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# The Impact of Experiential Programs on Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Students in California Public Schools

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## **Abstract**

Many students from low-income households have experienced acute trauma and experienced life challenges including the seeking of refuge from their home country, homelessness, financial hardship, death or serious injury of immediate family members, and unplanned pregnancy. Most such students lack the resources necessary for mere survival let alone in-school success, with the absence of parental guidance and support a major roadblock in their educational path. Not surprisingly, achievement figures among this equity group are traditionally far below their peers. These factors beg the question – how can we better engage these learners, improving their outcomes and thus shifting social equity?

Experiential Learning is the notion of learning by doing, and it is a model of instruction utilized in different forms in both adolescent and adult education. This this model involves a cyclical pattern of learning concepts, applying knowledge in pragmatic situations, and reflecting on the learning process. Experiential Learning Programs (ELP) are being offered for the third year at Continue 2Learn, a non-classroom-based independent-study charter organization serving over 12,000 students annually – 80 percent socio-economically disadvantaged youth – with learning centers across California. The early success of the experiential learning program indicated that this style

of learning could be highly purposeful for schools that serve a high percentage of disenfranchised youth.

This study aimed to answer the following research question: Do experiential learning programs quantifiably impact engagement and achievement among socio-economically disadvantaged students in alternative high schools, thus affecting equity in California secondary education?

The literature review presents existing research in education relative to the factors impacting the research question. It is organized according to the themes with which the writing most closely connects:

- 1) Experiential Learning Theory
- 2) Changing Cognitive Needs in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century
- 3) Education Equity and Instructional Reforms
- 4) Social-Emotional Needs of Disadvantaged Students

Overall, inquiry- and project-based learning has been researched at schools that serve mainstream populations. However, there is a lack of research regarding the effectiveness of experiential learning programs at the high school level respect to underserved and underperforming populations. This study will investigate program data that measures experiential learning's effectiveness as an engaging and supportive model for socio-economically disadvantaged students that have often struggled with traditional learning environments and linear curriculum.

The study sought quantitative data that measured the efficacy of the programs. The research accessed data from the following tools:

1) Student Surveys. Likert-style questions are designed to measure the efficacy of the coursework/experiential platform, specifically its ability to engage students and increase achievement.

2) NWEA Standardized Reading Scores (Pre and Post). This is an adaptive test that measures reading comprehension in tiers and can be equated to anticipated ACT and ASBAC scores, as well as likelihood of successfully accessing college-level and technical texts.

The study showed that at the two charters – one is Los Angeles and the other in San Diego – a statistically-relevant percentage of socio-economically disadvantaged students enrolled in an experiential learning course experienced significant literacy growth over 12 weeks as evidenced by improvement in RIT scores on a standardized normative assessment. Furthermore, the survey results indicate that a vast majority of these students felt they experienced significant academic and social-emotional growth during the course, which positively impacted their outcomes.

The data suggests that that the answer to the research question is affirmative: **quantitative evidence shows that experiential learning programs do positively impact student engagement and achievement in alternative high school settings.** The research shows that an experiential learning pathway with trauma-informed, project-based curriculum across multiple disciplines can equip students for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by providing organic learning experiences that cyclically connect conceptual knowledge, application of skills, and reflection on the learning process. This study signifies the need for experiential learning programs at alternative school in

order to quantifiably increase student engagement and achievement. The research led to the following recommendations for education leaders:

- 1) Utilization of trauma-informed curriculum and instruction: As research shows the indisputable impact of trauma in the form of adverse childhood experiences on in-school achievement, schools may provide all staff with professional development opportunities focused on trauma-informed practices.
- 2) Emphasis on social-emotional learning: Students often thrive in safe, collaborative work spaces that foster their social and emotional growth. Socio-economically disadvantaged students often have little time for socialization and even less development of prosocial behaviors.
- 3) Access to learning-objective aligned field experiences, relevant guest speakers, platforms for presenting evidence of critical thinking and deepened content knowledge. Authentic learning experiences provide students with understanding of real-world application and thus make curriculum more personalized and meaningful.

Charter schools originally opened to address shortcomings in performance by traditional public schools. Furthermore, the school choice movement proposed that alternative educational programs, including non-classroom based, independent study charters, provide families with the flexibility necessary to sustain quality of life without sacrificing the education of their children. This is especially applicable to families whose respective incomes fall far below the state median, creating a need for increased reliance on their high school-aged children for assistance in child care and income. Embedding experiential learning programs in alternative instructional pathways supports a mission to inspire students to succeed academically and socially by providing experiential learning in a safe, collaborative

environment. Implementing experiential learning programs requires a multi-faceted paradigm shift in regards to educational philosophy. Following these recommendations, education leaders can bridge the gap between socio-economically disadvantaged youth and their non-disadvantaged peers and thus affect equity in California public education.

## **Chapter 1: Definition of Problem**

Experiential Learning is the notion of learning by doing, and it is a model of instruction utilized in different forms in both adolescent and adult education. Experiential Learning Programs exist when students “are given a chance to acquire and apply knowledge, skills and feelings in an immediate and relevant setting and involves a “direct encounter with the phenomena being studied rather than merely thinking about the encounter, or only considering the possibility of doing something about it’ (Borzak 1981: 9 quoted in Brookfield 1983)” (Smith, 2010). As introduced in literature by David A. Kolb (1999) this model involves a cyclical pattern of learning concepts, applying knowledge in pragmatic situations, and reflecting on the learning process.

In a climate of growing school choice options, it is important to consider the specific educational models being offered in addition to the multitude of settings in which students are being educated. Experiential Learning Programs (ELP) are being offered for the third year at Continue 2Learn, a non-classroom-based independent-study charter organization with 27 charters and 85 resource centers stretching from Chula Vista to Sacramento, California. The organization is developing and implementing new ELP’s following the model of the Dramatic Literature course, which instructs Spoken Word Poetry in a small-group setting. The curriculum aligns to Common

Core ELA standards, and is also geared towards meeting the social-emotional needs of students. In the course, students discover classic and modern poetry and create original works as a response. The students perform both their memorized classics and original works in front of select students, staff, at local venues, and they compete in local events and at a major youth poetry slam held annually in Los Angeles.

This program is instructed in some form at 20 resource centers across California, utilizing authentic experiences to make curriculum relevant and meaningful for students. It has drawn dozens of students, each with a unique story to tell and now with a platform to tell it. The success of the program indicates that this style of learning could be highly purposeful for schools that serve a high percentage of at-risk youth, particularly students that have been disenfranchised.

### **Statement of Problem/Purpose/Research Question**

Continue2Learn high schools have started utilizing experiential learning to reach disenfranchised students who require social-emotional as well as academic intervention. ELPs started with a Spoken Word elective, and have evolved into an English Language Arts Common Core State Standards-aligned 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade course entitled Dramatic Literature, and an ELA CCSS-aligned 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> grade course entitled Media Literacy. The organization will continue its growth pattern by creating an inter-disciplinary approach to this model of learning. This presents an opportunity to research the impact of this model with a substantial sample size.

Hands-on, project-based learning has been researched at schools that serve mainstream populations. However, there is a lack of research regarding the effectiveness of experiential learning programs at the high school level respect to underserved and underperforming populations. This study will investigate program data that measures experiential learning's

effectiveness as an engaging and supportive model for socio-economically disadvantaged students that have often struggled with traditional learning environments and linear curriculum.

Therefore, this study will aim to answer the following research question:

Do experiential learning programs quantifiably impact engagement and achievement among socio-economically disadvantaged students in alternative high schools, thus affecting equity in California secondary education?

## **Literature Review**

The literature review presents existing research in education relative to the factors impacting the research question. It is organized according to the themes with which the writing most closely connects:

- 1) Experiential Learning Theory
- 2) Changing Cognitive Needs in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century
- 3) Education Equity and Instructional Reforms
- 4) Social-Emotional Needs of Disadvantaged Students

The purpose of this literature review is to closely examine and analyze the findings within relevant existent research. This will inform the study by providing necessary context and giving insight on each of the key pieces. It will decipher what we already know, what we don't know, and what we really need to know in order to promote educational equity.

## **Methodology**

The study will seek quantitative data that measures the efficacy of the programs. The research will access data from the following:

- 1) Student Surveys. The yes/no questions are designed to measure the efficacy of the coursework/experiential platform, and its ability to engage students.
- 2) NWEA Standardized Reading Scores (Pre and Post). This is an adaptive test that measures reading comprehension in tiers and can be equated to anticipated ACT and ASBAC scores, as well as likelihood of successfully accessing college-level and technical texts.

## **Significance**

Many disenfranchised students have experienced life-altering trauma and/or significant life challenges including the seeking of refuge from their home country, homelessness, major financial hardship, death of immediate family members and teen pregnancy. Many socio-economically disadvantaged students lack the resources necessary for mere survival let alone academic success, with the absence of parental guidance, involvement and support a major roadblock in their educational path.

An experiential learning pathway with trauma-informed, project-based curriculum across multiple disciplines can equip students for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by providing organic learning experiences that cyclically connect conceptual knowledge, application of skills, and reflection on the learning process.

## **Summary**

Experiential Learning is the notion of learning by doing, and it is a model of instruction utilized in different forms in both adolescent and adult education. At Continue2Learn, a large non-classroom based charter organization, experiential learning offered through a Dramatic Literature course that instructs Spoken Word Poetry and Modern Theater in a small-group setting. The population of students in this charter organization include roughly 80 percent socio-economically disadvantaged, with critical sub-groups including but not limited to pregnant teens, homeless and foster youth, refugees and recent immigrants. A high percentage of the students are victims of traumatic experience.

This study looks at a sample of disadvantaged students participating in an Experiential Learning program, and measures quantitatively their acquisition of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. Finally, the research will speak to the ability of Experiential Learning to engage underserved students and offer equitable education, as evidenced by their growth in reading and survey responses. All in all, this research will introduce Experiential Learning as a revolutionary approach to 21<sup>st</sup> century learning that reaches disenfranchised students and creates sustainable change in education.

## **Chapter 2: Review of Literature**

### **Introduction**

The research question is: Do experiential learning programs quantifiably impact engagement and achievement among socio-economically disadvantaged students in alternative high schools, thus affecting equity in California secondary education? Seeking the measurable impact of experiential learning in an alternative school setting which includes a majority of high-risk, critical need students, the study will bring together several key pieces, identified in this section

as themes of research. The literature review is organized according to the themes with which the existing research most closely connects.

- 1) Experiential Learning Theory
- 2) Changing Cognitive Needs in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century
- 3) Instructional Deficits and Reforms
- 4) Social-Emotional Needs of Disadvantaged Students

The purpose of this literature review is to closely examine and analyze the findings within relevant existent research. This will inform the study by providing necessary context and giving insight on each of the key pieces. It will tell the researcher what we already know, what we don't know, and what we really need to know in order to promote educational equity. Making sense of the literature will empower the research to perform a unique study on experiential learning that builds off prior research and contributes new findings that fit these pieces together.

### **Experiential Learning Theory**

Experiential learning, including project-based and phenomenon learning, is a long-standing theory on hands-on learning that has been developed, revised and implemented in many fields and for many age groups over the last three decades and counting. David Kolb articulated experiential learning as a cyclical process of conceptual knowledge, hands-on application and reflection on the process. In this charter organization, the Spoken Word program has been the first major platform of this style of learning and can be utilized to analyze student outcome data relative to experiential learning. In this section I will look at several studies on experiential learning in order to evaluate the efficacy of this platform as demonstrated in a multitude of settings.

