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A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF RURAL SCHOOL RETURNERS' JOURNEYS

TO SECONDARY CREDENTIAL COMPLETION

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

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On behalf of the Graduate Committee for Brenda Elaine Swan Gammon I affirm that this manuscript is the final and accepted dissertation. Signatures of all committee members are on file with the Graduate School at the University of Maine, 42 Strodder Hall, Orono, Maine.

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A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF RURAL SCHOOL RETURNERS' JOURNEYS

TO SECONDARY CREDENTIAL COMPLETION

By Brenda Elaine Swan Gammon

Dissertation Advisor: Dr. Sarah Mackenzie

An Abstract of the Dissertation Presented

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Dropping out of school has a negative impact on an individual's life and a person's ability to contribute to the country's society and economy. Returning to schooling and obtaining a diploma or equivalent is fraught with obstacles. Many people try several times to complete the degree; fewer succeed. The plight of rural students including rural school returners is often overlooked because their problems are overshadowed by the problems of urban areas.

The purpose of this qualitative study, involving three extensive interviews of five rural school returners, was to build upon existing research on high school dropouts through the exploration of lived experiences of rural school returners. Such an in-depth focus highlights this understudied population. The lenses of rurality, resilience, and mattering guided the design of the study.

The findings of the study offer insight for educational leaders, educators, and policy makers to employ in their endeavors of supporting school returners. The study found that the rural context both motivates as well as challenges school returners. Long

distances and inadequate services, family and work obligations, and low paying, dead-end jobs provided both the impetus and the impediment to school returning and completion. In addition, the study found that regret about their public school experiences helped to motivate the participants to return to schooling. Others have noted regret as a motivator because lost opportunity often engenders regret while education can open or reopen doors to opportunity.

The study found that gender impacts educational experiences in rural areas. Rural female students often report traditional gender roles and situations as challenges to their educational attainment. As other studies have found, women more often find they want to seek further education after finally gaining the high school credential. Finally, this study found that personal resilience and educational resilience factors, internal attributes, and mattering to others supported the participants in overcoming the challenges they faced as school returners. This finding adds to the literature on successful school returners because it describes the interplay of these factors noted in each participant's story. Previous research presents these factors separately rather than in dynamic interaction with each other.

DEDICATION

This dissertation on school returners is dedicated to many individuals whom have helped me become the individual I am today, a University of Maine doctoral student graduate.

To my mom, Elizabeth Swan Stearns, who as an educator for thirty years instilled the love of learning in me. I will always cherish the years we taught down the hall from each other.

To my dad, Charles Clayton Swan, who taught me to always do my best, to never quit, and who always said, "If you don't get it right the first time, try, and try again."

To my father-in-law, Warren Gammon, who made me promise him that I would continue my schooling until he could call me "Doctor."

To my brother-in-law, Zack Gammon, for your loving smiles, twinkling eyewinks, and your big bear hugs that always reminded me that you were there for me.

Dad, Warren, and Zack I know the three of you watched over me on all of my early morning and late night trips to Orono and back home. Thank you for your love and support from Heaven throughout this journey I have traveled on.

To my former high school guidance counselor, John Baker, who made the call in the summer of 1977 that inspired me to return to high school and earn my high school diploma.

Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, David E. Gammon, who has supported me, loved me, and stood beside me for the past forty years. At sixteen we were married and both dropped out of high school. You supported me when I returned to high school nine months later and have continued to support me through my schooling

journeys. These journeys have included; a high school diploma in 1978; a Bachelor of Science Degree in Elementary Education in 1981; a Master's of Education Degree in Elementary Education in 2001; a Certificate of Advanced Study Degree in Educational Leadership in 2007; and this last journey that has resulted in a Doctor of Education Degree in Educational Leadership in 2016. For each journey you stood beside me with your love, your support, and your encouragement. You were there for our children and grandchildren when I couldn't be. You also returned to school and earned your high school diploma and have taken many classes and workshops since. I am very proud of you and love you dearly!

For each of you I am forever grateful.

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I want to thank the Region 9 School of Applied Technology's Cooperative Board members and the staff members of Region 9 for your support. Debbie, Mel, Pam, Cheryl, Nancy, and Brian I thank you for suffering through my low times and for celebrating my accomplishments with me. Thank you for the goodie bags you packed for me for my trips to class and for being my sounding boards for the past seven years. You are all special individuals. Your support and encouragement has energized me to complete this goal.

I must also thank and acknowledge my cohort members. Thank you for your friendship, together we embarked on this journey. Allyson for your support, love, and friendship when "life happened" over the past seven years and Abdullahi for your 10:15 pm message that inspired me to get back on track. You have all, through our course work and our cohort gatherings, given me the inspiration to be successful in this process.

Thank you to my friends and family members who supported me and encouraged me to keep plugging away. Each time you asked how it was going gave me the push I needed to continue my work. Knowing that you cared about my work as a doctoral student gave me the motivation to finish the journey.

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Thank you

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CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

"Let us think of education as the means of developing our greatest abilities, because in each of us there is a private hope and dream which, fulfilled, can be translated into benefit for everyone and greater strength of the nation."

- John F. Kennedy, 1961

A high school diploma is an important step in preparing a person to live an independent, secure, and happy life and to contribute to America's economic competitiveness as part of an educated, innovative workforce (America's Promise Alliance, 2013). However, every 26 seconds, a student drops out of school (America's Promise Alliance, 2013; Beaven, 2013). Hope for the country and individuals can be found in obtaining a high school credential, the first step to future education and successful employment (Rumberger, 2001). As public schools grapple with how to support all children in achieving this credential, the importance of reenrolling dropouts in school is gaining attention across the nation (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore, & Fox, 2010).

Educators do not know as much about how and why people return to school to earn a high secondary credential as they know about factors that lead to individuals dropping out of school and dropout prevention programs. The literature notes that students drop out of school for many reasons. The decision to drop out is rarely spur of the moment. Usually, students drop out of school following a long process of disengagement and academic struggle (Convissor, 2014). Once individuals drop out of school, it can take a tremendous amount of resilience and perseverance for them to take the steps necessary to return and complete their schooling (Sparks, 2013a). In fact, many

people start the process of returning to gain the credential and still do not complete it (Berliner, Barrat, Fong, & Shirk, 2008). Although there are no national figures on the number of dropouts who re-enroll, some studies of cities and districts find one-third to one-half of out-of-school youth do try at least once to return to complete high school before aging out of the K-12 system (Sparks, 2013a).

Grad Nation is a large and growing movement of dedicated individuals, organizations, and communities working together to end America's dropout crisis. Grad Nation goals include achieving a ninety percent graduation rate nationwide by 2020, with no high school graduating less than eighty percent of its students, and regaining America's standing as first in the world in college and/or technical training completion (America's Promise Alliance, 2013). Sparks (2013b) believes that there is no way to achieve the Grad Nation goal of ninety percent graduation rate by 2020 without taking the time to find, bring back, and keep the students who have already fallen through the cracks. School returners are individuals who have dropped out of school for a period of time and then made the decision to reenroll. Therefore, knowing what motivates and sustains those individuals who do in fact return to school and obtain a high school credential can aid in helping the nation reach its graduation goal.

While there has been a considerable amount of research on the nation's dropout crisis less is known about what brings these dropouts back to school and how to support school returners in their journey to becoming school completers (Berliner et al., 2008). Sparks (2013b) believes the hunger to return dropouts before the economic downturn was not present because people believed that there were still places in the economy where dropouts could go.

Across the nation, a variety of programs can be found whose mission it is to encourage dropouts to return to school and to support them along the way. The Boston Public Schools' Re-Engagement Center (BPSREC), which originated in 2004 as a result of the mayor's Youth Transitions Task Force developed to study the dropout crisis in Boston and create and implement an action plan to address the issue, is an example of one of the programs. In 2014 the Department of Education created a resource guide for implementing and enhancing re-engagement centers for out of school youth titled, "Bringing Students Back to the Center." The guide is designed to help school and community leaders address the challenges of dropout recovery and establish or strengthen their own re-engagement efforts. Another program is the High School Graduation Initiative also known as School Dropout Prevention Program. These grant funds are for identifying and encouraging youth who have left school without graduating to reenter and graduate. The GED program was conceived and developed in the late 1940s as a way to certify that returning World War II veterans who had left their high school classrooms to serve in the war were ready for college or the labor market. For many, especially those who are too old to return to the public K-12 system, the GED assessment has long been the main route to the high school credential (Adams, 2013). The National External Diploma Program (NEDP) is another initiative that allows students to demonstrate their high school level skills by applying their life experiences in real-life situations. When NEDP certifies that the applicant has met benchmark skill levels, the cooperating school district awards a high school diploma (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2008).

These initiatives assist those who have discovered the need to return and those who have the desire to re-enroll in schooling and complete the requirements for a high

school diploma or to pass the HiSET/GED. Often these programs are established in urban areas, and all too often remain invisible in rural settings. The lack of organizations that support these initiatives as well as large areas with sparse populations all add to the lack of these programs being available for individuals living in rural areas.

Rural education is becoming a bigger and even more complex part of our national landscape (Strange, Showalter, & Klein, 2012). The bottom line according to Strange, Showalter, and Klein (2012) is that growth in rural school enrollment is outpacing non-rural enrollment growth in the United States. Rural schools are becoming more complex with increasing rates of poverty, diversity, and special needs students as well as geographical dispersion. Therefore, it is important to examine the challenges rural schools face concerning school dropouts and ways to re-engage them. Debertin and Goetz (1994) reported on educational challenges that rural areas face. They noted that these challenges include difficulty in recruiting and retaining qualified teachers and principals lagging behind other areas in Internet access, and not being able to provide advanced courses due to limited curricula that often consist of those courses mandated by the state and a few additional offerings. Although this work is dated, more recent writing about rural schooling reports that the problems continue and, in fact, have grown.

According to Johnson, Showalter, Klein, and Lester (2014) in their work, *Why Rural Matters 2013-2014: The Condition of Rural Education in the 50 States*, the national average for the percentage of rural schools across the states is just under 33%. However, they note that the states vary considerably from a low of 6.5% in Massachusetts to a high of 75.3% in Montana. Also Johnson, et al. report that in fifteen of the fifty states half or more of all public schools are rural. These states are Montana,

South Dakota, Vermont, North Dakota, Maine, Alaska, Wyoming, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Arkansas, West Virginia, Iowa, New Hampshire, Mississippi, and Kansas. In general, states with a high percentage of rural schools are those where sparse populations or challenging terrain make it difficult to transport students to consolidated regional schools in non-rural areas and those where there has been less push to consolidate or successful resistance to consolidation. Just over 20% of all public school students were enrolled in districts classified as rural in 2010-11. In only three states were more than half of all students enrolled in rural districts–Vermont (57.5%), Maine (57.2%), and Mississippi (56.5%) (Johnson et al., 2014, pp. 6 & 7). Therefore, due to the percentage of rural schools across the country, the issues they face must matter to policy makers, educators, and to the dedicated individuals, organizations, and communities working together to end America's dropout crisis.

The scale and the scope of rural education in the United States continue to grow (Strange, Showalter, and Klein, 2012). Over 11 million students are enrolled in rural school districts, more than 20 percent of all public school students in the United States. Johnson, et al. (2014) noted that more than two in five of those rural students live in poverty; more than one in four is a child of color; and one in eight has changed residence in the previous twelve months. The trend continues, with total rural student enrollment increasing by 136,884 students from 2008-09 to 2009-10 while non-rural student enrollment decreased by 54,162. Moreover, the demographic characteristics of the rural student population continue to shift, with rural schools becoming increasingly diverse and serving larger populations of students that schools have historically not served effectively. The percentage of rural students eligible for free or reduced-priced meals increased from

41.0% to 46.6% from 2008-09 to 2010-11 (an increase of nearly 603,000 students).

Likewise, the percentage of rural minority students increased over that same period by

127,151 (a 5.1% increase). Less dramatic but still noteworthy, the percentage of rural

students qualifying for special education services increased from 12.1% to 12.8%, an

increase of nearly 85,000 students (Johnson et al. 2014, pp. 8-28). For these reasons rural

schools must matter to all concerned with educating the youth of today.

According to Johnson et al. (2014) rural instructional expenditures per pupil

represent the state's total current expenditures for instruction in rural public school

districts divided by the total number of students enrolled in those same districts. The

highest spending states are either states with very small rural districts (Alaska, Wyoming,

Vermont, New Hampshire, Nebraska, Montana and Maine) or Northeastern and Mid-

Atlantic urban states with a relatively small rural education sector (New York,

Connecticut, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Maryland and Massachusetts). The national

average of $5,826 per pupil is much closer to the low end of the range ($4,271 in Arizona

and $4,349 in Idaho) than to the high end ($11,061 in New York). Arizona and Idaho are

spending less than half of the amount that New York spends per pupil on instruction in its

rural school districts (Johnson et al., 2014). According to the Maine Department of

Education website, the average per pupil operating cost during the fiscal year 2013-14 for

Maine was $10,545.58. This figure has increased over $3,000 per pupil in the past decade

(Johnson et al., 2014, pp. 18 – 21).

Unavoidable issues related to geography and terrain affect variations in pupil

transportation costs, but they also result from policies and practices related to the size and

location of schools and school districts, personnel, and the length of students' bus rides.

On average, rural school districts nationally spend about $11.71 on instruction for every dollar spent on transportation with considerable variation among states (Johnson et al., 2014). Using the 12.71:1 ratio Maine spent an average of $829.71 per student for transportation during the 2013-14 school year where Arizona spent $336.03 per student. This indicator is an important factor in the educational policy context because extraordinary transportation costs are a burden that shifts money away from programs and resources that directly impact student learning (Why Rural Matters, 2013-14).

Johnson et al. (2014) believe these trends should make it increasingly difficult for policy makers to ignore the challenges faced by rural schools and the students they serve, or what those challenges mean to state and national goals of improving achievement and narrowing achievement gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged groups. Still, the invisibility of rural education persists in many states. Many rural students are largely invisible to state policy makers because they live in states where education policy is dominated by highly visible urban problems.

Over the few past decades, sobering dropout data have led community and school leaders to question their responsibilities to out-of-school youth. Due to the heightened awareness of the costly economic impact dropping out of school has on individuals and communities, national and state leaders are focusing on the issue as well (Rennie-Hill, Villano, Fiest, & Legters, 2014, pp. 3). A 2012 report by labor economists recommends targeted investments for disconnected youth and asserts, "Failure to harness their potential is an opportunity missed for themselves and society," (Rennie-Hill, et al., 2014, p. 3).

The Problem

It is noted throughout research that obtaining a high school credential is seen as the first step to future education and successful employment (Rumberger, 2001). However, over one million students continue to drop out of school each year across this nation. Despite the attention and resources dedicated to dropout prevention initiatives, the dropout problem continues to exist in both urban and rural areas. Understanding why high school dropouts make the decision to return to school to obtain a high school credential and how their life experiences, the challenges they face, and the supports they receive, all impact the efforts of school returners, is an important contribution to the field of education.

In a world in which education is becoming ever more important, finding solutions to the dropout problem is one of the most pressing issues facing America's high schools (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). This proposal emerged because of the increasing concern for students who leave school without a high school diploma or credential. As accountability demands and economic pressures have sparked the drive to bring dropouts back to school it is important to understand how to best support school returners as they work to obtain a secondary credential.

The purpose of exploring the context of rural school returners is based on decades of well-documented research on early school leavers and the factors that impact their lives as high school dropouts. This study helps fill the gaps in the literature of what we do not know about school returners in general and in particular rural school learners who successfully complete the requirements of a secondary credential.

The literature on dropping out of school and the literature on the construct of returning to school is scarce, what little exists has been examined for the most part from a quantitative perspective. Seidman (2006) notes that much research regarding schooling is done in this country but little of the research is based on the perspectives of those whose experiences constitute schooling. In attempting to help fill this gap in literature on school returners this qualitative study provides information on the process of returning to school and obtaining a secondary credential based on the experiences of the participants through their words.

Analyzing the stories of school returners may help educators develop a deeper understanding of the experience of being a rural school returner. As Dewey (1897) wrote, *"The most important attitude that can be formed is that of desire to go on learning."*

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the stories of school returners to understand what motivates and supports students in rural settings to return to school to obtain a secondary credential and what challenges they face as they work to obtain a credential. A school returner, in this study, is defined as an individual at least eighteen years of age who returned to schooling after not attending high school for at least one year.

This qualitative study of rural school returners builds upon a small but emerging body of research in the education field. The previous research on school returners has focused mainly on urban areas and has been quantitative in nature. This study provides insight into the experiences of school returners as they worked to complete the requirements of a secondary credential. Examining the lived stories of rural school

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returners, through the contexts, situations, and circumstances of their personal

experiences can lead to a better understanding of the challenges school returners face.

Significance of the Study

The intent of this study was to add to the literature base on the topic of school

returners. This research can provide critical information about how schools need to work

to first re-engage students and then how as a system we can work to support them after

they return. Berliner et al. (2008) believe a more complete and accurate national

description of school returners is needed to help shape policies and practices that enable

high school dropouts to reenroll and obtain a high school credential.

Researching why individuals drop out from and then reenroll in schooling, what

supports they need along the way, and how the system impacts their efforts may provide

critical information to policymakers, educational leaders, and educators about how well

schools first retain students, how they re-engage high school dropouts, and then how

successful they are in graduating them after they return (Morse, A., Christenson, & Lehr,

2004). By developing this understanding for policy makers, educators, community

members, and parents and by expanding the knowledge base of previous research,

strategies can be implemented to encourage early school leavers to return to school and

complete the requirements of a secondary credential by establishing supports for them

based on their experiences and needs. This study, although it only looks at a small

number of rural school returners, begins to address Berliner's call for more accurate data

on school returners, an understudied population.

Overview of Subsequent Chapters

Chapter One described the problem of the study and the purpose, significance and need of this research. Chapter Two provides a review of relevant literature to this study. Chapter Three provides the design of the study of rural school returners including data collection and management, the analytic procedures, ethical considerations, and the conceptual framework for this study. Chapters Four and Five describe the data collected with Chapter Five concluding with the findings of this study. Chapter Six provides an overview of the purpose, design, and limitations of the study. A discussion of the findings in light of the current literature on school returners and implications of the study for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers, along with concluding thoughts are also included in Chapter Six.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Chapter Two provides the reader with a review of literature that is relevant to the proposed study of school returners. This review includes the following areas of research in order to help the reader understand the context of rural school returners: what schooling means in a rural area, challenges rural school returners face, and school returners as learners. Then the review covers motivations to return to school, engagement of the out-of-school population, and the factors of resilience and mattering that others have found as significant in supporting those individuals who do return to school to obtain a secondary credential. The conceptual framework of this study is based on the Theories of Resilience and Mattering.

What Schooling Means in a Rural Area

Nationwide, nearly one-half of all operating school districts are in rural areas, and more than ten million children attend a rural school in this country (American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF), 2010). About one-third of the approximately 100,000 public schools in the United States in 2010-2011 were located in rural areas. These public schools in rural areas enrolled 12 million students, representing 24 percent of the nation's total enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

The notion of rurality is the context for the problem this study seeks to explore. Traditionally, rural is defined in two ways: objectively – in terms of size of place and distance from major cities, and subjectively – in terms of community feeling, intimacy, and interdependency among individuals and families (Hill, 2014). The implications of both of these definitions of rural were found to impact this study of rural school learners.

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Approximately 47 million people live in rural America (Johnson, Mitchel &

Rotherham, 2014). Johnson, Mitchel, and Rotherham (2014) noted that in the nation's

early years, farming was the backbone of rural life. Today, service and manufacturing

industries employ two-thirds of rural laborers. Hill (2014) reported that previously

students from America's rural communities and small towns were often the ones who

became inventors, captains of industry, and national leaders. Changes in the economic

structure of rural communities have made it increasingly difficult for young people to live

well in these places for the entirety of their lives, which is ultimately a challenge within

the context of a global economy.

The Rural School

Rural schools serve many functions in addition to educating children. Often rural

school districts are the largest single employer in the area. Rural schools frequently serve

as the social, recreational, and cultural foundation of their communities (National

Education Association, 2015).

The Census Bureau, the Office of Management and Budget, and the National

Center for Education Statistics developed a new education classification system in 2006.

This system divides schools into one of four general categories: city, suburban, town, or

rural (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). According to the American Youth

Policy Forum (AYPF) (2010) the challenges facing rural school districts differ from some

of the challenges facing their urban and suburban counterparts. Rural areas traditionally

generate less property tax revenue than urban districts and thus rely heavily on state

funding. However, because of budget shortfalls many states and the federal government

have cut funding to K-12 schools. Due to limited financial resources, many rural districts

lack the means to confront educational issues. Small budgets pose a variety of problems from purchasing textbooks and curriculum materials to funding bus transportation. Transporting students in rural areas is a significantly greater burden and, with higher fuel costs, these districts have been forced to shift funding from critical educational programs to transportation. Rural areas, with ever shrinking budgets find it difficult to meet the requirements of No Child Left Behind and other federal and state mandates (AYPF, 2010). As rural schools struggle to meet these mandates for students still in school they have very few, if any, resources to use for bringing back those who have left school before graduation.

Rural school districts are usually smaller than their urban and suburban counterparts, with fewer teachers and support staff (Johnson, Mitchel & Rotherham, 2014). The National Education Association (2015) noted the unique challenges rural education employees face. These challenges include lower salaries and benefits, lack of access to professional development opportunities, professional isolation, preparation for multiple subjects and grade levels, and being responsible for multiple extracurricular duties. As stretched as the rural educators often are they do not have time or energy to focus on the population of out-of-school youth. Therefore, these individuals often go unnoticed and unassisted in their efforts to return to school and obtain a secondary credential.

Resistance to Formal Education in Rural Areas

Hill (2014) suggested that some rural economies are evolving, so some young people who want to return home after college may find good jobs waiting for them especially in the fields of engineering and health. However, he also noted that there

would be even more opportunities for well-prepared rural students in dynamic big-city

economies. Unlike Hill, Corbett (2007) found in his research when young people leave

home for an education it was not often to return home for a job within the community.

Michael Corbett's (2007) study of Digby Neck, Nova Scotia, looked at the connection

between education and out-migration in rural areas. Corbett noted that the school has

often "stood in opposition to local lifeworlds" (p. 10) instead of supporting social,

economic, and cultural networks in rural communities. Corbett suggested that the rural

resistance to formal education is because it is not sensitive to any particular place or the

skills needed to thrive there and thus can be seen as recognition that one's social capital is

localized and of no value elsewhere. For individuals who choose to remain in rural areas

the link between "learning and earning" may not be as simple as the school propaganda

suggests (Corbett, 2007, p. 85).

The rural youth of Digby Neck understand that if they want to fish or work in

most close-to-home jobs, higher education will be of little value to them. Most male

stayers who wanted to get on their feet and do something constructive viewed school as

"irrelevance and drudgery" (p. 125). Corbett (2007) reported that the young people

watched their parents and responded eagerly when an opportunity presented itself. Not

everyone got rich, like some young men from elite fishing families were able to, but

everyone had something to do. The decision to leave school and take up fishing was not

unusual for the boys of Digby Neck. In fact, it was expected and came without stigma

attached. The people of rural communities, such as Digby Neck, believe that family

traditions of working hard and supporting one another have allowed young people to

remain close to home even when the economy of the area offered very little in terms of

employment. Many rural students believe that hard work and staying connected to family traditions are better than attending school and seeking to leave the area. This can mean for some rural communities dropping out of school is constructed as a positive decision to drop in to community life and accept a familiar way of living grounded in community and regional culture (Corbett, 2007, pp. 12 & 13). Corbett (2007) noted that while the men of Digby Neck have been acquiring more formal education credentials, fewer than half of all males in any of the cohorts in his study have graduated from high school.

For the women of Digby Neck getting a good education, which meant completing grade twelve, was desirable. Corbett (2007) noted that the women claim to have enjoyed school but encountered obstacles, which included lack of money for post-secondary education, self-esteem issues, pregnancy, problematic relationships with men, and the pressure to fall into the traditional women's roles. Most women who stayed became housewives, just as most men who stayed became fishermen. Corbett noted that over the thirty-six years the general trend was that women were twice as likely as men to complete high school. Because high school was seen as the basic prerequisite for most forms of post-secondary education opportunities and mobility beyond the local area, women were more mobile than men. "Education was a mobility ticket purchased with precious earned money and time, and neither of these commodities could be squandered," (Corbett, 2007, p. 121).

Rural areas do remain attractive for some students because of the lifestyle offered there. Brandau and Collins (1994) found that many Appalachian rural working-class youth choose community life and integration into "unskilled" or "semiskilled" marginal employment and social assistance over migration to more stable and lucrative urban

opportunities (Corbett, 2007, p. 23). Therefore, to resist schooling is to resist mobility, or at least to grasp the multiple problems mobility entails for working-class youth. "In isolated rural places, to resist schooling is to commit at some level to membership in a community of others who stay put" (Corbett, 2007, p. 57).

The present study explored how the five participants resisted schooling while in high school. After experiencing life as a dropout they surrendered to this resistance and returned to schooling to obtain a secondary credential. However, each of the participants did not surrender to mobility as they returned to schooling and earned a secondary credential. Instead each returned to schooling in their rural communities and elected to remain after finding employment in the area. Brooks (2016) noted that mobility is more than a metaphor for getting ahead. He explained that in America, mobility has been a solution to economic and social barriers. Brooks described the first rungs of the economic ladder as being slippery which causes young adults to delay stepping into adulthood and thus being less likely to relocate for college or for a career.

Oversight of Rural Education

Hill (2014) notes that rural education has not been a sponsored research or policy priority for presidents, Congress, many state governments, or foundations. The current landscape of national organizations working on rural education policy and their impact on policy are limited (Johnson, Mitchel & Rotherham, 2014). Too often rural education, in general, is considered someone else's problem. Hill (2014) notes there are three reasons why rural education should become a priority for federal and state governments and for philanthropies concerned with education: 1. Schools in rural areas educate millions of students. 2. The talents of the most capable rural young people are seldom fully

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developed. Hill noted that rural students are less likely to attend college and enroll in graduate and other professional programs. "At a time when the US economy is suffering from a shortage of highly skilled individuals, the loss of large numbers of extremely capable young people from rural areas is a serious matter" (Hill, 2014, p. 2). 3. Rural areas are not just as sources of talent; they are also indispensable places.

Rural schools constitute a significant proportion of America's schools and school districts. Therefore, Ayers (2011) says it is imperative that their needs be taken into account. Ayers notes the federal government cannot singlehandedly solve every educational problem in rural or urban settings. However, it can leverage its role in ways that improve outcomes for all students in all geographic areas. The promise of the federal education law is to ensure all students have equal access to a high-quality education. Ayers (2011) believes that promise cannot materialize if certain geographic segments of the populations are not equitably served by the education system. As we do not understand what policies and practices will benefit school returners in rural areas, this study set out to explore the stories of five rural school returners.

As students return to school, they face challenges as they work to obtain a secondary credential. The following section is a brief review of the literature on challenges school returners face.

Challenges School Returners Face

Mitgang (1990 as cited in Mayfield-Harris, 2008) noted that rural students, including school returners, are more likely than city or suburban kids to face failure because of crime, substance abuse, parental neglect, or other factors. Although students can be at risk of failure in any area, a great deal of the research and program development

has occurred in urban schools but has not been carried into rural areas. The Rennie Center (2012) notes it can be challenging to re-enroll out-of-school youth, but research shows that they frequently want to return to school and continue their education but do not have the knowledge or means to do so.

Berliner et al. (2008) followed 1,352 students who dropped out of public schools in California between 2001 and 2006, reported that more than 30 percent of the students returned to school more than once with some returning as many as three times. Berliner and colleagues (2008) reported that in the end fewer than one in five of these dropouts made it to graduation. The rest struggled, earning a few credits, before giving up on high school for good. Returning students are often more motivated to succeed but are expected to navigate a complex maze of systems, services, and programs as they complete their education (Sparks, 2013a). As this navigation process becomes more complex and confusing for those who drop back in, the cycle of frustration continues, and often the individual drops out again and again.

Another challenge the literature reveals is the limited access to recovery programs for school returners. Smollin (2010) reported that while dropout prevention still dominates, school systems are slowly recognizing the importance of recovery programs. Describing the charter school opened by Goodwill Education Initiatives, Smollin noted that the school initially set the enrollment at 200, but as they became inundated with applications they created an additional 100 slots. Several months into the school year the school had a waiting list of over 800. Aleccia (2009) also noted in her article, "Upside of a downturn: Dropouts drop back in" that there are "long waiting lists for adult education and GED classes."

Ransel (2010, p. 1) noted to help school returners overcome some of the challenges they face it is important to "restructure the traditional high school program to meet non-graduates halfway." Ransel believes that by understanding the student's situation and the challenges he/she is facing as they try to return helps to design a successful learning experience for these students. Lamb (2011) believes that as systems implement reforms to raise secondary completion rates they need to build programs that can cater to students from diverse backgrounds and with varying talents that will support the needs of school returners who return to schooling with unique life experiences. Sparks (2013b) agrees that school returners need second-chance recovery programs that can help them integrate education with work and family duties as well as overcome the previous trauma or academic failure that impacted their motivation to learn in high school.

Although he did not detail challenges school returners encounter, Littky (2004) reminds us that, "Kids [students] are up against some serious stuff that makes life incredibly hard even without the pressure of school. Kids [They] need to see school as part of the solution rather than one of their many problems" (p. 21). Young people who leave high school need fewer easy exits from the classroom and more easy on-ramps back into education. Some young people who stop going to school find it easier to leave school than to stay in or get back in. In other words, there are too many off-ramps and exits that are too easy to take, and too few on-ramps that are too hard to access (America's Promise Alliance, 2014).

In addition to understanding where our school returners live and the challenges they face, it is important to understand school returners as learners in order to support them as they work to obtain a secondary credential. As adolescent and adult learners,

school returners enter the schooling environment with a variety of life experiences, which challenge and support them. The following section of this chapter reviews the literature on school returners as learners.

School Returners as Learners

Educators and researchers who work with at-risk youth agree it will be difficult to achieve the Grad Nation goal of a ninety percent graduation rate by 2020 without taking the time to find, bring back, and keep the students who have already fallen through the cracks of our schools (Sparks, 2013b). There is minimal research on who is returning to school. Likewise, research on the number of individuals who return varies. In one of the most comprehensive studies of returning students in San Bernadino, California, Berliner, et al. (2008) noted that thirty percent of the school system's dropouts returned at least once, but just one in twenty managed to get a diploma. Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, and Rock (1987), using the High School and Beyond dataset for 1980-82, found that seventeen percent of their sample returned to an education institution. Chuang (1997), using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth dataset, estimated that nearly fifty percent of dropouts in the sample for 1979-86 reenrolled. Hurst, Kelly, and Princiotta (2004) used the National Educational Longitudinal Study dataset reported that forty percent of early school leavers earned a high school diploma or alternative certificate within eight years of their cohort's expected graduation year.

The Rennie Center (2012) notes it can be challenging to re-enroll out-of-school youth, but research shows that they frequently want to return to school and continue their education but do not have the knowledge or means to do so. The process of re-enrolling dropouts begins by fully understanding why most students leave school. In *Facing the*

School Dropout Dilemma, the American Psychological Association (APA) (2011) reports

that four major high school dropout categories begin to emerge as one reviews the

literature on high school dropouts; 1. Life events – dropping out is prompted by

something that happens to the student outside of school, e.g., teen pregnancy, foster care

placement, high school mobility. 2. Fade outs – dropping out is prompted by frustration

and boredom with school even though the student has not repeated or failed any grades. 3.

Push outs – when dropouts are subtly or explicitly encouraged to withdraw or transfer

away from school because they are perceived to be difficult or detrimental to the success

of the school. And 4. Failure to succeed – occurs when dropouts leave school after a

history of academic failure, absenteeism, or lack of engagement. Therefore, effective

strategies to bring students back to schooling must address not only prior schooling, but

also present solutions to the social, economic, and psychological barriers returners may

continue to face (Rennie Center, 2012; Sparks, 2013a).

Research notes many reasons why adolescents leave school before graduation.

Often the reasons for dropping out of school may also impact one's decision to return to

school. School returners making the decision to drop back in can be the adolescent

learner who has dropped out of schooling for a period and has reenrolled before aging out

of the public school system. However, often it is an adult learner who has made the

decision to return to school to complete the requirements of secondary education.

Following is a discussion of each type of returning learner.

