relationship was so strong that students felt comfortable asking their teachers for help. Teachers in this setting had the time to give students the attention they needed to be successful and create meaningful learning experiences. In addition, teachers were able to check

in with students to see how they were doing outside of school to help them with external factors that could have contributed to learning loss.

***Structural Deficiencies.*** The study found that some significant conversations were missing in the educational system as a whole. Phase-One participants shared their perceptions of the demographics of the school; specifically, the lack of ethnic diversity. All participants were aware the majority of the students at GHS were of Latino descent. Many of the Phase-One participants believed students were mostly of Mexican descent or brown-colored skin.

Two of the post-graduate students shared what appears to be aligned most directly with the Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework. Specifically, students in the school could not see themselves in the curriculum. The inference here is that the educational system was not set up to create equitable outcomes for students of color. Not only that, but the high rates of suspension and expulsion created a dumping ground or holding place for students of color in continuation schools. In addition, many of the Phase-One participants observed that there was also higher number of males in the continuation high school. The conversations to provide support for marginalized students before getting to continuation schools were simply not happening. When these critical conversations are not happening, students in the larger school context are not going to have the opportunity to complete their education.

***Family dynamics.*** The students in continuation schools have competing factors that are greater than those of earning a diploma, not to mention attending a university after high school. Many of the Phase-One participants had plans to attend college before arriving at GHS. However, their plans changed as obstacles got in the way during their comprehensive high school experience. Among these obstacles for many are family dynamics.

As previously mentioned, many of the GHS Phase-One participants are the first in their families to attend college. As students shared their stories, two post-graduate students spoke they had a parent who wanted them to attend college but did not know how to help them. Their lack of social capital when it came to college became an obstacle. Yet for others, it was the need to work, crime involvement, disinterest in school in general, or low socioeconomics which led to disengagement in school. The participants commented that external factors weighed so heavily on them, that they just could not or did not care to focus on school. Teachers in the comprehensive high school discounted them or, at times, encouraged them to give up since they would soon be transferred to continuation high school.

Upon transferring to GHS, the school began to support the student as a whole person including family members. The financial aid process was shared with students through GHS's College and Career Center. The school took interest in the students and the entire family. While many students believed college was unattainable because of the lack of financial resources and knowledge of the college system, GHS created a system to support continuation high school students with the necessary resources to apply to college, and encouraged them to persist. The relationships formed between teachers and students helped students realize their potential and the capacity to be successful. The teachers provided the social capital that the GHS students need to realize their innate ability to reach their educational goal. The students that participated in this study always had the capacity to achieve at high levels. The teachers' positive encouragement and support served as a catalyst to unlock the students' academic abilities.

### **Implications of the Study**

This study used a qualitative approach to reveal how teacher-student relationships influence the educational outcomes for continuation high school students, especially as it

pertains to college matriculation and persistence. The lack of research on continuation high schools creates a void in the knowledge and efficacy these schools have with successful outcomes in college matriculation and college persistence. Phase-One participants in this study represent a slice of those educational successes that GHS graduates have had. The study also demonstrates how the power of relationships in continuation high schools can affect the educational trajectory and self-realization of continuation high school students. Continuation high school students, that did not initially think they could go to college, attended college and many of them graduated because their teachers believed in them, helped them with enrollment, and secured the economic resources needed to attend.

### **Implications for Practice**

GHS has RTP and the Connections courses, two of the staples of GHS that bind the school together. The two courses work in tandem to establish and cement the culture of the school. Once GHS students complete RTP, they are assigned a Connections teacher and will remain with that teacher until they graduate, return to their comprehensive site, or, sadly, drop out of high school. GHS, through these two programs, has created a system that provides the breeding ground to foster powerful teacher-student relationships.

RTP and the Connections advisory course have the potential to be replicated across other continuation high schools in the state. It is important to mention that while these programs support relationship building, it is not enough to have only a strong relationship. Relationships alone are not going to assist a student in becoming an academic scholar. Relationships between teacher and student must also be coupled with high academic standards. GHS's course offerings meet some of the CSU/UC A-G course requirements in Mathematics, Science, English, History, and Fine Arts—the course of study required for four-year university matriculation. If students

are going to engage with education, they must believe that education is going to lead them to an outcome they want for themselves (Muller, 2001). This level of engagement must exist for continuation students to matriculate to colleges and universities. When the connection to the caring adult is present, the students are more likely to persist in school (Lee & Burkham, 2003).

### **Implications for Policy**

The educational accountability, the Dashboard Alternative School Status (DASS), in place has moved in the right direction for continuation high schools to track the efficacy of their program offering. The implementation of the (DASS)—where school officials and the public can view how the schools meet equity and academic indicators—has created a way to measure continuation schools' performance. This has allowed schools to measure progress with more than just standardized test scores. The California Department of Education (CDE) meets with stakeholders from all alternative education programs, which includes continuation high schools, to decide and shape indicators that will be measured in the DASS. The expectation is that this will allow continuation high schools to review authentic data to help them evaluate program efficacy.