In the 1980's, David A. Kolb identified experiential learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). The acquisition of knowledge begins with authentic experience leading to thoughtful experience and progressing to conceptualization of the subject matter (Kolb, 1984). While the basis of experiential learning can be traced all the way back to the inquiry-based practices utilized by Socrates in Ancient Greece (Efstratia, 2014), its "intellectual roots" stem from the "experiential works of Dewey, Lewis and Piaget" (Boyatzis, Kolb & Mainemelis, 1999, p. 2). Experiential learning has been used across many fields and has recently come to the forefront as an educational method in preparatory schools (Efstratia, 2014).

Following Kolb's research on experiential learning, Boyatzis, Kolb & Mainemelis (1999) looked to update the findings and establish new directions for research on the subject. Kolb (1984) had established a model of experiential learning, explaining that "immediate or concrete experiences are the basis for observations and reflections. These reflections are assimilated and distilled into abstract concepts from which new implications for action can be drawn. These implications can be actively tested and serve as guides in creating new experiences" (Boyatzis, Kolb & Mainemelis, 1999, p. 3). Thus, this model established four vastly different yet interconnected dimensions of learning: Experiencing the concrete, abstract conceptualization, reflective observation and active experimentation (Boyatzis, Kolb & Mainemelis, 1999). These dimensions are ingrained in four learning styles: Diverging, Assimilating, Converging, and Accommodating (Boyatzis, Kolb & Mainemelis, 1999, p. 4).

Divergent learners dominant learning abilities are Concrete Experience (CE) and Reflective Observation (RO), and they "are best at viewing concrete situations from many different points of view" (Boyatzis, Kolb & Mainemelis, 1999, p. 5). They tend to be people-oriented,

interested in art and culture, imaginative and emotional (Boyatzis, Kolb & Mainemelis, 1999). These are the types of learners that excel in groups and are able to incorporate multiple vantage points. Assimilating learners thrive in Abstract Conceptualization (AC) and Reflective Observation and (RO) “are best at understanding a wide range of information and putting into concise, logical form” (Boyatzis, Kolb & Mainemelis, 1999, p.6). Converging learners most closely align with AC and Active Experimentation (AE). They “are best at finding practical uses for ideas and theories.” Accommodating learners, meanwhile, excel in CE and AE and “have the ability to learn from primarily “hand-on” experience” (Boyatzis, Kolb & Mainemelis, 1999, p. 5-6).

The authors go on to identify factors that shape and influence learning styles, including Personality Types, Educational Specialization, Professional Career Choice, Current Job Role, and Adaptive Competencies (Boyatzis, Kolb & Mainemelis, 1999, p. 5-6). This research identifies specific learning styles and that “K-12 education research has been primarily focused on the use of ELT as a framework for curriculum design, particularly in language and science” (Boyatzis, Kolb & Mainemelis, 1999, p. 12-13). It establishes that nearly 1,000 studies exist on ELT and Learning Style Inventory, though very few in the realm of K-12 education. This begs the question: what can we do with this information to purposefully align learning styles with instructional methods at the high school level? In addition, how can we evolve this method to meet the needs of disadvantaged 21<sup>st</sup> century students?

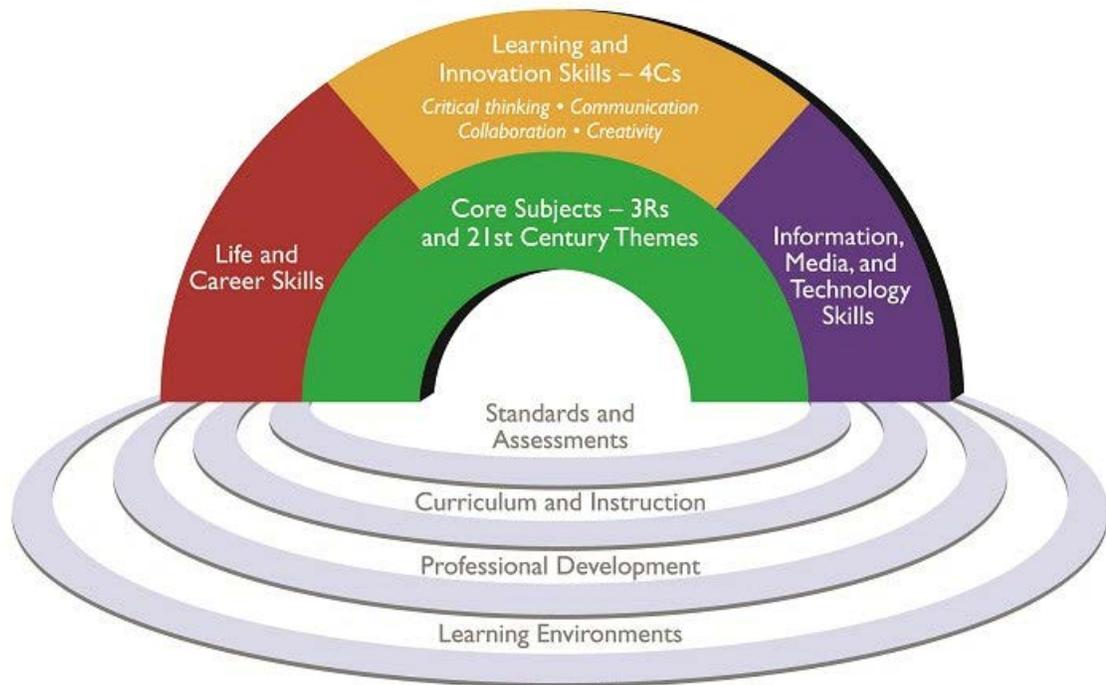
### **Changing Cognitive Needs in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Experiential learning works to engage students in learning by showing them the real-world application of the knowledge and skills acquired. Furthermore, it promotes the 4 C’s of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning: experiential learning harnesses *creativity*, builds *collaboration* and *communication* skills

and develops *critical thinking*. Furthermore, new philosophies including growth mindset and zone of proximal development have emerged in recent years and offer teaching strategies that may be included and expanded on in experiential learning. All in all, there are a number of questions we need to answer since experiential learning seeks to meet students at their level, take into account their multilayered needs, promote confidence and positive attitude, and most importantly, prepare them for the real world. Analyzing the existing research connected to these sub-topics will support the study on experiential learning meeting the cognitive needs of students:

The workplace landscape in California has changed dramatically over the past two decades, altering the skills required for a multitude of career pathways. “The rapid decline in ‘routine’ work has been well documented by many researchers and organizations. At the same time, there has been a rapid increase in jobs involving non-routine, analytic, and interactive communication skills. Today’s job market requires competencies such as critical thinking and the ability to interact with people from many linguistic and cultural backgrounds (cultural competency)” (Roekel, 2015, p. 5). In addition, natural, social and economic challenges are on the rise, and the next generation will dictate the direction in which our world heads. “Global warming, immigration reform, pandemic diseases, and financial meltdowns are just a few of the issues today’s students will be called upon to address. Today’s students must be prepared to solve these challenges” (Roekel, 2015, p. 5). Accordingly, The Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century introduced a visual framework for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning (Alismail & McGuire, 2015, p. 150) depicted below:

## 21st Century Student Outcomes and Support Systems



Partnership for 21st Century Skills: Framework for 21st Century Learning

Studies have shown that the U.S. has fallen behind other civilized nations in regards to workforce preparation. “In only 5 OECD countries do more than two-thirds of young people reach or surpass PISA level 3 in reading literacy - the level which involves comprehension and interpretation of moderately complex text. (The 5 countries are: Canada, Finland, Ireland, Korea, and New Zealand.) The average across OECD countries is 57.1% attaining level 3 or above. In 17 OECD countries, 40% or more do not achieve at the level 3 threshold in reading literacy, and these low-performing students are in the majority in four of these countries. The countries which have 40% or more achieving at best at level 2 are Austria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, Mexico, Norway, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Spain, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. They are the majority of students in Greece,

Italy, Mexico, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Spain, and Turkey [*PISA2006, Chapter 6*]” (OECD, 2008, p. 3). In order to prepare our students for a changing world, educators must consider *what* and *how* we are teaching students.

The NEA acknowledges that “America’s system of education was built for an economy and a society that no longer exists” and that “If today’s students want to compete in this global society... they must also be proficient communicators, creators, critical thinkers, and collaborators” (Roekel, 2015, p. 5). Accordingly, the National Education Association interviewed leaders of all kinds to determine which of the 21st century skills were the most important for K-12 education. There was near unanimity that four specific skills were the most important: They became known as the “Four Cs”— critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity” (Roekel, 2015, p. 3). According to a 2010 study — the American Management Association’s 2010 *Critical Skills Survey* — the “Four Cs” will become even more important to organizations in the future. “Three out of four (75.7 percent) executives who responded to the AMA survey said they believe these skills and competencies will become more important to their organizations in the next three to five years, particularly as the economy improves and organizations look to grow in a global marketplace” (Roekel, 2015, p.6). The big question, though, is how do we as educators contextualize these skills, teach them purposefully, and measure the outcomes. Disagreements on this issue have raged since heated debates over the efficacy of the Common Core replaced similar arguments regarding the 2011 federal No Child Left Behind legislation.

Key research regarding 21<sup>st</sup> century learning comes from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which works to “promote policies that will improve the

economic and social well-being of people around the world” (OECD). The OECD utilizes PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), which “has measured the outcomes of education systems at the end of compulsory schooling and related factors every three years since 2000, involving well over 1 million 15-year-olds surveyed and over 60 countries” (OECD, 2008). The OECD values lifelong learning that exist in knowledge-oriented societies, rather than systems where education is “considered to have been completed when a student leaves initial education” and thus has different objectives and characteristics altogether (OECD, 2008, p. 1). Still, significant obstacles remain related to educational philosophy and approach within our national, statewide, and local communities.

There remains a tendency for school education to be assessed in terms of the achievements and targets that systems have set themselves, rather than their broader success in laying the foundation for lifelong learning. In the knowledge economy, memorization of facts and procedures is not enough for success. Educated workers need a conceptual understanding of complex concepts, and the ability to work with them creatively to generate new ideas, new theories, new products, and new knowledge. They need to be able critically to evaluate what they read, be able to express themselves clearly both verbally and in writing, and understand scientific and mathematical thinking. They need to learn integrated and usable knowledge, rather than the sets of compartmentalized and de-contextualized facts. They need to be able to take responsibility for their own continuing, life-long learning (OECD, 2008, p.1).