The Adolescent Learner

There is currently no standard definition of "adolescent." Although often captured

as an age range between twelve and nineteen years of age, chronological age is just one

way of defining adolescence. Adolescence can also be defined in numerous other ways, considering such factors as physical, social, and cognitive development. Another definition of adolescence is the period of time from the onset of puberty until an individual achieves economic independence (APA, 2002). In the professional literature adolescence is frequently portrayed as a negative stage of life (Arnett, 1999).

Although, each teenager is an individual with a unique personality and special interests, likes, and dislikes, the adolescent period is marked by basic biological and cognitive changes, as well as changes in the social surroundings where children's daily lives unfold (Eccles, 1999). There are numerous developmental issues that everyone faces during the adolescent years. The normal feelings and behaviors of the middle school and early high school adolescent include a movement toward independence (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP), 2001). Students struggle with a sense of identity and feeling awkward about one's self and one's body. They focus on self, alternating between high expectations and poor self-esteem. Peer groups influence their interests, behaviors, and clothing styles to a great extent (AACAP, 2001; Arnett, 1999; Eccles, 1999). Adolescents are known to demonstrate moodiness and to show less overt affection toward their parents, with occasional rudeness sprinkled in. They are interested in the present with limited thoughts of their future (AACAP, 2001).

Emotional development during adolescence involves establishing a realistic and coherent sense of identity in the context of relating to others and learning to cope with stress and manage emotions. Identity refers to more than just how adolescents see themselves right now; it also includes what has been termed the "possible self," what individuals might become and who they would like to become. Establishing a sense of

identity has traditionally been thought of as the central task of adolescence. During adolescence is when individuals have the cognitive capacity to consciously sort through who they are and what makes them unique (APA, 2002).

The social development of adolescents is best considered in the contexts in which it occurs, that is, relating to peers, family, school, work, and community. Adolescents typically increase the amount of time that they spend with their peers. They report that they are happier spending time with peers of the same age than with their parents. Conflicts and arguments between adolescents and their parents increase during this period as adolescents strive to create a separation from their parents and a sense of independence (APA, 2002).

The majority of young adolescents are still concrete thinkers who need to touch, feel, and manipulate objects to understand them. Students at this age learn more by doing than by just seeing or hearing. Research consistently demonstrates that most adolescents learn best when they experience success and are engaged in learning about things that matter to them. The material needs to be meaningful to ensure that young adolescents experience the pleasure of learning; thus it needs to relate to prior knowledge and grab the attention of the learner (California Department of Education, 2012).

All of the ways adolescents develop and learn (cognitively, physically, socially, and emotionally) prepare them to experiment with new behaviors as they transition from childhood to adulthood. This experimentation, in turn, helps them to fine-tune their development in these other realms (APA, 2002). Risk-taking in adolescence is an important way that adolescents shape their identities, try out their new decision-making skills, and develop realistic assessments of themselves, other people, and the world. Such

exploratory behaviors are natural during adolescence, and teens need room to experiment and to experience the results of their decision-making in many different situations. To win the approval of peers or to avoid peer rejection, adolescents will sometimes take risks even they usually would judge to be "too risky." These risks often include choosing not to attend school and to eventually drop out (APA, 2002).

Research notes that adolescents learn best by doing, being engaged, and learning things that matter to them or things that are relevant to their lives (California Department of Education, 2012; Checkley, 2004). Educators must understand how adolescents learn best and incorporate these techniques into their teaching to keep them engaged in their learning, thus keeping them in school. Littky (2004) reminds us that "our students are up against some serious stuff that makes life incredibly hard even without the pressure of school. Kids need to see school as part of the solution rather than one of their many problems," (p. 21)

The Adult Learner

With the changing demographic situation of the developed world, there has been a focus on the concept of lifelong learning, where individuals learn throughout their lives. The emergence of the knowledge society, rapid introduction of new technology, and the changing workplace increases the importance of adult learning (Chao, 2009). As in the case of the adolescent learner, there is currently no standard definition of the adult learner. The American Council on Education (2014) defines adult learners as learners over the age of twenty-five noting that they are often referred to nontraditional students in the post-secondary setting. Crawford (2004) noted four definitions of an adult learner: the Biological Definition – the age at which an individual can reproduce; the Legal

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Definition – the age that an individual can vote, drive, marry, etc.; the Social Definition – the age when an individual begins to perform adult roles such as being a full-time worker, participating citizen, a spouse, a parent, etc.; and the Psychological Definition – as being the age when an individual develops a self-concept of being responsible for his/her life.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2013) acknowledges there is no precise definition for the adult learner often referred to as the nontraditional student, but suggests that part-time status and age are common elements. In a 1996 study, the NCES included anyone who satisfies at least one of the following as a non-traditional student: delays enrollment (does not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year that he or she finished high school); attends part-time for at least part of the academic year; works full-time (thirty-five hours or more per week) while enrolled; is considered financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid; has dependents other than a spouse (usually children, but may also be caregivers of sick or elderly family members); is a single parent (either not married or married but separated and has dependents); and does not have a high school diploma (completed high school with a GED or other high school completion certificate or did not finish high school).

Andragogy, as a study of adult learning, originated in Europe in 1950's. It was then pioneered as a theory and model of adult learning in the 1970's by Malcolm Knowles an American practitioner and theorist of adult education. Knowles defined andragogy as the art and science of helping adults learn. Knowles's Theory of Andragogy makes the following assumptions about the design of adult learning: adults need to know why they need to learn something; adults need to learn experientially; adults approach

learning as problem-solving; adults learn best when the topic is of immediate value (Culatta 2013).

Knowles identified six principles of adult learning: adults are internally motivated and self-directed; adults bring life experiences and knowledge to learning experiences; adults are goal oriented; adults are relevancy oriented; adults are practical; and adult learners like to be respected. Russell (2006) supported Knowles' principles noting that meaningful learning can be intrinsically motivating. Therefore, adults learn best when convinced of the need for knowing the information. Russell (2006) also points out that adults have a greater depth, breadth, and variation in the quality of previous life experiences than younger people. Past educational or work experiences may color or bias the adult student's perceived ideas about how learning will occur. Russell (2006) noted that in a classic 1969 study, Rogers illustrated that when an adult learner has control over the nature, timing, and direction of the learning process, the entire experience is facilitated. Adults have a need to be self-directed, deciding for themselves what they want to learn.

Compared to adolescents, the major differences in adult learners are in the degree of motivation, the amount of previous experience, the level of engagement in the learning process, and the way learning is applied. Knowing that each adult brings to the learning experience preconceived thoughts and feelings that will be influenced by each of these factors educators need to structure schooling experiences for adult school learners with the above factors in mind. In practical terms, andragogy means that instruction for adults needs to focus more on the process and less on the content taught (Culatta, 2013).

The setting for the present study is rural western Maine. The participants all attended high school in rural Maine and returned to schooling in a rural location. Therefore, the following section explores what it means to be a rural learner including the notion of resistance to formal education.

The Rural Learner

The rural learner is often pulled between learning for living in his/her community and learning for leaving. In her work in rural Appalachia Hendrickson (2012) noted that a source of tension for students in rural areas is the lack of economic opportunity coupled with family values of cohesiveness. Students in rural areas can highly value a sense of community and family relationships. As a result, these students are more focused on the well-being of the family group than individual achievement or personal goals (Hendrickson, 2012). Rather than leaving for college, some students may be pressured to choose family cohesiveness and remain in the area (Corbett, 2007).

Because many jobs in the rural areas do not require education, many students believe school education cannot help them in the future (Corbett, 2007; Dehyle, 1995; Starcher, 2005 as cited in Hendrickson, 2012). Further, many families in rural areas have not seen economic advancement as a result of schooling, so school is frequently not seen as a way to escape poverty or provide upward mobility (Corbett, 2007). Hendrickson (2012) reported that rural students highly value their parents' opinions, wanting to please them and thereby internalizing the hopes and expectations of their parents. The parents wanted their children to obtain jobs in the community. Because the majority of jobs in the area were low-paying and required low levels of education, students who obtained higher education may not be able to find jobs in the area. Therefore, ultimately neither family

values nor potential career opportunities in the region encouraged educational achievement.

Rural Appalachian students, like Digby Neck students, described the importance of family cohesion and abiding by their parents' wishes. Some families reportedly encouraged vocational work that enabled the students to stay in the area, thus rural students often do not expect to attend college. Therefore, many students did not believe the school provided a quality education relevant to their lives. Only the vocational and hands-on courses were important to the students. Students described the failure of teachers to understand the multiple influences on students, and this misunderstanding resulted in negative consequences for the students. Thus, parents, families, teachers, and the students themselves all contributed to the dynamics of resistance (Corbett, 2007; Henderickson, 2012).

The rural school system also perpetuated student resistance through the incompatibility of academic content and community life. Many students reported a belief that school subjects did not relate to their lives and would not help them in the future. Schools frequently promote cosmopolitanism, the worldly knowledge that is inconsistent with place-based knowledge and local connections. Corbett (2007, p.10) noted that the school has often "stood in opposition to local lifeworlds" instead of supporting social, economic, and cultural networks in rural communities.

The rural school problem has been discussed for at least the past hundred years in both Canada and the United States. At least part of this problem is that education may be presented to and perceived by rural students as preparation for leaving. Often in rural communities, such as Digby Neck and Appalachia, those planning on staying in the area

often drop out of school to drop into life in their communities. The stayers take living in their communities seriously. They are committed to their communities and want to protect their way of life (Corbett, 2007).

Understanding who the rural learner is and what education matters to him/her will assist educators in providing an appropriate schooling experience for each school returner. In addition, having knowledge of placed-based education versus formal education helps one understand why often times the rural learner will resist schooling as he/she believes it does not pertain to his/her life. The following section looks at the research that describes what is known about what motivates dropouts to make the decision to return to schooling.

What Motivates One to Return to School

Why students leave high school before graduation has been well documented in the literature. Less is known about why individuals reenroll after dropping out. According to Russell (2006) the reason most adults enter any learning experience, such as returning to school, is to create change. This could encompass a change in their skills, their behavior, their knowledge level, or even their attitudes about things. Berliner et al. (2008) noted in their study of the reenrollment of dropouts in a large urban school district that the primary reason why individuals returned to school was the failure to find a job causing them to be pushed out of the labor market. Greenberg (2012), Gammon (2010), and Roese (2005) would add the emotion of regret as a driving force behind the decision of some dropouts to return to school.

The intent of this study was to add to the literature base on the topic of school returners by reporting individual stories of being a rural school returner. Therefore, the reader has been introduced to what schooling means in a rural area, school returners as

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learners, and what motivates one to return to school. Now we turn our focus from who these rural school returners are as learners to how to engage them in their learning. The following section includes a brief discussion on research regarding re-engaging the out-of-school population.

Re-Engagement of Out-of-School Population

The Rennie Center (2012) notes it can be challenging to re-engage the out-of-school population, but research shows that they frequently want to return to school and continue their education but do not have the knowledge or means to do so. A review of the literature suggests the following strategies that have been successful in working with those who return to schooling: maintain a focus on the individuals' future after high school; allow individualized and flexible academic programs; take a needs-based and supportive approach; and integrate or link the program to community organizations. In addition, successful second-chance programs offer classes online during the school day, provide certified teachers to supervise and provide help, create flexible times for the students, and provide counselors to help students deal with barriers to graduation (Butrymowiez, 2010; Hartness, 2012; Hoaglund, 2012; The Rennie Center, 2012).

Stephen Lamb (2011) in his work surrounding pathways to school completion noted that in high school not all students can or want to pursue academic pathways leading to university schooling. He reported that most countries have developed alternative courses and qualifications to enable an increasing number of young people, with a wider range of abilities, to complete school and graduate with a relevant qualification. The same holds true for school returners. From being a high school student, to living life as a dropout, to facing the challenges as a school returner, each one has had

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experiences that have impacted the path they find themselves on as they reenroll in schooling. Lamb (2011) believes that as systems implement reforms to raise secondary completion rates they need to build programs that can cater to students from diverse backgrounds and with varying talents that will support the needs of school returners who return to schooling with unique life experiences.

Sparks (2013b) noted that the new trend is to have programs designed to attract, enroll, and help these students finish. D' Entremont (2012) points out that the experience of dropout recovery may be quite different from one district or school to another. Practices that work in one area may not be seamlessly applied elsewhere. It is important to tailor dropout re-engagement and recovery strategies to local community needs. D' Entremont notes that without a more systemic approach connecting with out-of-school youth through second-chance programs we will continue to struggle to fulfill our commitment of educating all students. It takes time, patience, effort, and luck to find and return students back to the classroom. According to Sparks (2013a) getting them back may be the easy part: keeping them engaged, through a variety of second-chance options, long enough to get a diploma is another thing entirely. The following section describes a variety of second-chance options for high school dropouts.

Second-Chance Initiatives for School Returners

Second-chance recovery programs can help students integrate education with work and family duties as well as overcome the previous trauma or academic failure that impacted their motivation to learn (Sparks, 2013b). There are a variety of recovery program options available to school returners that address the academic as well as the emotional needs of the individual.

General education development (GED). As measured by sheer numbers, the

most important second chance option for school returners is, by far, the GED program.

Conceived and developed in the late 1940s. The GED was a way to certify that returning

World War II veterans who had left their high school classrooms to serve in the war were

ready for college or the labor market. For many, especially those who are too old to

return to the public K-12 system, the GED assessment has long been the main route to the

high school credential that eluded them (Adams, 2013). Suh and Suh (2004) reported that

many studies of dropouts who reenroll had used the time frame of two years after the rest

of the cohort had graduated high school noting that this time frame seems inadequate

since the American Council on Education reported that the average age of GED takers is

25 years old, eight years after most of his or her cohort had completed high school.

Golden, Kist, Trehan, and Padak (2005) note that even though the GED is a primary

source for providing dropouts increased opportunities to become successful and

productive citizens, the process of individuals obtaining a GED and their personal stories

are largely unknown.

Adult education program initiative. Adult Education initiative helps

communities respond to the needs of out-of-school youth and adults who left school

before graduation. The Adult Education life and career pathways system enables

individuals to be prepared for post-secondary education and/or employment. According

to data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Maine was noted as the most rural state in the

nation in 2010. These census data reported that only 1.17 percent of Maine's 33,215

square miles would be considered "urban," while 98.83 percent would be considered

"rural." In 2010, the state had a population of 1.3 million people, with 513,542 people

living in urban areas and 814,819 living in rural areas. In Maine, over 100 Adult

Education programs serve as re-engagement opportunities for individuals who left school

before graduation. These programs provide a range of instructional services to help

individuals develop the skills for further educational opportunities, job training, paths to

better employment, and to realize their full potential as productive workers, family

members, and citizens.

Maine's Adult Education programs offer business and skills training, adult and

family literacy, personal enrichment classes, and high school completion classes. Rural

Adult Education programs, such as those located in Maine, face the same type of

challenges as the pre-kindergarten to grade twelve school systems do. The lack of a

tracking system to know how to contact individuals who have dropped out of the system

is a major challenge for these programs. Other challenges rural Adult Education

programs face include: lack of funding from state, local, and grant monies, lagging

technology, lack of transportation and childcare offerings for the adult students, and the

difficulty of recruiting and retaining qualified teachers and administrators. In spite of the

challenges, in 2012 Maine's Adult Education programs had a total enrollment of over

98,000 (Maine Adult Education Association, 2012).

High school diploma. Although the GED, now known as the High School

Equivalency Test (HiSET), is the preeminent second-chance option, returning students

also have the opportunity to earn a regular high school diploma. There are two pathways

to a high school diploma for students who have returned to school after dropping out.

One requires the student to earn the necessary credits that were lacking when he or she

left school. Another pathway is for the student to demonstrate that he/she has high school

level skills. One example of this option is through the National External Diploma

Program (NEDP). Students in the NEDP demonstrate their high school level skills by

applying their life experiences in real-life situations (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). When

NEDP certifies that the applicant has met benchmark skill levels, the cooperating school

district awards a high school diploma. This alternative high school diploma program is

presently a minor part of the second-chance landscape; only 1,700 people nationwide

earned a high school diploma through NEDP in 2006-07 (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

Community colleges provide another second-chance option for some school

returners to demonstrate their level of academic skills. Open enrollment policies and

placement exams determine if an applicant is ready for post-secondary education credit

programs or whether they first need to complete remediation courses to raise their skill

levels which can lead to the equivalency of a high school diploma (Tyler & Loftstrom,

2009).

Rural second chance programs. Second-chance programs are not often readily

available to dropouts in rural areas across the country. Following is a brief description of

two programs operating in rural locations. The Do-Over School located in rural Rantoul,

Illinois (120 miles south of Chicago) offers a second-chance military-style education

program to high school dropouts. The school was the result of a study by the Center for

Strategic and International Studies, which showed that dropouts could benefit from

military-style educational programs.

The National Guard and a handful of governors around the country decided to act

on this notion. Congress provided the funding, and the idea was an instant hit.

Communities saw their dropouts return to class and their unused military facilities

returned to service (Kingsbury, 2006). "It's not a matter of intelligence; it's a matter of changing their patterns of behavior and creating an environment where they have nothing else to do but learn," says Peter Thomas, a retired Army sergeant major. Nationwide, 70 percent of the students in this program earn their secondary credentials. That is nearly double the 41 percent pass rate of other adult education programs. The combination of service and discipline seems to have a powerful and lasting effect on the school returners (Kingsbury, 2006).

Koenig (2012) of the Bangor Daily News in his article, Portland Program Gives Drop-outs, Troubled Teens Second Chance at Graduation, wrote about a Youth Building Alternatives (YBA) program located in Portland, Maine. This program combines classroom work with specialized trade programs such as culinary arts and building construction. Koenig noted that at greater than 80% the state's graduation rate is among the highest in the country. However, this means nearly one in every five of Maine's high school students does not graduate with a secondary credential. Strimling, the former CEO of YBA, stated that many Maine teenagers take graduating for granted which is a milestone many high school dropouts view as inconceivable. Often students who struggle academically and socially drop out of school. These students frequently believe obtaining a secondary credential is out of the question for them. Maine's Governor LePage attended a recent graduation at YBA and told the graduates, "Once you're lost, you're lost, and the only way to get back on track is to fight for yourself." In rural locations those dropouts who are determined to return to school often times must advocate for themselves. They must seek out information on available services and overcome challenges created by returning to school.

Accountability demands and economic pressures have sparked educators' drive to bring dropouts back to school. According to Rumberger (2001), new models for dropout recovery, which include re-engagement centers, charter school networks, and public and private partnerships are blossoming nationwide. These types of programs offer support for returning students through engaging conversations, by offering flexible schedules, by having certified teachers to supervise and help, by providing counseling, ensuring in person meetings and conversations, and by partnering with higher education entities. Programs such as these have found that often individuals who have left high school before earning a diploma are not dead-end dropouts; rather, they are often students waiting and looking for opportunities to re-enroll and finish high school (Washington CNN, 2009).

As school returners work to obtain a secondary credential they face challenges along the way. However, they also experience support, which helps them become successful school completers. The following section of this chapter looks at the role resilience and mattering play in the success of school returners.

School Returners Are Supported By Resilience and Mattering

There is a question about what it takes for an individual to return to schooling after having dropped out of high school before graduation. Most often, dropouts have experienced difficulty in school before they drop out. Usually, students drop out of school following a long process of disengagement and academic struggle. Many teens say they were bored and frustrated with classes that did not seem relevant to their lives. Or they felt they had fallen so far behind they eventually gave up hope (Convissor, 2014). Nevertheless, there are many who overcome their disenchantment with schooling or

discover a reason to attempt to reengage in school. This study used two theories, the Theory of Resilience and the Theory of Mattering, to help explain what motivates or sustains school returners. Garmezy's (1991) work was a major voice in the development of the Theory of Resilience, which relates to the strengths and abilities that people demonstrate which enable them to utilize their skills to recover from problems and challenges. Resilience Theory addresses the strengths that people and systems demonstrate that enable them to rise above adversity (Cherry, 1994; VanBreda, 2001). Schlossberg's (1989) Theory of Mattering, notes that if students (including school returners) feel they matter in their educational environment they may be more engaged in their learning and schooling.

Theory of Resilience

Returning students are often more motivated to succeed but are expected to navigate a complex maze of systems, services, and programs as they complete their education. As this navigation process becomes more complex and confusing for some of those who drop back in, the cycle of frustration continues, and the individual may drop out again and again (Sparks, 2013a). Why is it that some returners are successful in completing the process of becoming completers while others who return become frustrated and confused and end up dropping back out over and over again often for good? One's ability to be resilient may play a large role in the outcome of one's success.

Resilience Theory is a multifaceted field of study that has been addressed by social workers, psychologists, sociologists, educators and many others over the past few decades (VanBreda, 2001). Major voices in resilience research have included Norman Garmezy (1974) in studying schizophrenia; Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith (1989) in

their work with children of Kauai, Hawaii, and more recently Michael Rutter (1999), Michael Ungar (2004), Michael Resnick (2004), and Suniya Luthar (2006) have all added their voices to the discussions by critiquing and evaluating the evidence focusing on areas such as gene-environmental influences, social construction of resilience, and protective factors in the lives of young people (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2013).

Resilience Theory addresses the strengths that people and systems demonstrate that enable them to rise above adversity (VanBreda, 2001). Kendra Cherry (1994) reports resilient people can utilize their skills and strengths to cope and recover from problems and challenges while those who lack resilience may instead become overwhelmed by such experiences and dwell on the problems and use unhealthy coping mechanisms to deal with the challenges. Resilience does not eliminate stress or erase life's difficulties. Instead, it gives people the strength to tackle problems head on, overcome adversity, and move on with their lives (Cherry, 1994).

Educational Resilience

Educational resilience is defined as "the heightened likelihood of educational success despite personal vulnerabilities and adversities brought about by environmental conditions and experiences" (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994, p. 39). The study of educational resilience has sprung from the more general concept of resilience. School returners who have gained a high school credential can be said to be educationally resilient in the sense that they have shown academic success by gaining a degree despite the adverse conditions presented to them by dropping out of school.

In the study of educational resilience, researchers (Alva, 1991; McMillan & Reed, 1994; Arellano & Padilla, 1996) identify factors which protect against the adverse effects

caused by an at-risk situation and which ultimately produce students who are academically successful (Wayman, 2002). The factors are typically categorized into personal and environmental factors.

Personal factors are internal attributes and attitudes, which the individual uses to buffer the adverse effects of their situation. Willingness to work hard, healthy self-concept, educational aspirations, and motivation are among the personal factors believed to be associated with educational resilience (Geary, 1988; McMillan & Reed, 1994; Wang et al., 1994).

Environmental factors are external influences. These factors can provide support and protect against negative factors threatening the resilient individual (Wayman, 2002). Positive adult contact has been shown to be an important environmental factor correlated with educational resilience. This contact may be from an immediate family member, relatives outside of the immediate family, teachers, and friends (Floyd, 1996; McMillan & Reed, 1994). Resilient students often form an informal support network of friends, family, and others that provide support in tough times (Geary, 1988). Additional environmental factors include family support of education which helps students see the value and importance of the pursuit of an education, school environments and teachers that are supportive and provide a positive place for students to learn, and the influence of peers (Wayman, 2002).

Theory of Mattering

Most at-risk youth believe no one cares about them (Saliwanchik-Brown, 2008). Saliwanchik-Brown in her dissertation, *From K-GED; Teens Describe Social, Emotional and Relational Factors and Conditions in their Decisions to Drop Out of High School,*

noted that the process of completing the requirements for a secondary education credential often involves the internal commitment to "heal" that part of the psyche that yearns for a positive personal identity (Saliwanchik-Brown, 2008). This healing for many school returners begins as they work through the process of completing the requirements of a secondary education credential.

Nancy Schlossberg (1989) noted that students of all ages (including those returning to schooling) are positively affected and are engaged in their learning when they feel like they matter to their educational institution. Schlossberg's theory outlines five aspects of mattering: attention, the feeling that one is noticed; importance, a belief that one is cared about; ego-extension, the feeling someone else will be proud of what one does or will sympathize with failures; dependence, a feeling of being needed; and appreciation, the feeling that one's efforts are appreciated by others. In the late 1980's Nancy Schlossberg, using mattering theory behavior, studied instructor attention to students. She saw the effects of students feeling they matter to a college institution, which resulted in the student behaviors of academic engagement and connection. Schlossberg also observed that if students do not feel they matter within the context of the academic environment, it creates feelings of marginalization. Marginalized individuals are less likely to be engaged and actively involved in all aspects of their academic life (Wiggin, 2013). According to Schlossberg (1989), one of the deepest current concerns in education is to find ways to more fully involve students in learning. Involvement is defined as, "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to academic experience" (p. 1).

Mattering is how students see themselves as significant. Often this is influenced by how others, including people in schools, see them. According to Washor and Mojkowski (2013), young people need to know that who they are, what they want to become, and what they are going through matters in school. Additionally, they need for it to be affirmed by the school and their teachers. All too often students conclude that their schools do not care about their interests or who they are. Morris Rosenberg (1989 as cited in Schlossberg, 1989) suggested that mattering is a motive: the feeling that others depend on us, that others are interested in us and they are concerned with our fate. Rosenberg noted that mattering is the direct reciprocal of significance. Mattering refers to the feeling that you matter to another. Schlossberg (1989) notes that if mattering is a motive and does determine behavior, as Rosenberg suggests, educators need to make sure educational programs, practices, and polices are helping people (students) feel they matter, including those educational programs, practices, and policies established for returning students (Schlossberg, 1989).

This literature review is the basis of the conceptual framework that guided this study. The following is an exposition of the conceptual framework of this study including a visual representation of the framework.

Conceptual Framework

This study is framed around school returners and their perception of life events that impacted their decisions to return to schooling and complete the requirements for a secondary credential. A high school diploma or secondary credential represents the attainment of skills, knowledge, and attitudes that certify to society that the individual has studied for thirteen years and has met the requirements of a basic education. School

returners are people of all ages with varying levels of high school completion on their transcripts. These individuals have different qualities including resilience, which is seen as an internal quality, and mattering, which usually comes from outside the individual.

School returners often demonstrate educational resilience, which Wang, Haertel and Walberg (1994) have defined as "the heightened likelihood of educational success despite personal vulnerabilities and adversities" (p. 39). Garmezy's (1991) work was a major voice in the development of the Theory of Resilience, which relates to the strengths and abilities that people demonstrate which enable them to utilize their skills to recover from problems and challenges. Schlossberg's (1989) work on the Theory of Mattering noted when college students believed they mattered to others it helped to combat the stressors of transitioning from secondary to post-secondary education. This study looked at rural school returners through the lenses of resilience and mattering.

Figure 1. is a visual representation of the conceptual framework that guided this study of school returners. The rural school returners are the focal point of this framework. The factors of educational resiliency and resilience and the aspects of mattering are described in previous literature review as skills and strengths that support individuals in overcoming obstacles in their lives. Therefore, these are connected to the rural school returner in the framework.
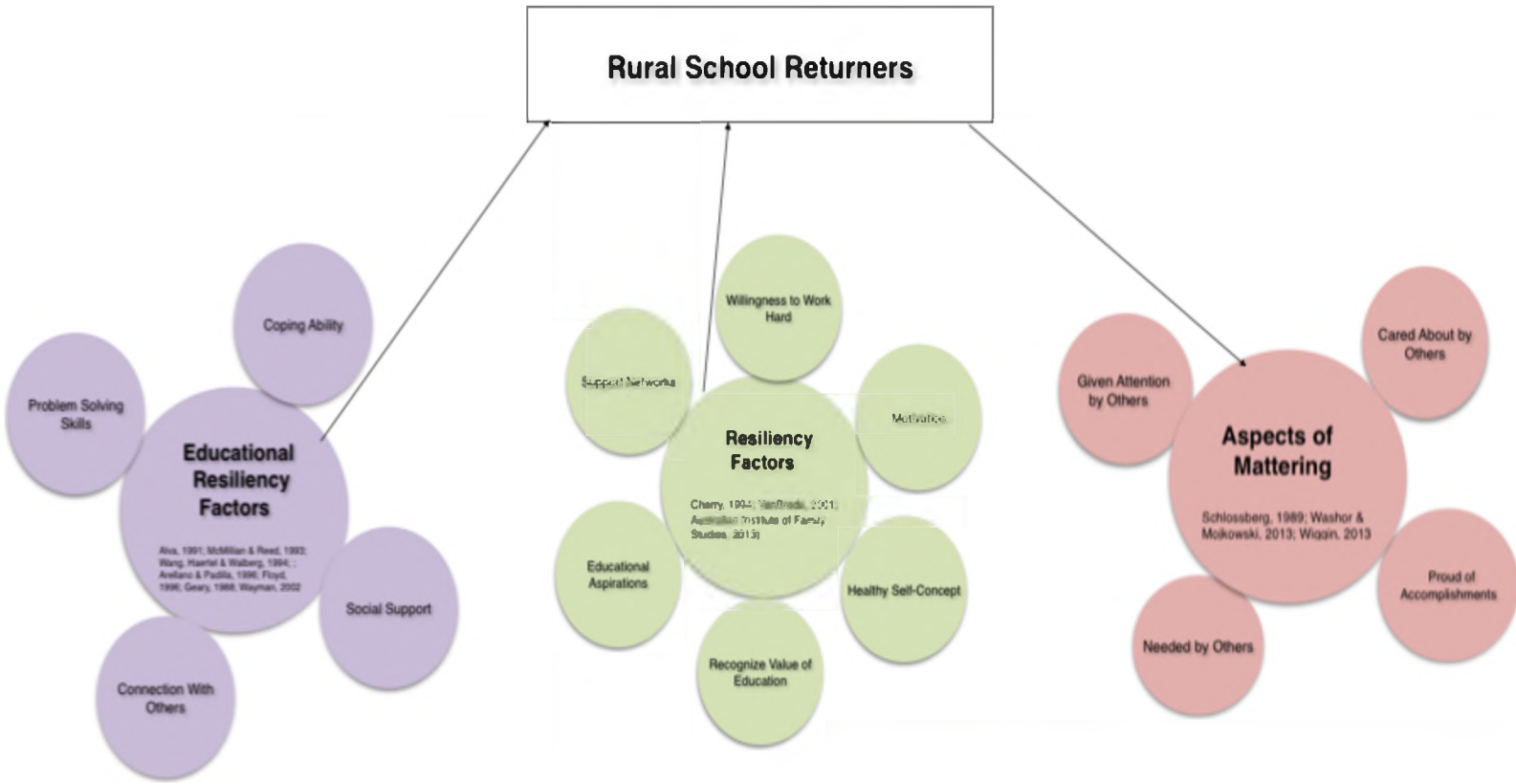
Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: School Returners

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a review of the literature relevant to this study. It described what schooling means in the rural areas, why there is often a resistance to formal education in rural settings, and how rural education is often overlooked. The literature review also looked at school returners as learners including the adolescent, the adult, and the rural learners.

The chapter then presented literature on what motivates a person to return to school and a variety of initiatives that have been established to assist the dropout in returning and completing the requirements for a secondary credential. In addition, the review noted challenges school returners face and how they are supported in their efforts by resilience and mattering.

Chapter Three provides the reader with a description of the design of the study on rural school returners.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore the stories of school returners to understand what motivates and supports students in rural settings to return to school to obtain a secondary credential and what challenges they face as they work to obtain it. The frameworks of resilience, mattering, and rurality guided the design of the study. This study builds upon extensive existing research on high school dropouts and the limited research on school returners by exploring qualitatively the lived experiences of rural school returners.

Chapter Three describes the design of the study. It begins with the research goal and questions as well as operational definitions of key terms included in the research questions. The next section includes the rationale and design of the study, including an explanation of methodology. This section is followed by a discussion of the setting and the participant sample for the study. Chapter Three also includes the data collection, data management, and data analysis procedures used. In conclusion, this chapter discusses ethical matters and trustworthiness of the study.

Research Goal and Research Questions

In order to improve our understanding of what it is like to be a school returner completing the requirements of secondary education in a rural setting, the study explored the factors and conditions that impact the journey of a school returner to school completer through narrative accounts that reflect the stories of these experiences. Three overarching research questions guided the study.

RQ 1. What motivates rural adults who left school before graduation to return to schooling and complete the requirements of a secondary education?

RQ 2. What experiences or barriers do rural adult school returners describe as negatively impacting their efforts in obtaining a high school diploma or in passing the GED exams?

RQ 3. What experiences do rural adult school returners describe as supporting their success in becoming a school completer by obtaining a secondary credential?

Operational Definitions of Key Terms in the Research Questions

This section includes the definitions of terms used in the research questions of the study. For the purpose of this study, the following operational definitions apply:

Rural – an area declared by the 2010 census data as being rural. The Census does not actually define "rural." "Rural" encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area. Whatever is not urban is considered rural. The Census Bureau identifies two types of urban areas: Urbanized Areas (UAs) of 50,000 or more people and Urban Clusters (UCs) of at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people.

