

Pre-College Gap Year Experiences and Youth Well-Being: A Qualitative Exploration

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ABSTRACT

A pre-college gap year refers to a temporary break taken before entering higher education, during which students engage in activities such as skill development, employment, volunteering, travel, or preparation for future academic goals. In recent years, gap years have become increasingly common among young people due to academic uncertainty, burnout, financial limitations, and the desire for personal growth. The present study explored pre-college gap year experiences and their influence on youth well-being using a qualitative exploratory research design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with ten college students selected through purposive sampling. Narrative analysis was used to interpret participants lived experiences and understand the meanings attached to their gap year journeys. The findings revealed that although many participants initially experienced disappointment, confusion, social comparison, and societal pressure, they gradually reconstructed their gap year experiences positively. Participants reported improvements in emotional well-being, self-awareness, maturity, academic motivation, career clarity, and interpersonal skills. Several participants also described the gap year as a period of recovery from academic burnout and an opportunity for self-reflection and personal development. Family and peer support emerged as important factors that helped participants cope with uncertainty and maintain confidence. Despite challenges related to stigma and delayed academic progression, most participants viewed the gap year as a transformative phase that contributed positively to their personal and academic growth. The study highlights the importance of understanding gap years not merely as interruptions in education but as meaningful developmental transitions that can enhance youth well-being and readiness for higher education.

Keywords: Gap year, Youth well-being, Narrative analysis, Personal growth, Academic readiness, Qualitative study

INTRODUCTION

A gap year generally refers to a temporary break from formal education that is commonly taken after the completion of school and before entering higher education. During this period, students may engage in various activities such as employment, volunteering, travelling, internships, skill development programmes, coaching classes, or self-exploration. The duration of a gap year may range from a few months to several years depending on the individual's goals and circumstances. A gap year provides students with an opportunity to explore their interests, gain practical exposure, develop life skills, and reflect upon future educational and career plans.

In recent years, the concept of a gap year has gained popularity worldwide. Many students choose to take a break due to academic burnout, uncertainty regarding career choices, financial limitations, entrance examination preparation, or the desire for personal growth. Research suggests that gap year experiences can contribute positively to emotional maturity, motivation, self-awareness, and academic preparedness. At the same time, gap years may also be associated with feelings of loneliness, social comparison, pressure from peers and relatives, and anxiety regarding delayed educational progression.

The transition from school to college is a significant developmental phase in the life of young adults. During this period, individuals often experience pressure related to academic expectations, career decisions, and societal standards. A gap year can function either as a period of uncertainty or as an opportunity for meaningful self-development depending on how individuals interpret and engage with the experience. Although gap years are

becoming increasingly common, there is limited qualitative research exploring how students personally experience and understand this phase of life.

The present study attempts to understand the lived experiences of students who took a gap year before entering college. By exploring their personal narratives, the study seeks to understand how gap year experiences influence emotional well-being, identity formation, academic motivation, and personal development. The study also aims to provide insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with gap years, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of youth well-being and transitional educational experiences.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Research on gap year experiences suggests that these transitional periods can significantly influence students' personal, academic, and psychological development. The Gap Year Association reported that a majority of gap year participants experienced improvements in critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and decision-making skills. Previous studies have also highlighted that gap years may enhance self-awareness, maturity, confidence, and academic motivation.

Haigler and Nelson (2011) found that students who engaged in gap year activities often developed greater independence and practical life skills. Similarly, Walker (2018) emphasized that gap year experiences can positively influence personal transformation and readiness for higher education.

Van der Merwe, Gohori, and Vosloo (2023) examined the role of structured gap year programmes in South Africa and found that such programmes contributed significantly to the development of facilitation, instructional, and organisational skills. Their findings demonstrated that structured experiential activities can strengthen soft skills and personal growth.

Martin (2010) explored gap year experiences from a psychoeducational perspective and found that students who participated in gap years reported higher academic motivation upon returning to formal education. The study also suggested that academic uncertainty and low motivation may initially influence students to take a gap year, but the experience itself can later function as a motivational reset.

Despite these positive findings, some studies have also identified challenges associated with gap years. Andres et al. (2017) noted that students may experience uncertainty, confusion, social comparison, and self-doubt during this period. Concerns regarding delayed academic progression and societal expectations may also create emotional stress.

Although existing literature highlights both the benefits and challenges of gap year experiences, there remains limited qualitative research focusing on how students personally interpret these experiences within their social and psychological contexts. Therefore, the present study seeks to explore the lived experiences of students who took a gap year before college and understand how these experiences shaped their well-being and personal development.

