FROM DROPOUT TO DOCTORATE:

A PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE SELF-DETERMINATION OF INDIVIDUALS WHO

PERSISTED TO COMPLETION

by

Nancy Hamilton

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Liberty University

2023

FROM DROPOUT TO DOCTORATE:

A PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE SELF-DETERMINATION OF INDIVIDUALS WHO

PERSISTED TO COMPLETION

by Nancy Hamilton

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

2023

APPROVED BY:

Lucinda S. Spaulding, Ph.D., Committee Chair

Kristy Motte Ed.D., Committee Member

Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of former high school dropouts in the Continental United States who self-determined to persist to doctoral degree attainment. The theory that guided this study was the self-determination theory with support from the self-efficacy theory and adult learning theory. These three theories framed this study, which sought to discover the motivating factors, life influences, and perseverance required of former high school dropouts who determined to re-enter academia and pursue an education to the doctoral level. The problem this study sought to address was the need to discover the ongoing and necessary motivation, self-determination, and perseverance of high school dropouts who have returned to school to pursue graduate studies to the doctoral level. The participants' lived experiences were gathered through a demographic survey, personal interviews, open-ended questions, journals, observations, and letter writing. The study was undertaken within an interpretive framework through the social constructivism worldview. Data analysis was achieved by bracketing, categorization into significant concepts and themes, and textural and structural descriptions. The participants' lived experiences were investigated to discover their essential universal experience. The essence of the phenomenon was the discovery of the necessary self-motivation and persistence of individuals who graduate with a doctorate degree as former high school dropouts despite the many obstacles. Core themes were (a) personal suffering increased self-determination, (b) overcoming negative childhood experiences motivated academic accomplishment, and (c) the pursuit and attainment of a doctoral degree was life-changing and accomplished through faith.

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my Heavenly Father, His Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, my Comforter. You have done amazingly more than I ever thought possible, proving once again that your thoughts are so much higher than mine. After God, I dedicate this work *equally* to my best friend Desiree De Anda and my daughter Mishka Nobel who believed in me when I didn't and helped me in so many practical ways on my own journey from high school dropout to doctoral studies. I love you both with all my heart!

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge and thank my Chair Dr. Lucinda Spaulding who jumped on board early to guide me so skillfully and kindly through these unknown waters. You were the answer to so many prayers and a beacon of light in the night! I would also like to acknowledge my encouraging and thoughtful Committee Dr. Kristy Motte, and above all else, the amazing self-determination and perseverance of my participants who championed a cause so few undertake against seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Thank you for allowing me the privilege of studying your lived experience. May this research inspire others to follow your determined examples.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Abbreviations

Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL)

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

Doctor of Education (EdD)

General Education Development Test (GED)

High School Equivalency Test (HiSET)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)

Recognized Prior Learning (RPL)

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

There is a clear and decisive need to address education and life-long learning in today's Western society and the motivation required to persevere. The presentation of such ideals must be championed by those who continue to live a model of ongoing education. The purpose of this study was to describe the lived experiences of former high school dropouts in the Continental United States who self-determined to persist to doctoral degree attainment. Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1994), self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977), and adult learning theory (Knowles, 1962) provided the theoretical lenses by which to examine the fortitude needed for individuals who were high school dropouts and sought to overcome many life obstacles to alleviate self and cultural stigma by returning to school to persist in studies to doctoral completion. Chapter 1 includes a discussion of the background of the topic including its historical and social context, an overview of the theoretical frameworks, the situation to self, the problem statement, purpose statement, significance of the study, research questions, definitions, and a summary.

Background

Attrition significantly affects an individual's future employability and earned income in the United States as well as substantial societal costs, such as welfare and social programs, higher crime rates, incarceration, and retirement options (Bowers & Bergman, 2016; Laird et al., 2007; Nilsson, 2016). Within this context, no work thus far has examined the self-determination of individuals who dropped out of high school and later enrolled in higher education to eventually pursue a doctoral degree. Historically, research on high school dropouts who return to school is markedly absent. Prior to this study, there was no significant research or statistical data

on high school dropouts who later returned to school to successfully graduate from doctorate programs. Both personal advancement and national economy are affected by an investment in education, and this investment directly affects both national and international security. Lastly, from a theoretical perspective, this study is important as it examines Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy, which states that people will only do that which they feel they can accomplish, and they will not attempt that which they deem too difficult or impossible.