One of the most important needs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that of a personalized education, specifically tailored to meet the needs of a diverse student body. The research suggests that:

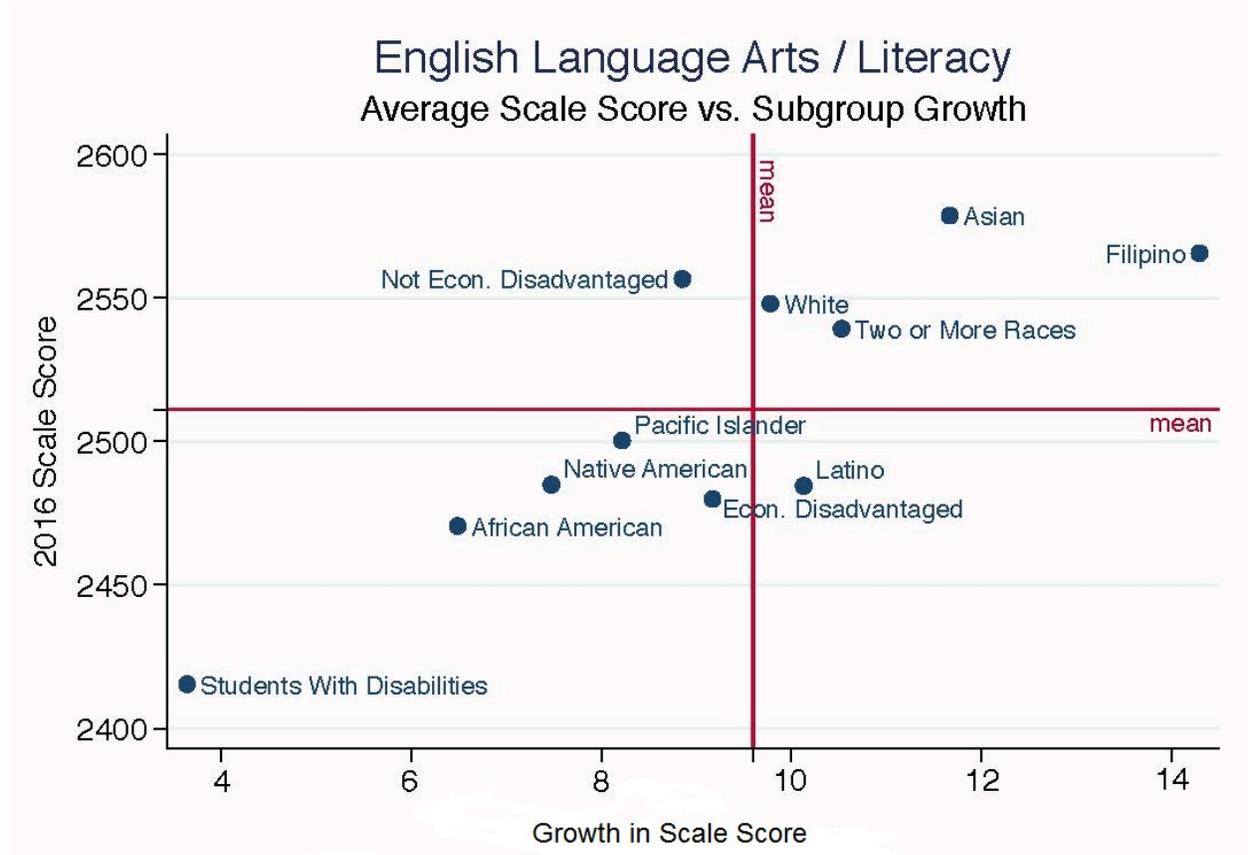
More effective learning will occur if each learner receives a customized learning experience. Different learners enter the classroom with different cognitive structures and as we know from neuroscience, individual characteristics are far from fixed. Therefore, students learn best when they are placed in a learning environment that is sensitive to their pre-existing structures and that is flexible enough to adapt teaching strategies to individual needs. Formative assessment can be seen as an essential element of those personalized learning approaches, as it is characterized by the continual identification of and responses to students' needs (OECD, 2008, p. 10).

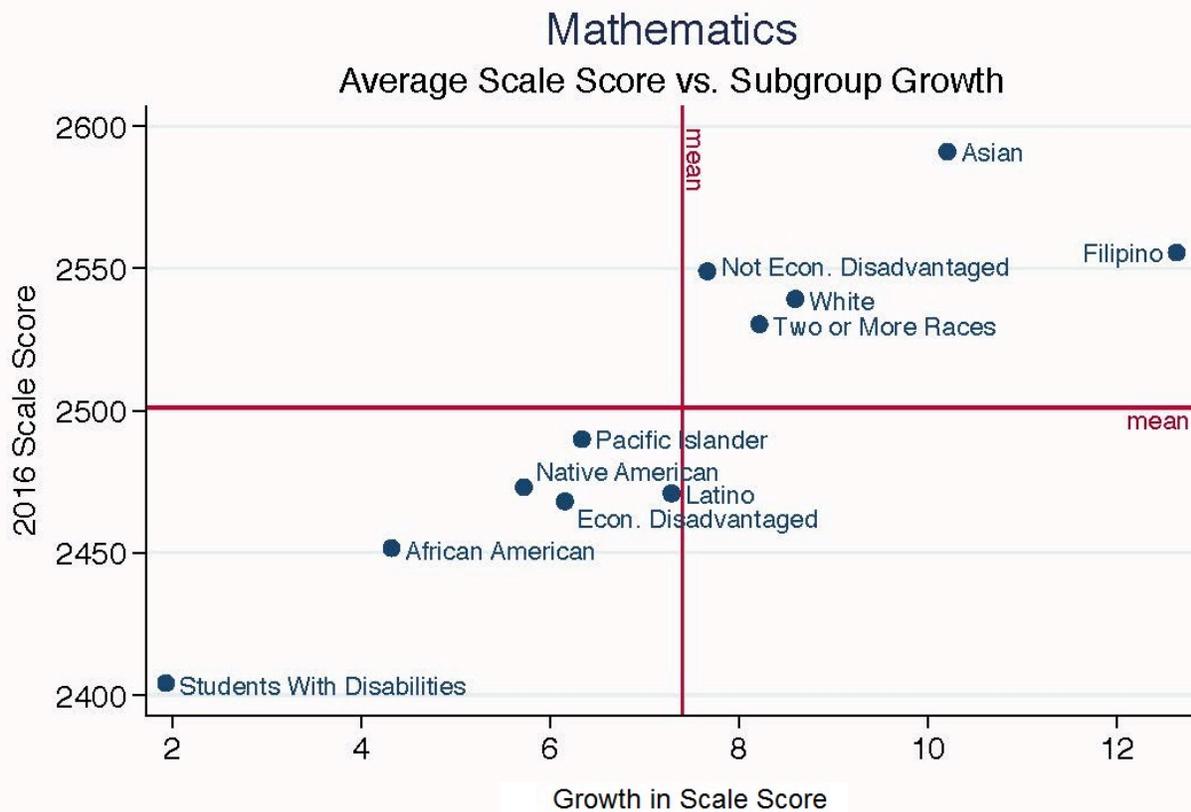
### **Instructional Deficits and Reforms**

Many students in California including pregnant teens, refugees, and homeless and foster youth have been disenfranchised by the educational system. By engaging students in hands-on learning and building their capacity for sustainable growth, we can take action towards promoting equity and narrowing the achievement gap. If experiential-style learning increases academic progress in a positive way, we can show the far-reaching impact of this program. This section will demonstrate equity gaps in California schools and examine studies on successful reform efforts involving instructional shifts.

When the Smarter Balanced test scores – part of California's new student evaluation system called the CAASPP – were released in the spring of 2015, the results for schools were disappointing but not surprising with regards to equity. This may be because history shows that “Differentials by race, ethnicity, income, language background and disability status have become a common feature of the landscape, like our dry riverbeds and brush fires in the summertime —

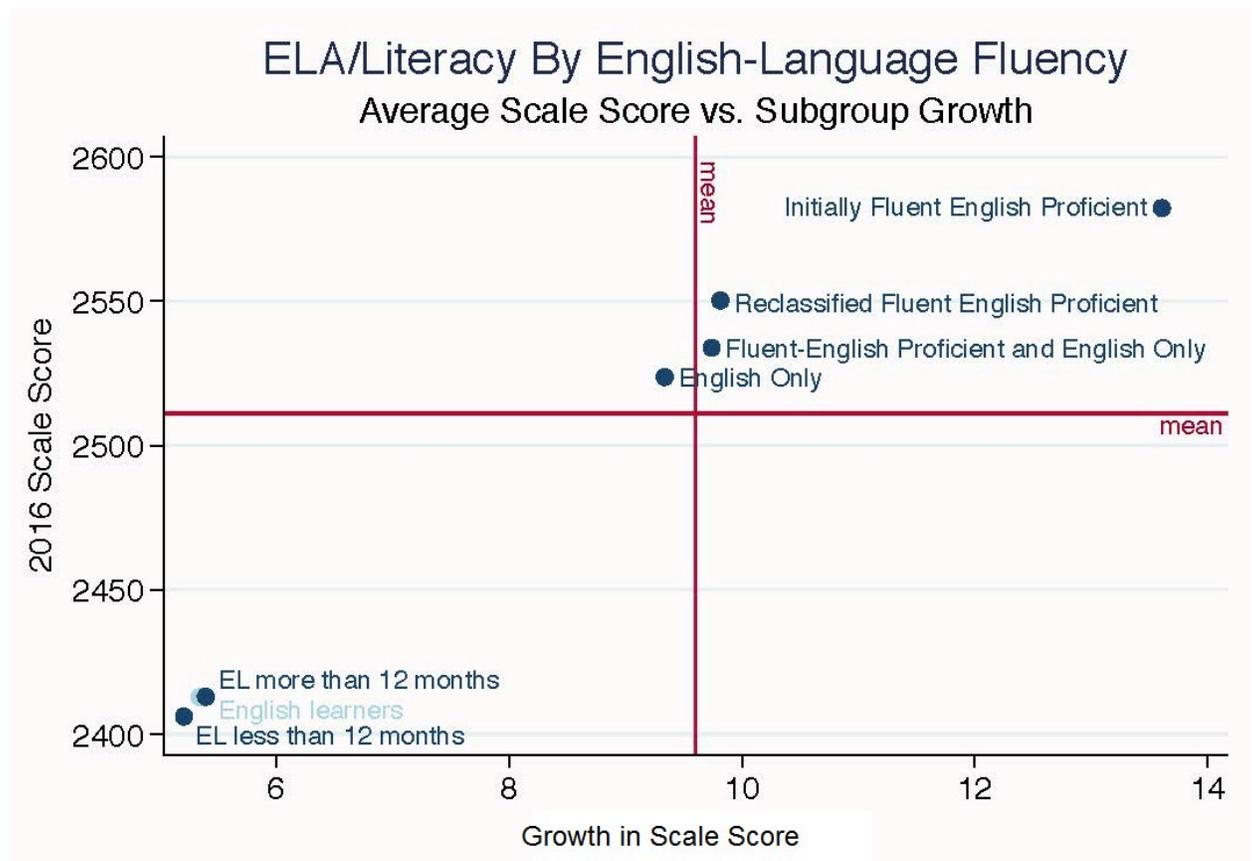
worrisome but not really viewed as solvable” (Hammond & Sutchter, 2016, p.1).