Adult – an individual who is at least eighteen years of age.

Secondary Credential –

High School Diploma – a certificate awarded for the completion of high school, which recognizes that an individual has met the credit requirements of the secondary educational facility and is considered to have the minimum education required for post-secondary education.

General Educational Development (GED) – a set of tests designed to

determine whether the test-taker has a high school graduate's level

of knowledge given to individuals who for various reasons did not

graduate from high school but want a certificate equivalent to the

traditional high school diploma (as of January 2014 it is known as

HiSET).

School Returner – an individual who returned to schooling after not

attending high school for one year or more.

School Completer – an individual who returned to schooling after

dropping out and met the requirements for a secondary credential.

Schooling – any educational, instructional, or training activity that leads to the

obtainment of a high school diploma or its equivalency – i.e. attending

high school, participating in adult education program, completing on-line

programs.

Experiences – particular incident, feeling, etc. that a person has undergone.

Barriers – challenges/obstacles to meeting a goal.

Design of Study

Overview of Narrative Design

This qualitative study followed a narrative research design. Creswell (2008)

outlines the characteristics of narrative research design which include: individual

experiences, a chronology of experiences, collecting of stories, restorying, coding for

themes, establishing context or setting, and collaborating with participants. Narrative

research is the study of the way humans experience the world (Connelly & Clandinin,

1990). This study is a multi-case narrative, in which stories of lived experiences of the participants were collected and described using the words of the individuals. By following a narrative research design, I was able to collect and retell the stories of rural school returners. In addition, through these stories I was able to make sense of what the process of returning to school was like for rural school returners. Seidman (2006) notes that so much research regarding schooling is done in this country, but so little of the research is based on the perspectives of those whose experiences constitute schooling. He believes that if a researcher is to make meaning of an individual's experiences in education interviewing provides a "completely sufficient avenue of inquiry" (p. 11).

The narrative research design was chosen because the intent of the study was to report individual stories of being a school returner and chronologically ordering the meaning of these experiences. This study has the potential to influence how educational leaders, educators, and policy makers structure schooling experiences for school returners to support them in their journey in completing a secondary credential. In line with the narrative design, the study engaged a small sample of participants (Czarniawska, 2004). Schwandt (1994) believes that in-depth interviewing provides a deep, rich, description of lived experiences from the point of view of those who have lived it.

Setting

The setting for this study was the context of rural school returners. I selected school returners from rural Maine as the focus of this study. According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Maine was noted as the most rural state in the nation in 2010, thus it seems fitting as the setting for this study. I also choose rural Maine as the setting for this study as it is the area in which I live and work. A goal of this research was for this study

to be both meaningful to the field of educational research as well as to me in the work I do each day as a director of a technology school, who supervises a director of the local adult education program, located in Western Maine. Maine, a rural state with close to one in five of its students still dropping out of school before graduation, was a logical setting for this study of school returners.

Participant Sample

Consistent with the narrative design of this study, I selected five rural Maine school returners as the participants for the study. Although the participants did not necessarily live in the same geographic location of the state, each one had dropped out from a school located in rural Maine. For the purpose of this study, the participants were out of school for at least one year before returning to schooling. The participants met the established criteria and identified themselves as rural Maine school returners. In determining the number of participants to include for this study, I considered the following:

First, the data collection method includes a series of three one-on-one interviews. These interviews were spaced out about a week apart with each participant. This design is for depth rather than breadth; thus I considered the depth of the interviews when determining the number of participants for the study. A second factor was based on the guidance of similar studies in deciding on the number of participants. Creswell (1998) notes a general guideline in qualitative research is not only to study a few sites or individuals but also to collect extensive detail about each one. Creswell (2008) recommends that qualitative researchers study a few individuals or a few cases because the ability to provide an in-depth picture diminishes if the sample becomes too large. In

narrative research there are many examples of studies with just a few cases, which is appropriate, unless a larger pool of participants is needed to develop a collective story (Creswell, 2012).

Recruitment and participant selection. To develop a pool of school returners I first made contact with high school guidance counselors and directors of adult education programs located in rural Maine. My position as the director of a technical and career school in rural Maine meant I had a relationship with guidance counselors and adult education directors in the area. I asked for their assistance in helping find willing participants for my study who met the study criteria. Once the counselors and directors identified potential participants, they gave them a brief explanation of this study and distributed a recruitment letter (Appendix A) with my contact information on it. My goal was to create a pool of ten potential participants to use and to narrow my pool to five individuals who met the criteria for this study. I was able to establish a pool of nine over a two-month period.

To narrow this pool to five, I first confirmed that my pool was comprised of school returners from rural Maine. Second, I verified that each participant was at least eighteen years of age. Third, I confirmed that each participant had been out of high school for at least one year before returning. Next, I verified that the participants completed the requirements for a secondary credential. Finally, I had both genders represented by the participants of the study to the greatest extent possible. As reported by Davis, Forstadt, and Lee (2006) the US Student Completion Rates in 2001 for males was 84.6 percent and for females, it was 88.3 percent. Davis et al. (2006) noted that student dropout rates in Maine varied by county in 2004-2005, ranging from a high of 4.70

percent and a low of 1.51 percent and by gender with males 3.18 and females 2.38

percent. After confirming the participants met the criteria for the study, I had five of the

pool of nine that met the criteria and could be used in this study. I contacted each one to

set up our first interview session.

At this point, the study took a step backward. For a variety of unknown reasons,

all five participants did not show up for their first interview and all but one did not

respond to further attempts to contact them. The one individual stated that something had

come up and that he still wanted to participate in the study. He noted that he would also

try and help me make contact with other school returners. At this time snowball sampling

was used to obtain a new pool of participants. Crabtree and Miller (1992) describe the

snowball sampling method as a way of expanding the pool by asking one participant to

recommend other participants for the study. My new goal was to find five participants

who met the criteria of the study and who were willing to participate in this research

study.

I reflected on the first attempt to interview the established pool of participants and

wondered if the summer months played a part in the "no shows." I also noted that the

time frame from when they had first discussed the study with the counselors and directors

had been approximately three months from the time they agreed to participate to the time

we set up the first interview dates and times. Based on this reflection, I committed to

establishing a pool of participants and to set the first interview dates up immediately.

Once five participants were found who met the criteria, the first interviews were

scheduled. I also decided at that point to complete the first round and transcribe them

immediately so the next two rounds could be completed as soon as possible. A timeframe

of three and a half weeks was used to conduct and transcribe all three interviews with the five participants.

Data Collection

Data collection activities consisted of an initial phone call to establish that the participants met the criteria of the study and to set the date and time for the first interview session. This was followed by three in-person interview sessions with each school returner.

Initial contact. After I had established a tentative pool of participants for the second time, due to the snowball sampling, I made initial contact with the individuals. Together we reviewed the purpose of the study and the participant criteria. Once it was established that an individual met the criteria and that he/she was interested in participating in the study I scheduled a date and time for the first interview session.

Participant interviews. The next and major stage of data collection activity involved a series of three one-on-one interviews with the school returners. Informed consent (Appendix B) was obtained from each participant before conducting the first interviews. The interview structure followed the guidelines for semi-structured interviews including the use of a protocol for each interview, conducting the interviews with a minimal number of interruptions, recording the interviews using a laptop, a Snoball microphone, and Garageband software, and transcribing each interview, which was completed by the researcher immediately following each interview session.

The design of this interview protocol is a based upon Seidman's (2006) three-stage structure for in-depth interviewing which allowed for the collection of data regarding the participants' story as a school returner. In his model, the first stage consists

of an interview focusing on the participant's life history related to the phenomena being studied, in this case, the return to schooling. In the second stage, the researcher concentrates on the details of the participants' lived experience in the topic area of the study (Seidman, 2006). During the second stage of interviews, I listened for the details of the experiences of the participants from the time they left high school to when they returned to school to the present as a school completer. Finally, the third stage prompted the participants to reflect upon the meaning of their experiences. The third stage of this study allowed the participants the opportunity to make meaning of their lived experiences and reflect on their decision to return to schooling. This approach gave the participant and me the opportunity, as Seidman (2006) describes the process, "to plumb the experience and to place it in context" (p. 17).

Each interview protocol for this study was designed for a specific purpose allowing the participants the chance to examine and reflect upon their personal lived experience. The interviews lasted approximately sixty minutes; however, the format allowed for additional time if the data being collected during an interview warranted an extension of time. The interviews and the transcribing process were spaced out over a three-week period based on participant availability. This timeframe allowed for each interview stage to be completed with all participants and the interviews to be transcribed before scheduling the next stage of interviews. According to Seidman (2006) spacing out interviews can help account for idiosyncratic days while also allowing a check on internal consistency regarding the participants' comments.

The research questions are closely aligned with the literature and the methods used to collect the data as outlined in the following Table 3.1, Table 3.2, and Table 3.3.

Table 3.1

Alignment of Research Question One, Literature, and Data Collection

Research Questions	Connection to Literature and Conceptual Framework	Data Collection and Focus of Specific Data
RQ 1. What motivates rural adults who left school before graduation to return to schooling and complete the requirements of a secondary education?	*Reasons for leaving school before graduation literature - (APA, 2011; Balfanz et al., 2010; Beaven, 2013; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Davis & Lee, 2006; Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2011; McCaul, 1989; Phelps, 2009; Rumberger, 2001; Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009) *Literature on Non-Completers – (Berliner, Barrat, Fong, & Shirk, 2008; Bridgeland, J., Dilulio, Jr., J., & Morison, K., 2006; Davis, W. & Lee, R., 2006; McCaul, 1989;Phelps, 2009; Rumberger, R., 2001; Rumberger, R. & Lim, S., 2008; Tyler, J., & Lofstrom, M.,2009) *Literature on Rural School Setting - (Ayers, 2011; Debertin & Goetz, 1994; Hill, 2014; Ransel, 2010; Strange et al., 2012) *Literature regarding the Theory of Mattering – (Schlossberg, 1989; Washor & Mojkowski, 2013; Wiggin, 2013) *Literature on Dropping Back In - (Crawford, 2004; Golden et al., 2005; Ransel, 2010) *Literature on School Returners – (Butrymowicz, 2010; Sparks, 2013; Ransel, 2010; Saliwanchik-Brown, 2008) * Literature on the Theory of Resilience - (Australian Institute of Family Studies, nd; Cherry, 1994; Floyd, 1996; VanBreda, 2001)	Data will be collected from the three series of one-on-one interviews. The focus of data collection for this research question will be specific interview questions regarding the daily life experiences of early school leavers that motivated them to return to school. The data will be collected and reported - to the extent possible - in the words of the participant.

Table 3.2

Alignment of Research Question Two, Literature, and Data Collection

Research Questions	Connection to Literature and Conceptual Framework	Data Collection and Focus of Specific Data
RQ 2. What experiences or barriers do rural adult school returners describe as negatively impacting their efforts in obtaining a high school diploma or in passing the GED?	*Literature on Rural School Setting - (Ayers, 2011; Debertin & Goetz, 1994; Hill, 2014; Ransel, 2010; Strange et al., 2012) *Literature regarding the Theory of Mattering – (Schlossberg, 1989; Washor & Mojkowski, 2013; Wiggin, 2013) *Literature on Dropping Back In - (Crawford, 2004; Golden et al., 2005; Ransel, 2010) *Literature on School Returners – (Butrymowicz, 2010; Sparks, 2013; Ransel, 2010; Saliwanchik-Brown, 2008) * Literature on the Theory of Resilience - (Australian Institute of Family Studies, nd; Cherry, 1994; Floyd, 1996; VanBreda, 2001)	This data will be collected through the use of the one-on- one three series of interviews with the participants. The focus will be on what the participants report as barriers, obstacles, or life events that negatively impacted their efforts in obtaining a high school diploma or passing the GED. The data will be collected and reported using the words of the participants to the extent possible.

Table 3.3

Alignment of Research Question Three, Literature, and Data Collection

Research Questions	Connection to Literature and Conceptual Framework	Data Collection and Focus of Specific Data
RQ 3. What experiences do rural adult school returners describe as supporting their success in becoming a school completer by obtaining a secondary credential?	*Literature on Rural School Setting - (Ayers, 2011; Debertin & Goetz, 1994; Hill, 2014; Ransel, 2010; Strange et al., 2012) *Literature regarding the Theory of Mattering – (Schlossberg, 1989; Washor & Mojkowski, 2013; Wiggin, 2013) *Literature on Dropping Back In - (Crawford, 2004; Golden et al., 2005; Ransel, 2010) *Literature on School Returners – (Butrymowicz, 2010; Sparks, 2013; Ransel, 2010; Saliwanchik-Brown, 2008) * Literature on the Theory of Resilience - (Australian Institute of Family Studies, nd; Cherry, 1994; Floyd, 1996; VanBreda, 2001)	Data will be collected from the series of one-on-one interviews. The focus of data collection will be specific to the supports and life experiences that impacted the participants' journey of completion in a positive way. The data will be collected and reported to the extent possible in the words of the participants.

First stage interviews. Following the identification of the five participants of the study, the first stage one-on-one interviews were scheduled. The protocol for the first stage interviews (Appendix C) was designed to establish rapport with the participants as well as to understand the schooling experiences and the factors that lead to the decision to leave high school before graduation and the motivation that inspired them to return to school. The questions and probes of the first interview allowed me to gather data on the perceptions of the participants on what going to school was like for them.

The participants were asked to describe the connections they had to their schooling, things they liked and disliked about schooling, and to discuss the factors and events that they felt lead to their decision to drop out of high school. The first stage of interviews was designed to gather the participants' recollections of their first-hand knowledge and experiences with schooling in rural Maine. In later interviews, the participants were asked to reflect on their responses to the first stage interview questions. Seidman (2006) recommends that the first interview in the three-stage process should be used to reconstruct concrete details of the participants' lived experience as a springboard for more exploration in later interviews.

Second stage interviews. Following the transcribing of the first stage interviews, the second stage interviews took place. The second stage interviews also followed an interview protocol (Appendix D). During this interview, I sought clarification on data collected during the first stage interviews. In addition, this protocol provided the opportunity for some member checking to occur. Member checking is viewed as a technique for establishing the validity of an account (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2008). The protocol allowed me to summarize the findings of the first interview with

each participant and allowed him or her the opportunity to volunteer additional

information. As well it gave them the chance to assess the accuracy of the data. When

asked, none of the participants had questions or any additional thoughts to add to

interview one questions before we started the second interview protocol. (This was the

same at the beginning of interview three.) With participant one, I asked for clarification

on the type of diploma/GED she had received. At one point I reread a portion of

interview one, and the participant could not add further details.

During the second stage, participants were asked to reflect on their personal

decision to return to school and the motivation behind this decision. The participants

were asked to describe their journey of returning to completion of the requirements for a

secondary credential noting the barriers they faced and the supports they received along

the way.

Third stage interviews. Following the transcribing of the second interviews, the

third stage interviews were conducted. This stage also followed an interview protocol

(Appendix E). During this interview I asked for further details on data gathered during

the first and second stages. However, none of the participants offered additional data.

Participants were asked to describe a day in their lives by making meaning of their lived

experiences of dropping out of school, returning to school, and receiving a secondary

credential. By making meaning of their experiences they were asked to compare what

going to high school was like for them originally to what it was like for them as a school

returner. They described what accomplishing the goal of completing the requirements of

the credential means to them and how it has impacted their lives. To ensure the interview

protocols provided adequate coverage of each research question the following matrix was

developed (Table 3.4)

Table 3.4

Alignment of Research Questions with Interview Questions

Research Questions	Corresponding first stage interview questions	Corresponding second stage interview questions	Corresponding third stage interview questions
RQ 1. What motivates rural adults who left school before graduation to return to schooling and complete the requirements of a secondary education?	2, 2e, 3b, 4, 4c, 5, 5a, 5b, 5c, 5d, 5e, 6, 6a, 6b, 7, 7b	2, 3, 3b, 6	2, 2a, 3, 4, 4a, 4b, 4d, 4e, 8
RQ 2. What experiences or barriers do rural adult school returners describe as negatively impacting their efforts in obtaining a high school diploma or in passing the GED exams?	1, 2, 2d, 3, 3a, 3b	2, 3, 3a, 3c, 3d, 4, 6	4, 4a, 4f, 7, 8
RQ 3. What experiences do rural adult school returners describe as supporting their success in becoming a school completer by obtaining a secondary credential?	2, 2b, 2c, 6, 6a, 6b, 7, 7a, 7b, 7c	2, 3, 3e, 5, 6	1, 2, 2a, 3, 4, 4a, 4c, 4e, 4g, 5, 6, 8

To ensure the interview protocols provide adequate coverage of the theoretical

framework of the study the following matrix was developed (Table 3.5)

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Table 3.5.

Alignment of Interview Questions to Theoretical Framework

Theoretical Framework	Corresponding first stage interview questions	Corresponding second stage interview questions	Corresponding third stage interview questions
Theory of Mattering	2, 2b, 2c, 2d, 2f, 2g, 5, 5a, 5b, 5c, 5d, 5e	2, 3b, 3e, 4, 5, 6	1, 2, 3, 4, 4b, 4e, 4g, 5, 6, 7
Theory of Resilience	2, 2a, 2b, 2c, 2d, 2g, 3, 3a, 4, 5, 5a, 5b, 5c, 5d, 5e, 7a, 7b, 7c	2, 3, 3a, 3b, 3c, 3d, 3e, 4, 5, 6	1, 4, 4a, 4b, 4e, 4f, 5, 7
Rurality	1, 3b, 4a	5	1, 4c

The primary method for data collection for this study involved a series of three one-on-one semi-structured interviews with each of the five participants. In addition to the data collected during the interviews, I used my notes as data in this research study. I also reflected on my biases, on connections in the data gathered to my personal experiences, and on any connections to my positions as director of a technical and career school for high school students and supervisor of a director of an adult education program.

Data Management

Managing the data gathered involved a variety of steps. The first step was audio recording each interview and transcribing the interviews as soon as possible. During my field study experience, I learned that for the researcher it is valuable to transcribe the interviews as the transcription process provides the opportunity to read and reread the data, which helps the researcher begin to become familiar with the data. Transcribing interviews immediately after each interview is an important data management step as well. All transcripts were reviewed for proper names or any other identifying information, and this information was replaced by pseudonyms. The transcripts were saved according

to numeral titles such as 1:1 (participant number 1: first interview), 2:3 (participant number 2: third interview).

The next step of data management was the use of a version of what Miles and Huberman (1994) refer to as a contact summary sheet. On these sheets, after each interview was transcribed I noted the information the participant provided about each of the research questions, participants' epiphanies I heard during the interview, and points on which I needed clarification. The contact sheet helped me prepare for the next stage of interviews as well as allowed me to begin the analysis of the gathered data.

Another method I used to organize the data was through the use of a chart (Table 3.6) to help manage the data I collected during this research study. I placed the research questions on the left of the chart with the five participants (pseudonyms) listed across the top of the chart. I recorded words of the participants beside each question. This information allowed me to organize the responses that contained rich detail that would be used in the reporting of the findings step of the research process and ensured the participants provided answers related to each of my research questions.

Table 3.6

Data Connected to Research Questions

	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5
RQ 1. What motivates rural adults who left school before graduation to return to schooling and complete the requirements of a secondary education?					
RQ 2. What experiences or barriers do rural adult school returners describe as negatively impacting their efforts in obtaining a high school diploma or in passing the GED exams?					
RQ 3. What experiences do rural adult school returners describe as supporting their success in becoming a school completer by obtaining a secondary credential?					

All transcriptions, contact summary sheets, and data organizational charts were reviewed for proper names and other identifying information which were encrypted. Paper files were kept in a locked office, and electronic files were password protected and kept in a locked office as well. When files were disposed of care was taken to protect the confidentiality of all participants. In this published version of this dissertation, pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of all participants.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data involved many steps. The analysis began during the data collection and management stages as I was listening to the responses of the participants

and as I read and reread the transcripts during the transcription stage. According to

Seidman (2006): "Through it (in-depth interviewing) we can come to understand the

details of people's experience from their point of view. . . . We can discover the

interconnections among people who live and work in a shared context" (p. 139). The data

were collected and analyzed simultaneously, as Maxwell (2005) suggests, which allowed

me to progressively focus my interviews. Boeije (2010) noted that postponement of

analysis could add to the pressure. He believed the yield of the research would most

likely be better if the analysis is started right at the beginning because the exploration and

verification opportunities of an emerging design can then be utilized. The first level of

inquiry was to use the analytic strategy of restorying the participant stories.

    Restorying. Creswell (2008) explains that story collection, derived from

interviews, offers aspects of a good novel including predicament, conflict, character,

sequence of events, and resolution. Using interview transcripts, I organized the data so

that the stories of the participants had a beginning, middle, and end. I followed the

restorying method outlined by Creswell (2008, p 519-520). Creswell describes restorying

as a process of gathering stories (data collection), analyzing them for key elements (time,

place, plot, and scene), and then rewriting the story in chronological sequence

(restorying).

    The transcripts were coded for: setting (S) describes the place and time of the

event; characters (C) refers to the individuals relevant to and described in the stories;

actions (A) describes the thinking or behavior of the characters; problem (P) refers to the

questions to be answered or phenomena to be described or explained; resolution (R)

refers to answers to questions and solutions to problems. These coded elements of the

participants' stories were used during the restorying process. This process was iterative as I collaborated with the participants both during the data collection phase and the restorying phase. Once the narrative restorying was completed, I asked the participants to check the stories for accuracy. The second level of inquiry involved the coding and identification of categories and themes within the stories of the participants to create a collective story of the data.

Coding for themes. Patton (1990) notes that inductive analysis means that the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis. The goal here is to come to understand the narratives of the participants and to identify themes within their stories. Coding for themes can highlight the relationship between human experiences, as told in the narrative stories, and the connection to the larger phenomenon of returning to schooling after dropping out. I include themes that arise from the participants' stories to help provide a more detailed discussion of the meaning of the stories. Participants' responses aided in the development of categories and themes during the inductive analysis phase.

I used the transcripts and the participant narratives to search for themes. These themes were organized in a table so supporting evidence could be charted. This table was expanded to accommodate emerging themes (Table 3.7).

Table 3.7.

Emerging Themes

Themes	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5
#1					
#2					
#3					

Deductive analysis. Deductive analysis followed the inductive analysis stage. This analysis, was based on my research questions and my conceptual framework. During this phase of analysis codes were applied to the data. I used the data to answer the research questions by using codes related to each question (Appendix F).

RQ 1. What motivates rural adults who left school before graduation to return to schooling and complete the requirements of a secondary education?

PM - Personal Motivators for School Returners

SM - Societal Motivators for School Returners

MT – Mattering Theory

RT – Theory of Resilience

R - Rurality

RQ 2. What barriers do rural adult school returners describe as impacting their efforts in obtaining a secondary credential?

EFSR – Efforts of School Returners

BSC – Barriers to Secondary Credential

MT – Mattering Theory

RT – Theory of Resilience

R - Rurality

RQ 3. What experiences do rural adult school returners describe as supporting their success in becoming a school completer by obtaining a secondary credential?

SExR – Supporting Experiences for School Returners

SExC – Supporting Experiences for School Completers

MT – Mattering Theory

RT – Theory of Resilience

R – Rurality

Additional codes and subcodes for this question emerged as I coded any information I interpreted as experiences of school returners that supported them in their journey of completing the secondary credential.

Once the coding was completed, I created a matrix for each research question. The number of rows was based on the number of codes that surfaced during the analysis phase. Direct quotes from the transcripts were placed in the matrix. Table 3.8 is an example of the matrix for Research Question #2 regarding the barriers that rural adult school returners describe as impacting their efforts in obtaining a secondary credential.

Table 3.8.

Codes For Research Question #2

Codes	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5
EFSR (Efforts of School Returners)					
BSC (Barriers to Secondary Credential)					
RT (Resilience Theory)					
MT (Theory of Mattering)					
R (Rurality)					

The third strategy was to analyze the data for points of commonality and points of differences among the participants. This strategy helped to enhance my understanding of what it was like to be a school returner in rural Maine. In summary, data analysis stemmed from information provided by the participants during the semi-structured interviews. The data obtained from these interviews were presented first in a narrative format as a restorying of their individual experiences. A thematic analysis of the narrative section provided details and insights about the perceptions these rural school returners had about how their decisions to drop out of school only to return at a later time and complete their secondary education. The analysis was useful in connecting the individual narratives to the collective story of the participants through the research questions and the conceptual framework of this study.

Ethical Matters

This research adhered to the ethical standards of the University of Maine's Institutional Review Board (IRB). To ensure that data were collected in an ethical manner, all participants were given an informed consent form (Appendix B) outlining the overall purpose of the study and the types of information to be collected. In addition, the form outlined the ways in which the data would be shared and used by the researcher. Once data were collected and transcribed, all participants' identifying information was replaced by pseudonyms, and all data were stored in a locked office and on a password protected device. Participants were informed that they could remove themselves from the study at any time, and they could refuse to answer any of the questions that were asked during the interview sessions.

In addition, participants were notified that this research was being conducted for the purpose of my dissertation work and not for my professional role as the director of a career and technical education program although a goal of my research is to share with educators the findings of this research study. Through the words of the participants, I want to help others develop an understanding of what motivates dropouts to return to school in a rural school setting, noting the barriers and supports these individuals face through their journey to school completion.

Trustworthiness

Creswell (2003, 2012) highlights eight strategies for ensuring trustworthiness: triangulation, member checking, rich, thick descriptions, clarification of researcher bias, peer review and debriefing, negative case analysis, and external audit. To ensure trustworthiness, I used several of these strategies during this research study to add

validity to my research. According to Creswell (2008), all research is interpretive, and researchers need to be self-reflective throughout the process and understand how one's personal history shapes interpretations. As a former school returner, I have high expectations and respect for rural high school early leavers who made the decision to return to schooling. As the first strategy to ensure trustworthiness, I reflected on my biases, values, and assumptions throughout the process. I worked hard to ensure my experiences did not interfere with retelling the stories of the participants of this study. To do this, I needed to be aware of my biases and expectations, as this allowed me to be open to hearing the stories of the participants.

Member checking is another strategy I used. I checked with the participants during the clarification point of interviews two and three. Through member checking, I established the validity of a participant's account of the data collected. A third strategy recommended by Creswell (2003) is to thoroughly describe findings in "rich, thick" descriptions. The data resulting from the series of three one-on-one interviews and my researcher memos allowed me to describe the findings in a manner that is rich and descriptive. The fourth strategy that I employed to ensure trustworthiness involves peer review and debriefing. I shared and discussed data, data analysis, and research findings with the chair of my committee and committee members. I also shared and discussed my findings with a peer from my doctoral cohort who is aware of my study. Due to this knowledge and her background in research, I believe she was able to offer me supportive and challenging advice.

Another strategy noted by Creswell (2003) involves negative case analysis. This strategy involves examining the data for disconfirming evidence. Maxwell (2005) also

recommends this strategy to increase trustworthiness. If I had found that one or more of my participants' accounts of returning to school were different from the others, I planned to analyze this data and not just dismiss it in my findings. I also helped to ensure trustworthiness by the extended engagement with my participants that the three series of interviews provided. Finally, using the words of the participants helped to minimize bias in my findings report. The deliberate and on-going use of the above strategies improved the trustworthiness of my findings.

Chapter Summary

The design of this study was described in this chapter. This design included the research goal and questions along with the key operational definitions. The chapter also outlined data collection, management, and analysis, concluding with a discussion of ethical matters and trustworthiness of the study. Chapter Four presents descriptions of the five participants' experiences as school returners. Chapter Five presents an analysis of the data collected that highlights the results and responds to the research questions which guided the study.

CHAPTER 4

STORIES OF FIVE RURAL SCHOOL RETURNERS

This study examines the life experiences of five school returners. The participants all have roots in rural Maine, living and attending schooling in Oxford County. With a population of a little over 58,000 people, Oxford County is the seventh most populated county in the state of Maine. According to the 2015 census, the median household income of Oxford County residents is $40,100 approximately $7,500 less than the state average. This results in 16.3% of Oxford County residents living in poverty. The median age for residents is 45.4 years. In Oxford County, 16% of residents over eighteen graduated from high school, and 22% completed a Bachelor's degree or higher. Presently, there are six high schools and two Career and Technical Education schools that serve the 2,751 high school students. Each participant attended and dropped out of a high school located in Oxford County.

The landscape of schooling has changed over the period of time these individuals attended high school, dropped out of school, returned to school, and competed their secondary credential. In the past, schools were built around small communities, each being a separate school district. Today many small districts have combined to create larger Regional School Units (RSUs). One example of this is the Oxford Hills Comprehensive High School, which combined Norway High School and Paris High School. Regional School Unit 10 is an example of an RSU that joined together in 2008 but has maintained three separate high schools to this point, Mountain Valley High School, Dirigo High School, and Buckfield Junior Senior High School. Mountain Valley High School was established in 1989 as the result of the merger of Rumford High School

and Mexico High School. The five participants of this study attended three of the six Oxford County high schools before dropping out of school. Eventually, each participant returned to schooling and completed the requirements of a secondary credential.

Chapter Four presents descriptive data about the experiences of the five school returners who participated in this study. This chapter includes a restorying of each participant's experiences, which emerged from a series of three one-on-one interviews. Narrative research, as defined by Creswell (2012), is a type of qualitative design in which "narrative is understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events /actions, chronologically connected," (p. 17). Restorying is the process of reorganizing the stories into a framework based on key elements of the story and then rewriting the stories within a chronological sequence (Creswell, 2012).

The stories of the participants have been constructed to reveal their resilience in the face of their life experiences. This resilience provided the school returners with the strength and skills necessary for them to recover from life challenges in order to return to school and complete the requirements for a secondary credential. School returners often demonstrate educational resilience, which has been defined by Wang, Haertel and Walberg (1994) as the "heightened likelihood of educational success despite personal vulnerabilities and adversities brought about by environmental conditions and experiences" (p. 39). The participants' stories also highlight the Theory of Mattering, which is another aspect of the conceptual framework that guided this study. Essentially, mattering is how students see themselves as significant and the notion that one matters to another. The stories of the school returners have also been constructed to reveal how the

rural location of their life experiences, including schooling, impacted their efforts in obtaining a secondary credential.

The data of this study are organized chronologically, using the words of the participants as they described their life experiences. To portray these key elements of the experiences, words of the participants are included. These statements are not full quotations in all circumstances but are a combination of quotations from the transcripts of interviews, so the logic of the stories is maintained. The stories provide contextual information about their experiences as students in public schooling and how these experiences resulted in their dropping out of school. Details about the lives of these individuals as high school dropouts and what motivated them to return to schooling are also included. The stories describe the experiences of these five school returners as they worked to complete their secondary credential. These details include the barriers they faced and the supports they received along their journeys. The stories of the school returners end by describing how earning a secondary credential has influenced the way they live their lives today.

The stories are ordered by the age of the participants; the oldest participant's story is first, the youngest last. This order was selected to help demonstrate how the returning to schooling process has changed over the past two decades. Following the participants' stories is a section on the understandings of the school returners' experiences derived from the stories of the participants.

Debbie's Story

I met Debbie the day she came to my office for our first interview session. Sitting in my office that overlooks the parking lot I was aware of her arrival. Debbie seemed to

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hesitate before exiting her vehicle and beginning the short walk to the main entrance of the building. She slowly approached the door to the building. After climbing one flight of stairs to my office, she appeared winded. I introduced myself and thanked her for participating in this study. I motioned for her to have a seat and handed her a bottle of water, which she gratefully accepted. As the interview got underway I quickly realized that it was going to take some pumping of the well to extract the story from within her. At first her answers were short with very few details. At one point very early in the interview, after she had given me a one-word answer, I commented, "Okay, one word. Well this is going to be a very short interview." At that point we both laughed. This seemed to ease the tension she must have been feeling as she began to open up with details of her experiences.

For Debbie the development of resilience began at a very early age. Living in rural Maine, Debbie grew up in a single-parent home. For the first five years of her life Debbie was bounced between being with her mom on weekends and staying with another family during the week. Debbie witnessed her mother working three dead-end jobs just to make ends meet. She noted, "My mother went through hell to raise me and keep me safe."

As a little girl Debbie entered public schooling. She attended the local elementary school for grades kindergarten through fourth grade. "I loved school. I loved the fact that we had an EdTech that went right from first grade through fourth grade with us." When she entered fifth grade, Debbie moved to the local middle school. "It wasn't bad in middle school. I still attended. I still enjoyed it. I mean, I had friends all the way through. The middle school was actually pretty good." As I asked Debbie to share what going to high school was like for her she hung her head. When she looked up at me she said,

"HELL." The expression on her face showed the pain this memory was causing her. The day she finally gave up on high school she had endured negative comments from two of her teachers. The pain was evident as she described the actions of these two high school teachers.