Historical Context

Historically, there has been a lack of research on students who drop out of high school and who later return to complete a GED or college degree (Barrat et al., 2016; Berktold et al., 1998; Boylan, 2017; Chuang, 1994; Entwisle et al., 2004). Between October 2016 and October 2017, the number of 15-to-24-year-olds who dropped out of high school in the United States was approximately 523,000, which was 4.7% of the 11.1 million youth enrolled in Grades 10-12 in the United States in 2016 (McFarland et al., 2020). The dropout rates for college graduation statistics continue to show that just 25% of college freshmen will earn a degree within 4 years, and the national graduation rate for those seeking a bachelor's degree is currently less than half, at 46%. In the United States, the overall dropout rate for undergraduate college students is currently 40% (Hanson, 2021).

Barrat et al. (2016) found that about one in five students who dropped out during high school later returned. Recent research of dropouts who return to school is unavailable; however, the National Center for Education Statistics in 1988 found that 26% of dropouts enrolled in a postsecondary institution, approximately 11% of dropouts enrolled in a 2 or 4-year degree program, 11% had enrolled in a certificate program, and the remaining 4% had enrolled in other postsecondary programs (NCES, 1998). In 2019, there were 2 million status dropouts between

the ages of 16 and 24, and the overall status dropout rate was 5.1% (NCES, 2021). About 16.5 million persons or 43.9% of 16-to-24-years were not enrolled in school (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021).

To date, there are no definitive statistics which state the percentage of high school dropouts who later returned to school to successfully graduate from doctorate programs, but it is well documented that even students who have not dropped out struggle to complete doctoral studies (Dinham & Scott, 1999; Templeton, 2016; Van der Linden et al., 2018; Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Research shows that while most doctoral students have the ability to graduate, the reality is that across decades and disciplines, approximately 50% of candidates fail to persist to completion (De Clercq et al., 2019; Fiore et al., 2019; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Attrition rates are reported to range from 20% to as high as 70%, and some departments have recorded 100% attrition over the course of a decade (Nettles & Millett, 2006; Smallwood, 2006). Historically, graduation rates at the doctorate level are staggeringly poor. Considering the odds, graduating from doctoral studies as a former high school dropout is a study in persistence and self-determination which necessitates a deeper understanding and more extensive research.

The term dropout, which describes those who left high school before receiving a diploma, dates to the 1960s. In the 1960s, dropping out of high school was deemed a social problem, dangerous both to the individual and to society at large (Conant, 1961; Dorn, 1993, 1996; Tyack, 1974). Dropping out of school continues to be perceived as a social problem, with blame being placed on students, teachers, and educational systems for failing to create or provide the necessary motivation and materials to enable students to graduate with a diploma, which would allow for greater opportunities in life (McFarland et al., 2020; Wild & Schulze Heuling, 2020;

Zaff et al., 2017). The simple term "dropout" has carried a stigma for more than 6 decades and is often associated with poverty, criminality, indolence, and economic disaster.

On the other hand, Thelin and the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research (2010) stated that the so-called "Golden Age" of America in which completion rates were the norm is nothing more than a myth and that attrition dates to the early 1900s. While the dates may be rightly argued, "dropping out" is universally characterized with failure. While attrition continues to bare this stigma today, it is important to understand that there are as many reasons for dropping out of school as there are for returning, and that what has historically been seen as failure may today be understood as the first step to subsequent success.

Social Context

The level of an adult's education indirectly influences their earning ability and retirement options and, ultimately, their entire life (Nilsson, 2016; Xing, et al., 2019). Both individuals and the national economy are affected by an investment in education, which directly affects individual, family, state, and local economies (Badulescu, & Csintalan, 2016; Bowers & Bergman, 2016; Eva, 2020). I sought to describe the unique path of individuals who turned academic failure into personal motivation to accomplish their goals and successfully span the gap between high school dropout to doctoral graduate.