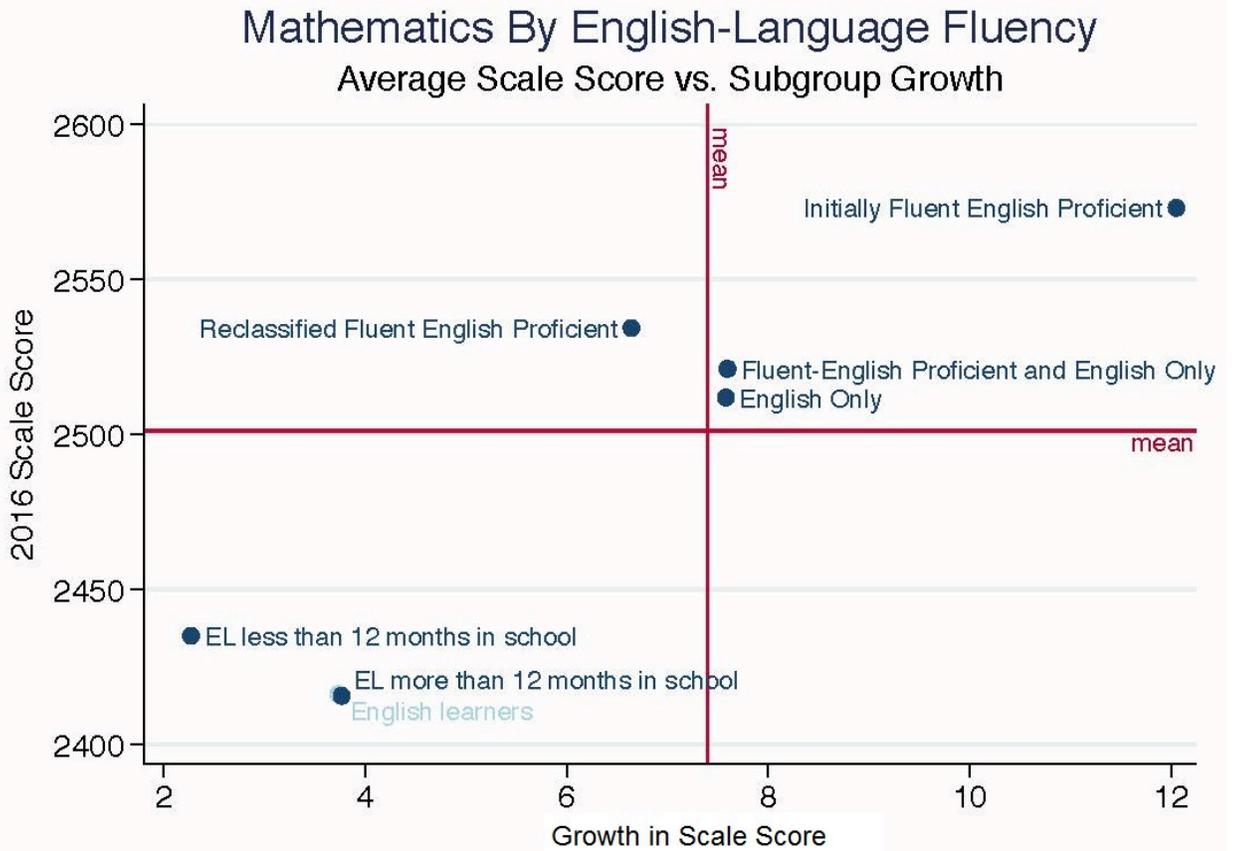




As illustrated above, students with disabilities, many historically underserved minority students and economically disadvantaged students scored far-below or below the mean scores for both English Language Arts/Literacy and Mathematics (Hammond & Sutchter, 2016, p. 3). Furthermore, students with disabilities and African Americans experienced only minor gains in the two disciplines while white and Asian students moved further ahead, widening the achievement gap between these groups. On a brighter note, Latino, Native American and Pacific Islander students made more significant progress and are approaching the mean. More encouragingly, the charts below show that fluent students who speak another language in the household and those that have been reclassified as English proficient outscored their English-only counterparts in both ELA and Math. That part of the story isn't perfect, however, as the data shows that too many students that have been in the English Learner system for a substantial time period are making inadequate

progress. Still, it is easy to conclude that the EL system is making significant strides while SPED and service of African American students needs major improvement. “To solve these issues, California must improve the quality of special education services; eliminate teacher shortages in special education and math, as well as other fields; and increase the adequacy and equity of school funding” (Hammond & Sutchter, 2016, p. 4).





This data and subsequent conclusions show the equity gaps in California and demonstrate the clear need for instructional innovation that could provide more suitable service for our struggling students. It serves to inform the research and maintain a clear focus in the ultimate social purpose of the study. Experiential learning presents a potential catalyst for change, and it is important to understand the efforts of other reform measures, which are presented in the literature in the next section. It is also critical to note that with change comes challenge, and to stay grounded in that notion throughout the research process.

In the face of skepticism regarding the impact of instructional practices on educational equity, Stanford University Researcher Jo Boaler (2002) produced data from two studies on reform-oriented math instruction by high school and middle school teachers. He wanted to test the impact of learning style on equity using the correlation between social class and mathematics achievement. Boaler studied two schools in England that utilized very different approaches to Mathematics instruction – one that was open-ended and project-based, and the other procedural and skills-based. He studied 300 high school students between the two schools – Phoenix Park (reform curriculum) and Amber Hill (traditional curriculum) – over a period of three years. Students at both schools were predominantly white, low-income, and working class.

At Phoenix Park, the correlation between achievement and social class fell from .43 to .15 among a sample size of 110 students, indicating a significant shift in equity. At Amber Hill, the correlation increased from .19 to .30 for 196 students over the same time period. Boaler concluded that the schools in which the teachers were utilizing the reform approach experienced reductions in linguistic, ethnic and class inequality. Furthermore, he was able to trace these outcomes directly to teaching and learning practices (Boaler, 2002).

Along with Laura Jane Roop and Stephen Best, both directors of National Writing Projects, Laura Denstaedt dedicated five years to explore in two classrooms at a Detroit, MI high school “the idea of authentic disciplinary literacies, giving students real-world projects and stakes to help them become more engaged in their learning” (Collopy, 2015, p.1). At Oak Park High School in Detroit, literacy teacher Peter Faun and consultant Linda Denstaedt launched a hands-on learning platform as an integral part of a school-improvement plan for a failing program (Collopy, 2015). Faun implemented a literacy curriculum “that engaged students by asking them to think like writers, rather than listening to lectures on novels and copying notes for multiple-choice tests”

(Collopy, 2015, p. 1). Her research team's purpose also connected to leveling the playing field in our schools as Denstaedt offered that "there are issues of equity at stake here, issues of accelerating students who are grade levels behind in reading and writing" (Collopy, 2015, p.1)

In their book Doing and Making Authentic Literacies (2014), Best, Denstaedt and Roop detail their experience at Oak Park, utilizing mainly qualitative data to illustrate the impact of experiential learning on disadvantaged students. Their research tackles how teachers of math, English, and interdisciplinary studies, are able to empower students by making them "makers and doers" (Best, Denstaedt & Roop, 2014). The authors expand on NCTE's policy research brief (Gere, 2011), which established a multilayered approach to literacy building where "disciplines represent unique languages and structures for thinking and acting; disciplines are spaces where students must encounter, be supported in, and be expected to demonstrate a plurality of literacies" (Gere, 2011).

Teaching and learning practices shift to help students develop ways to represent and generate knowledge, transfer prior knowledge, become learners who solve problems, engage with discipline-specific language, focus on a few issues at a time, and receive feedback throughout the learning experience (Beth, Denstaedt & Roop, 2014, p. 9).

Building off this concept, Beth, Denstaedt & Roop (2014) further the continuum of learning that can be revolutionary in secondary schools. They studied teachers "working in high-need, high-priority settings, seeing the things that happened to students when they've been given the opportunity to do more than bookwork and rote memorization" (Collopy, 2015, p.1). Their work seeks to answer the question "Why are school and life distinguishable?" (Beth, Denstaedt & Roop,

2014, xi): a question one of the students at Oak Park posed and one that swiftly addresses a major challenge in education today.

This research is important for the study in that it presents a clear model of pedagogy related to experiential learning, and demonstrates the success of this approach in a small sample. It allows the researcher to build off what occurred in these classrooms in England and in Detroit, and investigate how experiential learning impacts thousands of students in non-classroom based charters in California. This setting offers very unique instructional obstacles that may present more roadblocks than these researchers observed and experienced. Furthermore, it begins the conversation of working towards educational equity. The goal is to use quantitative data to observe the impact of this learning model on the correlation between race and social class, and academic achievement.

### **Social-Emotional Needs of Disadvantaged Students**

Until recently, trauma was not identified in any way by schools as a disability or obstacle to learning deserving of an individualized educational plan. Students that have experienced trauma receive information in drastically different ways than their peers. The ACEs test is used to identify degrees of trauma experienced by a student, and a vast majority of students enrolled in the experiential learning program in the charter organization being studied have suffered adverse experiences that impact their learning. This section is dedicated to examining the impact of trauma on learning, and the strategies educators can use to meet the social and emotional as well as academic needs of students. This will lead to an extension of the current research in that we demonstrate the social-emotional impact of experiential learning on students that have experienced significant life challenges at a young age.

The OCED quantified that “The motivation to learn, the belief about one’s own abilities and the existence of learning strategies are a precondition for successful and lifelong learning, as PISA has shown. These findings are supported by the results from neuroscience: Negative emotions that are caused, e.g. by incomprehensible learning materials, affect cognitive functions negatively” (OECD, 2008, p. 10).

Following the trauma connected to a massacre at a middle school in Arkansas in 1998, Robert Lamm shows how poetry writing can offer therapy in the wake of trauma. “Poets can empower language to elevate sentiment, to ennoble hardship, or to relieve suffering. The rest of us likely live our lives in prose, the plain language that serves us well enough in our everyday transactions. Yet in times of deep emotion, of great joy or deep sorrow...even the most prosaic of us may strive for a poet’s voice” (Lamm, 1999, p. 1). This work shows that learning to respond to traumatic events or difficult circumstances using one’s mind and pen encourages growth in writing ability but as importantly the catharsis our students require to be successful in life. Psychologist Nick Mazza explains the impact of Poetry Therapy as observed in clinical trials. “For trauma victims, poetry therapy provides a release and helps the individual gain a sense of order and control. The writing serves as an outlet and safety valve, a safe place to express feelings and sort them out” (Lamm, 1999, p. 5-6). The themes expressed by students in the face of tremendous adversity is exemplified by one of the poems below, and illustrates the profound, multilayered positive impact of learning by doing in the classroom – bringing authentic ideas and emotions to life.

*Their parents won't get the chance  
to give them car keys.*

*They won't be able to cry on our shoulders  
when someone breaks their hearts  
Because a tragedy had to come  
and tear their lives apart.  
It's hard to wear a smile  
to hide a million tears,  
But I'll eventually get over it  
on through the years.*

*I know I'll see them once again,  
but in a sacred place  
And we can pick up right where we left off,  
and my pain will be erased.*

A more recent study conducted by Amy K. Hill (2016) looked at the effectiveness of a school-based program utilizing trauma-informed education in the form of “art therapy.” The students studied had experienced complex trauma, adverse childhood experiences – as measured on the ACEs scale – and toxic stress. There were 15 participants whom were former students as well as 28 current and former staff members that were interviewed. The researchers used effectiveness studies, narrative analysis and program evaluation in evaluating both quantitative and qualitative data.

This research serves to define trauma-informed care as a “program, organization, or system that: (1) realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential pathways for recovery; (2) recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system; (3) responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and (4) seeks to actively resist re-traumatization” (Hill, 2016, p. 54-55).

One of the key outcomes was an understanding that trauma-informed education must be a collaborative process between many stakeholders. “For a trauma-informed treatment program to be effective, it is important for clinicians, educators, students, and families to reach a common understanding of students’ difficulties, to develop similar expectations of students’ needs, and be able to agree upon appropriate future plans” (Hill, 2016, p. 247). It thus presents the presence or absence of a collaborative process as a key factor to be aware of in this study. This research also contributes evidence that art therapy provides catharsis and sustainable growth patterns for adolescents afflicted by complex trauma. In doing so, it sets a precedent for research on performing arts and their impact on disadvantaged youth. This demonstrates the need to provide policymakers with tangible data, in addition to moving narratives, on the impact of learning through experience.

## **Conclusion**

Students who have experienced significant trauma as children are disadvantaged by the time they reach secondary school. To compound the issue, many of these students have been forcibly re-routed because they are rejected or underserved by their home schools. Experiential Learning, a concept being implemented in a large non-classroom based independent study charter organization in California, helps bridge the gap. It is an avenue to success in college, career and beyond for thousands of California students who have been routed to alternative educational settings where they can receive carefully tailored attention and work at their own pace.