In high school, HELL that's it. Actually a number of my friends had dropped out because they were pregnant. I think that was a problem too because a lot of my friends had either stayed back or were just a year younger or whatever and didn't go to the high school when I did.

However, I loved to learn. I liked homework. Yeah I did. Yeah I loved homework. I could do that at home on my own you know. The more they gave me the happier I was.

I never actually finished a whole year. I dropped out at fourteen as a freshman. Went back as a sophomore and got done as a sophomore. I only went back as a sophomore 'cause the law required it. I dropped out again at fifteen because I had my mother's consent signature. It was hell. There was bullying from staff as well as students. It was the bullying, I mean that was it. To be honest with you there was plenty from students but what stands out and what I remember the most is from those two teachers. When a teacher does it in front of the other students. It had been a bad day to begin with. I had had another teacher comment about the dress I was wearing being a tent. Then there was that teacher that was like his exact words were, "You never come to school so why bother." So I said, "Okay, Bye," and I walked out and didn't walk back in.

As a high school dropout Debbie spent her time split between doing what fifteen

year olds like to do, hanging out with her friends on the street corners, sitting on the wall

across from the local bar making fun of the drunks, and riding bikes downtown, and

having to act like an adult, working and helping out with the household bills. In rural

western Maine there were not many employment options for fifteen year olds. So Debbie

picked up some babysitting jobs and some odd cleaning jobs. Debbie never called herself

and her mom poor. However, she did note that they never had any extra money, "I think I

missed out on a lot 'cause we had no money. My mother worked three jobs. I earned

money babysitting. But there was never any money. We had what we had to have and my

mother did a remarkable job, but there wasn't anything for extras." She noted that she

found herself living the same life as her mom, working dead end jobs to help them get by.

When she turned sixteen and was old enough to get a workers' permit she went to work

at the local shoe factory. Working these jobs made her all the more determined to return

to school and earn a secondary credential.

As a dropout herself, Debbie's mom could sympathize with her in regards to why

she dropped out of school. However, she continuously reminded her of what she had to

look forward to if she did not go back to school. Although she dropped out of school,

Debbie had not given up on education. There was never a question in Debbie's mind that

she would one day get a General Education Development (GED) certificate. The GED, at

the time, was the only high school credential recognized in all fifty states. Since 2014

some states are now switching over to a new testing format. The GED test consists of five

different test sections: Social Studies, Science, Mathematics, Reading, and Writing.

When passed, the GED certifies that the test taker has American high school-level

academic skills. For Debbie it was a waiting game. She needed to turn eighteen before

she could return to school and take the tests to get her GED. For three long years Debbie found herself working low paying jobs and being reminded by her mom that without a secondary credential this was the life she had to look forward to.

> Oh, I knew when I dropped out that I was going to go get it [the GED] I just couldn't until after I turned eighteen. They told me I could not get my GED until I was eighteen. I knew when I dropped out I would get my GED or something at some point. It was never that I didn't like education or that I didn't want it. I knew I was going to get that one way or another. I think knowing that there was the GED out there made the decision to quit easier because, like I said, I wanted that education. I wanted that paper.

Although Debbie always knew she would one day return to school and earn a secondary credential, the life she lived between the time she dropped out of high school and when she turned eighteen, able to return to school, could have changed this path for her if it were not for her own drive and her mom's support. When asked to describe what returning to school was like, Debbie said the worst part was playing the waiting game until she turned eighteen. Her age was the major barrier she faced. Her mom was her network of support. She had supported her when she dropped out of school by signing the consent form, and she supported her and was proud of her for returning to school and earning a secondary credential.

> I called the school and asked them when I could take the test. They told me the date they were doing it. I set up an appointment, and I went and took the tests. I figured I would do okay. I didn't think I would do as well as I did. I didn't realize that that was such a big deal cause, I mean, it just seemed so easy. It may be really

a lot harder nowadays than it was back then. I'm not exactly a patient person. So not being able to do what I wanted when I wanted wasn't easy. I couldn't take it until I turned eighteen.

My mother, she just stood by me when I quit even though she didn't want me to quit, you know, so she was very supportive. She understood, and she went along with it even though it broke her heart. She was supportive, not pushy. When I told her I was getting my GED she was like, "Great." She was disappointed that it took so long, but that's because I couldn't take it until I turned eighteen. I mean, I guess in some ways I wanted to please my mother. Just my mother.

I have never graduated from anything. There was no ceremony for the GED. I got through it and got the GED that I wanted. It wasn't very exciting. It was just what it was. I just did it because I wanted the diploma. There was relief that it was over, and there was probably some pride there too. I wanted to go back to school. To be honest with you, the diploma got put in a jar in a drawer and I never looked at it again.

After receiving her secondary credential Debbie continued to work at the shoe shop and at the same time enrolled in a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) course through the local Adult Education program. After she became certified, she was employed as a CNA. She worked at this job for a few years before her daughter was born. She noted that after staying at home for a brief time she returned to work as a CNA. Three years later her son was born. He had multiple health issues so she made the decision to stop working to stay at home and care for him. During this time her CNA certification expired, as they would not count the time she spent meeting his medical

needs. She admitted that she was fine with that because she was tired from her work at the nursing home. She found herself thrown into other dead end jobs in factories and working at Wal-Mart. It wasn't long before her life would change once again as she made the choice to follow her heart into the field of education. This decision helped Debbie gain confidence in herself. She realized that she mattered to others. This move also encouraged her to continue her education in order to become a classroom EdTech III. Going to college was a major turning point in her life. She had shared how in rural Maine there didn't seem to be a lot of talk about going to college when she was in high school. She said that the expectation of going on to college seemed to be for students in the top ten of the class.

The local school district had five openings for EdTech I positions. I was lucky enough to get one of those positions. I worked and became an EdTech II and when a position opened up I got it. I then became an EdTech III because it was either that or I was going to lose my job because of layoffs. I am still taking classes. I am taking education classes, but I don't want to teach in the classroom. I love being an EdTech. I don't like the politics and the paperwork that teachers have to deal with. I am an EdTech three, and I am extremely happy about that. I get to spend way more quality time with the kids than the teachers do. Their education is important, but I am a nurturer too. I like to make sure they get the attention they need. I want to keep on learning, but I don't want to advance.

As a former high school dropout who returned to school and completed her secondary credential, Debbie's life experiences set the stage for how she lives her life today as a fifty-year-old married mother of two. Her resilience, which began to develop at

a very early age, gave her the strength and skills to overcome life struggles and stressors. She now realizes the importance of mattering to others and how life experiences can be challenging but can create new opportunities for oneself. Debbie was all smiles as she spoke about what she is presently doing. She truly seems sincere in loving what she is doing and appears very happy and content with her life at this time.

> I can afford to live my life today. I was able to get a job that I love rather than the crappy jobs I have had in the past that I did just to survive. I think that's the big thing. I am doing something that I want to do. I'm an EdTech. I'm not really proud of dropping out, but I am very proud of where I've come. What I've become. Where I've ended up. I've got two children, one's severely disabled. I waited until he was in school until I went back to college. I love being an EdTech. I am an EdTech III, and I am extremely happy about that. I am. I really am. I plan to retire in St. Thomas, and I want grand babies.

The notion of her keeping her story held tightly to herself, as she tried to do at the beginning of our first interview session, came full circle at the end of our last interview. As the third interview session was wrapping up, I asked Debbie if there was anything else she wanted to add to her story. She smiled, shook her head, and said, "Nothing, you got more out of me than I thought. I mean it isn't something I talk about. The fact that you got what you got is pretty good. I am not proud of dropping out of school, but I am proud of what I have accomplished."

As she got up to leave, I thanked her for participating in this study and for sharing her story. She gave me a hug and said, "No, thank you for giving me the chance to realize I made it. I am happy with my life." With that, our time together was over. However,

Debbie left me with the details of her story, her experiences. It seems I now knew more of her story than she was prepared to share that first day. I really think when she left my office that day there was a lighter step in her walk as she headed across the parking lot to her vehicle. Maybe it was because she was done with the interviews. However, I believe by sharing the story that she had not talked about for years lifted a weight from her shoulders. She was now able to allow herself to say she has succeeded.

Wendy's Story

From the very beginning of our first interview to the end of the third session Wendy was eager to share the story of her life experiences. Her responses to the questions were lengthy and included many details of her experiences including those of attending, dropping out of, and returning to schooling. She laughed at times during the interviews, and she cried at other times. As her story began to unfold, I soon realized that Wendy was trusting me with the details of a story that, when pieced together, described an emotional journey filled with separation and loss. She described how each time she experienced an emotional upset she grew stronger. She relied on her resilience and those close to her whom she mattered to. These factors supported her in conquering the struggles she faced and helped her to become the person she is today.

As a little girl, Wendy lived in rural western Maine with her parents and her siblings. Her grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins all lived in the same area. She shared how she loved spending time together as one big family.

We would walk down the hill almost every evening in the winter on the weekends, and we would just ice skate. It was a really fun activity. We did a lot of things as a family. We did trick or treating together. We went to the old animal farm. We

would do that like once or twice a month in the summer. We did do a lot of things after school as a family.

Wendy attended a small hometown elementary school. She then moved to the junior high school building and as a freshman, she entered the local high school. In high school, Wendy noted schooling and her friends were a big part of her life.

Obviously friends. [I] did things with girlfriends. I had a friend who had a pool and we would go there if it was nice. I liked my teachers. Doing class trips that was fun. I loved English. I loved writing and reading lit. I loved science too. The majorette thing. We would do all of the parades. School was actually a big part of my life.

As Wendy recalled the fun times spent together with family members and friends she also shared, at different points in the interviews, times she was separated from those she loved and cared about. Her life changed dramatically when she was in high school. Her family circle was broken when her parents divorced. Her circle of friends also became broken.

I hung out with a particular group of girls. They started going down a path that I didn't want to go down. It was very, very hard for me. I kind of distanced myself and had to start fresh. I remember my high school career. There was a couple of deaths from drunk driving which was shocking back then. It was like extremely shocking. Prior to me being in high school there wasn't a lot of that alcohol, things like that. But when I was in high school there was a couple back-to-back [accidents], which I remember was shocking to the community. Actually one of the accidents that was so tragic these two girls were in. They didn't die, but the

car caught on fire, and they were burned extremely bad. That was a real pivotal time for me. I had to start fresh.

She found herself making the decision to stay with her grandparents instead of moving out of town with her mom and her new stepdad, another separation she endured as a high school student. As the summer before her senior year began to wind down and with senior pictures taken, Wendy's life seemed to be on track for her to graduate the following June. However, once again someone important in her life was moving away. This is when her life as a soon-to-be high school senior took another path. Wendy noted that it was not academics, and it wasn't a school thing that led her to drop out of high school. It was what she called being "young and dumb." Her boyfriend was heading to Plymouth State University in New Hampshire. Once again Wendy found herself being separated from someone she loved. Her boyfriend suggested that she move out of state with him. She made the decision to drop out of school and go with him leaving behind her grandparents, causing yet another separation in her life while at the same time preventing another one between her and her boyfriend. Breaking the news to her grandparents that she was leaving is a memory that Wendy still recalls years later.

I told my grandfather because I was very close to my grandfather and my grandmother. I told him I was moving. I was going to be eighteen in August, and this was like the end of July. He said, "Wendy you don't want to leave. You don't want to do it. You don't realize." I said, "Oh I do Grampa," and I packed up and left. To this day I can see him standing in the doorway watching me walking away. I mean just the look on his face.

As she and her boyfriend settled down out of state, Wendy got a job and decided to reenroll in schooling. She found herself being pulled between doing homework as a reenrolled student and tending to adult tasks such as household chores and working. In the end, schooling lost, and she did not continue.

I signed up for a class. It was for my GED. I went to two or three meetings. I was just not disciplined enough to go home and do the work. It was like something really does happen. You think, I am an adult. I'm paying my own bills. What am I doing? Why do I want to do this homework? It just wasn't like you're in high school, and that's your job to do your homework. So I just didn't go back.

Wendy then became pregnant with her first child. When their son was a year old, the couple returned home to Maine where they were married surrounded by their family and friends. The newlyweds were fortunate to have this network of love surrounding them because shortly after their return home the newly married couple discovered their son had leukemia. At this point in the interview, Wendy's eyes began to tear up. As I handed her a tissue, she kept speaking about her little boy and how she had helped with his care. She noted that it was hard trying to stay connected to family and friends while she was at the hospital with her son. At the time in rural Maine, there were no cell phones or Internet service. This caused her to feel very isolated. Therefore, she became friends with many of the nurses at the hospital.

After her little boy died following his battle with cancer, Wendy turned her attention and efforts to her new goal in life, to become a nurse. She realized that she needed to finish the requirements of a high school credential before she could continue toward her new goal.

I saw there was a little flyer in the local newspaper, and it said, "Get your GED." I called, and that's how I started. It was always in the back of my mind I need to do this. I've got to. I've got to finish. I've got to at least get that under my belt. Even back then you heard, "Oh if you don't have an education, you can't even get a job in the mill without a diploma," you know.

Wendy embarked on a six-month journey that took her from being a school returner to a school completer. As she described this journey, the memory of being embarrassed for having to be returning to school came through loud and clear. Wendy faced challenges, in addition to the embarrassment, as a school returner.

It was hard. I won't lie. The embarrassment of having to walk through those doors as a high school dropout. It was also embarrassing. I can remember being embarrassed like, oh my gosh I can't believe I am here.

I think it's hard where we live in a rural area. We don't have a bus system. I know transportation was an issue at the time. I remember it took a lot of planning and a lot of navigating of who had to get where and by when with my husband and my in-laws.

Then there was what I call the "struggle of the juggle" challenge. I had more responsibilities at the time. I had a new baby. I was married. I had a job. I had laundry and dishes and studying. Sometimes you just did not want to go to school that night. It was almost like you don't belong there any more for some strange reason. You know you have a kid, and you have bills, and you have a job, and it is like, what am I doing in school? It's almost like a double-edge sword. I wish the only thing I had to worry about was studying.

In addition to her determination, the support Wendy received from the people who surrounded her made it easier for Wendy to return to school and complete the requirements for a secondary credential.

I mean it was hard, oh so hard to go back. But once I got through that door I was like I am going to do this. I wasn't going to let anything get in the way. I remember thinking at that time it is a gift to be able to go to school. I have another chance. This time, I was determined to make the most of the gift of having the opportunity to go back. I was also 100% focused because I was there on my own accord. No one telling me I had to do this. I was there because I had made the choice to be there.

My in-laws would give me rides or let me borrow their truck. They would babysit for me. My friends, when we would be together, they would encourage me to get it done. My grandfather and grandmother, you know, even though he never said it, I know, I disappointed my grandfather when I dropped out. He never held it against me. He would be there to encourage me along the way. The Director of Adult Education was a big support for me. She helped me through the enrollment process. She explained what classes I had to take, and she let me know when it was time to take the test. As a matter of fact, she was the one to call me and tell me that I had passed the tests and that she had that piece of paper waiting for me.

Returning to school and taking classes in preparation for the GED was a different experience for Wendy from going to high school.

I remember there were quite a few people in the class. Some were even younger than me. There was not a lot of camaraderie like a class that is graduating together.

There wasn't a lot of interaction. It was very like structured. There wasn't a lot of before and after hanging out. So you didn't really bond with people. It was like everyone was there, you had a goal, and you are going to do it. They did the testing at different times and days. They would say, "You can come in between this time and this time and take your test." It was very sporadic. It was kind of like an individual process.

Wendy described the day she got the call that she had passed the GED and how she felt as she actually held the paper in her hands.

I went up and got it. I was standing in the parking lot all by myself. You know, there wasn't any marching or any parties or any walking across the stage. We did not have a ceremony. We didn't do the cap and gown. But standing there I was proud. I felt a sense of accomplishment. I had completed something that I had always felt like I had failed at. Looking at that piece of paper I saw my name, yes my name, on that thick piece of paper.

Although Wendy never spoke about being poor, within her words one can find hints of her living a life without extras. As a child her family did a lot of free activities such as skating, sliding, swimming, and trick or treating. She spoke about living with the in-laws instead of having a place of their own and sharing vehicles where she did not have one. Returning to schooling and earning her GED had a major impact on Wendy by setting her life on a new course. She was able to continue her education and gain employment.

The journey of going back to school and completing jump-started my life to what it is now. Oh yeah, that sense of pride that day made me become a life-long

learner. It really set the stage for what I am doing now and what I plan to do in the future. I am a strong enough person now. I am on this track, and I am not going to derail myself again. I am going to keep on chugging down the track. I personally felt like something was missing. I felt like I had failed, you know. It was kind of like not just a worldly goal I should have met, but it was a personal goal too that I didn't meet. Once I did that and I had that under my belt, it was shortly after that, well it was a couple of years, that I went, and I did the Certified Nursing Assistant course through the local Adult Education program. So I think that it got me back on track to where I should have been going all along.

In spite of her accomplishments Wendy still, regrets leaving school before graduation.

[I think about it] Everyday, everyday, even if I don't think about it, it is always in the back of my mind. I think looking back I made a split decision. I think if I had taken an hour to sit and really ponder and not make such an impulsive decision, but to think about what is going to happen, what are the consequences going to be, I never would have dropped out. However, my entire life would have changed. Should I have stayed in school in an education standpoint? Yes. Was my life a little harder because I didn't? Yes. Would I change it? No. It is what it is.

Today, Wendy is a forty-six-year-old divorced mother of three living children. Wendy did not only endure the loss of her first son to leukemia, but she also lost another son to a tragic home accident. Although she did not come right out and say it, she implied that the tragic loss of another child caused such a strain on her marriage that it ended. She spends her time switching off between what she calls class days and workdays. Each day

she is out of bed at 6:00 am to send her youngest child off to high school. She then does house work and goes for a run with the dogs before preparing for the day ahead. Presently, Wendy is enrolled in the Bachelor of Nursing program at the University of Maine at Augusta. On class days she attends class and does homework. On workdays, she leaves home around 1:00 pm and works the 2:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m. shift before traveling an hour home. In regards to her future Wendy shared,

> Well, I first see myself continuing to work and going to college. When I finish college I will be an RN. You know, my goal is to eventually become a RN for Life Flight of Maine. There are two in Maine, one at CMMC and one at EMMC. That's what I want to do, become a Life Flight nurse. My friend and I were walking to our cars this morning at 2 a.m. and the helicopter was coming in for a landing. You know they sit down very slowly. I was like to my friend, "Oh I'd love to be on there."

As the third interview session was wrapping up, I asked Wendy if there was anything she wished I had asked about her experiences that I hadn't. I wanted to give her the opportunity to expand her story with further details.

> Well, I don't think there is anything you forgot to ask. I must say you asked me more than I thought you would. It is funny. You asked me about my feelings not just what school was like for me. You really seemed to care about my feelings and the impact it had on my life. I hadn't really thought about the barriers and even, you know, what support I had through this process. It was good for me to have to have the opportunity to say, "Hey I did this. I made this happen." Because in the end no matter what barriers you have or what support you get from others, it all

comes down to you. What decisions and choices you make in your life. You can

overcome barriers, and you can use the support you get to help you accomplish

your goals, but in the end, it is the effort you put into it that will determine what

you get out of it.

Wow, that was a wordy way of me saying I think you covered it, and I really am

glad I have been given the opportunity to revisit the journey I have been on

because I really think for people to appreciate where they are today they must

understand the journey they have been on to this point. Thank you for giving me

this chance.

Nancy's Story

Nancy is a mother of two: a son who is out of school and working full time in the

automotive field and a daughter who is presently in high school. She is very close with

her children and wanting the best for them radiates loud and clear through her words. She

shares a story of regrets when talking about her youth and her decision to drop out of

high school. Nancy grew up living in a small rural community with a population of about

fifteen hundred people. She lived with her mom, dad, and older sister. As a young girl,

Nancy attended kindergarten through eighth grade at her small hometown school. The

school consisted of two buildings, with kindergarten through third grade in the one story

brick building out back and grades four through eight in the big wooden structure in the

front. The small size of her class and the school made it a great experience for Nancy.

We only had eight students to one teacher. It was pretty good. They could

explain things to you, and they were more than willing to help. They seemed to

care about the students. I went through all of the teachers and sometimes the

teachers twice because they moved from second grade to fifth grade. I found that they had compassion in their heart. They wanted us to do well, and that made all the difference. That made going to school important.

Despite a history of liking school and getting good grades, Nancy found the transition to high school difficult. Her small class was split up as each one made the choice as to what high school they would be attending. She was grouped with students that for the most part had been together since Kindergarten. She felt like an outsider. In high school, Nancy began to show her resilience, but it was not enough to keep her in school. At the time she did not feel like she mattered to the school, the students, or even to the teachers who were part of this environment. Nancy had not fully gained the strength and skills she needed to combat the issues she was dealing with in high school.

That was a hard transition going from eight students to 120 students at the time. I don't think I was ready to do that huge transition. When you got in high school, it was like you are a number and was ignored a lot of the time. You would ask for help, and they wouldn't have the time for you. I didn't like any of the classes. I didn't like any bit of it to be honest with you. It took a really long time to get other friends because all of them had grown up together. They had gone to school together. We were the newbies. We were kind of the outcasts. They were going to trip you in the hall, and they were going to push you into the lockers. They did not accept you. You were lucky if someone actually grabbed hold of you and became your friend. Sometimes you would find that lonely one that was the outcast at the other school, and now you could become friends with them. I ended up hanging out with these kids that were so called "troublemakers" because they accepted you.

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The teachers didn't accept you either. You were not part of their group. I hate to say this, but at the time, in my head, they didn't like us. They were all about their students and their town. That's who they were going to help. That's who they wanted to succeed. That's how I saw it as a child. It was a very uncomfortable feeling.

Nancy did not have any goals or dreams for herself as a high school student. Following is how she described her high school experience.

I didn't know what I wanted to do. I didn't. Honestly didn't. [I] got through my freshman year struggled socially, academically, and emotionally. Half way through my sophomore year, I started skipping school and hanging out with my friends. We would be hanging out at the park and riding around. We would party a lot. There was a lot of partying. We would lie to our parents saying we were going here, and actually you would be going over there. Junior year I went back for like two weeks and found that I was so far behind in school. I saw no use in what they were teaching. Nobody had any solutions as to how I was going to graduate on time. I felt there was no other option but to quit. I was done. At that point, I had become pregnant with my son. I thought about staying. The school principal and guidance counselor were not so keen about that. They were like I'd be better suited, they thought, in another school. So at that point, I did not feel that I needed to be there and that I wasn't wanted. So I left.

When I dropped out my parents were trying to be supportive but told me I had to do something so they actually sent me to Job Corps out of state. I didn't last there very long. I was the only white girl. I was scared to death. I was called white

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cracker. It was horrible. The girls were not nice. They were hard-core girls who were scary. After a week and a half of just being tormented, I will never forget, I called my mother and said you either send my boyfriend to come get me or I'm walking. I will hitch hike all the way home. My father was not about to let me hitchhike home. He was like, I will let him come get you but you have to do something.

In regards to attending school in a rural location, Nancy noted that she felt the small rural schools did not prepare you for college as schools located in more populated areas. She felt the lack of labs, equipment, and course offerings put rural kids at a disadvantage. Like Wendy, Nancy also felt isolated living in rural Maine due to the lack of advancement in technology. She also noted the lack of social activities available to those growing up in rural Maine added to the feeling of isolation. She shared that in the city there are things for kids to do such as going bowling, going to the movies, and going to the mall to hang out. Nancy also noted the lack of cultural differences in a small rural community made it difficult for her to adjust when she moved out of state for a short time.

After returning home from out of state Nancy moved out of her parents' home, got married, and moved in with her new husband, the father of her baby. She got a job stacking wood in a lumber mill. Admitting that this was a hard life, Nancy put her newborn son first. She realized that she mattered to him and he to her. As a wife in a volatile relationship, Nancy continued to gain the skills and strength that she would one day use to break out of the life she was living.

I was pregnant, so the father of my child and I moved out. That was a hard life. That was very difficult. He was bipolar. He definitely had a temper that you

would not want to mess with. We had a very volatile relationship. I went to work. It was hard. It wasn't an easy job. It was dirty, and it was gross. It was hard to find work. I took care of my son. I was seventeen when I had him.

Nancy knew she needed to finish high school. Her dad had always encouraged her to go back and finish. He had dropped out of high school a month before graduation, so he could sympathize with her and her situation. After being out of school for nearly three years, she made the decision to go back to school. Her experience of reenrolling in school began a nearly year-long journey from being a school returner to becoming a school completer. Nancy noted that she did not want her son to think of her as a dropout, "I thought when my son gets older, what is he going to think? What is he going to say? My mother never graduated from high school. That's not a positive thing." In addition to her son, her dad also inspired her to go back and finish.

My dad quit a month before his graduation. [He] went into the service and went to war. I remember him saying it was so hard to go back because he waited. It was like a spiral in my head. I kept thinking back. Dad said it is going to be really hard to go back. [I] better do it soon because it is going to be hard. The GED at that time was changing. It was it was supposed to be becoming more difficult.

Once Nancy decided to return to school she faced the challenge of not knowing where to turn for help. "It wasn't easy. Information about Adult Education wasn't easy to find at that time." Although Nancy was determined to make a better life for herself and her son by earning her GED, she did face challenges along the way as she worked to earn a secondary credential.

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Took me a while to actually settle down at first. I was starting out to try to do my

high school diploma, but that was taking forever. So I decided I'm going to take

the testing to do my GED. I still needed to brush up on some things at that point

in time, so I went through the classes that I needed to. Just trying to get through it.

Just trying to have enough time to come here, sit down, and focus on my work so

I could get the heck out of there. [For me] it was really a let me get this done.

I felt like I should be more at home. My husband, at the time, thought I should

have been home more. He would say, "What are you doing that for? You've got

this at home. We need you at home. We don't need you there." So it was difficult.

Being pulled between her schooling and her home life was a struggle for Nancy.

Fortunately for her, she found support along her journey, which helped her face the

challenges that she experienced as a school returner.

My parents were a big influence. They wanted me to go back, especially my dad.

My grandmother was a huge support by saying, "I will help you in any way I can.

You need to graduate, you know, in order to do anything." It was a lot of family

support at that time. They [the staff] were very good. I don't even remember her

name, but I remember her bouffant. The administrative assistant, she was great.

She was like this is what you are going to do, and these are the dates you are

going to come. If you can't make it, oh well, no big deal, just come the next time.

I don't remember their names, but I know that they were there if you needed help.

If not, you were pretty much on your own. You passed it in, and they corrected it.

They asked you, "Do you need anything from us? Do you need help on that? Do

you understand it?" They would let you go on and do your own thing.

For Nancy earning her GED gave her a sense of pride that she could share with her family.

> Oh, I was a smiling girl. I felt pride in myself. I felt like look at me. Look what I have done. I did this, and I did it all on my own. I was able to do this, and I proved my point. I finally finished, and I could finally tell my family that I made it. I am going to graduate, and we are going to have this little graduation. It almost brings tears to my eyes.

Returning to schooling and completing the requirements of a secondary credential had a major impact on Nancy's life and her personally. She had experienced feeling that she mattered to others and certainly felt in herself how much her family, especially her son, mattered to her. She now mattered, more than just to herself. Her resilience had increased, helping her develop the strength to continue going back to classes even with the pull at home to stay there. After earning her GED, this resilience shined as Nancy made the decision to continue her education.

> It encouraged me to go on. Encouraged me to go on, not right off, but fairly soon afterward to get my Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) certificate through the local Adult Education program. Had I not gone to get my GED, I don't think I would have known about the program for CNA. So with that GED I could further my education. I think by going back to school it has given me the drive, but the drive hasn't gone away. It is a constant. It gives you the giddy up and go. I guess you could say it was a positive change. I could go from working in the mill to working in an actual career.

Nancy gave birth to her second child after completing the GED. At this point, she decided to go back to school and enrolled in a semester of college as she worked as a CNA She noted that at the time she and her husband were fighting a lot, and it was the end of her marriage. She also shared how she knew it would be a struggle financially to support her children and herself, but that was something she was willing to face to do whatever it took.

We had a very volatile relationship. When I finally left, it took everything I had because at that point I was convinced that I could not do it without him. He would say, "You were seventeen and I took you in." It was very difficult to jump out of the box and be on my own. I decided I could do this on my own. I would work two jobs, and I would take care of my kids. I would support them, and I did that with that CNA Certificate.

As Nancy worked hard to support herself and her two children, she found herself in a new relationship. She could now allow herself to feel she mattered to another adult. However, once again she would find herself in the situation of starting over on her own.

I got into a relationship, and I was going to get remarried. He ended up passing away in 2005 from complications from diabetes. He died in his sleep. At that point, I went through the grieving process. After about six months I decided I want to help people more than I am now as a CNA I want to help people more. I want to become a nurse.

I then got into the actual nursing school. The School of Nursing which takes awhile and you are on a waiting list. I got the call probably it was two weeks prior to the start date. I wasn't supposed to start until the next semester. I was at work

when I got the call, and I am just sitting there going, "Yes I will take it." I actually hung up the phone with a huge smile on my face. So for two long, long years, I did seven days a week. Four days full-time schooling along with clinicals, and three days a week I was doing twelve-hour shifts at the hospital working my tail end off trying to make sure it happened. I did it, and I have to say my biggest support was my son. He's a good boy. If it wasn't for him, I couldn't have done it. [Begins to tear up]

Nancy has accomplished a lot since she returned to school and completed the GED. However, when discussing the decision she made in her youth to drop out of high school, there is regret in her words.

I missed out on a lot of things. I watched my son go through [high school], and I was like you will go to that dance, and you will go to this and that. There's a lot of things that you miss out on when you are out on your own. You miss your friends. You miss graduation. You don't get to do what all the other kids got to do. You're just an outcast. Everybody forgets about you.

Today Nancy is a thirty-nine-year-old newlywed. Recently remarried, she now lives in the same small community where she grew up. She works as a full-time Intensive Care Unit Nurse and part time doing home health care. Nancy allows herself to share the goals she now has her future.

I'm going to become a travel nurse. That is my ultimate goal. I want warmer climates in the winter. I think I will do three-month stints as a traveling nurse. I will go all over the country and work in different facilities and see where it is I really want to be.

As our final interview session was coming to a close, I asked Nancy if there were any other details of her story she wanted to share about her life experiences including those as a school returner. She replied, "I'm thinking no. I think you have covered it pretty well. You have my story." With that, Nancy was on her way to work. She smiled as she headed down the stairs to the front exit. I realized that she now realized that she mattered. Her life now mattered not only to those she helped in the medical field, not only to her children and her new husband but also more importantly to herself.

Brian's Story

Brian grew up as an only child in a rural community in western Maine. At first, Brian paints the image of a family who always had fun together.

> My mother was like one of the super moms. We had like fifteen kids in the
> neighborhood come over, and my mom would be playing soccer with us, baseball
> with us.
>
> I was the type of kid who had an imagination. I was always outside building stuff.
> So as a kid, you know, my father was a painter, so there was always spray cans
> around and everything. It was a pretty good childhood over all I think.

However, further into his story, Brian shared how his mom was depressed and was in and out of the hospital several times as he grew up. Although his dad had a hot temper according to Brian, he always did the best he could with his mom's situation and with raising his son. Brian also felt that his family did not have the same status as other families in the area because his dad worked as a painter instead of working in the mill. Brian believed working in the mill gave you status, made you popular, and meant that

your family had money. Thus he recognized that he did not have all the things some of his friends were able to have because their dads worked in the mill.

My mother was like, you know, she was depressed. I mean she had two brothers that committed suicide, and there was a lot a lot of emotional baggage on her side. My mom was in and out of the hospital, and it was really tough. I mean, I think, that is why I was always embarrassed. My father was a painter. He was his own contractor and because the other guys, the popular kids, their fathers all worked in the mill, so they all had big money. They worked in the mill, and that's what it was based on. My father did the best he could. He was a hot-tempered person, you know, but he was full of a lot of love. My father would give his life for me. It's just that's who my father is. I guess I am pretty lucky that I have him.

As Brian's story continued to unfold it was evident that Brian spent much of his life being pulled between fitting in with others, being there for his parents, and being able to do what he wanted to meet his goals in life. As a young student, Brian attended the local elementary school for grades Kindergarten through fifth grade.

For the most part, now that I go back and really think about it, it was fun. We learned a lot, and you got to have different conversations with different people.