Overall, the existing literature suggests that gap year experiences can function both as opportunities for growth and as periods of uncertainty. While several studies highlight improvements in maturity, motivation, and life skills following a gap year, others emphasize emotional challenges such as social comparison, fear of academic delay, and identity confusion. This indicates that the impact of a gap year largely depends on individual interpretation, social support, and the nature of activities undertaken during the transition period.

Objective of the Study

The objective of the study was to understand students' pre-college gap year experiences and their influence on youth well-being.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The present study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design to understand pre-college gap year experiences and their influence on youth well-being. A qualitative approach was considered suitable because it

enabled the researcher to explore participant’s lived experiences, emotions, perceptions, and interpretations in depth. Narrative analysis was used to interpret how participants constructed meaning from their gap year experiences through storytelling.

Sample

Variable	Details
Number of Participants	10
Age	18–22 years
Gender	Male and Female
Educational Status	College Students
Socio-economic Background	Middle Class

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling technique was used in the study. Participants were intentionally selected based on specific criteria relevant to the research objective, particularly individuals who had experienced a pre-college gap year and were willing to share their experiences in detail.

Data Collection Method

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. This method included predetermined open-ended questions while also allowing flexibility for spontaneous discussions and deeper exploration of participants’ experiences. The interview format encouraged participants to express their thoughts and feelings freely.

Data Collection Procedure

The semi-structured interview schedule was prepared under the guidance of the supervising teacher. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before conducting the interviews. Data were collected through both telephone-based and face-to-face interviews conducted individually in a confidential setting.

The interviews began with a brief self-introduction and explanation of the purpose of the study. Participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and would be used solely for academic purposes. Rapport was established to create a comfortable and trusting environment. Participants were encouraged to speak openly and honestly about their experiences, and they were informed that there were no right or wrong answers.

The interviews were later transcribed for analysis. Narrative analysis was employed to examine participants’ stories and identify themes related to emotional experiences, coping strategies, personal growth, social influences, and academic readiness.

Method of Analysis

Narrative analysis was used to analyse the collected data. Narrative analysis focuses on understanding how individuals construct meaning through personal stories and lived experiences. The method helped interpret participants’ experiences of taking a gap year and how they understood its influence on their emotional, academic, and personal development.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

Table 1: Participants' Responses and Inferences

Participant	Responses	Inferences
1	The participant reported that the gap year was unplanned due to failure to secure admission in the desired course. Initially, feelings of disappointment and confusion were experienced. The participant stayed at home, prepared for reapplication, and engaged in part-time tutoring.	The gap year began as an involuntary academic disruption but was later reframed as a productive period. Emotional distress was managed through structured engagement and family support.
2	The participant took a gap year due to financial constraints and entrance examination preparation. The time was spent attending coaching classes and developing communication and time management skills.	The gap year functioned as a strategic preparation period that enhanced skill development and academic readiness.
3	The participant felt socially pressured after seeing peers join college. However, volunteering activities and online certification courses were pursued during the gap year.	Despite social comparison, the participant demonstrated resilience through meaningful and confidence-building activities.
4	The participant described the gap year as a period of self-reflection and explored different career interests before shifting academic streams.	The gap year facilitated career exploration and clarity through introspection and self-understanding.
5	The participant experienced burnout after higher secondary education and intentionally chose to take a break. The year was used for emotional relaxation and pursuing hobbies.	The gap year acted as a recovery phase that improved emotional well-being and motivation.
6	The participant engaged in part-time employment during the gap year to support family income while preparing for college admission.	The experience strengthened responsibility, independence, and financial awareness.
7	The participant relied heavily on family and peer support during the gap year. Encouragement from close networks helped maintain optimism and confidence.	Informal support systems played an important role in coping and adaptation.
8	The participant experienced societal stigma and frequent questions from relatives regarding delayed academic progression but remained focused on future goals.	Societal expectations created psychological pressure, but internal motivation reduced long-term negative impact.
9	The participant described improved maturity, time management, and goal clarity after the gap year. Adjustment to college life became easier.	The gap year enhanced developmental maturity and college readiness.
10	The participant reflected positively on the overall impact of the gap year and reported reduced fear of "falling behind."	The gap year reshaped perceptions about academic timelines and encouraged a growth-oriented mindset.

The findings revealed that participants experienced the gap year in different ways depending on their personal, academic, and social circumstances. Although many participants initially described feelings of disappointment, uncertainty, and pressure, they gradually began to view the experience more positively.