Experiential Learning Theory has been around for more than 30 years, and clearly developed with research on learning styles. This model has been shown to be effective in specific cases, but the research is limited to small sample sizes and with little quantitative data to support its legitimacy as a powerful educational tool. Similarly, research has recognized the gaps in educational equity and the need for social-emotional learning, but we are lacking the necessary

research on the correlation between the two. Finally, we have asserted that the world has changed and learning methods need to evolve accordingly, but a paradigm shift has not been clearly documented because it has only happened in bits and pieces. The OECD itself acknowledges that “This idea of doing ‘good experimental things’ means predominantly something interesting and innovative that affects only some people in the school or segment of the system but not the routines and the largely dominant practices of teachers and schools. (OECD 2003: 89-90)” (OECD, 2008, p. 7-8). This dictates that “there is need to understand more profoundly the nature of innovation and to focus on its encouragement and sustainability, even bureaucratization, rather than just gather examples of innovative practice as if by themselves they might inspire a profound change of practice” (OECD, 2008, p. 8).

The existing research on these four themes qualify the necessity for the impending research – the need to study what happens when you take these ideas out of a vacuum and study their relationship and interactions. This study looks at a sample of disadvantaged students participating in an Experiential Learning program, and measures their acquisition of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. Finally, the research will speak to the ability of Experiential Learning to engage underserved students and offer equitable education, as evidenced by their progression through rigorous curriculum, completion of high school credits and progress towards graduation. All in all, this research will introduce Experiential Learning as a revolutionary approach to 21<sup>st</sup> century learning that reaches disenfranchised students and creates sustainable change in education.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

Experiential Learning is a cyclical model of instruction utilized in different forms in both adolescent and adult education. At the post-secondary level, EL can be the basis of both core and elective coursework, wherein hands-on, project-based learning is utilized to engage students and display real-world application of curriculum. Accordingly, research was constructed to empirically evaluate Experiential Learning as an innovative approach to 21<sup>st</sup> century learning that reaches disenfranchised students and affects equity in education. The research question was:

Do experiential learning programs quantifiably impact engagement and achievement among socio-economically disadvantaged students in alternative high schools, thus affecting equity in California secondary education?

The problem was that there is a major achievement gap between socioeconomically disadvantaged students and their grade level counterparts. Traditional, linear teaching methods may not be engaging nor culturally or socially relevant for at-risk students, and were not adequately preparing them for a multitude of career paths. The main focus of the research was – through a change-theory lens – to show the effect of experiential learning programs on student outcomes and presumably recommend this instructional approach as a method of reaching an increased number of students, narrowing the achievement gap and attaining equity. The research also aimed to answer the following sub-questions:

1. “How can we instruct students based on their learning styles and cognitive abilities?”
2. “How can experiential learning serve to meet the 21<sup>st</sup> century needs of students?”

This Chapter will look at the research design, participants, setting, instruments, and participants, with each sub-section clearly marked in bold.

## **Design**

Continue2Learn used experiential learning to engage a population of socio-economically disadvantaged students, many of which had encountered acute trauma that impacted their cognitive abilities. This organization was selected for research that utilized quantitative data. In this alternative school setting that served primarily high-school dropouts and students seeking credit recovery, student academic outcomes were most quantifiably demonstrated by:

- 1) Student Survey
- 2) Reading standardized test score issued at the start and end of the course.

This design method was chosen to obtain facts and numbers as well as data from the perspective of the subjects, both as they pertain to the research purpose and questions. The research included a single-blind experiment in which the participants did not know they were being studied. This was done to isolate the ELP platform as the sole factor causing variance, and orchestrated with no risks posed for the participants or researcher. All research was conducted in-line with standard classroom procedures, with appropriate measures taken to ensure reliability and validity, protecting instructor obligation to students, “need for personal and collective efficacy” and desire to add to the “professional knowledge base” (Sagor, 2000, Chapter 9).

## **Participants**

One ELP in Continue2Learn was an ELA CCSS-aligned Spoken Word course instructing classic and spoken word Poetry in a small-group setting. The curriculum was also geared towards

meeting the social-emotional needs of students. In the course, students discovered classic and modern poetry, and created original works. They performed both their memorized classics and pieces in front of select students, staff, at local venues, and they competed in a major youth Poetry Slam held annually in Los Angeles.

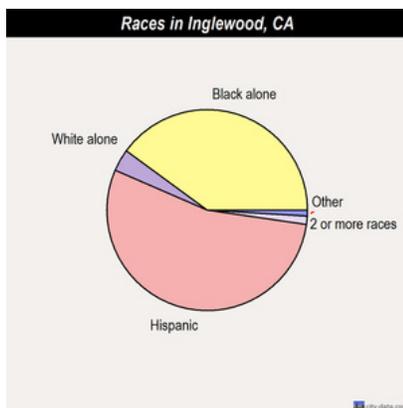
The research followed Spoken Word courses at two of Continue2Learn’s California resource centers, located in Los Angeles and San Diego respectively. 20 total student participants: 10 students from the San Diego school and 10 from Los Angeles were selected. All of the students selected – ranging from 14 to 22 years old – were socio-economically disadvantaged. The sample was representative of all students in the organization, with diversity in gender, race, religion and ethnicity. The students were identified on this basis among all students enrolled in the Spoken Word course at Continue2Learn’s resource centers.

### **Setting**

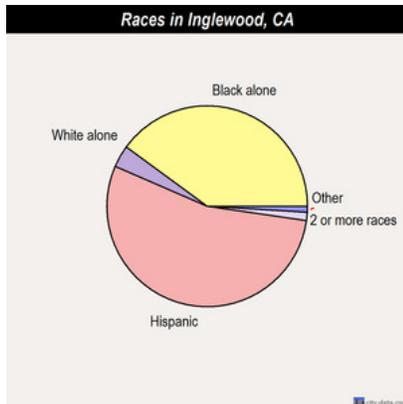
Continue2Learn is a large non-classroom based charter organization that serves nearly 30,000 students across California. Each of the 27 charters within the organization have between two and five resource centers that provide one-on-one instruction with highly qualified teachers, tutoring services, and exclusive partnerships with federally funded professional preparation programs. Two resources centers will be studied in this research, representing the Los Angeles and San Diego regions.

<b>Resource Center</b>	<b>Overall Enrollment</b>	<b>Percent Socio-Economically Disadvantaged</b>
San Diego	214	81
Los Angeles	320	92

A typical Continue2Learn resource center has roughly 80 percent socio-economically disadvantaged students – with site-specific data displayed above – and nearly 90 percent having encountered significant childhood or adolescent trauma. The average Continue2Learn student is 19 years old and has a 5<sup>th</sup> grade reading level. The charters explicitly state that the schools draw at-risk youth and students scoring far-below the median in Math and Reading. Many of the learners are pregnant teens, refugees, homeless and foster youth, and other students that are traditionally underserved in district schools.



The South LA charter has its main resource center in Inglewood, which has a high percentage of African-American – roughly 44 percent – and Hispanic residents (any race), representing just under 50 percent of the population. The neighborhood has a median income of below 52,000, far below the California average of nearly 68,000 per household. (City-Data, 2016). The city has an unemployment rate (8.1 percent) above the California average (5.5 percent), and a crime rate well above the national average (City-Data, 2016). The area has a graduation rate of 70 percent that is well below the California average of 83 percent, and most high school students attend Inglewood High (1199 students) or Morgningside High (846) within the Inglewood Unified School District (Public School Review, 2016). The establishment of charter schools has been on the rise in the territory. Inglewood is a very liberal city, with over 72 percent voting for Democratic Candidate Hillary Clinton over Republican candidate Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election.



The San Diego charter has its main resource center in Lakeside, which has a very high percentage of Caucasian residents – roughly 73 percent. The neighborhood has a median income of over 69,000, slightly above the California average of nearly 68,000 per household. (City-Data, 2016). The city has an unemployment rate (4.6 percent) below the California average (5.5 percent), and a crime rate below the national average (City-Data, 2016). The area has a graduation rate of 89 percent that is above the California average of 83 percent, and most high school students attend El Capital within the Lakeside Unified School District (US News, 2017). Inglewood is a liberal city, with 56 percent of residents voting for Democratic Candidate Hillary Clinton over Republican candidate Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election.

The South LA Experiential Learning Program selected was in its second school year of existence, while the San Diego ELP was in its third year of existence. They were selected because the courses were established beyond the pilot stage, and could be accurately and reliably studied in the absence of significant obstacles posed by the setting. It is important to note that the researcher was an Instructional Specialist for Continue2Learn at the time of the study, and formerly a literacy teacher at the San Diego charter who had worked with the student participants.

## Instruments

Utilizing mixed-method research, the study will seek qualitative and quantitative data that measures the success of the programs. The research will access data from the following:

### Quantitative:

1) Student Survey. The Likert-scale questions are designed to measure the efficacy of the coursework/experiential platform, and its ability to engage students. The survey asked students about their academic, and social-emotional learning experience in the program.

2) NWEA Standardized Reading Scores (Pre and Post). This is an adaptive test that measures reading comprehension in tiers and can be equated to anticipated ACT and ASBAC scores, as well as likelihood of successfully accessing college-level and technical texts. Scores are tabulated as Rausch Unit (RIT) scores.

## **Procedure**

- 1) School sites for research are identified and recognized with administrator approval*
- 2) Survey questions are created and survey is generated using Google Forms.*
- 3) NWEA Reading Assessments are administered as courses begin*
- 4) Students participate in and complete 10-week course*
- 6) Student survey and teacher questionnaires are administered towards the end of instructional period*
- 7) NWEA Reading Assessments are administered at conclusion of courses*
- 9) Findings are recorded, analyzed and transcribed*

## **Analysis**

This study is a form of action research in which the practitioner will "reflect upon the consequences of their own questions, beliefs, assumptions, and practices with the goal of understanding, developing, and improving social practices. This action is simultaneously directed towards self-change and towards restructuring the organization or institution within which the practitioner works"

(Rowell et. al, 2015).

The study examines the relationship between participation in the experiential learning pathway option and student engagement and achievement. The study has a quasi-experimental design (Overview of Quantitative Research Methods, 2015) also featuring a within-subjects

design, as there is a comparison between pre- and post-data among the group of participants to analyze possible correlation. The research questions are relational in that they address "a relationship between two or more variables" (Overview of Quantitative Research Methods, 2015) in this case engagement and achievement versus participation in ELP.

## **Conclusion**

Socio-economically disadvantaged students are traditionally underserved from both an academic and social-emotional learning standpoint. 90 percent of students in this charter organization are socio-economically disadvantaged and well-represent the struggles of this equity group, expressed by graduation rates and Math and English Language Arts scores on the California Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments. The research aimed to show that experiential learning programs increase student outcomes among this equity group.

The research question was: Do experiential learning programs quantifiably impact engagement and achievement among socio-economically disadvantaged students in alternative high schools, thus affecting equity in California secondary education?

This study looked at a secondary educational setting serving primarily low -income families. 20 student participants were selected from experiential learning program cohorts. Engagement was measured by:

### 1) Survey Responses

Continue2learn is a non-classroom based independent study organization, so students have minimal attendance and work completion requirements to remain enrolled. The idea here was to study whether students were attending school more frequently and successfully completing more credits once they were participating in the EL program.

Achievement was measured by:

1) A norm-referenced standardized test that measures Reading Comprehension. This is a relevant instrument because the EL program has a literacy focus. The figures obtained represent interval data (Overview of Quantitative Research Methods, 2015), using RIT and Lexile scores to quantify achievement.

2) A Post-Survey (Likert-scale) also established interval data (Overview of Quantitative Research Methods, 2015), ranking the levels of engagement and achievement from the perspective of the participants. The questions posed measured the effectiveness of the EL pathway with regards to the relationships the research questions seek to identify.