In sixth grade he moved to the middle school. For Brian this was the beginning of a lifetime of not fitting in with others.

I had to be put in special education. I knew I was worth more. It's not that I knew I was worth more, I knew I could do more. But they put me at that level, so it always kept holding me back. I always felt distant from the mainstreamed kids. I was special needs, and maybe so, but I did not feel like I was getting that feeling

from the special education teachers that you would get from the mainstreamed teachers. I think that was the biggest self-esteem issue I had. That pretty much started taking down the blocks of my self-esteem. It made me feel like I could never live up to mainstream even though I wanted to go and have that opportunity.

In high school Brian did have dreams for his future. "I always wanted to be a pilot. I always wanted to be in the Navy and work on aircraft carriers. Be around planes and jets." As he continued to struggle to fit in with others, he tried to participate in sports such as basketball, baseball, and wrestling. He also participated in band. He did not have the resilience he needed to be successful in his high school setting. This only compounded his situation as he discovered he was lost, his self-esteem crumbled more, and he became insecure. Going to school became more like being on an amusement park ride that he did not enjoy being on.

> [It was] like a rollercoaster ride. Excited to go to school but your stomach felt kind of empty. I was a kid that was my own person, so I was different. I didn't really fit in anywhere, and it was kind of hard. I was lost. I mean you were kind of in limbo land. Just the feeling that I wasn't smart enough that was the biggest part, you know. Putting kids in special education is a big thing because not only do the teachers stay in that mentality, the students stay in that mentality as well. It's all he's worth. That's not how you want them to think. They are supposed to have high self-esteem knowing that they are going out in the world to conquer it, not the world conquering them.

As Brian's insecurity continued to build in the school setting as a junior in high school, he made the decision to quit.

I was young. I had a girlfriend, and that played a big part in it. Insecurity. Having

to be paced in special education and not being able to live up to the mainstream

even though I wanted that opportunity. Trying regular classes for a month and

having that not work and being put back in special education classes. I left school

because the moment I got into the mainstreamed classes I was lost and I couldn't

succeed. I just didn't feel like I fit. I don't know why I felt like that, but I always

felt like someone was always cutting me down, making fun of me.

As a high school dropout, Brian continued to feel lost as he still struggled to fit in

while trying to figure out who he was. He found himself hanging with an older group that

seemed as troubled as he was. He continued to search for someone he could matter to and

who could matter to him.

Lost, trying to figure out who I was. Smoking pot. Hanging with an older crowd.

They weren't in trouble, but they were troubled. The crowd was just looking for

somebody to accept them and them to kind of fit in with. I just think that I was

trying to find places where I fit in. I would find a place, and I could never stay in

one place too long before I would move on and find another place. I didn't really

find it you know what I mean.

Between 1999 and 2013 Brian returned to schooling several times through the

local Adult Education program. Each time he stopped attending, thus failing to meet all

the requirements of the GED. There was a lot of pressure on him in the family

professional painting business as he was working with his father. Brian felt rural Maine

was "behind other states." At one point he even left the area to get away from the family

business, but he soon returned home and back to the family business. The pull continued

between trying to follow his dreams and staying close to his family and helping his dad in his business. Brian expressed that no matter where you live, rural Maine or someplace else, it is up to you to make the most of where you live.

> I was living life, but I was also dragging my feet because the reality of it is I was always worried about leaving my parents. I worry about them because there is no one else to take care of them. I always felt I had to help my dad out. People used to say I'm never going to be able to move away. I'm never going to be able to leave my parents behind. I'm never going to be able to make it on my own. Which is hard because my family is all I have, but I also want to change. I want to go to college. I want to get on a plane and fly to San Francisco and rent a pedal bike and pedal across the San Francisco Bridge.

In 2013 he received a letter from the school that informed him that his time was running out to complete the GED requirements before the new High School Equivalency Test (HiSET) replaced the GED. Adult Education programs across the state were about to implement the new exam. The HiSET measures the academic knowledge and proficiency equivalent to those of a high school graduate. The exam covers the five content areas of Language Arts, Reading and Writing, Mathematics, Social Studies, and Science. Individuals who had successfully completed some of the GED content areas could still use these scores through 2014. Brian was one of the individuals who had completed sections of the GED exam but had never finished all of the requirements to earn the credential.

For Brian, the letter came at a point in his life when he needed a boost. He was tired of thinking about all his failures. It was time for him to do something for himself.

Something that might help him break away from the family and begin out on his own life's journey. Although Brian had returned to school several times the pressure of the letter stating, "time was running out" weighed on his mind.

It was weird because I had like two or three tests already done. That I had passed. I only had like two more to do. Then the paper came that said you've got this much time and after that, it's wiped out. It was like an eye opener.

I was just living life you know. I was just sick of my life I guess. I was sick of thinking about all of my failures. That's really what it was. They kept adding up, adding up. It felt like I needed something to lift my self-esteem. I said to myself if I don't do it this time, I am just going to leave it alone. I just don't need to keep going back. Going back wasting other people's time and wasting your own time that's how I felt.

I was nervous, and I thought to myself am I really going to complete it? I said I am going to focus on my schooling. I am really going to do it, this time, you know, because I want it. This is my way of getting out of this environment. This time, I said I'm not letting anything get in the way. I am going to really try this time.

As he focused on his goal of completing the requirements for a GED, he returned to schooling through the local Adult Education program once again. Brian noted that this time, like the other times he returned to schooling, he faced challenges along his journey.

Trying to juggle a job with school and then life on top of it. It was a lot of struggle. Making time for myself. I mean when you are unhappy, or you're having a bad day, usually make time for yourself to get away from it all. But then the reality, there was no way of getting away. I mean I had school like three days or four days

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a week and then I worked. I mean it was like an eighty-hour week or somewhere around there. I was getting something like forty-two hours at work plus doing school. Not having time for myself. Relearning all of that. Taking it all in. You know, it's win or lose. That right there would probably be the biggest struggle of all, knowing that this is my goal. This is what I want. I need to succeed no matter what it takes.

Although there were challenges Brian was also supported throughout his journey. In the Adult Education setting he felt as if he mattered to those who worked with him, and encouraged to keep on working toward his goal of completing the requirements of the GED. This time, he had developed the skills and strength he needed to overcome the barriers. His resilience aided him in his efforts of obtaining a secondary credential.

You know they [Adult Education staff] are all good. They try. They go the distance. They really go beyond their job. It's like its own little family and they really try. All you have to do is ask, and they are there. [My] family and friends, my parents definitely were a big help. My sister [was] a big motivator. She is younger than me, and she went back to school for her masters. A lot of it was my grandfather died. He always said, "You know you have got to finish. That is something that you have got to finish." I always knew that, and I guess when he died I said to myself, it is time.

As June quickly approached, so did the date for graduation, and the ceremony for school returners who completed the requirements for a secondary credentials over the past year. Successfully passing the GED brought about a mixed bag of emotions for Brian.

Everybody was taking the tests to pass before school was getting out. It was crunch time. I said I didn't feel like I was ready. They said take it anyways just to see. I took it, and I passed. I really didn't know how to take it. Everybody wanted to make a big thing of it and everything, my family, and the adult education director, all of them. I knew that I needed that tool to add to my toolbox. I mean my emotions were like all over the place. When I sat down and really thought about it, you know, I felt good. I really did. You know it would have felt better knowing I had graduated with my class. They [parents] felt proud. Yeah, it was like it was long and they wanted me to complete it. To have that feeling that you are not just wasting your life. You know that you completed. You know my parents they were crying and everything. I mean it felt good, you know, knowing that that chapter in my life I completed. Now it is time to set a new goal and chapter, and that's what I am after. I want it all. I am setting the goal. Even if I don't go to college. I did open the doors to the opportunity.

Returning to schooling and completing the requirements of a secondary credential have impacted Brian's life.

I still do feel insecure. Without it [GED] I would be less motivated, and I'd be more depressed, I guess. This has helped you know. It is like building a cement wall. It's the first block that really is the structure of what I am trying to create. I think that is the key to it all. It's where you define yourself. What you are worth. If you know what you are worth no matter what someone says, I think that's really is the key. It was kind of uplifting, and that's a good feeling.

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Brian has accomplished a lot since he dropped out of school, but he still regrets his decision to leave school before graduation.

It's always bothered me that I failed. I couldn't complete a task or I could, and I walked away, and that bothered me a lot. I think a lot of times it was about the GED thing. I always felt like it wasn't as good as the diploma. I always felt like no matter if I go back and finish it's not as good as that paper, that document, that says high school diploma.

Today Brian is thirty-two years old. He speaks little about his future. He continues to work with his dad on industrial construction painting projects. He has participated in a college transition course through his local Adult Education program and would still like to give college a try.

When asked if he felt I had captured his story through our interview sessions he replied, "Yeah for the most part. There's probably a lot of things I left out for good reason," as he gave me a huge laugh. I thanked him for participating in the study. He shook my hand and said, "You are welcome," and Brian then left my office and headed off to the parking lot.

Eddy's Story

Eddy was the fifth participant of the study. He noted that he had heard about this study from his local Adult Education Director who felt he met the criteria for participation. As Eddy began to share his story, it appeared that he felt cheated by the public schooling system. "It is crazy. I feel like they owe me a high school diploma or at least my tax money back." At the beginning of our sessions together he blamed others for his actions. "I pretty much blame the Columbine kid." However, by the end of the third

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interview, Eddy appeared to take responsibility for his actions by stating, "It's not like it was somebody else's fault."

It was apparent that Eddy did not have many close relationships with others. It appeared that he felt he did not matter to others and very few individuals mattered to him. Throughout the interviews, Eddy only spoke of his mom. There was no mention of his father.

I didn't really have any friends in school. I mean nothing too major. Just me and maybe a couple of close friends. I wasn't really family oriented. It was pretty much me and my girlfriend and my couple of friends. I mean I had five friends back in the day. I cut two. I got three friends now.

Eddy, like many students growing up in rural Maine, attended a small local elementary school up through fourth grade.

Elementary school, from what I remember, was fine. I remember they used to make me go to, they used to make me go to the counselor all the time. I don't know why. Looking back on it I don't remember there's no reason. I never acted out or anything. Looking back on it at the time I didn't question it, but I have no idea why.

He entered middle school in fifth grade. It took a few interview sessions to clearly understand that Eddy wanted no part of schooling. Eddy lacked the resilience he needed to cope with the educational environment he found himself in.

Everything was fine up until fifth grade. It wasn't even down hill. It was a sheer drop-off. I'm fairly certain I hold the record for suspensions, a lot of suspensions. I used to get off from a week's suspension and walk in the school on Monday, and

I'd get suspended within fifteen minutes. I mean, it was my fault, I guess. There was no point to me being there. I'd realized I had no idea what was going on with the lesson plans. I didn't feel any affiliation with the people I went to school with. I didn't see how the lessons they were teaching had anything to do with life. Well, my life anyways. The teachers pissed me off. If I were messed with, I'd get pissed. I really didn't want to be there, you know. It was uncomfortable. I didn't like going to school. I didn't like being in groups, large groups of people. I didn't really like it at all. I felt like I was being picked on, so I wouldn't go.

Eddy's public schooling ended one day in the eighth grade when he had an altercation with a teacher. This event led to his never returning to school.

There is a teacher. He is a dink of a dink. He started laying into me about something or other. I can't even remember now. I told him I was going to fucking kill him. They ended up sending me home, and I never came back. In my defense it wasn't really my fa --, it was my fault, but obviously, my teacher was a dink.

Even though he was out of school on an expulsion, Eddy was promoted to high school at the end of his eighth grade year. He believes being kicked out of school in eighth grade and the school board's decision not to allow him to return was the result of the Columbine incident.

They passed me on to the next grade, but I never went. They passed me on and told me I couldn't come. I went up against the school board, and they decided I wasn't fit to be allowed back into school. But it was shortly after the whole Columbine thing so everybody was on edge. I pretty much blame the Columbine kid.

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As a dropout Eddy spent his time sleeping in, hanging out with his friends, and being with his girlfriend. Eddy felt that no one even noticed or cared that he was not in school.

For the first year or so I'd sleep until two in the afternoon. I'd wake up, and my buddies would come over after they got out of school. We would play video games. We'd go to one of my friends' houses and we'd play video games and poker. We used to play poker for quarters all the time. I mean that was probably the first year. The second year I got a girlfriend. I spent most of my time with her. I didn't have to attend school or anything so I would spend weeks up there at a time. I feel bad. I think I might have got her to stop going to school. I mean that was pretty much what I did. I stuck with her for years. We just would mess around; play video games and just hang out.

It seemed to me living in a rural area made it easier for me to slip through the cracks. I got booted out of school in eighth-grade, and nobody even came looking for me. Nobody even noticed me missing really.

As his few school friends prepared to graduate, Eddy realized he was going to be left behind. "They were going to be graduating, and I was going to be left the loser." This was a turning point in his life as he made the decision to return to school at eighteen through the local Adult Education program. He had begun to develop the skills necessary to be successful. His resilience was put to the test as he made the decision to return to school.

It dawned upon me that they were going to graduate, and the idea of becoming an adult became more prevalent I guess. I wasn't going to be able to function

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properly in society. I didn't want to pump gas. I didn't want to. I wasn't going to be a loser. I realized I needed some form of education to get a decent job.

Well, my mom was sick, and I wanted her, you know, kind of a peace of mind for her, to know that her son wasn't going to grow up to be an absolute loser. I was grown up more. I had calmed down a bit. Nothing bothers me now. People can't, you know, piss me off.

My buddy, he's the one that brought me. He introduced me to the teacher and a couple of other people that worked there. The teacher ended up starting the paper work process with me and talking with me, then having me talk to the director. I don't know if it was that night or shortly there after, I think it was that night [I] did some placement tests to see where I was. I eventually hammered out the essay part of it and the science and the social studies. I got everything done pretty quickly except for my math. We were dealing with fractions and decimals and letters. Who ever introduced letters in math? Math, that ended up taking me a while longer. It did. But I did it, and I took my math test finally. I passed by the skin of my teeth.

As a school returner, Eddy noted that he faced a variety of challenges as he worked to obtain a secondary credential.

Well barriers, I faced the simple ones first off. I didn't have a car, so I did a lot of walking. Living in rural Maine there is no public transportation, so I walked. Another barrier I faced was, you know, motivation sometimes. I really didn't have anybody. In high school you've got everybody, the entire system is nudging you along. With Adult Education, it's not the case at all. The other one was a lot of the

stuff they were doing I had never done. I never even got a taste of because I was

booted out of school so early. It was all brand new. It wasn't a refresher. Getting

the placement test and seeing stuff on it that I have never even seen before.

[Feeling] overwhelmed. I felt like maybe I wasn't going to be able to do it

because it's stuff I've never seen before.

Along with the barriers he faced, Eddy was also supported throughout his six-month journey from school returner to school completer. He realized that he did matter to this schooling environment as the staff began to work with him.

The teacher, you know, she's great. She helped me out. I needed a bit of

one-on-one with math in particular and she did it. She really helped me out.

Everybody was pretty good. My mom, obviously, my girl friend at the time, and

my buddy who I came with a couple more times. You know the schedule, for one

I got to do it on my own terms. I was grown up more. I had calmed down a bit. It

was good. I'd come in, and they had coffee that's always a plus. If they would

have had coffee in our school, I probably would of done a lot better.

Passing the GED made Eddy feel like he was smart. He now realizes earning his GED is the basis for how he presently lives his life.

I felt good. I felt happy, you know. It was nice to have it done. It made me feel at

least relatively smart. I mean, I may not be very well educated but, you know, I

am intelligent. I learned the things that I've never even done before. It was fairly

simple. I got it done you know. I realized it had to be done, and I got it done.

[The] most rewarding point was probably when I finished all the tests. When the

results came back, that I had passed.

I realized that I need, you need, some form of education. I was getting close to eighteen, and I knew I was going to be, or supposed to be, self-reliant and self-sufficient. So that was kind of a driving fact. It was getting close to sink or swim. You can't really do much without a high school education or GED. I guess it helped me get this job. This job that I have has pretty much, you know, driven my life at this point. I am employed. I mean you know the job puts a roof over my head. It puts food in my stomach and gives me a car. I mean if you look at it from that aspect it's really everything, it really is. There are the smaller things like my personal sense of accomplishment. I don't feel like a high school dropout loser.

There was regret as Eddy talked about his decision to leave school before graduation.

I did. I did very much. My friends would get out of school and they would tell me about things that happened in school. The people they met in school and girls from school. You know going to prom and everything else. I've never been to prom. I've never been to a school dance. I'm missing a lot of experience you know. As far as hanging out and playing video games, you can do that anytime. I didn't get to go to school. You know it was dumb thing to get done with school. I should have just kept my head down and my mouth closed.

Today Eddy is a twenty-six-year-old single dad of two children. He is employed full time as a maintenance supervisor at a lumber company where before earning his GED he had applied and had not been hired. In his free time, he enjoys playing video games and going target practicing. His future goals and dreams are what he calls "small dreams, little dreams."

My dreams and goals are pay off a decent car, pay off my house and be able to

have a little bit of money at least to travel. That would be ideal for me. I just want

to go to Europe. I just would like to get my house paid off.

Before ending our time together, I wanted Eddy to have the opportunity to add

details to his story if he felt the need to do so. I asked him what he wished I had asked

him about his schooling experiences or the process of returning to school that I didn't ask.

I asked him if he felt I had a true picture of his school experiences.

Honestly, when I came in here, I didn't have any idea what you were going to ask.

I tried to think about it, you know, because obviously, you try to prepare for

something. I really couldn't come up with anything. I had no idea. I don't think

you, I don't think anybody will ever have a true picture except (laughs) except for

maybe the police. My middle school experiences, it wasn't good. I shouldn't say

it was rough on me. I wasn't good either, you know. It's not like it was somebody

else's fault.

I asked him if there was anything else he wanted to add to his story, and he

replied, "I don't think so." With that, our time had ended. I had the story Eddy was

prepared to share at this time. No more, no less. Following is a note to the reader on the

willingness of the participants of the study to share the details of their life experiences.

Participants' Willingness to Share Experiences

During the series of three one-on-one interviews, the participants of the study

shared details of their personal journeys. The details of their stories are only as good as

the self-disclosures by the participants. The three female participants, Debbie, Wendy,

and Nancy all seemed to speak freely about their life experiences. When I finished the

third interviews with each of them, I felt as if I knew them and the story of their life experiences in regards to dropping out of school, living life as a dropout, returning to school, completing the secondary credential requirements, and as school completers, living their lives today.

The two male participants appeared willing to participate in the study. However, both seemed to be less reflective during the interviews. Therefore, they disclosed fewer details about their life experiences. When I asked if they felt I had a clear picture of their story, they both gave me replies that made me realize I didn't. I only had what they had been willing to share. Brian replied, "Yeah for the most part. There's probably a lot of things I left out for good reason." Eddy noted that he did not think I or anyone would ever have a true picture. "I don't think you, I don't think anybody, will ever have a true picture except (laughs) except for maybe the police." I associate this with the developmental stage of the two males. They were the youngest of the five participants. Thus, they have had limited "lived experiences." I also find females are more apt to talk more freely in general about themselves where males are often hesitant to open up when talking about themselves.

Chapter Summary

Chapter Four presented the stories of the five participants' life experiences of being public school students, high school dropouts, school returners, and school completers. Table 4.1 allows the reader to gain a sense of the uniqueness of each participant's experiences. The details have been presented in order to help the reader get a feel for the general details of the participants' dropping out of school, returning to school, and being school completers. These details help highlight the individual

experiences of the participants as well as it gives one the ability to look across the cases

and compare the details of data from the study interviews.

Table 4.1.

Cross Case Analysis of Participants' Experiences

	Debbie	Wendy	Nancy	Brian	Eddy
Age Dropped Out of High School and Reason for Dropping Out	Quit as a Freshman at 14-had to go back because of law - sophomore she quit again when she turned 15 -It was Hell Bulling by Students and Staff Members	Dropped out just a month before beginning her Senior year - she left the state when she was 17 -Boy friend moving out of state	Junior year-at 16-Transition to hs difficult, felt like an outcast, got behind & couldn't graduate on time - pregnant	Junior Year at 17-HS was like a rollercoaster ride-felt he was different-didn't fit in-limbo land-felt he wasn't smart enough-special education experience	Never attended a high school -14 years old-Suspended - Expelled - passed on to high school – School Board would not allow him to return
Age Returned	18	19	19	Between 17 and 31 many times	17
Credential	GED	GED	GED	GED	GED
Timeframe	2 Weeks	Six Months	A year	14 years	Six Months
How They Feel Now About Their Decision to Leave High School Before Graduation	Doesn't regret doing it regrets that she had to	The decision has stuck with her for 27/28 years regrets it every day - it is always in the back of her mind	Absolutely regrets it - missed out on a lot of things - you are just an outcast - everybody forgets about you	Regrets his decision because it always bothered him that he had failed.	Regret it very much- missed a lot - never been to a dance- dumb thing to do-should have kept head down and mouth closed
How they feel now as a School Completer	I am proud of where I have come, What I have become, Where I have ended up	The journey jump started my life to what it is now- I have become a life-long learner - It set the stage - I am a strong person now-It got me back on track to where I should have been going all along	It encouraged me to go on. I think going back to school has given me the drive- I could go from working in the mill to working in an actual career	without this I would be less motivated and more depressed- this has helped-It was kind of uplifting and that's a good thing	Education helped me get this job-this job has pretty much driven my life - I'm employed-puts roof over your head-puts food in stomach and gives me a car-I don't feel like a high school drop out loser

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As one reads the stories of the participants and reviews Table 4.1, he/she will note some similarities and some differences in the experiences of the individuals who participated in the study. While all of the participants dropped out of school for their own reasons at varying points in their schooling career, Eddy was unique in that he never actually attended high school. He was expelled as an eighth grader and passed on to high school. However, when the school board refused to allow him to return as a freshman, his public schooling career ended at the age of fourteen. Debbie quit going when she was fourteen but returned and finally dropped out as a sophomore at the age of fifteen. Nancy and Brian were both juniors and Wendy was ready to begin her senior year when they dropped out of schooling.

Debbie, Nancy, Brian, and Eddy all became dropouts because of social or behavior issues. Debbie experienced bullying. Nancy did not fit in, felt like an outcast, and became pregnant. Brian did not feel as if he fit in, and Eddy's inappropriate behavior caused his departure from school. Wendy admitted that her decision to leave school had nothing to do with social, academic, or behavior reasons. She liked school, had friends, and did well in school. For her, it was because she made the decision to leave the state with her boyfriend. She was in love and was afraid she would lose him if she did not go with him. Therefore, she gave up on her schooling to follow him.

Table 4.1 shows that the participants returned to schooling between seventeen and nineteen years of age. However, a closer look reveals that although Brian did attempt to return to school at the age of seventeen, it was not until he was thirty-one that he was successful in returning to school and obtaining a secondary credential. All five participants earned a GED as their secondary credential. Nancy noted that she had started

out working toward earning a high school diploma, but the process was taking too long, so she switched to the GED route.

In regards to the length of time it took for the participants to complete the requirements of the secondary credential there are two extremes that are unique. Debbie's timeframe was two weeks from the time she enrolled, waited for a scheduled time and date, and took the tests. Brian, on the other hand, took fourteen years from the first time he attempted to earn the credential at the age of seventeen to the age of thirty-one when he was successful in meeting the requirements of the GED.

In summary, the stories shared with me by the participants were unique. However, Table 4.1 points out some of the similarities and differences found within the collection of their stories. The goal of the study was to explore the factors and conditions that impact the journey of a school returner to school completer. This was achieved by studying the following three overarching research questions, which guided the research.

RQ 1. What motivates rural adults who left school before graduation to return to schooling and complete the requirements of a secondary education?

RQ 2. What experiences or barriers do rural adult school returners describe as negatively impacting their efforts in obtaining a high school diploma or in passing the GED exams?

RQ 3. What experiences do rural adult school returners describe as supporting their success in becoming a school completer by obtaining a secondary credential?

Chapter Five presents an analysis of the stories of the five school returners based on these three research questions. The road to returning to school is connected to these research questions that guided the study. Chapter Five concludes with a section that

describes the major findings of the study based on the restorying process of the

participants' stories found in Chapter Four and the analysis of these stories based on the

research questions found in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS OF PARTICIPANTS' STORIES

Chapter Four presented the stories of five school returners from rural Maine. In order to explore the experiences and meaning of returning to school for these five school returners, I analyzed the stories of the participants' road to returning to school. This analysis was based on the three research questions, which guided the research. I gathered data from the stories of the participants that connected to each research question. The data were sorted and categorized by themes related to each research question.

First, I present life events that were disclosed by the participants as being factors in motivating them to make the decision to return to school. The next section of the chapter includes the experiences reported by the school returners that created challenges for them. Throughout this analysis, I use the word challenges to refer to difficult experiences and barriers.

Following the section on challenges the participants faced, I include a section on the factors that impacted the success of rural school returners in obtaining a secondary credential. These factors were based on experiences of the participants that supported their return to schooling and gaining a secondary credential.

The chapter concludes with a chapter summary and the findings of this study. The following is a presentation, based on the three research questions of this study, of the road to returning to school and earning a secondary credential for these five participants.

The Road to Returning to School

The road to returning to school and working to obtain a secondary credential for the five school returners was paved with motivators, challenges, and supports. The following sections describe these aspects of the experiences of the participants.

Motivators for Rural School Returners to Return to Schooling and Complete the Requirements of a Secondary Credential

As I listened to the stories of the participants and later analyzed the data, it appears to this researcher that the motivation to return to schooling for these five rural school returners came from three major factors. These motivators are regret for not completing high school on time, desire for changes in one's life, and rurality and its effect on education attainment for the participants. In addition, I discuss the role of gender and how it impacted their need for schooling. These factors are presented in the following section.

Regret for dropping out of school was a motivator to return to schooling for the participants. Wendy, Nancy, Brian, and Eddy all regretted their decision to drop out of school, and Debbie regretted that she felt, at the time, she had no other choice but to drop out of school before graduation. Wendy noted that, even when she doesn't think about dropping out, it is always in the back of her mind. Wendy expressed her feeling of regret and her understanding of how leaving high school without a secondary credential impacted her life.

I think if I had taken an hour to sit and really ponder and not make such an impulsive decision but to think about, what is going to happen? What are the consequences going to be? I never would have dropped out. However, my entire

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life would have changed. I would not be sitting here right now with you. Should I have stayed in school in an education standpoint? Yes. Was my life a little harder because I didn't? Yes. Would I change it? No. It is what it is.

For Nancy and Eddy it was the aspect of missed opportunities that they regretted. They both regretted missing out on a lot of things such as not attending dances, not going to prom, not marching and graduating with their class, and not getting to know the other students or adults in school. Eddy noted, "I'm missing a lot of experience you know. As far as hanging out and playing video games, you can do that any time. I didn't get to go to school. You know, it was a dumb thing to get done with school." Nancy felt when you drop out of school you become an outcast and everyone forgets about you. She was determined that her son would have the experiences that she missed out on. "I watched my son go through high school, and I was like 'you will go to that dance, you will graduate, and you will go to this and that.'"

For Brian and Eddy it was feeling like a failure that they regretted. The force behind their returning to school to obtain a secondary credential came, in part, from this feeling of failure. Brian noted, "Yeah, I did regret dropping out because it always bothered me that I failed. I couldn't complete a task or I could and I walked away and that bothered me a lot." Debbie stated that she did not regret dropping out of school. Debbie explained, "I do not regret dropping out of school. I regret that I had to." It was at this point that Debbie felt that the only way to escape the bullying was to drop out of school. Thus the emotional feeling of regret came when she actually believed that she had to remove herself from this environment.

Missed opportunities for Wendy, Nancy, and Eddy, the feeling of being a failure for Brian and Eddy, life experiences that were hard to face and deal with for all five of the participants, and the feeling of having only one way out of a difficult situation for Debbie, Nancy, and Brian, all created the feeling of regret for these individuals. These aspects of regret impacted their lives and gave them the motivation to return to schooling. As the participants experienced life without a secondary credential, they began to want a new life path for their futures. Regrets of the past inspired motivation to return to schooling to obtain a secondary credential in order to create a new future.

Wanting a new life path for the future as a motivator to return to schooling. Each of the participants experienced life events that impacted their decision to drop out of high school as well as life events which motivated them to return to school. As the participants began to desire a new life, enhanced employment opportunities, and/or educational opportunities, they became motivated to reenroll in schooling to obtain a secondary credential.

Debbie, Nancy, and Brian all expressed the desire for a new life, different from what they were experiencing, as motivation to return to schooling. Debbie shared that she had seen her mom work multiple dead end jobs just to get by. She saw herself following in her mom's footsteps after she dropped out of school. She was babysitting, working in a shoe shop, and doing odd jobs to help her and her mom get by. Debbie was motivated to return to school to create a new life for herself that she could enjoy. Nancy was motivated to return to school in order to break free from the life she found herself living. She was in an unhealthy relationship with her husband. She felt by returning to school she could create a new life for her and her child. Brian shared that he had hit rock bottom in his life

as a high school dropout. "I was lost trying to figure out who I was, you know. I was smoking pot and hanging with an older crowd. I was just sick of my life I guess. I needed something to lift my self-esteem." Brian's desire for a new life motivated him to return to schooling.

Four of the participants, Debbie, Wendy, Nancy, and Eddy, all shared their desire for future employment opportunities as a motivator to return to schooling to obtain a secondary credential. Debbie desired to get a job that she loved doing. "I wanted to get a job that I loved rather than the crappy jobs I have had in the past that I did just to survive." Wendy, after the loss of her son, made the decision to join the profession of nursing. She knew her desire to become a nurse had to start with returning to school and obtaining a secondary degree before she could further her education. Nancy shared how she was tired of working in the dirty gross factory. She was motivated to return to school in order to find different employment opportunities. "[With a secondary credential] I could go from working in the mill to working in an actual career." For Eddy his motivation of future employment opportunities came after being turned down for a job. "I put in for a position and they didn't hire me. That kind of made me want to return to school so I could get a job."

The personal desire to complete the requirements for a secondary credential motivated Debbie, Nancy, Brian, and Eddy to return to schooling. Debbie states, "Oh I knew when I dropped out that I was going to go get it. I just couldn't until after I turned eighteen." For Nancy her desire to obtain the credential stemmed from becoming a mom and wanting to be a role model for her son. "I myself felt the need that I had to return to school. I thought when my son gets older, what is he going to think? What is he going to

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say? My mother didn't graduate from high school. That's not a positive thing." Brian had attempted several times between the ages of seventeen and thirty-one to obtain a secondary credential. He desired to, for once and all, be successful in obtaining the credential. "I said, alright I am going to focus on my schooling. I am really going to do it this time, you know, because I want it." Eddy's personal motivation to return to school and obtain a secondary credential came from his desire to prove to his sick mom that he could. "Well my mom was sick and I wanted her to have, you know, kind of a peace of mind for her. Before she kicked the old bucket to know that her son wasn't going to grow up to be an absolute loser." Each of these four participants had the personal desire to obtain a secondary credential, which gave them the motivation to return to school.

For three of the participants, Wendy, Nancy, and Brian, the desire to further their education beyond high school was a motivator to return to schooling. Both Wendy and Nancy had made the decision to become a nurse. They both understood that in order to go on to post-secondary schooling they needed to first reenroll and obtain a secondary credential. Brian noted that he had always wanted to give college a try and he realized this was a step in that direction. "My family is all I have. But I also want to change, you know what I mean. I want to go to college. I am thirty-two and I am thinking like the guy said, it is either do something now or you will just keep doing what you are doing."

Living in a rural location also impacted the motivation of the participants to return to school and obtain a secondary credential. The following section looks at this impact.

Living in a rural location motivated the participants to return to schooling. All five of the participants noted living in rural Maine impacted their life experiences in a variety of ways. This section looks at how living in rural Maine motivated them to return

to school to obtain a secondary credential. This motivation came because of the types of job opportunities that were available to them living in rural areas without a secondary credential.

The jobs once available to individuals without a high school credential are not as available. To be able to find work in rural areas individuals now, more than in the past, need a secondary credential. Debbie worked in a shoe shop, Nancy in a dowel mill, Eddy found a job pumping gas, while Brian worked as a dish washer. These were types of jobs available to individuals with no high school credential in rural areas. The four of them noted that they wanted to find higher paying jobs and realized they needed a secondary credential and thus were motivated to return to school.

Brian shared that he knew it was time to return to school when he got a job. "I got a job washing dishes. That really showed me, you know, not that it's a crappy job but I mean that is usually the way you start. Bottom of the barrel." Eddy admitted, "The idea of becoming an adult became more prevalent, I guess. I wasn't going to be able to function properly in society. I didn't want to just pump gas." After Nancy's son was born she resolved to make some changes in her life.