Several participants described the gap year as a period that allowed them to reflect on personal goals, recover emotionally from academic stress, and gain greater clarity regarding future career decisions. Others reported improvements in communication skills, time management, confidence, and independence. Activities such as volunteering, part-time employment, online learning, and exam preparation helped participants remain engaged and productive during the break.

Participants also highlighted challenges related to peer comparison and societal expectations. Watching friends progress academically often created feelings of insecurity and self-doubt. However, emotional support from family and friends helped participants cope with these pressures and maintain hope for the future.

Overall, the results suggest that pre-college gap year experiences can contribute positively to personal growth, emotional well-being, resilience, and academic readiness when individuals engage meaningfully with the experience.

DISCUSSION

The present study explored pre-college gap year experiences and their influence on youth well-being through narrative analysis. The findings revealed that gap year experiences were not merely interruptions in education but meaningful life transitions shaped by emotional, social, academic, and personal factors.

Many participants reported that their gap year began unexpectedly due to factors such as admission difficulties, financial limitations, or academic uncertainty. Initially, participants experienced disappointment, confusion, and pressure arising from comparisons with peers who had already entered college. These findings are consistent with previous studies that identified uncertainty and self-doubt as common emotional experiences during gap years.

Over time, however, participants reconstructed their experiences in more positive ways. Through self-reflection, skill development, volunteering, work experiences, and academic preparation, participants gradually developed a sense of purpose and direction. Narrative analysis showed that participants actively interpreted their gap year as a period of growth rather than failure.

Several participants described improvements in emotional well-being and psychological adjustment. The gap year provided space for recovery from academic burnout and emotional exhaustion. Participants reported feeling mentally refreshed, more motivated, and better prepared to return to formal education. These findings support earlier research suggesting that gap years can contribute positively to academic motivation and personal maturity.

Family and peer support emerged as an important factor influencing participants' adjustment during the gap year. Emotional reassurance, encouragement, and practical support from close relationships helped participants cope with uncertainty and maintain confidence. The findings indicate that supportive interpersonal relationships can significantly reduce stress during transitional educational phases.

At the same time, participants also described experiencing societal stigma and pressure related to delayed academic progression. Questions from relatives and comparisons with peers sometimes created emotional discomfort and fear of being left behind. Despite these pressures, many participants demonstrated resilience and maintained focus on long-term goals.

These findings also fit into the context of identity formation as described by Erikson and the theory of emerging adulthood by Jeffrey Arnett. Young adulthood is a critical time for identity exploration and development according to Erikson. In a similar vein, Arnett defines emerging adulthood as a period of exploration, instability and self-focus. Participant's narratives suggested that the gap year allowed individuals to explore different career

options, gain independence, recover emotionally, and develop a stronger sense of self during the transition to adulthood.

Overall, the findings of the study suggest that gap years should be understood as complex developmental experiences rather than simple academic delays. The meaning individuals attach to their experiences plays a crucial role in shaping the psychological impact of the gap year. When approached with support, purpose, and engagement, gap years may contribute positively to identity formation, emotional resilience, and readiness for higher education.

The findings of the study may help educators, counsellors, and parents better understand the emotional and developmental needs of students taking pre-college gap years. Educational institutions can provide structured guidance, counselling support, and awareness programmes to reduce stigma surrounding academic delays and support students during transitional phases.

CONCLUSION

The present qualitative study explored pre-college gap year experiences and their influence on youth well-being through the personal narratives of ten college students. The study revealed that gap years often begin with uncertainty, disappointment, or external challenges such as financial limitations, academic pressure, and admission difficulties. However, over time, participants reconstructed these experiences as opportunities for growth, reflection, and self-discovery.

Participants reported improvements in emotional well-being, confidence, maturity, career clarity, and academic motivation following their gap year experiences. The findings also highlighted the importance of family and peer support in helping students cope with social pressure and uncertainty during transitional periods.

The study concludes that pre-college gap years should not be viewed solely as interruptions in education. Instead, they can function as meaningful developmental phases that contribute to psychological adjustment, identity formation, and readiness for future academic and personal challenges. Increased awareness, reduced stigma, and appropriate guidance can help students experience gap years in more positive and productive ways.

LIMITATIONS

The present study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. The sample size was limited to ten participants, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. In addition, participants were selected using purposive sampling, and the experiences described may differ across diverse socio-cultural and economic backgrounds. The study mainly focused on personal narratives. Therefore, the findings are interpretive in nature. Future research may include larger and more diverse samples and adopt longitudinal or mixed-method approaches to gain a deeper understanding of pre-college gap year experiences and youth well-being.

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ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity of participants were maintained throughout the study, and the collected information was used solely for academic research purposes.

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