The research was quasi-experimental quantitative study using a within-subjects design. In Chapter 4, the findings and validity of the research will be diagnosed, interpreted and reported.

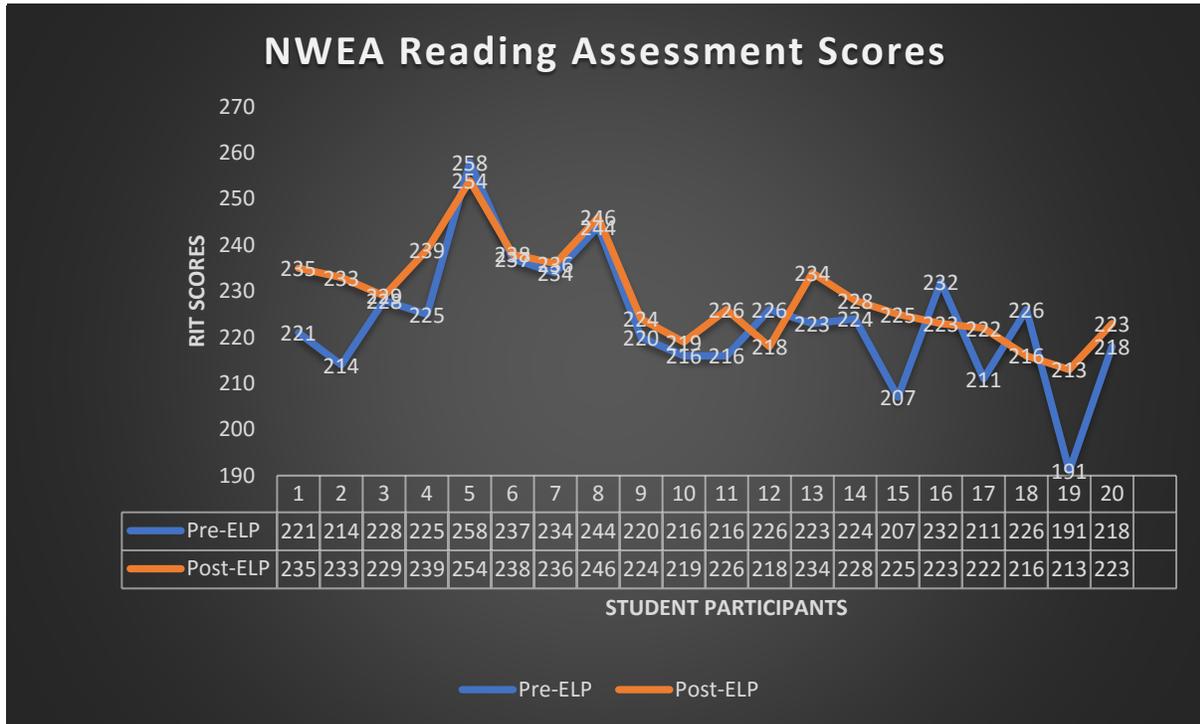
## **Chapter Four: Data Analysis**

Nearly all of students at Continue2Learn Charter High Schools across California are part of an equity group – socioeconomically disadvantaged youth, including foster/homeless. Conducting the research through a change theory lens, the researcher aimed to see if experiential learning could affect equity in education by quantitatively illustrating improvement in student outcomes as measured by survey results and pre- and post- reading scores. The researcher also used student and teacher interviews and class observations in an attempt to observe qualitative academic, and social and emotional growth. The research question is:

Do experiential learning programs quantifiably impact engagement and achievement among socio-economically disadvantaged students in alternative high schools, thus affecting equity in California secondary education? The following chapter includes Data Presentation, which includes the research findings within the setting, research questions and field of education. The findings are organized to reflect the themes in the literature review and include visual representations of the data. The next section focuses on Data Analysis, which explains how the researcher made sense of the findings. Following suit, the next sub-section – Interpretations – interprets the data and analysis as related to the research questions. This part seeks to answer: How do the findings relate to education practices? How can education benefit from the research? What insights can be gained from this research? Lastly, the Summary/Conclusion summarizes the key concepts of the research questions, data findings, analysis and interpretations. It also provides a transition to chapter 5 – the educational recommendations.

### **Data Presentation**

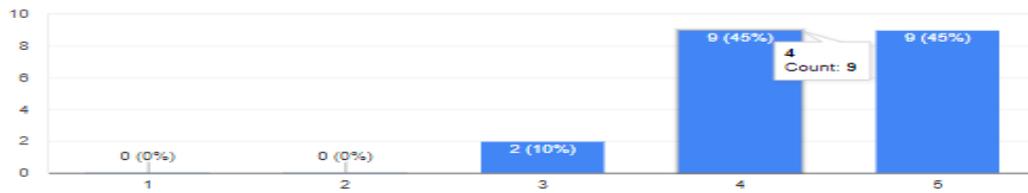
In researching the impact of this style of learning on socio-economically disadvantaged youth in an alternative school setting (independent study, non-classroom based charter organization), the study quantitatively examines student outcomes including engagement and achievement. The study uses a sample of 20 students – 10 each at school sites in San Diego and Los Angeles, respectively – participating in an experiential learning course, measuring their growth relative to these outcomes, and also compares the data to the entire population of students at the schools. A NWEA Reading assessment (pre- and post -) and Likert style survey and were used to quantify student engagement and achievement. The former looked at pre- and post- data to determine correlation, with the results visually depicted below. The blue line represents pre-course scores, while the red line represents post-course scores.



The survey below posed questions regarding engagement and achievement in the course. Responses ranged from Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4) and Strongly Agree (5). The bar graphs below break down all results by each individual question.

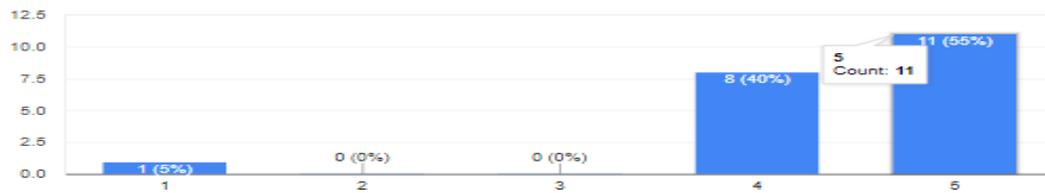
I experienced more literacy growth (reading, writing, speaking, listening) than in previous courses taken at the high-school level.

20 responses



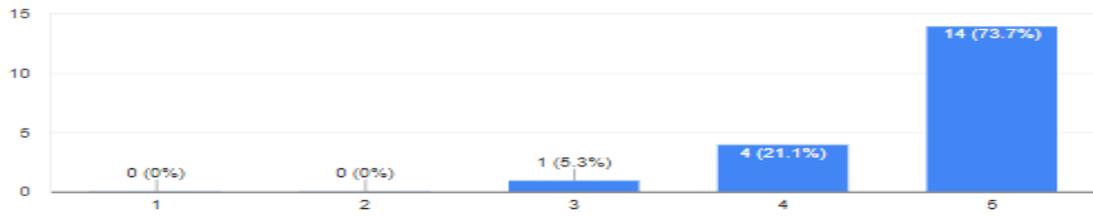
This experiential course helped me gain confidence and self-esteem.

20 responses



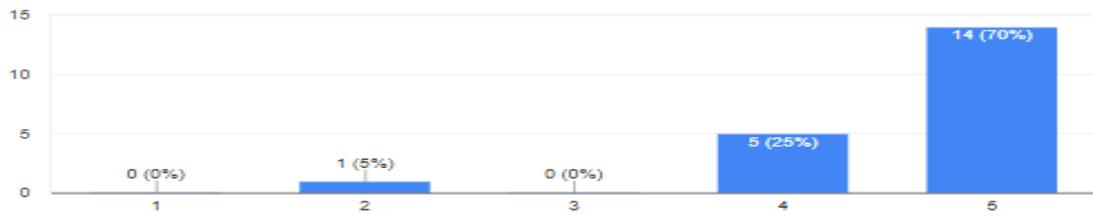
**This experiential course was a positive academic experience for me.**

19 responses



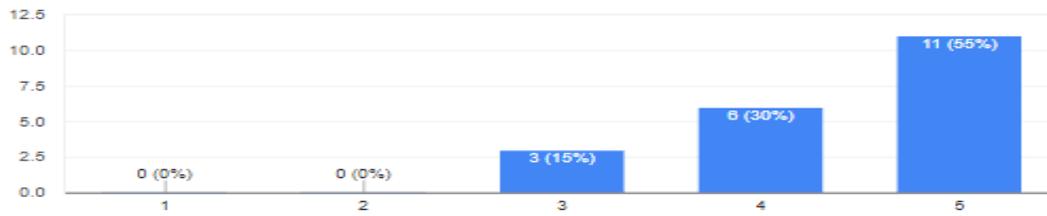
**This course was a positive social-emotional experience for me.**

20 responses



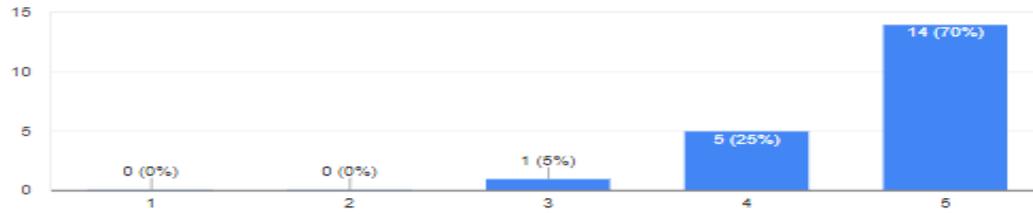
**This experiential course helped me gain motivation toward reaching my personal and academic goals.**

20 responses



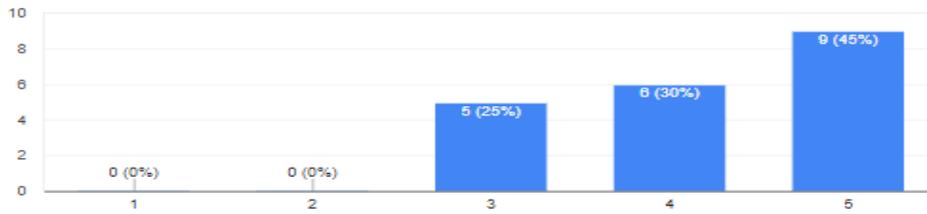
**I believe experiential learning is an improved platform to prepare students like me for success after high school.**

20 responses



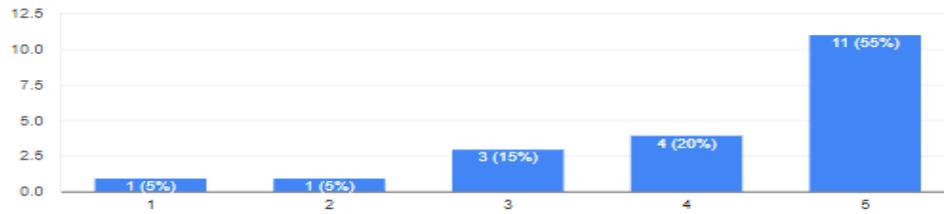
Experiential Learning (Conceptualizing, Experiencing and Reflecting) is a better way for me to acquire knowledge than what I had encountered before.