> I decided at that point that I needed to go back to school or I was never going to get anything besides a factory job. I felt like I had to. You couldn't get a job. I felt like if I ever wanted to do anything other than stack wood I have to go back to school. I returned to school and after that I decided to go into CNA work. I needed at least my GED so I could go from working in the mill to working in an actual career.

Debbie's motivation to return to school in part came from growing up in rural Maine and watching her mom work multiple low paying jobs.

> She [mom] never got out of the shoe shop or the laundry mat, you know. She had to work three jobs to support us instead of being maybe able to work one and relax. I missed out on a lot because we had no money living in a single parent family. My mother worked three jobs and I earned money babysitting and things, but there was never any money. We had what we had to have, you know, and my mother did a remarkable job, but there wasn't anything for extras.

Debbie was motivated to return to school to obtain a secondary credential so she could get a higher paying job that she loved. She is now an EdTech working in the community she grew up in.

> I am an EdTech three. I am extremely happy about that. I am. I really am. I love being an EdTech. I can afford to live my life today (laughs) ummm, you know. I was able to get a job that I love rather than the crappy jobs I have had in the past that I did just to survive. I think that's the big thing. I am doing something that I want to do.

These motivators were important to the participants. Another factor of the participants' experiences related to rurality can be understood through the lens of gender. The following section looks at the connection between gender and an individual's motivation to return to schooling in order to obtain a secondary credential.

Motivation to return to school and the role of gender. Although, this study has few participants, some indicators of the connection between gender and formal education can be extracted from the data. The three females, Debbie, Wendy, and Nancy all were

motivated to return to school and obtain a secondary credential as a step toward a different career than they found themselves having as a dropout. Their motivation to earn a secondary credential was based on the fact that all three of the females planned to obtain more education beyond this credential. Debbie wanted a position that would allow her to work only one job and live a comfortable life. She wanted to break free from the life of multiple dead end jobs that her mother had experienced. Wendy wanted to become a nurse and thus was motivated to return to school and get her secondary credential. Nancy wanted to get her secondary credential so she could find a better job, one that was based on a career that she loved. For the males of the study their motivation connected to wanting a different job like the females, but they were looking at going to work not college. Brian did say he wanted to give college a try, but his motivation came from wanting to break free of the family business and get out on his own. Eddy wanted a job in the local lumber mill where he had previously been turned down for a position for lack of a high school diploma.

As reported by Corbett (2007) gender impacts one's educational experiences. Corbett reported that the women of Digby Neck were twice as likely to complete high school as men. The women of this study shared some of the same challenges to an education as females living in Digby Neck shared. Nancy shared being pregnant was an obstacle for her. Wendy explained how she quit school to move out of state with her boyfriend because she was afraid of losing the relationship if she didn't. Debbie endured bullying, and Nancy had an abusive husband causing both of them to experience self-esteem issues. Nancy shared how the pressure she faced to stay home "where she belonged" instead of going to school created a challenge for her.

The males of Digby Neck reported leaving school before graduation to work in the family fishing business or for someone in the fishing industry. They also reported they left because they saw the formal education as "irrelevance and drudgery" (Corbett, 2007, p. 125). Brian shared the pressure to help his dad in the family painting business as a reason to leave and stay out of school. Both of the males of this study shared that they found the education they were receiving irrelevant to their lives and future plans.

It is worth noting that the rural school returners of this study expressed some of the same views regarding education as the males and females of Digby Neck and rural Appalachia. Assumed traditional gender roles within rural communities, relationships, self-esteem issues, relevancy of formal education, and working for family businesses are all unique experiences of the school returners that show how gender has an effect on rural school returners' educational experiences and goals.

Summary of Motivating Factors for Rural School Returners to Return to Schooling to Obtain a Secondary Credential

Table 5.1 summarizes the motivating factors that impacted the decision of the participants to return to schooling to obtain a secondary credential. Each of these factors impacted their return to schooling as well as their success in overcoming challenges they faced as they worked to complete the requirements of a secondary credential.

Table 5.1

Motivating Factors to Return to Schooling

	Debbie	Wendy	Nancy	Brian	Eddy
Regret					
For not Completing High School	X	X	X	X	X
For Missed Opportunities		X	X		X
Feeling as a Failure for not Finishing				X	X
Plan for a New Life					
Wanting a New Life	X		X	X	
Future Employment Opportunities	X	X	X		X
Personal Goal to Complete Credential	X		X	X	X
Additional Educational Opportunities		X	X	X	
Rurality					
Limited Employment Opportunities	X	X	X	X	X
Previous Schooling Irrelevant				X	X

Deciding to return was only the first step along this road. Each school returner faced challenges along his/her journey as a school returner. According to the participants, regret for dropping out of school, their desires for the future, and the lack of job opportunities in rural Maine without a secondary credential motivated them to return to school. However, the road to completion was scattered with roadblocks as they traveled toward a secondary credential. The following section describes the challenges the school returners faced.

Experiences and Emotions School Returners Describe as Negatively Impacting

Their Efforts in Obtaining a Secondary Credential

As the school returners worked to earn a secondary credential, they faced a variety of challenges. When asked directly during interview two, "describe the barriers you faced along the way," the participants shared a variety of challenges they encountered. These challenges are organized into three categories: the impact of living in a rural area, an individual's personal feelings about themselves and their ability, and the pull between schooling and adult responsibilities.

Living in a rural location. As noted above, rurality and its impact on the experiences of the participants was a motivating factor in their decision to return to school. However, in the process of actually fulfilling their goal of obtaining a secondary credential, living in a rural location created obstacles for the school returners. All five of the participants noted living in rural Maine impacted their life experiences in a variety of ways. The first of these was the lack of high paying jobs available in rural areas. All five participants described their jobs as entry level, hard, and low paying. Working in a shoe shop, a dowel mill, pumping gas, and doing dishes were the types of jobs available to individuals with no high school credential in rural areas. The participants were caught in a bind. They needed the low paying jobs to get by; however, working them limited the time and effort they could put towards meeting the requirements of an education that would help them get out of the rut they found themselves in.

Being unprepared for post-secondary opportunities was another challenge three of the participants noted living in rural areas created for them. There was little talk or expectation that one would go to college. In addition, there was a lack of programs and

equipment necessary to prepare one for college. Debbie noted that there seemed to be very little talk about going to college while she was in high school. She also noted that the expectation of going on to college seemed to be for very few students such as the top ten. Nancy shared that she felt the small rural schools did not prepare one for college as did schools located in more populated areas. She felt the lack of labs, equipment, and course offerings put rural kids at a disadvantage.

The lack of social activities were noted by both Wendy and Nancy who shared that they felt by living in rural Maine they were very isolated. They attributed the isolation to the lack of Internet service available to rural communities and the poor cell phone reception in rural areas as well. Nancy added that her feeling of isolation also came from a lack of social activities available to those growing up in rural Maine. She noted that in the city there are things for kids to do such as going bowling, going to the movies, and going to the mall to hang out. Nancy also noted the lack of cultural differences in a small rural community made it difficult for her to adjust when she moved out of state for a short period of time.

Another challenge that two of the participants reported they faced living in rural Maine was the lack of transportation. Wendy and Eddy both mentioned in rural Maine there was no public transportation system. Wendy shared how they had to really plan out who had to be where and when because there were four adults in the house and only three vehicles. Eddy reported that he did not have any transportation and that was a big challenge for him. He shared that he did a lot of walking, even at night, in order to obtain his credential. The lack of transportation impacted their efforts in becoming a school completer.

Brian noted that rural Maine was behind other states. And a small rural Maine

town would be behind Portland, Maine in what it has to offer people for jobs and

education. However, he expressed that he felt it was up to the individual to make the most

of where he/she lived when he stated, "All these different places, it is what you put in that

you receive, no matter where you live." The participants noted how living in rural Maine

impacted their lives as high school students and as school returners. Lack of high paying

jobs, of technology, of preparation for post-secondary experiences, of social opportunities,

and of a public transportation system contributed to the general sense of isolation all

participants shared as ways living in rural Maine impacted their efforts in obtaining a

secondary credential.

Personal feelings about oneself and one's ability. Wendy, Nancy, Brian, and

Eddy all described how their personal feelings about themselves created challenges for

them as school returners working to obtain a secondary credential. Wendy, Nancy, Brian,

and Eddy reported that their inertia at times was an obstacle during their personal

journeys. Wendy said that it was hard to get herself to go back adding, "I guess I was a

barrier to myself." Nancy shared, "At times the barrier was me. It was a struggle to make

myself go." For Brian it was all about living life and as he noted, "dragging my feet."

Eddy stated that he was, "a barrier to his own personal efforts by lacking the motivation

at times to get through the process."

The feeling of not being smart enough was reported by Brian and Eddy. Brian

shared that he was nervous wondering if he was going to be able to complete the

requirements of the GED stating, "I'm guessing just the feeling that I wasn't smart

enough, that was the biggest part." Eddy was faced with material he had never seen

before. He was not sure if he was smart enough to learn all of this new material in order to pass the GED. Both Wendy and Eddy mentioned the feeling of being alone in the process as a personal/emotional challenge. Wendy felt alone because her high school friends were moving on with their lives and dreams and she was trying to do this without her classmates. For Eddy he felt alone when he realized he did not have anyone "to nudge him along" the journey as a school returner.

Another personal/emotional challenge reported was the feeling of embarrassment. Wendy is the only participant who described this feeling. For her having to face her embarrassment was admittedly a big challenge.

I hate to admit it. The embarrassment of having to be there in the first place. I know everyone else that that was there had their own story, but I think making myself get over that embarrassed feeling for not having finished high school, that embarrassment was big for me.

Eddy was the only participant to mention "feeling overwhelmed." He faced a lot of unknown material during his journey due to never attending high school. This emotion was evident when he said, "Feeling overwhelmed. I felt like maybe I wasn't going to be able to do it because it wasn't even stuff I had ever seen." Although the other participants did not say the word "overwhelmed" they described the feeling. Brian described the feeling of being overwhelmed this way, "I had the feeling that I wasn't smart enough, that was the biggest part, you know what I mean." Nancy shared that she was overwhelmed with the amount of time it was taking to get her high school diploma, so she changed pathways and worked on passing the GED.

The pull between schooling and "life" responsibilities. For three of the participants, Wendy, Nancy, and Brian, the pull between going to school and working to obtain a secondary credential and the other responsibilities they had as adults at that time created a challenge for them. Outside of their schooling Wendy, Nancy, and Brian all had jobs. They noted it was a challenge to juggle their time. Nancy and Brian both shared how the pull between family and schooling created a challenge for them. Household chores were another adult responsibility that Wendy and Nancy noted created a pull for them. Another pull described by Nancy and Brian was between family members and their schooling.

Brian was pulled between wanting to go to college and getting out of the area and having the pressure to help his dad in the family painting business. Brian shared there was always a lot of pressure on him to help his dad in the family business. The pull between following his dreams of going to college and getting out of the area and staying close to his family and helping his dad was a challenge for him. He had tried several times to return to school and obtain a secondary credential. However, each time the pressure of working for his dad got in the way of his schooling. Brian expressed it this way, "I always felt I had to help my dad out. Trying to juggle a job with school and then life on top of it. It was a lot of struggle."

This struggle was a challenge for Wendy as well. She found herself being pulled between doing homework as a school returner and tending to adult tasks such as household chores and working. In the end schooling lost, and she did not continue. Following, is her description of the challenge faced.

I signed up for a class. It was for my GED. I went to two or three meetings. I was just not disciplined enough to go home and do the work. It was like something really does happen. You think, I am an adult. I'm paying my own bills. What am I doing? Why do I want to do this homework? It just wasn't like you're in high school and that's your job to do your homework. So I just didn't go back.

Nancy felt the pressure from her husband to be at home instead of going to school. He would say, "What are you doing that for? You've got this at home. We need you at home. We don't need you there." She shared that it was difficult for her because she always felt that she should be at home instead of being at school working toward her credential.

Summary of Challenges Faced by Rural School Returners

Table 5.2 summarizes the challenges the school returners of this study faced as school returners working to obtain a secondary credential. The reader will note that the table includes some challenges that were faced by just one or two participants. As a group these may not seem as important to this study. However, for the individuals who were impacted by these challenges, they were real to them and created obstacles they had to overcome in order to be successful school completers. Therefore, I have elected to include them in the following table.

Table 5.2

Challenges Faced by Rural School Returners

	Debbie	Wendy	Nancy	Brian	Eddy
Living in a Rural Location					
Lack of High Paying Jobs	X	X	X	X	X
Unprepared for Post-Secondary	X		X	X	
Isolation		X	X		
Lack of Public Transportation		X			X
Personal Feelings About Oneself or One's Ability					
Personal Inertia		X	X	X	X
Unprepared Academically				X	X
Feeling of Being Alone		X			X
Embarrassment		X			
Overwhelmed			X	X	X
Pull Between Schooling and Adult Responsibilities					
Job		X	X	X	
Family			X	X	
Household Chores		X	X		
Pressure from Others			X	X	

All five participants noted how the rural location impacted their efforts in obtaining a secondary credential. Four of the participants mentioned personal/emotional challenges that they faced along their journeys. All but one of the participants of the study described the challenge of inertia in the face of taking steps to move forward returning to schooling. Three of the participants, Wendy, Nancy, and Brian shared how the pull between schooling and their other responsibilities created a challenge for them.

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The two male participants shared they did not feel academically prepared to be successful in mastering the material needed to obtain a secondary credential. Two of the school returners shared that they felt alone in the process. One participant detailed how the feeling of embarrassment created a challenge for her when she first became a school returner. Only one of the participants expressed feeling overwhelmed while trying to complete the requirements for a secondary credential. However, although they did not use the word "overwhelmed," it appears that others felt this way at some point in their journey by the words they used to describe their experiences as school returners in rural Maine. It is evident that for those who experienced them, these challenges created major obstacles in being successful as school returners.

The above sections allowed the reader to look across the experiences of the school returners to understand the challenges that each one faced in relation to how the challenges impacted the efforts of the five school returners as a group. The participants experienced events in their lives that motivated them to return to school. As school returners, each of them faced challenges as they worked to complete the requirements of a secondary credential. However, the road they traveled was also paved with supporting factors, which in turn assisted the participants as school returners and helped them become successful school completers. The following section describes the supportive factors that helped the school returners confront and deal effectively with the challenges they faced along their journeys to a secondary credential.

Supporting Factors for Rural School Returners

The journeys of these five school returners toward a secondary credential were impacted by a variety of supportive factors along the way. When asked directly during

interview two, "What would you describe as the things, events, or people that supported you the most in your return to school journey?" the participants all described networks of caring and supportive individuals who helped them in their efforts as school returners. In addition, they implied that there were resilience factors that also helped them.

Network of support. All five of the participants described experiences of love and support by family, friends, and teachers. This network of support showed the participants that they were cared about and were important to others. The school returners knew that members of their support networks were proud of them for their efforts as they worked to obtain a secondary credential. These networks of caring individuals encouraged the school returners as they worked to become school completers. The size of the network was not the important aspect for the school returners; it was the support they received from the individuals in the networks that made the difference for the school returners.

Unlike the other four participants, Debbie's network of support consisted of one individual, her mom. Debbie shared how her mom had stood beside her. "A lot of it had to do with my mother. She stood by me when I quit, even though she didn't want me to quit. She understood and she went along with it even though it broke her heart." Debbie's mother never pushed her in to returning but she did take every opportunity she could to remind her what kind of life she had to look forward to if she didn't. Nancy's network of support and love consisted of her parents and her grandmother. During the interviews she noted that her parents were a big influence and support for her especially her dad who had dropped out of high school and knew first-hand how hard it was to return. Nancy also

shared how important her grandmother was to her offering to help her in any way that she could.

The support networks for four of the five participants included staff members of the Adult Education programs. Wendy, Nancy, Brian, and Eddy all shared how the staff supported them as they worked to earn a secondary credential. Wendy noted the Adult Education Director was a huge support for her by helping her through the enrollment process. She added that it was the Director who called to say she had passed the tests. Nancy shared that the Adult Education staff was very good and that she appreciated the fact that they were there when you needed them. Brian too included the teachers and the Director on his list of those who had supported him. He added that the teachers are all good and that they really go beyond their job, making it like its own little family. For Eddy it was the Adult Education teacher that took the time to work with him in math one-on-one who became a valuable and supportive member of his network.

The networks for Debbie, Wendy, and Nancy included support from individuals who could sympathize with them as school returners. Debbie's mother had also dropped out of school, so she could sympathize with Debbie's failure to graduate. This caused Debbie to work to please her mom and make her proud. Wendy noted that all of the school returners participating in the classes could sympathize with each other because they were there working to earn the credential that they had failed to obtain in high school. Nancy also had her dad who could sympathize with her regarding her failure to graduate. He had quit school a month before graduation and knew the struggle it was for him to return. He encouraged her to return and finish. Each of these participants had

someone in their lives that understood first-hand what life was like being a high school dropout and could sympathize with them as they worked to earn a secondary credential.

Wendy had a huge network of support surrounding her, which helped her to earn her secondary credential and put her on the path to becoming a nurse. She was determined to return to school. She shared how important being surround by her network was in her success as a school returner.

When I moved back here, it was kind of like the familiar surroundings. It was a lot easier to make that decision to go back. I found the support I needed that wasn't there when I tried to go back when we lived out of state. My in-laws would give me rides or let me borrow their truck. They would babysit for me. My grandfather was there to encourage me along the way. For me also there was my work family. They were good to me, and they encouraged me as I went through this. My friends, of course, gave me inspiration to go back and get this done.

Brian's network was made up of family and friends. He shared that his friends, his parents, and his sister were a big help to him as he worked to obtain a secondary credential. However, Brian noted that he felt a lot of his emotional support came from his grandfather after he had passed away. "A lot of it was my grandfather died. He always said, 'You know you have got to finish. That is something that you have got to finish.' I always knew that and I guess when he died I said to myself, 'it is time.'" Eddy shared that his support network consisted of his girlfriend with whom he spent a lot of time, his buddy who first took him to the Adult Education program, and his mom. Although his mom was ill, it was for her that he was determined to be successful in obtaining a secondary credential.

Personal resilience factors and internal attributes. Personal resilience factors and internal attributes allow the individual to buffer the adverse effects of his or her situation. Willingness to work hard, coping mechanisms, recognizing the value of an education, and personal motivation are among the personal resilience factors believed to be associated with educational resilience (Geary, 1988; McMillan & Reed, 1994; Wang et al., 1994).

All five participants described how their willingness to work hard impacted their success in obtaining a secondary credential. Debbie credits her mom for instilling in her to, "work hard for something you want." Wendy shared that in the end no matter what challenges you face, or what support you get from others, it all comes down to you and the effort you are willing to put in to something. She admitted that returning to school and working to earn her GED was hard. "It was really hard, but it was very rewarding. That made it all the sweeter." Nancy wanted to finish the GED before it became more difficult. She noted that she had the drive to prove she could do this. Brian, like the three female participants, was willing to work hard and do what it took to become a school completer. He shared that he was determined to survive and do what it took to succeed no matter what. Eddy admitted that there were times that he felt like he was not going to be able to successfully complete the requirements of a secondary credential. However, he was determined to work hard and show his sick mom that he was not going to be a loser so he kept plugging away at his lessons.

Coping mechanisms are ways in which external and internal stress is managed, adapted to, or acted upon. Susan Folkman and Richard Lazarus (1984) define coping as constantly changing one's efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands

that are considered taxing. It is evident, through their stories, that the participants of this study did not possess the coping mechanisms as high school students. Rather than changing their efforts to manage the taxing situations they found themselves in, they made the decision to leave high school before graduation.

As the participants experienced life, it appears their personal coping mechanisms developed over time. Debbie experienced being separated from her mom as a child, being bullied in school, and working a factory job for three years until she turned eighteen and could take the GED. At the time she did not have the skills necessary to focus her efforts on managing the taxing situation of being bullied in school. In high school, Wendy did not have the ability to manage the internal demands she put on herself of being able to cope with being separated from her boyfriend. Thus, she dropped out of school and moved out of state to be with him. For Wendy her ability to cope with the tragic loss of her son was in part due to the support she received from others and the development of coping mechanisms, which she used to move forward in life putting her efforts in a new direction.

In high school Nancy endured both external and internal stresses. She described feeling like an outcast due to the pressure of finding herself in a larger school environment in which she was unable to be successful. Nancy's coping mechanisms strengthened as she became a mom. She used her skills to return to school and complete the GED as well as break free from a controlling relationship. She also faced the loss of a loved one, which once again put her coping efforts to the test.

Brian was also unable to use coping mechanisms in high school. He felt as if he did not fit in and felt lost and alone. Brian's effort was spent trying to cope with his home

life, which included a depressed mom and at times a hot-tempered dad. As an adult he tried several times to compete the requirements of the GED but was unable to cope with having to care for his mom and work for his dad while trying to attend schooling. As time passed, his skills became stronger and finally he was able to cope with the stresses of life while working to earn a secondary credential. Eddy's coping skills developed after he no longer attended school. In school he could not cope with the rules and the academic requirements, which led to behavior issues. As a high school dropout he developed coping mechanisms to survive. He put these to work as he returned to school by juggling his job, his home life, and the fact that in order to attend Adult Education classes he had to walk to and from school.

Even while facing unique life experiences the participants all had aspirations to move themselves forward in life. All five participants described in their stories how as school returners they recognized the value of an education. Debbie knew she wanted it and knew she would get her GED at some point. Both, Debbie and her mom recognized the value of an education and what opportunities the credential could open up for her.

I loved homework. The more they gave me the happier I was. I knew when I dropped out I would get my GED, or something, at some point. It was never that I didn't like education or that I didn't want it. I knew I was going to get that one way or another. I was determined. I was going to do it and get it done. I just wanted that piece of paper.

When Wendy decided to become a nurse she knew obtaining a secondary credential was the first step in this process. Nancy also knew that an education was the way to go from doing dead end meaningless jobs to building a career. Brian recognized

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the value of an education in helping him get out of the environment that he found himself in so he made the decision to return to schooling. "I said I am really going to do it this time, you know, because I want it. This is my way of getting out of this environment. This time I said I'm not letting anything get in the way."

Eddy also noted his aspirations impacted his success as a school returner. Passing the GED helped Eddy realize that earning a secondary credential was the basis for how he presently lives his life. He expressed this notion in the following manner.

I realized that you need some form of education. You can't really do much without a high school education or GED. I guess it helped me get this job. This job that I have has pretty much, you know, driven my life at this point. I am employed. I mean you know the job puts a roof over my head. It puts food in my stomach and gives me a car. I mean if you look at it from that aspect it's really everything, it really is.

The participants of this study described in their stories how personal Resilience factors and internal attributes supported their efforts as school returners. They shared how they were willing to work hard and do whatever it took to be successful. They had aspirations to move forward in life and came to understand the value of an education in helping them reach their goals. The participants of this study followed the patterns seen by other researchers (Corbett, 2007; Hendrickson, 2012) where the men end up in laborer jobs or in service industry employment, yet the women tend to follow a pattern of seeking further education. The desires they shared for the future motivated them to return to school, while resilience and internal attributes supported them as school returners working to obtain a secondary credential.

Summary of Supportive Factors for Rural School Returners

Table 5.3 summarizes the supportive factors the school returners of this study shared that assisted them as they worked to obtain a secondary credential. Each of these supports was instrumental in the success of the school returners who experienced them, therefore, I have elected to include them in this table.

Table 5.3.

Supportive Factors for Rural School Returners

	Debbie	Wendy	Nancy	Brian	Eddy
Network of Support					
Parent(s)	X	X	X	X	X
Adult Education Staff		X	X	X	X
Those Who Could Sympathize With the School Returner	X	X	X		
Other Relatives		X	X	X	
Friend(s)		X		X	X
Personal Resilience Factors and Internal Attributes					
Willingness to Work Hard	X	X	X	X	X
Coping Mechanisms	X	X	X	X	X
Recognized Value of Education	X	X	X	X	X

All five of the school returners of this study noted how important their networks of support were to their success in obtaining a secondary credential. As noted in Table 5.3 these networks consisted of their parents, adult education staff members, people who could sympathize with them because they too had dropped out of school and knew what life was like as a dropout, other relatives, and friends. All five of the participants also shared how their personal willingness to work hard, their coping mechanisms, and their

ability to recognize the importance of an education as school returners all helped them become successful school completers. It appears in the stories of these five school returners, that their support networks and their personal resilience and internal attributes were supportive factors that helped them manage the challenges they faced as they worked to obtain a secondary credential.

This chapter concludes with a chapter summary section followed by a section that presents the findings of this study.

Summary of Motivations, Challenges, and Supports for School Returners

Chapter Five presented the data based on the three research questions that guided the study. The participants described life events, regret for not completing high school on time, desire for a new life plan, and rurality and its effect on their education attainment, as motivators to return to schooling in order to obtain a secondary credential. Each of the participants described challenges they faced that impacted their efforts as a school returner. Four of the school returners described the pull between their schooling and all the adult responsibilities they faced as a challenge. All five participants mentioned aspects of the rurality of Maine as being a challenge for them at some point along their journey. These aspects included: little talk and preparation for postsecondary, isolation, lack of technology service, low paying job opportunities, lack of resources, and lack of public transportation. Likewise, four participants admitted that they themselves created a challenge to their efforts of obtaining a secondary credential in that inertia was a strong force they had to fight against and often they were overcome by it.

It is evident, just as in the case of challenging experiences, supporting factors the participants described, networks of support, resilience, and internal attributes helped them

manage the challenges they faced as they worked to obtain a secondary credential. It is also apparent that the experiences and rural community connections of the participants impacted their attachment to an education. The following section presents the major findings of the study based on the restorying process of the participants' stories found in Chapter Four and the analysis of these stories based on the research questions found in Chapter Five. This work led to the development of four major findings of this study.

Findings on School Returners' Experiences

This study examined the experiences of five rural school returners. Debbie, Wendy, Nancy, Brian, and Eddy all dropped out of a rural high school before graduation. Each participant returned to a rural adult education program after being out of school for at least one year. Their experiences allowed for exploration of what motivates one to return to school, what challenges rural school returners face, and what factors support the success of rural school returners in obtaining a secondary credential. I used the conceptual framework while designing this study and while analyzing the data. The findings of this study sifted out from the data also follow the conceptual framework. The following section of this chapter provides the findings of this study.

Finding #1. The rural context is an important factor in what motivates individuals to return to school and what challenges they face as school returners.

As noted previously, rural can be defined both objectively in terms of size of place and distance from major cities and subjectively in terms of community feeling, intimacy, and interdependency among individuals and families (Hill, 2014). The rural context motivated the participants to return to school because the jobs of the past were no longer available to them without a secondary credential. The notion of employment in the

rural context can be defined both objectively and subjectively in this study. Objectively the jobs available to the participants in their rural communities versus those that may have been available to them in urban areas, were fewer in number, entry-level positions that paid lower wages. However, considering the subjective aspects of rurality, the school dropouts remained in their communities close to their families because they were paid such low wages and they had no chance to leave for other employment opportunities because they lacked a credential.

The participants described working entry-level, low paying jobs. Often working multiple part-time jobs just to get by. Initially, the participants saw opportunities for employment within their rural communities just out of their reach without the credential. Debbie was motivated to break out of the cycle her mom was in and that she found herself in, working multiple jobs. She understood that by obtaining a secondary credential, this would be the first step in helping her find a job that she enjoyed and one that could give her the life she wanted. Wendy and Nancy both decided they wanted to become nurses. The secondary credential was the first step in going to college. They were motivated to return to obtain this credential, so they could pursue a post-secondary education. Eddy felt the disappointment of not being hired at a local lumber mill because he did not have his high school credential. He was motivated to return to school to obtain it, so he could get a job in his small rural community at the lumber mill. Debbie, Wendy, Nancy, and Eddy all were motivated to return to schooling to obtain employment in rural Maine. They saw employment opportunities within their communities that could be available to them if they had the credential as motivation to return to schooling. These

four wanted to be independent while having the feeling of intimacy for their jobs within their rural communities.

Unlike the other four participants, Brian was motivated to return to schooling so he could break out of the rural community he found himself living in. He shared, "I want to get on a plane and fly to San Francisco and rent a pedal bike and pedal across the San Francisco Bridge." He saw a secondary credential as a way out of rural Maine and as a way to break free from the family painting business. The objective definition of rural is what motivated Brian. He was motivated to return to school so he could distance himself from his rural community and relocate to a city environment. At the same time, however, his attachment to his family and their needs is what subjectively called him back.

After making the decision to return to school, the participants faced challenges that rurality created for them. The challenges posed by the rural context included both of these definitions in their return to school. The objective definition of rural being in terms of size of the place and distance from major cities posed these challenges to the school returners: being unprepared for and uninformed of post-secondary options, lack of public transportation, isolation due to the lack of Internet, poor cell phone reception, and limited social and educational opportunities. Considering the subjective definition of rural, community feeling, intimacy, and interdependency among individuals and families, four of the participants shared their connections to their families and rural communities. They wanted to remain close to and connected with their support networks. Also for them, rurality was not only a way of life. It was who they were, their identity. To the participants, community represented, "the place where life is lived, jobs are found, and identity is forged" (Corbett, 2007, p. 102).

All five of the participants noted living in rural Maine impacted their life experiences in a variety of ways. The first of these was the lack of high paying jobs available in rural areas. All five participants described their jobs as entry level, hard, and low paying. Working in a shoe shop, a dowel mill, pumping gas, and doing dishes were the types of jobs available to individuals with no high school credential in rural areas. The participants were caught in a bind. They needed the low paying jobs to get by; however, working at them limited the time and effort they could put into meeting the requirements of an education that would help them get out of the rut they found themselves in.

Being unprepared for post-secondary opportunities was another challenge three of the participants noted living in rural areas created for them. There was little talk or expectation that one would go to college. In addition, there was a lack of programs and equipment necessary to prepare one for college. Debbie noted that there seemed to be very little talk about going to college while she was in high school. She also noted that the expectation of going on to college seemed to be for very few students such as the top ten. Nancy shared that she felt the small rural schools did not prepare one for college as did schools located in more populated areas. She felt the lack of labs, equipment, and course offerings put rural kids at a disadvantage.

The lack of social activities was noted by both Wendy and Nancy who shared that they felt by living in rural Maine they were very isolated. They attributed the isolation to the lack of Internet service available to rural communities and the poor cell phone reception in rural areas as well. Nancy added that her feeling of isolation also came from a lack of social activities available to those growing up in rural Maine. She noted that in

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the city there are things for kids to do such as going bowling, going to the movies, and going to the mall to hang out. Nancy also noted the lack of cultural differences in a small rural community made it difficult for her to adjust when she moved out of state for a short period.

Another challenge that two of the participants reported they faced living in rural Maine was the lack of transportation. Wendy and Eddy both mentioned in rural Maine there was no public transportation system. Wendy shared how they had to really plan out who had to be where and when because there were four adults in the house and only three vehicles. Eddy reported that he did not have any transportation and that was a big challenge for him. He shared that he did a lot of walking, even at night, in order to obtain his credential. The lack of transportation impacted their efforts in becoming a school completer. Brian noted that rural Maine was behind other states. A small rural Maine town would be behind Portland, Maine in what it has to offer people for jobs and education. However, he expressed that he felt it was up to the individual to make the most of where he/she lived when he stated, "All these different places, it is what you put in that you receive, no matter where you live."

The participants appeared to feel hemmed in by the isolation and inadequacies of rural life compared to what urban areas offer. Yet, this is their home, their place of support and comfort, as well as their identity. For these school returners living in a rural area is doubled edged. They strain against it and feel challenged by it, but it is their motivation. The participants want to stay and continue to live in their rural communities because they are settled and feel connected to friends, family, and neighbors. In addition,

four of the school returners have children, and for them there is a strong pull to provide stability to the next generation within their rural communities.

Finding #2. Gender impacts one's educational experiences in the rural context.

As reported by Corbett (2007) and supported by this study, rural female students often report traditional gender roles and situations as challenges to their educational attainment. Pregnancy, relationships with men, traditional roles for women, and self-esteem issues were obstacles for the females of this study. Pregnancy impacted Nancy's high school experience, which resulted in her dropping out when the school staff suggested that she did not belong in their school. Wendy shared how being pregnant and having a child created a challenge for her as a school returner.