In addition, school districts need to have honest conversations about the curriculum offered to students and how students see themselves reflected in that curriculum. While GUHSD is beginning to review the curriculum and determine how students are reflected in it, the school district needs to continue the work of examining curriculum documents to meet the needs of their culturally diverse student population. Teachers at GHS seek ways to connect course content to students so that they will be able to learn program standards in relevant ways. The school district adopted a college-preparatory English Language Arts (ELA) Program different from the one students take at comprehensive high schools. By adopting a different curriculum, teachers have

been placed in a position to choose different textbooks; in some cases books written by authors of colors. Since many students are retaking ELA courses, it does not make sense for students to retake the same courses that they have already failed or opted out of. The Common Core Standards rely on teaching skills, not specific texts. This has given school districts and teachers latitude in deciding what texts will be used to teach students the skills that meet the content standard.

The decisions schools make about what will be taught in school speaks directly to the point that Christina made about school district and educator bias. The decision on what is taught in school can be based on politics and the individuals who are entrusted to make these decisions on behalf of the school district. Unfortunately, and depending on where the school district is positioned, the political landscape will dictate what students learn in schools. As more students become educated and their eyes are opened, marginalized schools will be posited to make the necessary changes needed to make learning relevant for those students in continuation high schools. This type of change requires bold and equity-driven leadership to make sure the curriculum does not become stagnant and, instead, becomes a living document which guides learning and instruction. Consequently, as the demographic landscape changes, the curriculum should adapt to reflect the educational needs of students, not only academically, but culturally, politically, and socioemotionally. This is what GHS has been able to offer continuation high school students.

### **Implications for Further Research**

Existing research for continuation schools does not reflect college attendance for the present demographic—mainly students of color. Furthermore, since continuation high schools were not designed for students to attend college, that has not been the focus. Early in this

researcher's career in continuation education, he was met with resistance when he wanted to help continuation students attend college. The argument given at the time was that if these kids could barely read, why would we waste our time with college? This type of thinking is consistent with Munoz's (2004) research. Thus, it is not surprising to find little research related to college matriculation and college persistence for continuation high school students.

There is a need to research how DASS indicators measure equity and academic progress. Since this program is less than two years old and COVID halted state testing and DASS-reported measures, more time is needed to decide if the relatively new accountability measure will give continuation schools the information needed to measure program efficacy. In addition, there is a need to do more research in the implementation of the Common Core Standards, specifically College and Career Readiness Standards that must be implemented across all content areas. These are the requisite skills all students must meet when they graduate from high school which also prepare them to enter the workforce or attend college upon high school graduation. Longitudinal data must be reviewed to see if college attendance has increased for continuation high school students. Lastly, while the evidence in this study demonstrated the influence of relationships on GHS students, there is a need to research on the influence of teacher-student relationships in a larger student-population sample.

### **Limitations**

The size and breadth of this research placed limitations on this study. The study was conducted in a relatively small-size school district of 7,400 students and at a continuation high school of 269 students. The sample size of nine students and four teachers gives a glimpse into the lives of each of the students. Additionally, since most continuation schools are similarly organized across the state of California, the study could be generalized for other institutions.



The stories told in the study were those of students and teachers who found success at GHS programs implemented over many years. These students were selected using a stratified sampling which allowed teachers to choose participants who met the study criteria. On the other hand, the use of random sampling may have yielded different results. Additionally, the use of a mixed-methods approach, including quantitative data, would have yielded results to determine if there is a correlation between teacher-student relationships and college matriculation for continuation high school students. Potentially allowing the researcher to determine the impact of teacher-student relationships on a larger portion of the continuation high school population.

### **Conclusion of the Study**

This study sought to capture the influence of teacher-student relationships on academic achievement and college attendance via individual interviews. The study concluded that for Phase-One participants teacher-student relationships influenced the continuation high school students' academic participation and college matriculation. Each of the participants described how many of the teachers influenced their educational decisions while they were attending GHS and even after they had graduated from high school and were attending a university.

Additionally, this study concluded that the RTP orientation program and Connections advisory course are necessary to build the school culture and foster the relationships necessary to connect the students to the teachers. The Connections course links continuation students to a significant adult who guides them through their education, mentors them, and holds them accountable when necessary. The Connections course keeps the tenets of RTP intact, helps them meet their social emotional needs, as well as their academic goals.

In closing, GHS has developed and put into practice a program for building relationships with students that transcends the traditional classroom. This could be replicated across the state

of California, so long as the teachers in the school are willing to invest the time necessary to foster positive relationships that allow their students to realize their full potential. These programs do not necessarily require special funding since most programs or courses could be implemented with the basic funding offered by the school district. However, continuation schools receiving categorical or 21<sup>st</sup> Century ASSETs Grant funding could augment their program offerings because of these additional resources. This underserved population of students deserves to be given the opportunity to break through the stigma of continuation, reach their goals, and achieve academic excellence.

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