20 responses



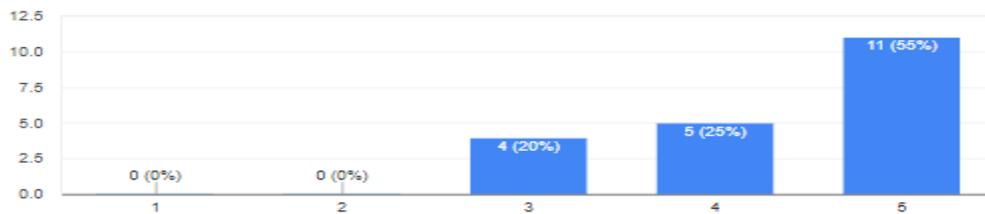
This experiential course had a cathartic (healing) effect on me.

20 responses



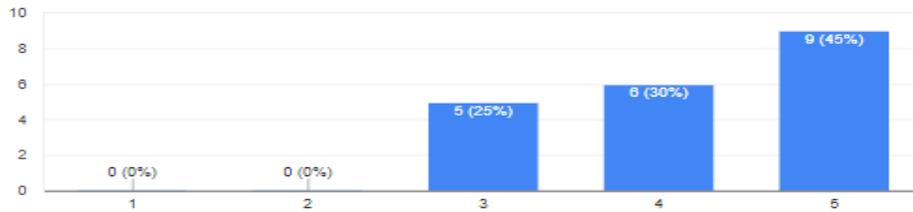
I attended school more frequently and consistently during this experiential course than I did before.

20 responses



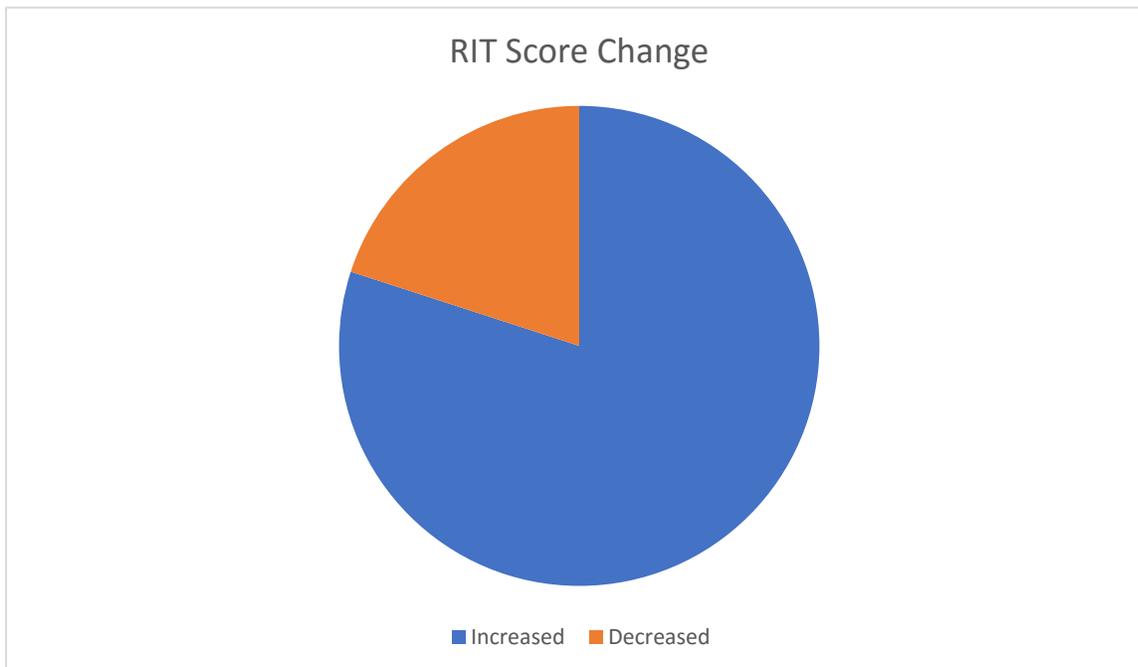
This experiential course prepared me for post-secondary (after high school) success more than previous non-experiential courses.

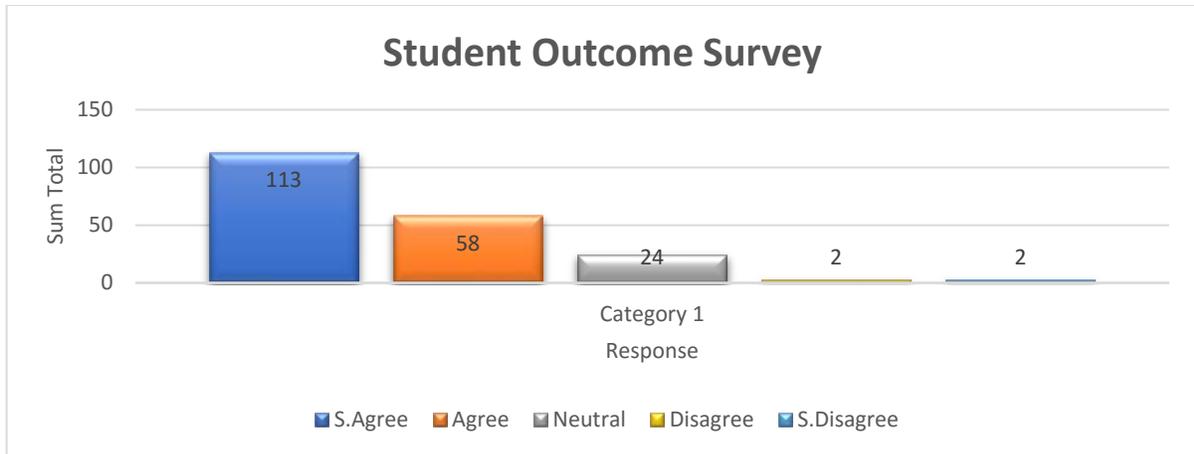
20 responses



### Data Analysis & Interpretations

On the RIT scale, 16 student scores went up (80 percent), while four went down (25 percent). The RIT median nationwide was 223 for 11<sup>th</sup> graders. Nine out of 20 students (45 percent) scored below the median on the pre-course assessment. Seven of those students (77 percent) increased their score beyond the nationwide median threshold. This shows that in a 6-month period, students enrolled in this course made substantial gains in reading.





56.5 percent of responses were “Strongly Agree”

29 percent of responses were “Agree”

12 percent of responses were “Neutral”

1 percent of responses were “Disagree”

1 percent of responses were “Strongly Disagree”

This shows that from a student perspective the course increased their engagement (attendance, social-emotional growth), and achievement (literacy growth, academic progress).

### **Interpretations**

Continue2Learn serves primarily socio-economically disadvantaged students, and is a meaningful representation of the struggles of this equity group. Offering more experiential

learning programs that illustrate real-world application and congruence will encourage engagement – measured by frequency of attendance – and achievement, evidenced by credit completion rates and scores on internal and external assessments.

Socio-economically disadvantaged students have to balance school pursuits with family and financial challenges. Promising a return on their investment of time and energy is one thing, but actually being able to give kids internships, resume building experiences, and instruction that encourages them to learn and apply themselves goes much farther.

These students are underserved or unprepared for mainstream education, and that's why they seek alternative education. Social and economic forces cyclically keep our students at the status quo, and all educators have a stake in breaking the patterns and giving our kids a chance to improve not only their own situations but their communities as a whole and next generations. We want to be able to prepare our kids for college, work force, armed forces etc. and in doing so improve the social climate in which they exist.

The Continue2Learn principals, regional vice presidents, and all the way up to the chief academic officer are very supportive of experiential learning and are providing the resources that allow educators to affect change. They are organizing experiences to take our kids to poetry slam competitions, to a join a NASA initiative in Washington D.C., and to explore experiential pathways across California, in other states and worldwide. Getting our kids out there to experience the world will prepare them for success in life.

Continue2Learn needs to get parents more involved, and there is an idea to bring the parents together more frequently to discuss the exciting opportunities we are able to provide for their kids. In-person communication is by far the most appropriate and engaging for the parents and relatives of our students, though it's challenging to put together. It's very easy to send a text,

tougher to make a call, and even more difficult to bring one, two, ten, or 100 parents together to understand what we are looking to accomplish in the community and how their kids and their own support is a huge part of that.

As we serve socio-economically disadvantaged students, a large portion fall below the standards in graduation rate and achievement. It is going to take time to increase engagement and achievement, systemically targeting instruction for students with adverse childhood experiences and ongoing struggles. This organization is also implementing new tools for measuring student outcomes quantitatively, also working with the CDE's effort to create effective and inclusive school accountability measures for alternative schools. We want to see these students catch up to the general population, which will represent significant shift in society considering the expectations and setbacks for the 30,000 students company-wide.

### **Summary/Conclusion**

Socio-economically disadvantaged students are traditionally underserved from both an academic and social-emotional learning standpoint. Nearly 90 percent of students in this charter organization are socio-economically disadvantaged and well-represent the struggles of this equity group, expressed by graduation rates and Math and ELA SBAC scores. This research aims to show that experiential learning programs increase student outcomes among this equity group.

Involving more students in these programs and developing a project-based Math course way can increase quantitative outcomes. Completing Algebra credits is one of the toughest challenges for our kids, and that's not even considering the Algebra-2 heavy SBAC assessment. If we can improve instruction by offering programs that align with our kids' interests and pursuits, and

make the learning more real for them, we can improve scores and show what these kids are capable of achieving.

## **Chapter 5: Recommendations**

Do experiential learning programs quantifiably impact engagement and achievement among socio-economically disadvantaged students in alternative high schools, thus affecting equity in California secondary education? The study aiming to answer this research question was set in Los Angeles and San Diego, studying two charter schools within Continue2Learn, a large non-classroom based charter organization that serves nearly 30,000 students across California, most of which are socio-economically disadvantaged.

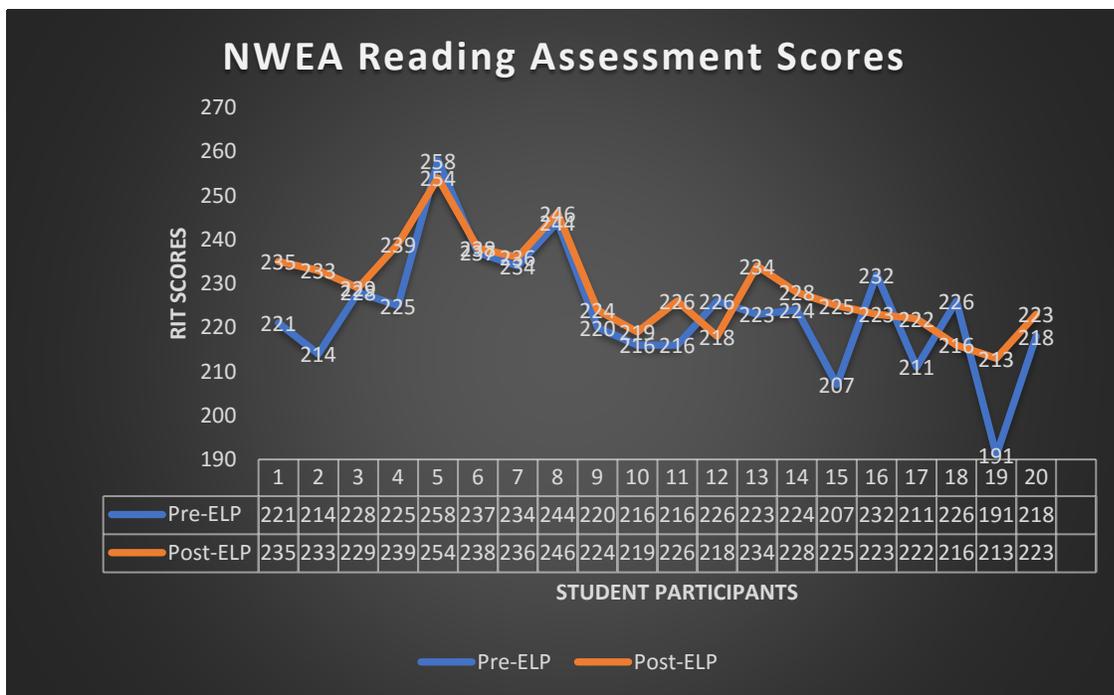
All of the participants selected – ranging from 14 to 22 years old – were socio-economically disadvantaged students. The sample was representative of all students in the organization, with diversity in gender, race, religion and ethnicity. The students were identified on this basis among all students enrolled in the Spoken Word course at Continue2Learn’s resource centers.