Both Wendy and Nancy shared how relationships with men and traditional female roles of life created challenges for them during their educational pursuits. As a high school student, Wendy made the decision to drop out of school just before the beginning of her senior year. It was what she called being "young and dumb." Her boyfriend was going to college out of state, and she was afraid he would forget about her back in Maine. Therefore, she made the decision to drop out of school and go with him. Wendy also described how traditional female roles created a "struggle of the juggle" for her as a school returner in the following manner.

> I had more responsibilities at the time. I had a new baby. I was married. I had a job. I had laundry and dishes and studying. You know you have a kid, and you have bills, and you have a job, and it is like, what am I doing in school?

For Nancy, it was the combination of traditional female roles and the relationship she had with her husband at the time she was returning to school. The pull she felt

between wanting to go to school to obtain a secondary credential and the pressure she received from her husband to stay at home "where she belonged" was a challenge for her. He would say, "What are you doing that for? You've got this at home. We need you at home. We don't need you there."

Self-esteem issues also impacted the educational experiences of three of the participants. Debbie's experience of being bullied in high school negatively impacted her self-esteem. To escape the taunting, she made the decision to drop out of school. Wendy shared how the embarrassment of being a dropout impacted her self-esteem. "The embarrassment of having to walk through those doors as a high school dropout. It was embarrassing. I can remember being embarrassed like, oh my gosh I can't believe I am here." Self-esteem was not only the experiences of two of the females in this study it also impacted Brian's educational experiences.

As a male student, Brian also dealt with self-esteem issues, which differs from what Corbett (2007) reported. Brian noted being placed in special education classes impacted his self-esteem as a high school student. "I had to be put in special education. I think that was my biggest self-esteem issue. That pretty much started taking down the blocks of my self-esteem." Even as a high school dropout Brian shared how his life continued to crumble his self-esteem. "I was just living life you know. I was just sick of my life I guess. I was sick of thinking about all of my failures that's really what it was. They kept adding up, adding up. It felt like I needed something to lift my self-esteem."

In regards to males Corbett (2007) reported that they often left schooling because they saw their formal education experiences as "irrelevance and drudgery" (p. 125). The experiences of both of the male participants supported this notion. Brian's story reflected

this as he described how being placed in special education classes made his school work seem like a worthless chore to him. He felt this placement kept him from having the opportunity to demonstrate his potential as a student.

> I had to be put in special education. I knew I was worth more. It's not that I knew I was worth more, I knew I could do more. But they put me at that level, so it always kept holding me back. I always felt distant from the mainstreamed kids. These classes made me feel like I could never live up to mainstream even though I wanted to go and have that opportunity.

As a middle school student Eddy felt the "irrelevance and drudgery" Corbett (2007) wrote about. "There was no point to me being there. I'd realized I had no idea what was going on with the lesson plans. I didn't see how the lessons they were teaching had anything to do with life. Well, my life anyways." Two of the females, Debbie and Wendy, supported Corbett's study sharing that they loved school, their classes, and the work they were given to do. Nancy, on the other hand, sided with the males in how she felt about the academics of high school. "I got through my freshman year, but I struggled socially, academically, and emotionally. Half way through my sophomore year, I started skipping school and hanging out with my friends because I saw no use in what they were teaching. Junior year I went back for like two weeks and found that I was so far behind in school. Nobody had any solutions as to how I was going to graduate on time. I felt there was no other option but to quit."

An additional support of previous research from this study is the notion that males often report leaving school before graduation to work in the family business (Corbett, 2007). One of the five school returners, Brian, shared how after dropping out of

school he began working for his dad's painting business. He also shared how he continues to feel the pressure to continue to help his dad rather than seeking further education or alternative job opportunities. Brian expressed it this way, "I always felt I had to help my dad out. This is hard because my family is all I have, but I also want a change."

This study revealed, in the experiences of the five school returners, enhancement of occupational opportunities for females was more dependent on post-secondary education. All five of the participants returned to school and obtained a secondary credential. All five presently work in rural Maine. However, the males obtained employment without additional schooling within their communities. Eddy is working for a local lumber mill as a supervisor and Brian continues to work with his dad in the family painting business. In order to enhance their employment opportunities within their rural communities the three females participated in post-secondary education opportunities to obtain additional credentials. With these credentials Debbie, Wendy, and Nancy are now employed within their rural communities.

In regards to gender, the females reported traditional gender issues and roles that impacted their educational experiences as both public school students and school returners. However, they found great relevance in schooling because they saw opportunities for themselves beyond what a high school diploma could gain them. The males for the most part reported that they were looking for relevance and a connection between what they were learning in school and their lives outside of school.

Finding #3. Regrets about their public school experiences helped to motivate the participants to return to schooling to obtain a secondary credential.

In the context of this study, regret served as an avenue through which the participants viewed the choices they made while in school. During the interview process the participants reflected on their educational experiences, the decision they made to drop out of school, the impact of this decision on their lives, and their motivation to return to school.

For Nancy, Eddy and Wendy this regret meant missed opportunities. They missed going to school dances and the prom, getting to know other students and teachers, participating in graduation, being prepared for post-secondary opportunities, and having connection with a support network. For these individuals regret meant not having the opportunity to take part in something. It meant being left out. They lost out on social and educational experiences. Their regret meant lack or recognition that students and graduates often receive. For them regret also meant separation from their social and support networks. As Nancy shared, "We were kind of the outcasts." The regret of being left out, having no recognition as a graduate, the loss of educational and social opportunities, and being separated from one's support network helped to motivate Nancy, Eddy, and Wendy to return to school to earn a secondary credential. Through the journey of returning to school, the participants felt like they were part of a group. They developed support networks and participated in social and educational opportunities. In the end, they participated in a graduation ceremony, which gave them the recognition that they had missed out on as high school students.

Brian and Eddy shared that for them their regret meant failure. Not being successful in completing high school made them feel like a failure. Regret for Eddy meant failure and failure for him meant he was undeserving of a job, which meant the loss of a livelihood. In his eyes he also looked at this failure as meaning the shame he felt knowing that his mom had not seen him graduate and make something of himself. He felt as if he had let her down. After experiencing life as a high school dropout and failing to obtain employment, Eddy shared that he knew not only that he had to prove to his sick mom that he wasn't a failure, but he also had to prove it to himself. This motivated Eddy to return to school and earn a secondary credential.

Brian was bothered by the fact that he too had failed to complete high school. He shared that he had walked away from school and, therefore, failed himself. Failure meant he had given up on his goal of graduating. Brian continued to face failure as a dropout. He struggled to find a support network in which he felt he fit in with. The failure to graduate meant Brian was an outsider feeling alone and defeated. On numerous attempts, he failed to complete the requirements for a secondary credential. He came to regret his life and the decision he had made. He was sick of seeing his failures build up. Being alone and feeling hopeless motivated him to return to schooling in order to obtain a secondary credential.

The meaning of regret was even more emotional for Debbie. She was pulled between loving school and regretting that she felt she had to drop out, "I do not regret dropping out of school. I regret that I had to." As a high school student she experienced bullying from students and teachers. She expressed that she felt the only way to escape the bullying was to drop out of school. For Debbie regret meant being vulnerable and

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defeated within the high school setting. In order to avoid the emotional toll of being bullied, she made the decision to drop out of school. The regret she felt as a high school dropout was that she saw no other way to deal with the emotional stress of being bullied. This decision impacted her life as she found herself following in her mother's footsteps of working low paying meaningless jobs just to get by. As a high school dropout, her regret meant giving up on her dream to find a job she loved that would afford her a good life. When Debbie turned eighteen, this goal motivated her to return to schooling to obtain a secondary credential.

As described in the stories of the five school returners regret took an emotional toll on their lives. This toll included missed opportunities, lack of recognition, separation from others which resulted in feelings of failure, shame, loneliness, defeat, and vulnerability. They gave up on life goals and dreams.

Finding #4. Personal resilience factors, internal attributes, and mattering to others supported the participants in overcoming the challenges they faced as school returners.

It is evident in the stories of these five school returners that personal and environmental educational resilience factors helped them manage the challenges they faced as they worked to obtain a secondary credential. As Cherry (1994) notes, resilience does not, "eliminate stress or erase life's difficulties. Instead it gives people the strength to tackle problems head on, overcome adversity, and move on" (p. 2). Debbie, Wendy, Nancy, Brian, and Eddy all shared how the personal educational resilience factors of being willing to work hard, having educational aspirations, and being personally motivated all helped them become successful school completers. Educational resilience

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factors were also found in the stories of the participants. These factors included positive

adult contact and support networks, an individual's ability to recognize the value of an

education, and a supportive educational environment and school staff.

Mattering refers to the feeling that you are important to others including teachers

and the schooling environment. The participants described how mattering to others

motivated them to return to school and confront the challenges they faced as they worked

to earn a secondary credential. All five of the participants described experiences of love

and support by family, friends, and teachers. This network of support showed the

participants that they were cared about and were important to others. The school returners

knew that members of their support networks were proud of them for their efforts as they

worked to obtain a secondary credential. An additional aspect of mattering is the ability

to sympathize with others. The three female participants, Debbie, Wendy, and Nancy, all

had someone in their lives who understood first-hand what life was like being a high

school dropout and could empathize with them as they worked to earn a secondary

credential.

Another aspect is the notion of mattering in the educational environment as school

returners. Schlossberg's (1989) Theory of Mattering, notes that if students (including

school returners) feel they matter in their educational environment, they may be more

engaged in their learning and schooling. Debbie, Nancy, Brian, and Eddy all described

how they felt supported and cared about by the Adult Education staff as they worked to

obtain a secondary credential. Wendy noted the adult education director was a huge

support for her by helping her through the enrollment process. She added that it was the

director who called to say she had passed the tests. Nancy shared that the adult education

staff was very good and that she appreciated the fact that they were there when you needed them. Brian too included the teachers and the director on his list of those who had supported him. He added that the teachers are all good and that they go beyond their job, making their students feel like members of a family. For Eddy, it was the adult education teacher that took the time to work with him in math one-on-one who became a valuable and supportive member of his network.

The participants described the relationship between the aspects of mattering to others, as outlined by Schlossberg (1989), and the support they received from their networks of support, described by Cherry, 1994; VanBreda, 2001; and Wayman, 2002. Geary (1988 as cited in Wayman, 2002) noted that resilient students often form an informal network of friends, family, and teachers that provide support in tough times. It was members of the support networks that cared about the participants and were proud of them for their efforts. The participants included in this study consistently connected their success in obtaining a secondary credential to what educators call personal and educational resilience and most importantly to the positive adult contact they experienced as school returners.

These findings and their implications will be discussed further in Chapter Six. Chapter Six will present an overview of the study, a review of its design, the limitations of the study, a discussion of the above findings with regard to research in the field, suggestions regarding implications of this study, and some concluding thoughts.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Chapter Six begins with an overview of the study, followed by a review of its purpose, design, and limitations. The findings of the study are discussed in qualitative fashion using the voices of the participants and in relationship to relevant literature. This is followed by suggestions regarding the implications of this study for future research. The chapter ends with a section called "Concluding Thoughts."

Overview of the Study

The success of the U.S. economy is tied more closely than ever to the level of education people achieve. A high school diploma is an important step in preparing a person to live an independent, secure, and happy life and to contribute to America's economic competitiveness as part of an educated, innovative workforce (America's Promise Alliance, 2013). However, every 26 seconds, a student drops out of school (Beaven, 2013). Dropping out makes it harder for these young people to succeed in life. We do not know as much about how and why people return to school to earn a secondary credential as we know about factors that lead to individuals' dropping out of school and dropout prevention programs.

According to Strange et al., (2012) over twenty-three percent of public school students totaling 11.4 million attend either rural schools or rural districts in the United States. Both the scale and scope of rural education in the U.S. are growing. Still the invisibility of rural education persists in many states.

Once individuals drop out of school, it can take a tremendous amount of resilience and perseverance for them to take the steps necessary to complete their schooling

(Berliner et al., 2008; Sparks, 2013). While there has been a considerable amount of research on the nation's dropout crisis, less is known about what brings these dropouts back to school and how to support school returners in their journey to becoming school completers (Berliner et al., 2008). This study explored the experiences of five rural school returners, including what motivated them to return, what challenges they faced, and what supports they received that helped them as they worked to obtain a secondary credential.

Purpose of the Study

To be more effective in supporting school returners, educators need to know more about the motivations and perceptions of school returners who have successfully earned a secondary credential. This qualitative study aimed to improve our understanding of what it is like to be a school returner completing the requirements of a secondary credential. For the purposes of this study a school returner was defined as an individual who was at least eighteen years of age and who had returned to schooling after not attending high school for a period of at least one year. A particular focus of this study was the rural Maine setting. The research questions that guided this study were:

RQ 1. What motivates rural adults who left school before graduation to return to schooling and complete the requirements of a secondary education?

RQ 2. What experiences or barriers do rural adult school returners describe as negatively impacting their efforts in obtaining a high school diploma or in passing the GED exam?

RQ 3. What experiences do rural adult school returners describe as supporting their success in becoming a school completer by obtaining a secondary credential?

Design of the Study

To fulfill the purpose, a qualitative study was conducted to describe the experiences of five rural Maine school returners. This qualitative study followed a narrative research design because the intent of the study was to report individual stories of being a school returner and chronologically ordering the meaning of these experiences to provide insight into the research questions.

The study was based on a conceptual framework rooted in Schlossberg's Theory of Mattering (1989) and the work of Cherry (1994), VanBreda (2001), and Wayman (2002) around the Theory of Resilience and how these factors support one's efforts in life. A key assumption of this study was that in order to understand the experiences of school returners, it was necessary to consider the context in which life experiences occurred for these individuals. The use of a series of three one-on-one interviews provided the opportunity to explore life experiences of the school returners, particularly what motivated them to return to schooling, what challenges they encountered, and what supported them in obtaining a secondary credential.

The setting for this study was the context of rurality. School returners from rural Maine were selected as participants in the study. Although the participants did not necessarily live in the same geographic location of the state, each one dropped out from a school located in rural Maine. The participants met the established criteria and identified themselves as rural Maine school returners. In line with the narrative design, the study engaged a small sample of participants (Czarniawska, 2004). Creswell (1998) notes a general guideline in qualitative research is not only to study a few sites or individuals but also to collect extensive detail about each site or individual studied.

The interview structure followed the guidelines for semi-structured interviews including the use of a protocol for each interview, conducting the interviews with a minimal number of interruptions, recording the interviews using a laptop, a Snoball microphone and Garageband software, and transcribing each interview, which was conducted by the researcher, as soon as possible after each interview session. The design of the interview protocols was based upon Seidman's (2006) three-stage structure for in-depth interviewing which allowed for the collection of data regarding each participant's story as a school returner.

The interviews followed Seidman's model of three one-on-one interviews. The interviews lasted approximately sixty minutes each; however, the format did allow for additional time if the data being collected during an interview warranted an extension of time. The interviews and the transcribing process were spaced out over a three-week period, which was dependent on participant availability. This time frame allowed for each interview stage to be completed with all participants and the interviews to be transcribed before scheduling the next stage of interviews.

Multiple steps were involved in the data analysis stage of the study. The analysis began in the data management stage as I collected the recorded interviews, transcribed each interview, and read and reread the transcripts. Analysis continued through the restorying process, which resulted in five stories of rural school returners. The data were then analyzed based on the three research questions that guided this study. The interviews and stories of the participants were analyzed in order to describe what motivated the participants to return to school, what challenges they faced as school returners, and what supportive factors helped them become school completers. Throughout the analysis of

data individual responses were examined followed by a collective comparison of all participants. This analysis resulted in points of commonality as well as individual unique points that represented the experiences of the five participants.

Limitations

This study was limited by several factors. The first of these factors involve my role as a student researcher and the comfort level of the participants to share their stories. The majority of the limitations are due to the methodology of qualitative research.

My role as a student researcher was a limitation of this study. Although I was careful to explain to the participants my role as a student researcher it would be hard for them to completely separate my student role and my professional role as a director of a career and technical high school as the interviews were held in my office at the school. The participants and I all agreed on this location as everyone felt it was a better place than other possible locations. In addition, I had experienced life as a dropout and a school returner, which was shared with the participants during the interview sessions. Both the notion of the interviews being held in the director's office and the sharing of my personal experience may have influenced how comfortable the participants were in sharing information about their educational experiences with me. Gender appeared to impact the self-disclosure of stories I gained from the participants. The females shared more in depth details than the male participants. The males were younger and thus had limited life experiences to share with me during the interviews. As noted in Chapter Four the details of their stories are only as good as the self-disclosures by the participants.

The methodology of qualitative research in itself can create limitations and most likely impacted this study. First, according to Creswell (2008), all research is interpretive

and researchers need to be self-reflective throughout the process and need to understand how one's personal experiences can shape interpretations. The fact that I dropped out of high school was revealed during my conversations with the participants. This revelation may have influenced their comfort level in sharing their stories with me. It was important for me to be cognizant of my subjectivity throughout the data collection, analysis, and reporting stages of this research. I kept memos regarding my experiences, thoughts, and questions, and had conversations with colleagues about my feelings and personal biases.

The second limitation of qualitative research is that it can be referred to as a snapshot in time where the participants are self reporting their memories and reflections of an experience. The methodology of this study included a collection of data over just three intervals. This exploration was restricted by the amount of interaction I had with each of the participants. Therefore time limited my ability fully explore the snapshot of their life experiences as school returners in rural Maine.

Connected to the limitation of being a snapshot in time is the limitation of the interview process of this study. Only three interviews, lasting approximately one hour each, were held with the participants over just a three-week span. During the sessions some of the participants were more forthcoming with details of their experiences as school returners. To address this limitation I created the protocols, which may have influenced the amount of detail the participants gave as they recalled their experiences as school returners. It is unlikely that the data collection of three interviews spread out over a three-week period provided enough sustained interaction to develop the level of trust needed to fully explore the experiences of the participants. However, I believe with the

use of interview protocols I was able to explore deeper the experiences of the participants than open-ended sessions may have provided.

Another limitation of this method is the limited ability to triangulate the data for verification. I implemented member checking with the participants as part of the interview protocols, to contain my own feelings and understandings and to help ensure I was reporting the stories of the participants and not my personal feelings or life experiences. In addition, this study was limited to the exploration of returning to schooling for five participants in rural Maine. Every effort was made to recruit a diverse group of participants for the study. The information collected is descriptive in nature and cannot be generalizable beyond the five school returners of this study.

In spite of these limitations, I believe the findings of this study represent the experiences of these five school returners and that the study provides insight into the process of returning to school and earning a secondary credential. This study adds to the limited research, mostly quantitative, on school returners. Seidman (2006) notes that so much research regarding schooling is done in this country but so little of the research is based on the perspectives of those whose experiences constitute schooling. This study provided the stories of five individuals who have experienced life as a school returner by using their voices to describe their experiences.

This study also addresses the problems of rurality some school returners face by being conducted with participants who attended and dropped out of high schools located in rural areas of Maine. It adds the stories of five individuals who were motivated to return to schooling to obtain a secondary credential, including the challenges they faced and the supports they received, to the limited amount of literature on school returners.

Finally, one of my major goals was to give voice to individuals who have experienced life as a rural school returner. I believe I have accomplished this through the willingness of the participants to share their stories with me. It is important to continue to highlight the voices of these five participants and others who can add insight to the literature on being a school returner and have yet to be heard.

The next section of this chapter presents the findings of this study followed by a discussion of these findings in relation to the literature.

Findings

This study explored the experiences of five rural school returners as they worked to obtain a secondary credential. Debbie, Wendy, Nancy, Brian, and Eddy each dropped out of high school before graduation and lived life as a dropout before returning to school. Three one-on-one interviews were used to elicit their stories. The restorying process led to analysis resulting in four major findings of this study that were introduced in Chapter Five. In the following section, I present a discussion of these findings.

Finding #1. The rural context is an important factor in what motivates individuals to return to school and what challenges they face as school returners.

Finding #2. Gender impacts one's educational experiences in the rural context.

Finding #3. Regrets about their public school experiences helped to motivate the participants to return to schooling to obtain a secondary credential.

Finding #4. Personal resilience factors, internal attributes, and mattering to others supported the participants in overcoming the challenges they faced as school returners.

Discussion

The exploration of the stories of five rural school returners provided the opportunity to describe the impact rurality, gender, regret, personal and educational resilience, and mattering to others has on a school returner. The goal of the study was to explore the factors and conditions that impact the journey of a school returner to school completer. The combination of what motivates one to return to school, the challenges rural school returners face, and the supports they receive as they work to obtain a secondary degree, as described in this study, offer insight into what it means to be a school returner in rural Maine. The following section of this chapter provides a discussion of the findings of this study and how they contribute to existing research on what it means to be a school returner in a rural setting.

The Complexity of the Rural Context for School Returners

The rural context is infused within the experiences of these five school returners of this study; we cannot separate their connection to rurality and their life experiences of being motivated to return to school and the challenges they faced as school returners.

Rurality motivated the participants to return to school. Both objective (size of area and distance from major cities) and subjective (community feeling, intimacy, and interdependency among individuals and families) definitions of rural are involved in the motivation of these five participants to return to school to obtain a secondary credential. The participants shared that within their rural communities, without a secondary credential, all they could find were entry-level, low paying jobs. As noted by Stone (2013) manufacturing jobs are drying up in Maine and are not being replaced especially in rural communities. With manufacturing jobs dwindling, the participants saw

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opportunities for employment within their rural communities just out of their reach without the credential. Their personal drive to live and work within their rural communities motivated them to return to school and obtain a secondary credential. Subjectively they were motivated to stay connected to their rural communities by finding employment close to home even as opportunities continued to disappear in these areas.

Richardson (2013) wrote, "Education is essential to prepare Maine's workforce" (p 1). Richardson continued by saying it did not matter if the job was in a corner office or on the assembly line in a manufacturing facility, an education is needed. Colgan, a former Maine economist, boosts public education because he believes it trains an individual for work regardless of the job one gets in the future (Richardson, 2013). Rural areas in the United States generally have to account for loss of population due to factories and plants closing. Technology and global markets are something all rural areas have to deal with. This study supports this notion. Four of the five participants shared how returning to school and obtaining a secondary credential set them on a path for employment opportunities that they would not have had without the credential. These employment prospects motivated them to return to schooling. Although the fifth participant was determined to break free of his rural community and the family painting business, he recognized the need for an education to set him on this path of opportunity and succumbed to the pull of his family in returning home.

Challenges faced by rural school returners. As noted above rurality and its impact on the experiences of the participants was a motivating factor in their decision to return to school. However, in the process of actually fulfilling their goal of obtaining a secondary credential, living in a rural location provided challenges for the school

returners. Mitgang (1990 as cited in Mayfield-Harris, 2008) noted that rural students, including school returners, are more likely to face failure because of crime, substance abuse, and parental neglect. Although this study had a limited number of participants, it confirms Mitgang's findings. The crimes referred to in their stories were skipping school, drinking as minors, doing drugs, and making threats against others. Three of the participants shared how they spent a lot of time drinking and doing drugs, which impacted their educational experiences and life in general. Brian shared how his substance use made him feel like a failure. "I was lost trying to figure out who I was. I was smoking pot and hanging with an older crowd. I was just sick of my life. I was sick of thinking about all of my failures. They kept adding up, adding up."

The Maine Adult Education Association (2012) noted other challenges rural school returners face such as the lack of funding from state, local, and grant monies for Adult Education programs, lagging technology, lack of transportation and child care offerings for the adult students, and the difficulty of recruiting and retaining qualified teachers and administrators. The findings from this current study confirm the challenges noted by the association. Two participants shared how difficult it was to find out information regarding local programs. This highlights the issue of lack of funding for adult education programs in rural Maine and describes an objective challenge they faced. The further out from urban areas, the fewer programs you find to support rural school returners. The participants also shared how lagging technology was an obstacle for them as school returners. Two of the participants in this study described how the lack of public transportation challenged them in their pursuit of a secondary credential. Another one described having to juggle her needs for transportation to school with her husband's and

in-laws' needs for the vehicles to get to and from work. One of the male participants shared that he did not have access to a vehicle, which, meant a lot of walking, even at night, to and from school. Lack of technology and public transportation are examples of the objective definition of rurality and what it means for the challenges school returners face.

Two of the female participants also shared how having children and needing childcare challenged them as returners as noted by the Maine Adult Education Association. One was made to feel guilty by her husband saying she was needed at home with her son instead of being at school. Another female participant shared how she needed to rely on her in-laws to babysit for her while she was in school. Having children, the pull between family and schooling and having to rely on one's family and support network are all indicators of the subjective (community feeling, intimacy, and interdependency among individuals and families) definition of rural that likewise posed challenges for some of the school returners.

This study differs from previous studies in how the participants saw the staff of the adult education programs. Previous research documents the difficulty rural areas have in recruiting and retaining qualified teachers (Biddle, 2011; Debertin & Goetz, 1994; Maine Adult Education Association, 2012). This is a challenge that did not seem to impact the participants of this study. They reported the teachers as being knowledgeable, caring, and supportive. The participants gave a lot of the credit for their success to the staff members of the Adult Education programs they attended.

Gendered roles and oppression in rural communities. Although this is not a large study, the results of this study of rural Maine school returners both support and differ from previous research regarding the connection between gender and formal educational experiences in rural contexts. Blackstone (2003) described gender roles in her work as being the product of the interactions between a person and his/her environment. These roles are grounded in the different expectations of individuals based on their sex. In addition, Blackstone notes that society's values and beliefs define appropriate gender roles for males and females. Gender oppression is associated with these gender roles within a society and the manner in which certain individuals or groups are privileged or disadvantaged because of their gender. These groups benefit socially and economically at the expense of others when everyday practices and unquestioned assumptions are maintained within a society.

Moore (2001) noted that often females living in rural areas accept traditional gender roles, which are embedded in the rural culture and enter relationships as young adults and take on traditional gender roles within the household. Corbett (2007) in his work in rural Digby, Nova Scotia supported Moore's work and noted that women claim to have enjoyed school but encountered gendered oppression situations which included self-esteem issues, pregnancy, relationships with men, and the pressure to fall into the traditional women's roles. The gender roles that he found based on this society's expectations were that most women who stayed in the community became housewives.

Meek (2016) in his work on the psychology of men notes that each culture has expectations for "being a man." Furthermore, he says gender roles are generally defined as a set of attitudes, behaviors, and self-presentation methods ascribed to members of a

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certain biological sex. This includes norms for behavior, which some researchers have started to call "the rules of masculinity" or "masculine ideology." These expectations include ways to act, attitudes to hold, and ways to look. The expectations also include ways males are not supposed to act, attitudes not to have, and ways not to present oneself (Meek, 2016). He writes how tension can be caused for males if they do not meet a certain level of "culturally preferred style and level of masculinity." This tension can lead to gendered oppression for males in regards to social status, income, and romantic interests from others.

This study, although limited in the number of participants, notes the impact of gender oppression in regards to one's educational experiences as described in their stories. Two of the female participants' experiences were impacted by pregnancy and traditional female roles. One was at a disadvantage being pregnant in high school, which led to her dropping out. Both described the pull between being mothers and being school returners, which caused challenges for them. For one it was her relationship with her boyfriend that impacted her decision to drop out of school so that she could move out of state with him. For the other one, it was her relationship with her husband that caused challenges for her as a school returner. One of the male participants, like many males in rural Digby (Corbett, 2007), left school and went to work in the family business.

However, this study also describes how some of the participants crossed the gendered role/oppression lines as part of their educational experiences. One of the females joined the two males in feeling that what was being taught in high school had very little if any relevance to her life. Educators know that individuals learn best when learning things that matter to them or things that are relevant to their lives. Career and

Technical Education (CTE) makes education relevant and important to the student. The mission of CTE is to "prepare students for high skill, high demand careers" (Moore, 2015, p 1). If these students had availed themselves of CTE, they might have found schooling having relevance to their lives. Many students reported a belief that school subjects did not relate to their lives and would not help them in the future. (California Department of Education, 2012; Checkley, 2004).

In addition, one male participant joined two of the females in regards to the impact self-esteem can have on one's educational experiences both as a high school student and as a school returner. The experiences of being bullied, embarrassed about being a school returner, and being placed in special education classes and experiencing a lot of failure in life described how low self-esteem impacted some participants' educational experiences.

Enhancement of occupational opportunities by gender. McCracken and Barcinas (1991) noted that rural communities would continue to export their brightest and most capable youth because there are not enough jobs available to satisfy the expectations of rural students. However, Wright (2012) discussed that often rural students, both males and females, believe staying in their rural communities, "even in a place seen as deficient in professional and economic opportunities" (p 2) as a positive choice. All five of the school returners support Wright's notion that both males and females will often stay in their rural communities by selecting occupational opportunities available in these areas.

In her work in rural Appalachia, Hendrickson (2012) noted that a source of tension for students is the lack of economic opportunity coupled with family values of

cohesiveness. Students in rural areas can highly value a sense of community and family relationships. As a result, these students are more focused on the well-being of the family group than individual achievement or personal goals (Hendrickson, 2012). Rather than leaving for college or work, some students, both males and females, may be pressured to choose family cohesiveness and remain in the area (Corbett, 2007). "In isolated rural places, to resist schooling is to commit at some level to membership in a community of others who stay put" (Corbett, 2007, p. 57). Females, more often than males, look at education as a ticket for mobility (Corbett, 2007). In this study, only one of the males saw education as "a way out" as a motivation to return to school. He dreamed of leaving his rural community. In fact, he did leave for a short time but soon returned to his family and rural surroundings.

Rurality is a force in the lives of women that creates challenges for them in becoming economically self-sufficient. Preferences for men in hiring and up to fifty percent wage differentials between male and females in rural jobs hamper females in obtaining stable employment with adequate wages within their rural communities (Moore, 2001). Maine ranks 38th in the United States for population density. It is estimated that 60% of Maine's population lives in rural areas. In addition, the rural counties in Maine tend to have higher rates of poverty (Maine's Permanent Commission on the Status of Women, 2015). Females make up less than half of the labor force in Maine, work for lower wages than males, and account for less than half of the state's unemployed. According to Maine's Permanent Commission on the Status of Women (2015), females represent more than half of Maine's part-time workers. Part-time work comes with lower wages and often little or no benefits such as health insurance, paid sick time, retirement

plans, or disability insurance. So, while females in Maine are employed, many are in jobs that do not lead to long-term economic security and success. The participants of this study describe working part time jobs for lower wages before obtaining a secondary credential.

Across the country and world, education is recognized as the foundation for economic development and social and political stability. This is especially true for women who have historically been excluded from educational opportunities but who play an increasing role in labor markets (Maine's Permanent Commission on the Status of Women, 2015). Jean Lipman-Blumen's (1984) study added that women who grew up following traditional gender roles were less likely to want to be highly educated. In contrast to women who were brought up with the view that men and women are equal. The latter were more likely to want and pursue a higher education.

In this study, both males continued working in their rural communities after obtaining their secondary credentials. One continued working in the family painting business full time. The other male school returner was hired at the local lumber mill where he had been turned down for employment before obtaining a secondary credential. He is now working as a supervisor, working full time, and earning a decent wage. For the three females of this study the occupational opportunities seemed limited within their rural communities. The jobs that were available to them and that they were interested in pursuing seemed more dependent on obtaining post-secondary education. All three went on to obtain post-secondary degrees whereas the two male participants of this study did not. One female now works in the field of education, and the other two both work in the medical field. All three of the females are working in their rural communities, making a

decent wage, working full time, and enjoying the jobs they have. Whether the need to get post-secondary education for job enhancement is greater for women than for men in metropolitan areas is really beyond the scope of this particular study. However, this study indicates that occupational opportunities differ in rural communities based on gender.

Regret as a Motivator for Rural School Returners

Regrets in the stories of the participants contained the meanings of missed opportunities, failure, and emotional distress. As noted in the literature, regret is a powerful force in human life as it can shape individuals and change their life paths. Regret is the brain's way of telling us to take another look at our choices (Roese, 2005; Gammon, 2010; Greenberg, 2012). As the participants reflected on the choices they had made to drop out of school, they shared how as dropouts they came to realize the importance of a secondary credential. Roese (2005) examined studies in which people ranked the parts of their lives they regret the most. Education was the biggest inducer of regret across studies of people in different age groups and locations (Gammon, 2010). Roese believed education topped the list because it is the part of life with endless opportunity, and lost opportunity often breeds regret. Three of the participants of this study expressed that to them the meaning of regret was connected to missed opportunities due to their decision to drop out of school. There deeper meaning of missed opportunities for the three participants of this study included being left out, separation from others, lack of recognition, and the loss of social and educational opportunities.

Roese (2005) noted that education connects to all other things in life including money, personal fulfillment, and building relationships with people. Roese (2005) noted that throughout our lives we have the opportunity to keep learning and developing new

skills. School returners often express how their regret about dropping out of school connected to their desire to return in order to improve other aspects of their lives (Gammon 2010). During the interviews, the participants described how their personal regrets and their desire to change their life path motivated them to return to school. All five of the participants returned to schooling to improve aspects of their lives. The three females aspired to participate in post-secondary opportunities in order to obtain credentials for a new career pathway. The two males wanted a secondary credential in order to obtain employment to improve their lives.

Bloom (2015) noted that the definition of failure "varies greatly among people as it is a personal thing, and each person defines their own idea of success and failure" (p 1). For these two participants, failure meant a variety of things including feeling undeserving, feeling shame, feeling like giving up, feeling alone, feeling defeated and hopeless. Tardanico (2012) wrote, "When we fail that doesn't mean we are a failure. All it means is that the process we attempted to use failed" (p 1). The process of schooling for the participants had failed them. As adolescents, they needed to understand the relevance between their studies and their lives. They also needed support networks to guide them through the challenges they faced. For the two participants who noted the feeling of failure as a regret, this notion held a much deeper meaning in their lives. For them this regret meant undeserving of a job and, therefore, the loss of a livelihood, the shame of letting others and themselves down, and feeling defeated, alone, and hopeless. When they made the decision to return to schooling, they gained power over their regret, and they began to face their failure to graduate and take the initiative to improve aspects of their lives.

Abigail Stewart, a professor of psychology and women's studies at the University of Michigan noted, "The key is acknowledging the thing you wish you'd done, or done differently, without fixating on it and using it as a motivator to make changes," (Reistad-Long, 2007). Roese says, "Regret is like a flag going up" (p 1), explaining that regret is useful for kicking people into action and helping them change the course of their futures (Gammon, 2010). The participants of this study regretted the decision to drop out of school. Their life experiences created personal meanings of regret for them in their lives. Their flags went up: They were eventually motivated into action; they returned to school and obtained a secondary credential. As school returners, the participants reached a point in their lives when they made the decision not to let the burden of their regrets direct the path for their lives.

The Interplay Between Mattering and Resiliency in School Returners' Experiences

This study corroborates what others have shown about the importance of being resilient and mattering to others (Alva, 1991; Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Cherry, 1994; McMillan & Reed, 1994; VanBreda, 2001; Wang, Haertel &Walberg, 1994; and Wayman, 2002). Unlike previous research that focuses separately on the factors of resilience and the aspects of mattering, this study notes the interaction between the two, both supporting rural school returners in being successful in obtaining a secondary credential. Interplay describes the way in which two or more things have an effect on each other. The interplay between the resilience of school returners and mattering to others builds upon previous research. This study shows the dynamic of the two constantly working with each other in ways no other research I was able to locate discussed. Instead of being separate domains as depicted in the conceptual framework (found in Chapter

Two), the stories of the participants describe the interplay between resiliency factors, educational resiliency factors, and mattering in their experiences.

The participants described how they were motivated and willingly worked hard, surrounded by a network of support and connection with positive adults. They reportedly used their coping skills and resilience to deal with the challenges they faced as rural school returners. To demonstrate the interplay between resiliency, especially educational resiliency, and mattering the following example has been pulled from the story of one of the participants in this study.

After losing her young son to cancer, Wendy recognized that society needs nurses (mattering), and thus she became motivated (resiliency) to return to school and earn a secondary credential, the first step in becoming a nurse. She was willing to work hard and now recognized the value of an education (resiliency factors). Wendy was cared about and supported by her network of supportive adults (mattering). The support she received helped build her resilience, which in turn enhanced her connection with others (educational resiliency). This educational resilience supported her as she returned to school and worked to obtain a secondary credential. The interplay is clear in all the participants' stories even if the details vary, thus supporting the decision to revise the conceptual framework of this study as described below.

Revisiting the Conceptual Framework that Guided the Study

The school returners of this study described all of the elements included in the original framework outlined in Chapter Two. The heading of the framework, Rural School Returners, was supported by all five of the participants as they each had dropped out of a high school and reenrolled in an Adult Education program located in rural Maine.

Throughout the stories of returning to schooling, the participants described the aspects of mattering (Schlossberg, 1989). These aspects included getting attention and appreciation, being cared about, being needed, and being proud of one's accomplishments. In reviewing the factors of resilience (Cherry, 1994; VanBreda, 2001), the participants described all of the factors outlined in the original conceptual framework. The aspects of mattering and the factors of resilience supported the school returners as they faced challenges along the road to a secondary credential.

As a result of this study, I would depict the conceptual framework differently. I now see the school returner as the focal point of the study and thus located in the center of the three interlocking circles of the Venn diagram. Rurality stretches beyond the school returner and is now considered the overall context of the research and is portrayed as a circle surrounding the school returner and the interlocking circles of the visual. Rurality created motivation, challenges, and supports for the school returners. In addition, it impacted the educational resiliency factors, the resiliency factors, and the aspects of mattering of the participants.

Previously, I noted educational resiliency factors, personal resiliency factors, and the aspects of mattering as three different blocks of the conceptual framework as outlined in previous research. As a result of this study, I have developed a greater understanding as to how rural school returners describe the interplay between these resiliency factors and the aspects of mattering through their experiences. The revised conceptual framework now shows these as interlocking circles making up the three components of a Venn diagram. This demonstrates how all three facets of the conceptual framework interplay with each other. The overlapping sections of the Venn diagram include the

findings of this study, which include motivations to return to school, challenges of returning to school, and supports received by the participants that the school returners described in their stories. These surround the school returner in the center of the revised framework. This two-dimensional visual shows the interplay between the school returner, the center focus of the framework, the aspects of mattering and the factors of resilience and educational resilience, and the impact rurality has on the school returner through motivation, challenges, and supports.

Rurality

Rurality

Rurality

Rurality

School Returner

Aspects of Mattering

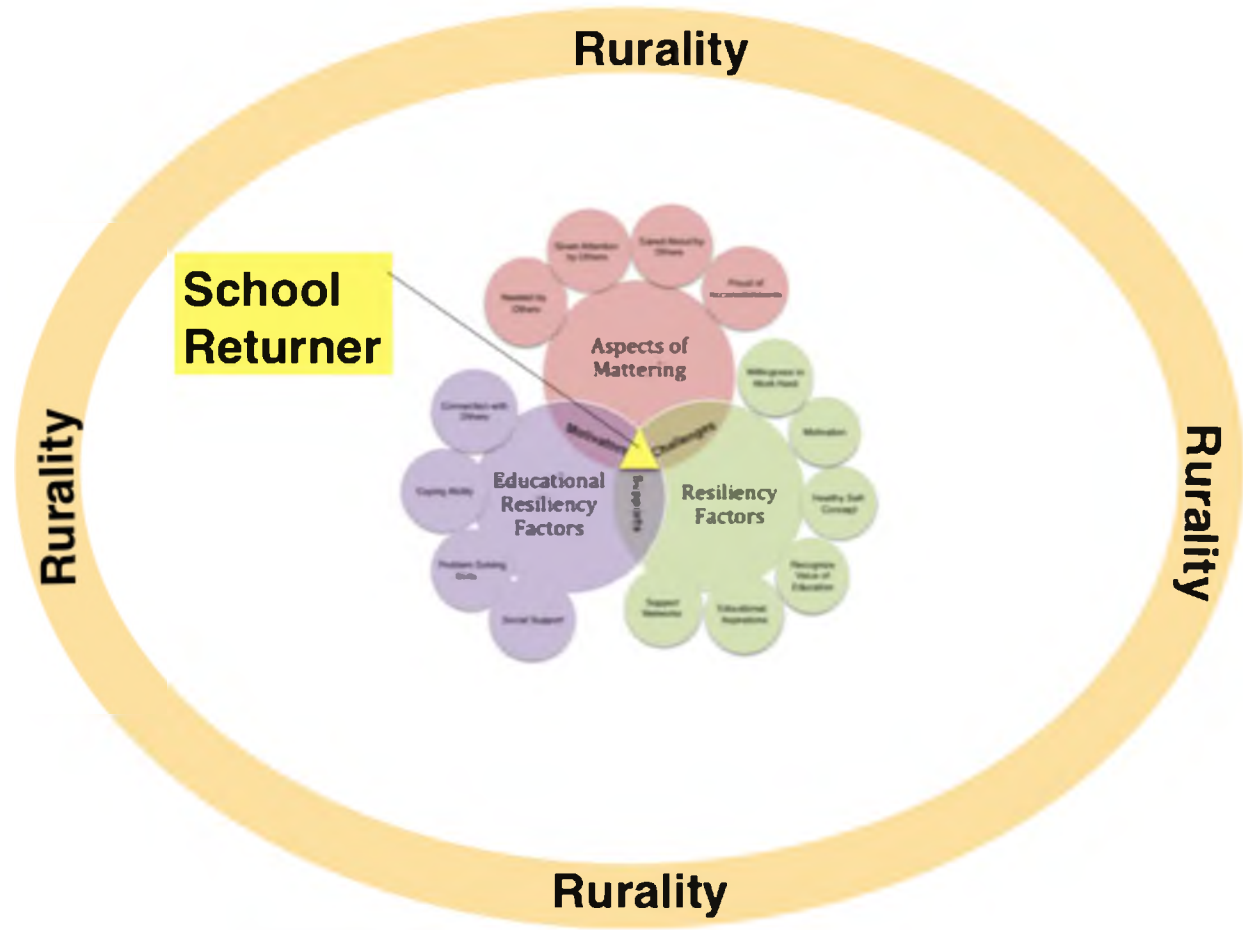Educational Resiliency Factors

Resiliency Factors

Figure 2.
Revised Conceptual Framework: School Returners

The dynamic interplay between the aspects of mattering and the factors of resilience and educational resilience is a significant piece of this study. An interesting insight from this study is the deeper understanding of how the interplay between resilience and mattering supports a school returner as he/she works to obtain a secondary credential. Previous research noted the importance of mattering to others and being resilient, but this study demonstrated these factors flow in and around a school returner in order for him or her to be successful in returning to school and obtaining a secondary credential. This is important as it demonstrates how dropouts can be encouraged and motivated to return to schooling and how they can be helped and supported as they face challenges as school returners. Future studies could tease out these aspects in greater depth both in rural and urban settings.

The discussion of the findings provides a deeper understanding of the process of returning to schooling and obtaining a secondary credential in rural Maine for school returners. The meaning of this study in regards to what motivated the participants to return to school, the challenges they faced, and the supports they received, in addition to the interplay between the concepts of resilience and mattering, plays a role in elaborating on the implications of this study. The next section will present implications for practice, policy, and further research.

Implications

The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of what it is like to be a school returner in a rural setting. Within the limitations outlined in an earlier section of this chapter, this study offers implications for educational leaders and others whose work has an impact on the experiences of those who make the decision to return to school and

obtain a secondary credential. Those who may benefit from this study include rural educators and educational leaders, rural school returners, policy makers, and future researchers.

Implications for Rural School Educators and Educational Leaders

Rural educators must be committed to their own personal development and learning. They must advocate for the resources they need to provide an educational program that meets the needs of their learners. Rural educators need to be members of their students' support networks. They need to understand the attachment rural students have to their communities. By being aware that people who live in rural communities often believe that understanding family traditions, working hard, and supporting one another is the only education they need, rural educators can provide formal education for these students that pertains to their rural community. In addition, rural educators need to be aware of deeply embedded traditional gender roles found within these communities. By understanding the impact gender oppression and traditional roles can have on one's educational experiences educators can support school returners as they dare to dream outside of the community gender standards.

Rural adult education educators can support rural school returners by understanding the challenges they face. They need to be proactive as they set schedules, create inviting learning environments, and offer a variety of programs and classes that fit the needs of the school returners. Adult education educators need to increase community outreach in order to increase re-enrollment. They need to investigate successful programs such as the SPICE-Family Literacy Program located in Waldo County, Maine and find ways to incorporate these programs into the communities they serve. Studies indicate that

communities in impoverished and isolated rural districts such as western Waldo County in Maine have limited access to quality education. Population census data for Waldo County indicates that between 15.4 and 16.3 per cent of the total adult population (aged 25 and above) failed to complete secondary (high) school. The SPICE-Family Literacy Program is a comprehensive, home-based and intergenerational program, that primarily provides literacy training to disadvantaged families in Maine's western Waldo County. In addition, the program also assists other learners with college placement examination preparation classes, citizenship test training, work-based literacy training and high school classes, as well as GED (General Educational Development) preparation and testing (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2011). From teaching the material to filling the coffee pot, rural adult education educators need to be aware of the needs of the school returners they work with.

Rural educational leaders in pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade and adult education programs must attend to an overwhelming number of day-to-day elements of schooling while adhering to state and federal mandates and regulations. Each of these elements can create a greater distance between the educational leader and the students in the school setting. Even so educational leaders can have a positive impact on staff members and students. Rural leaders can help stakeholders feel as if they matter and are significant to the school. As noted in research if one feels he/she matters the individual will more likely be invested. Leaders need individuals who are invested in children, the community, and the schools in order to support the education of the students. Educational leaders must be part of the support network for staff members.

Professional development opportunities must be available for rural educators on

topics such as, how to create learning environments that meet rural students where they are academically, socially, and economically, what types of support rural school returners need, and how to incorporate a rural community values within one's formal education experience. Furthermore, school leaders and educators must take responsibility for school returners and understand how one's life experiences can have an impact on the decision to return to schooling. In addition, rural leaders and educators must be part of their students' support networks and as Biddle (2011) says, educators who serve the students must do better by them no matter where they live and what school they attend.

Implications for School Returners

School returners can benefit from this research as they can connect to the experiences of the five participants of this study. School returners can develop an understanding of the process of returning to school and the requirements they must meet to obtain a secondary credential. Additionally, understanding that they are not alone in this world and that others have gone through similar circumstances could give them the encouragement needed to return to school and work to obtain a secondary credential.

From this study, school returners can understand the importance of a network of support and identify common challenges to obtaining a secondary credential. As school returners they can learn to expect a need to dig down within themselves, rely on others, and use their coping skills and resilience factors to aid in their success. Everyone's story and circumstances may be unique, but future school returners can recognize and learn from commonalities among this collection of stories.

Implications for Policy Makers

Despite the apparent distance between students and their schooling needs and policy makers and their work, findings from this study suggest that policy makers can, and do, influence the conditions under which school returners can be most successful. First, policy makers must understand the differences between rural and urban students and schooling and how their decisions impact these areas differently. Close to twenty-five percent of public school students attend schooling in rural schools and as Strange et al. (2012) noted, many rural students are largely invisible to state policy makers because they live in states where education policy is dominated by highly visible urban problems. Rural areas face problems that are often overlooked by educational and state leaders, and policy makers. Policy makers can make a difference for rural schools by paying attention to the scale and the scope of rural education in the United States as it continues to grow. Over 11 million students are enrolled in rural school districts, more than 20 percent of all public school students in the United States.

The resistance to education in rural areas often is a result of educators in schools not understanding and supporting place-based education. Rather than support established social, economic, and cultural networks in rural areas, schooling has typically stood in opposition to local "lifeworlds" (Corbett, 2007). Policy makers can equalize the funding for rural schools. Rural school districts face different challenges than urban districts (Biddle, 2011). Biddle (2011) notes that rural schools receive lower levels of Title I funding; they must deal with the high costs of transporting small numbers of children across longer distances to smaller schools; and they have a harder time providing the students with quality teachers and rigorous and college preparatory curricula.

Debertin and Goetz (1994) reported on educational challenges that rural areas face. They noted that these challenges include difficulty in recruiting and retaining qualified teachers and principals. This holds true for rural adult education programs as well. As policy makers propose increasing base pay for teachers in Maine, they need to also look at the disparity among teacher pay scales across the state. If rural educators earn less than their colleagues in urban areas, it will continue to be a challenge for rural areas to recruit and retain qualified teachers and principals.

Policy makers need to consider teacher-training techniques for preparing educators to work with a population (school returners) that has previously been unsuccessful in a school environment. Teacher prep programs should provide prospective teachers opportunities to practice in rural schools. These programs should also be recruiting teachers for rural schools in rural areas. As there are fewer teachers employed in rural schools due to enrollment, policy makers can support teacher prep programs that include options for obtaining multiple-subject certification. This would allow a teacher to be moved into alternate positions as the need arises. Course work that is part of rural teacher preparation programs should focus on rural education as the University of Maine's teacher prep program does.

Policy makers need to ensure that alternate pathways to graduation are available for all students including the eleven million students who attend either rural schools or rural districts in the United States. These pathways must be supported financially and be staffed with qualified educators.

Individuals responsible for developing and implementing federal, state, and local policies need to consider the impact these policies have on rural school returners. One

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example would be the policy of having to be eighteen before you can take the GED. This policy prevented Debbie from obtaining a secondary credential for over three years. Policy makers must consider the impact they have on school returners have when they set graduation requirements. There is also a need for more adult education programs located in convenient areas across the state. Policy makers must be willing to take a step back and reflect on their work. The new secondary credential assessment, the HiSET, is being used across the state. Policy makers need to examine the outcomes of this assessment. They must determine if it really works, if it is better, if more school returners are obtaining a secondary credential through the use of this assessment, and if rural employers and rural post-secondary institutions value this credential more than the GED.

Finally, for policy makers the findings from this study indicate a need to pay attention to placed-based rural education rather than standardized formal education for all. As written by Wright (2012), "Re/vitalizing the rural local, as a matter of equitable democratic practice, means taking the logic of rural social practice seriously and shaping educational policies which do not assume or pander to the primacy of metropolitan life" (p 10).

Implications for Future Research

As researchers, it is logical to build from the latest research in the field. However, it is also important to review previous research as well. The results of this study of school returners in the rural setting of Maine open up new opportunities for further research. One possible area of research involves school returners from rural areas outside of Maine. Another area would be to interview a greater number of school returners to add to the understanding of their journeys to completion. Further research could involve school

returners that dropout and reenroll numerous times. Why do they leave? What motivates then to return again and again? Future research could involve the impact resilience has on school returners who successfully complete schooling compared to those who fail at meeting the requirements of a secondary credential. Also, in regards to the Theory of Mattering, how does the notion that an individual matters to others impact their actions?

Another interesting study would be to return to Digby Neck ten (plus) years later and research if Corbett's (2007) findings still hold true for the inhabitants of the area. Has technology changed the situation for students and adults in this previously viable community? Is the major source of employment and financial independence gone? How does gender continue to impact the livelihoods of the students and the connection they have to education?

Additionally, a qualitative study in a rural Maine community that has lost its thriving wood mill following the lines of Corbett's study in the fishing community of Digby Neck, Nova Scotia holds promise. How do community members feel about formal education and future employment opportunities? Looking at the gender connection to formal education in a small rural community in Maine would be another interesting study. Furthermore, another research opportunity could be looking at the mobility of rural school completers. Do rural completers "learn to leave" (Corbett, 2012) their communities or do they make the decision to "become and remain" (Wright, 2012) within their rural communities? This study did not look at the connection between school completers and mobility. Further studies could recruit participants who dropped out of school, left the area, and then made the decision to obtain a secondary credential. Did they then return to rural Maine? Schwandt (1994) believes that in-depth interviewing will

provide a deep, rich, description of lived experiences from the point of view of those who have lived it. More research should be based on the life experiences of those who have experienced life as a school returner.

The final section of this chapter and this dissertation provides some concluding thoughts on the meaning of returning to school.

Concluding Thoughts

As a former high school dropout who returned to schooling and completed the requirements for a high school diploma, I respect the five participants of this study greatly. These individuals endured a variety of difficult life experiences. They tapped into the resilience they had developed within themselves and the network of support they had built around themselves to successfully complete the requirements of a secondary credential.

From my course work in the doctoral program at the University of Maine I developed an interest in qualitative research. Reading Seidman's works and attending his workshop on using interviewing as a means of data collection, on numerous occasions, inspired me to conduct a qualitative study. I enjoyed my time with each of the participants. I found myself fighting back the tears at times, laughing at other moments, and deep in thought at some points as I listened to each participant share his/her life experiences with me. I realized that for some of the participants participating in my study allowed them to revisit experiences they had not shared before or had not thought about in years. Knowing that these five school returners of this study trusted me with their stories makes me feel honored as a researcher. I end this dissertation with my

understanding of what the meaning of returning to school was for the five participants of this study.

The Meaning of Returning to School

The stories collected through the interviews for this study describe three transitions that each of the participants went through, from a public school student to school dropout, from a dropout to a school returner, and finally from a school returner to a school completer. At the beginning of each participant's story we begin to understand what going to school was like for the participants attending school in rural Maine. The participants shared how they did not fit in and how they had very few connections to other students and the adults within this setting. Three of them described how they were unsuccessful academically in the learning environments in which they found themselves. Feeling like an outcast, fearful of losing a boyfriend, having behavioral issues, and experiencing their days as a rollercoaster ride impacted their schooling experience and their decision to leave school before graduation. One participant summed up the experience in one word that seemed to generally fit the experiences of the participants, "Hell."

The participants first transitioned from a public school student to a school dropout. They described their life experiences as a dropout as being filled with dead end jobs, sickness, death, drugs and traumatic events. They shared the feeling of being alone, like a loser, and lost. Some of the participants seemed to hit rock bottom before they made the decision to return to school and complete the requirements of a secondary credential. Transitioning from a dropout to a school returner was not a smooth journey for the

participants of this study. Their stories capture the challenges they faced as well as the supportive factors they found, in the end, to be successful. The school returners described challenges such as time, family obligations, work, rural setting, and transportation as impacting their efforts. Their stories also showed them feeling embarrassed, being overwhelmed, and not being smart enough to be successful with the schoolwork.

However, their stories also contained descriptions of how the factors of resilience and the aspects of mattering supported and motivated them in their work. Their seeing that they were noticed by and cared about by other people created new, positive connections. These insights and connections combined with their willingness to work hard to do whatever it took to be successful enhanced their efforts positively.

All five of the participants were successful in earning a secondary credential, the event that created another transition for them from school returner to school completer. As school completers, the participants shared a feeling of pride. They also showed that they now have future goals and dreams. Their lives are now filled with new life paths, careers, and continuing their education. Each of the participants now has hope.

The following is a snapshot of the emotions and situations that I believe characterize the voices of the participants of this study. I have bolded each transition and what I see as the key word that introduces each new period in the lives of the five participants.

PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENT

NO CONNECTIONS

BULLYING

DIFFICULT TRANSITION

OUTCAST

FAMILY BREAK-UPS

DON'T FIT IN

BEHAVIOR ISSUES

RELATIONSHIPS

BECOMING A PARENT

ROLLERCOASTER RIDE

LIMBO

HELL

SCHOOL DROPOUT

DEAD END JOBS

FAILURES

LOST

WAITING

ALONE

LOSER

DRUGS

DEATH

SICKNESS

TRAMAUTIC EVENTS

REGRETS

ROCK BOTTOM

SCHOOL RETURNER

CHALLENGES

WORK

RURALITY

TRANSPORTATION

OVERWHELMED

EMBARRASSED

MATTERING

NOTICED

CARED ABOUT

NEEDED

APPRECIATED

PRIDE

SYMPATHY

RESILIENCE

COPING MECHANISMS

PROBLEM SOLVING

SOCIAL SUPPORT

CONNECTIONS

POSITIVE MEANING

WILLING TO WORK

EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS

MOTIVATION

POSITIVE ADULT CONTACT

SUPPORT NETWORK

SUPPORTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT/TEACHERS

SECONDARY CREDENTIAL

SECONDARY SCHOOL COMPLETER

PRIDE

NEW LIFE PATH

FUTURE GOALS

DREAMS

CAREERS

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

CONTINUING EDUCATION

CONNECTION TO RURAL COMMUNITY

HOPE

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Initial Recruitment Letter

Dear   ,

My name is Brenda Gammon and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership Program at the University of Maine. You are receiving this letter from me because your high school guidance counselor or the director of the adult education program that you attended identified you as a potential participant for a study I am conducting. The purpose of my research study is to capture, through the words of rural school returners, the complexity of experiences that impacted their decision to return to school and the experiences of their journey of completing the requirements for a secondary credential.

Involvement in this study will require your participation in three one-on-one interviews, which will last approximately sixty minutes each. Together we will select convenient locations, times, and dates for the interviews. The data collected during the study is intended to be used in my dissertation work and may be informative to educational leaders and policy makers whose work it is to provide educational environments that support the needs of all learners.

I hope that you are interested in participating in this important research study. You may reach me at brendagammon@region9school.org or 207-364-3764 if you have any questions, or if you would like to be part of this exciting research.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Brenda E. Gammon

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Dear Participant:

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by Brenda Gammon a graduate student in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Maine. The purpose of the research study is to capture, through the words of rural school returners the complexity of experiences that impacted their decision to return to school and the experiences of their journey of completing the requirements for a secondary credential.

What Will You Be Asked to Do?

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to take part in three one-on-one interviews to discuss your experiences as a school returner. Each of the interviews will take approximately sixty minutes of your time. The location, date, and time of the interviews will be scheduled around participant's availability. Interviews will be recorded using a laptop, Garageband software, and a Snoball Mic.

Risks

The risks to you as a participant in this study may include the emotional and psychological risk of making yourself vulnerable to the interviewer. Revealing private thoughts and feelings around life experiences can cause emotions to surface bringing to the forefront unpleasant memories. In addition, as a participant you may be inconvenienced by the time it takes to complete the three one-on-one interviews.

Benefits

The benefits of the study for you the participant include the opportunity to reflect upon your personal experiences as a school returner.

The benefit of the study to the larger educational community is that, like other research around educational topics, the telling of stories by rural school returners could aid educators in reflecting upon and improving the practices within rural educational settings.

Confidentiality

Your participation in this study is confidential. Audio recordings, transcriptions, and notes will be kept in a locked office. A pseudonym will be used to protect your identity. Your name will not be on any of the documentation. Names or other identifying information will not be reported in any publications. The key linking all participants' names to the data will be destroyed after my dissertation work is completed.

Voluntary

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose to take part in this study you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. Your decision to withdraw or participate in the study will not be shared by the researcher.

Compensation:

No compensation will be offered to individuals for participating in this study.

Contact Information

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at brendagammon@region9school.org or 207-364-3764. You may also contact my faculty advisor at sarah.mackenzie@maine.edu or 207-581-2734. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Gayle Jones, Assistant to the University of Maine's Protection of Human Subjects Review Board, at 581-1498 (or e-mail gayle.jones@umit.maine.edu).

Thank you in advance for your participation. Your time and input are greatly appreciated and valuable to me as a researcher.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the above information. You will receive a copy of this form.

_____   _____

Signature   **Date**

Appendix C: Interview Protocol #1

Project: A Qualitative Study of Rural School Returners' Journeys

to High School Completion

Time and Date of Interview:

Place:

Interviewer: Brenda E. Gammon

Interviewee:

Participant Interview One:

Thank you for agreeing to be part of this research study. As part of this study you will participate in three one–on–one interviews. I will use the data gathered in these interviews in my dissertation work. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate. I remind you that you may withdraw your consent at any time in the process. You may refuse to answer any questions for any reason. It is possible that, after reviewing the data collected, I may contact you for clarification or follow-up. Because of the personal nature of the data gathered for this study all information will be kept confidential. Audio recordings, transcriptions, and notes will be kept in a locked office. Your name will not be on any of the documentation. A code name/number will be used to protect your identity. Names or other identifying information will not be reported in any publications. The key linking your name to the data will be destroyed after data analysis and dissertation work is complete.

- Do you have questions about what I just read?

- Let's begin -

1. As background information trace for me your schooling experiences by describing what schools you attended for each grade level and how old your were while at each school.

2. Tell me the story of what going to school was like for you.

   Probes:

   a. Describe what a typical school day was like

   b. Tell me about the connections you had to your schooling and learning.

   c. Describe for me what you liked about school.

   d. Describe for me what you disliked about school.

   e. What were your dreams for the future?

   f. How did you spend your time after school?

   g. Who did you hang out with?

3. What are the factors that you believe led to you leaving school before graduation?

   Probes:

   a. What point do you recall as being the final factor in your decision to leave school?

   b. How did living in a rural area impact your schooling?

4. What was life like for you as a high school dropout?

   Probes:

   a. How did you spend your time?

b. Who did you associate with?

c. Did you ever regret your decision to leave school before

graduation? Explain

5. Tell me about the point that you decided to return to school?

Probes:

a. What was going on in your life?

b. Why did you make the decision at this point in your life?

c.   Did someone influence your decision?

d. What or who motivated you to make this decision?

e. What factors led up to you enrolling?

6.   Tell me about the process you went through to return to school.

Probes:

a. Where did you go?

b. Who did you contact?

c. Describe your process of re-enrolling

Project: A Qualitative Study of Rural School Returners' Journeys

to High School Completion

Time and Date of Interview:

Place:

Interviewer: Brenda E. Gammon

Interviewee:

Participant Interview Two:

I would like to thank you again for consenting to be part of this research study and for being willing to be interviewed once again. I want to remind you that you may withdraw your consent at any time in the process. You may refuse to answer any questions for any reason and because of the personal nature of the data gathered for this field study all information will be kept confidential.

- Do you have any questions about our first interview session?

- I will also use this time to ask for any clarification I may need regarding data collected during the first interview seeking further and richer details if needed.

1. During our first interview session you spoke about _____

    (list data gathered here as a way of member checking)

    Are there additional thoughts you would like to add to what you shared during the first interview?

2. During our first interview you shared the story of your decision to return to school – How did this decision impact your life at the time?

3. Please tell me the story of your journey from reenrolling in school to completing the requirements for a secondary credential.

        Probes:

                a. How long was this journey?

                b. Who supported you along the way?

                c. What barriers did you face?

                        a. How did you overcome these barriers?

                d. What was the most difficult aspect of your journey?

                e. What was the most rewarding point in your journey?

4. What would you note as the biggest motivators that convinced you to return to school?

5. Describe the barriers you faced along the way?

6. What would you describe as the things, events, or people that supported you the most in your return to school journey?

7. Are there any other details of your return to schooling that I did not ask you about that you would like to share that could help me understand your personal decision to drop out of school, to return to school, and your journey to becoming a completer?

Project: A Qualitative Study of Rural School Returners' Journeys

to High School Completion

Time and Date of Interview:

Place:

Interviewer: Brenda E. Gammon

Interviewee:

Participant Interview Three:

I would like to thank you again for consenting to be part of this research study and for being willing to be interviewed for the third time. I want to remind you that you may withdraw your consent at any time in the process. You may refuse to answer any questions for any reason and because of the personal nature of the data gathered for this field study all information will be kept confidential.

- Do you have any questions about either our first or second interview session?

- I will also use this time to ask for any clarification I may need regarding data collected during the first two interviews seeking further and richer details if needed.

1. Describe a typical day in the life of (interviewee's name).

2. What do you feel is the significance of your decision to return to school in regards to how you live your life today?

Probes:

     a. How has it impacted your life?

3. At this point in your life how do you see your future? What are your dreams/goals for yourself?

4. I would like you to think about what it was like going to high school originally compared to what it was like when you reenrolled. Describe the similarities and the differences.

     Probes

        a. How engaged were you each time?

        b. What motivators did you have to attend school?

        c. Location?

        d. Age?

        e. Connections you had to people?

        f. Barriers?

        g. Supports?

5. Describe the emotions you felt when you completed the requirements of a secondary credential.

6. Describe how this journey and accomplishment has impacted your life since.

7. What advice would you give to students who are looking to leave school before graduation?

8. What do you wish I had asked you about in regards to your schooling experiences and your process of returning to school?

BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Brenda Elaine Swan Gammon was born in Rumford, Maine. She attended and graduated in 1978 from Dirigo High School in Dixfield, Maine. She attended the University of Maine at Farmington and graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education in December of 1981. Brenda worked at the Kindergarten through eighth grade Peru Elementary School located in Peru, Maine for twenty-five years. She held a variety of positions at the school including: substitute teacher, part time custodian, classroom aide, Title I teacher, classroom teacher for grades – transitional first, first, second, fourth, and fifth, assistant principal, and principal. During this time she received a Master's of Education degree in Elementary Education through the University of Maine in 2001, and a Certificate of Advanced Study degree in Educational Leadership from the University of Southern Maine in 2007.

In 2007 Brenda became the Director of Region 9 School of Applied Technology located in Mexico, Maine. She continues in this position at the present time. The school provides career and technical education programs to students in grades nine through twelve. She also supervisors the Adult Education Learning Center located in the same building. Combining her experiences at Peru Elementary with those at the Region 9 School, Brenda has had the opportunity to work with student learners from pre-schoolers to adults. In 2009 Brenda began the journey as a doctoral student at the University of Maine. She is a candidate for a Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership from the University of Maine in December of 2016.