This chapter aims to offer recommendations for educators based on the research presented and analyzed in the study. In order to accomplish this, the researcher will first provide a Finding Summary that succinctly reviews the data acquired during the study. Next, the Finding Interpretation section offers analysis of findings, including their far-reaching effect. Findings in Context provides a more detailed look at the study’s evidence relative to the setting and current state of affairs in California education. This leads into the Recommendations section, which provides readers with insight as to what can be done with the acquired knowledge. This is supported by a look at the Limitations of the study, identifies questions the study could not

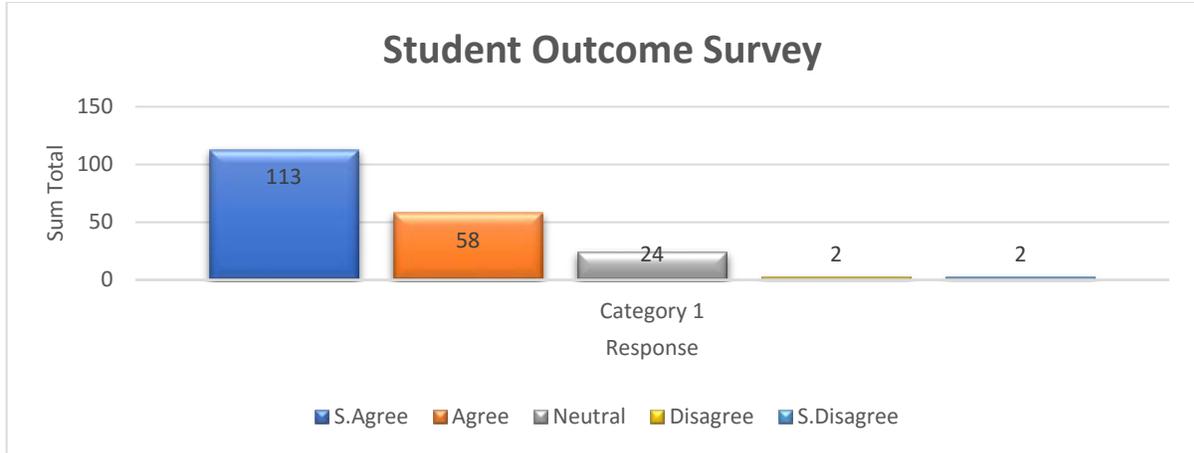
entirely answer. The Future Direction section offers insight on possible subsequent studies and remaining gaps in research relative to the purpose and direction of this particular study. A Conclusion section will follow, tying together the pieces presented in the research with respect to its contribution to educational philosophy and forward thinking.

### Findings Summary

This study measured literacy growth among the participants, with pre-and post-results shown on the graph below.

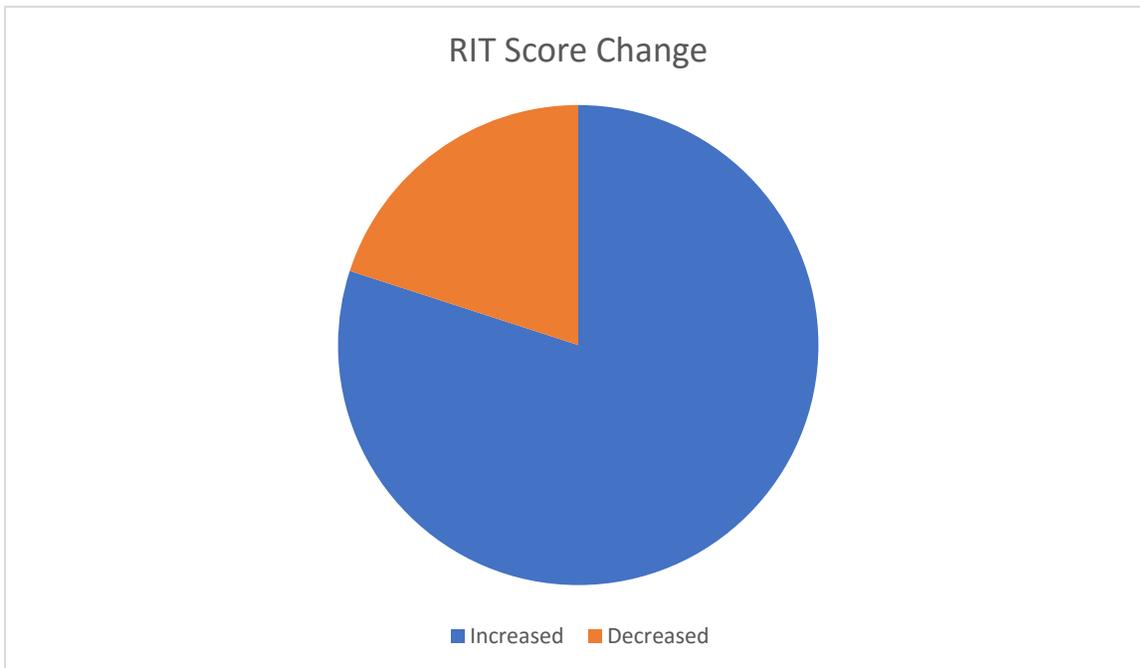


The participants were also given a survey with 10 affirmative statements relative to their engagement and achievement in the courses. Their responses are tabulated on the bar graph below:



## Findings Interpretation

The study showed that at the two charters, a statistically-relevant percentage of students enrolled in an experiential learning course experienced significant literacy growth over 12 weeks as evidenced by improvement in RIT scores on a standardized normative assessment.



Furthermore, the survey results indicate that a vast majority of students felt they experienced significant academic and social-emotional growth during the course, which positively impacted their outcomes. 56.5 percent of responses were “Strongly Agree”

29 percent of responses were “Agree”

12 percent of responses were “Neutral”

1 percent of responses were “Disagree”

1 percent of responses were “Strongly Disagree”

Overall the data suggests that that the answer to the research question is affirmative: **quantitative evidence shows that experiential learning programs do positively impact student engagement and achievement in alternative high school settings.**

### **Findings in Context**

The rise of non-traditional programs brings about new challenges relative to school accountability. The California Department of Education established that while “In traditional schools, teachers assess the time value of non-classroom-based independent study work to determine the completion of at least the "minimum day" defined in law for the grade level of the student and thereby record a ‘day of attendance.’ ... Those minimum day definitions do not apply to charter schools... Charter

non-classroom-based independent study school teachers, therefore, have no *statutory* standards on which they must base their time value calculation” (Hannan & Reyes, 2004).

Alternative schools have a multitude of societal and pragmatic factors impacting student engagement and achievement, and it is imperative that programs exist that increase student interest, positively influence quantitative and qualitative results, and as importantly provide empirical evidence substantiating their existence and offering a key solution to the perceiving educational shortcomings of alternative programs altogether. This study offers data obtained through a specific, targeted study and minimizes validity obstacles by isolating students that fit the criteria pertinent to the research and would be reliable for the purpose of the study.

## **Recommendations**

This study signifies the need for experiential learning programs at alternative school in order to quantifiably increase student engagement and achievement. Experiential learning programs follow three basic tenets aiming to improve student outcomes. Implementing experiential learning programs requires a multi-faceted paradigm shift in regards to educational philosophy.

- 4) Utilization of trauma-informed curriculum and instruction: As research shows the indisputable impact of trauma in the form of adverse childhood experiences on in-school achievement, schools may provide all staff with professional development opportunities focused on trauma-informed practices. Being trauma-informed is not just something that happens in the classroom: it begins the second a student walks through the front door of his or her school setting, continues into the classroom and follows the child through behavior and academic intervention efforts. It thus involves buy-in from administrative and instructional support staff, teachers and leadership personnel.

- 5) Emphasis on social-emotional learning: Students often thrive in safe, collaborative work spaces that foster their social and emotional growth. Socio-economically disadvantaged students often have little time for socialization and even less development of prosocial behaviors. In addition, response to any type of trauma, particularly system-induced trauma, requires the offering of catharsis through sharing difficult experiences and building relationships with peers and instructors. Courses that offer built-in supports for social and emotional challenges promote the growth of the whole child.
- 6) Access to learning-objective aligned field experiences, relevant guest speakers, platforms for presenting evidence of critical thinking and deepened content knowledge. Authentic learning experiences provide students with understanding of real-world application and thus make curriculum more personalized and meaningful. They also provide students with the opportunity to reflect on what they are learning, make adjustments, and set specific, manageable, attainable, relevant and time-bound (SMART) goals that help them become successful in their communities.

### **Limitations**

The study was limited by its relatively small sample size. Continue2Learn Charter Schools served nearly 30,000 students in 2017-2018, but less than 5 percent were enrolled in an experiential learning program. The reason for this is the same as the inspiration for the study – these programs are relatively new to high schools and require legislative and administrative buy-in to support their growth and development. Focusing on a small yet reliable sample size of 20 students who participated in an experiential course from start to finish and could be accurately studied allowed for effective and meaningful research but leaves opportunity for denser participant groups to be examined relative to the research question.

Furthermore, the quantitative survey results were subjective in nature and could benefit from being supported by more complex metrics measuring engagement and achievement. These are the types of data points being developed by the state of California with respect to alternative schools with unique structures and facing multitudes of challenges relative to validated measures of student performance. The pre- and post-scores on the reading assessment were a far more objective measure, but the impact of experiential learning goes beyond what can be substantiated by standardized-assessment statistics.

### **Future Direction**

Since “alternative schools and schools participating in [Alternative Schools Accountability Model] are not held accountable to the same standards established for traditional school...the CDE...[is] in the process of developing robust accountability indicators for alternative schools” (CDE, 2018). At the July 12, 2017 SBE meeting, the SBE approved the CDE’s development of the Dashboard Alternative School Status (DASS) program for alternative schools. The DASS program replaces the ASAM and holds alternative schools accountable for alternative accountability indicators that will be incorporated in the Dashboard beginning in the Fall 2018 release.” Improved accountability measures may substantially increase the overall access to meaningful data regarding student engagement and achievement. Identifying courses as experiential in nature and comparing the data of a variable group of students enrolled in such courses to the control group of all students will give us more information regarding the impact of these programs and how they can serve to improve equity.

## **Conclusion**

Charter schools originally opened to address shortcomings in performance by traditional public schools. Furthermore, the school choice movement proposed that alternative educational programs, including non-classroom based, independent study charters, provide families with the flexibility necessary to sustain quality of life without sacrificing the education of their children. This is especially applicable to families whose respective incomes fall far below the state median, creating a need for increased reliance on their high school-aged children for assistance in child care and income. Blended learning environments in which students have access to one-on-one, small-group and online instruction, provide the flexibility that many socio-economically disadvantaged families need.

Embedding experiential learning programs in alternative instructional pathways supports a mission to inspire students to succeed academically and socially by providing experiential learning in a safe, collaborative environment. By providing trauma-informed curriculum and experiences that promote positive social interactions and authentic learning with real-world applications, educators can bridge the gap between socio-economically disadvantaged youth and their non-disadvantaged peers and thus affect equity in California public education.

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