Research is lacking in connection with the motivating factors that drove former high school dropouts to carry out the difficult task of extending beyond their life circumstances in the pursuit of a doctoral degree in the Continental United States of America. It is necessary to note that adults in the workforce who do not hold formal degrees face the ongoing challenge of unemployment as employers continue to seek, at minimum, baccalaureate degrees for what have historically been considered sub-baccalaureate jobs (Glass, 2014; Sutton, 2017). Adults who are

often the most in need of continued education to be employable are often the least likely to obtain it. At present, 162.3 million people are a part of the U.S. workforce, and 38 million of them are working-age adults with some college education but no formal degree (Bergman et al., 2014; Midtsundstad, 2019).

As these workers age, they are at risk of being involuntarily pushed out of the workforce to face early retirement with minimal social security benefits at a time when life expectancy continues to climb. The percentage of the population over the age of 65 is projected to reach 28% by 2050 in comparison to only 10% between 1960 to 2015 (OECD, 2017a, cited in OECD, 2018, p. 17). Today, 18.8% of the retired population is expected to live another 18.1 to 22.5 years, while in the 1970s, seniors lived 10.8 years between retirement and death (OECD, 2017b, p. 48). There are numerous benefits to pursuing a college/university degree; however, many adults either do not follow continued educational opportunities or they leave school without a completed degree, a decision that directly affects both individual and community development (Bowers & Bergman, 2016; Burnell et al., 2021). Considering the length of time social services must be provided, the economic burden, and the health and wellbeing of retired seniors, it is advantageous to encourage workers to return to school and continue their education.

<div align="center">**Theoretical Context**</div>

The use of theory in research provides both the researcher and reader opportunity to better understand a topic. Theory also assists in presenting credible and rigorous findings to new concepts within a prescribed theoretical framework. Lastly, theory facilitates transferability and generalizability of the study findings.

Theory of Self-Determination

Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2001) establishes that individuals are motivated to grow through their own self-determination. However, individuals' need for connection, autonomy, and competence must first be met in themselves. One of the main tenets of this theory is that inherent rewards for an individual's chosen behavior plays an important part in motivation and engagement. SDT was introduced by psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan in 1985. The two psychologists proposed that individuals are motivated by their own need to grow and seek personal fulfillment.

According to this theory, the need to grow motivates an individual to take action and is a natural, intrinsic behavior. The theory further develops the concept that people feel the need to master difficult challenges, thus enabling growth. Embracing new experiences is thought to be essential to one's personal fulfilment as it inspires change and development. SDT stresses that the primary motivations for actions are internal and independent from external sources.

Theory of Self-Efficacy

The concept of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) refers to the belief that one can accomplish a desired goal and that the very belief that one is capable enables them to do so. The self-efficacy theory is both a theory and a construct of the social cognitive theory, which originated from Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. Bandura's self-efficacy theory emerged at a time when psychologists were searching for an alternative form of therapy from the previous lie-on-the-couch approach. Researchers sought to discover action-orientated methods which enabled a change in behavior, and which could be employed not only by psychologists, but also by like-minded professionals, such as educators.

Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy was established on the basis that people will only do that which they feel they are capable of accomplishing; conversely, they will not attempt to undertake what they deem as impossible. However, Bandura further stated that people with high levels of self-efficacy set challenging goals for themselves, and, in the face of possible failure, they nevertheless stick to the task until it is accomplished. Bandura stated that this positive outlook lessens stress and lowers the risk of depression. On the other hand, people who perceive a desired goal as too difficult often view tasks as a threat and give up quickly in the face of trials or perceived failure.

Theory of Adult Learning

The adult learning theory (Knowles, 1968) also supports this research and added a needed lens to examine the phenomenon. This theory, developed by Malcolm Knowles (1968), explains how adults learn and the way in which this learning differs from young children and adolescents. Knowles (1968) distinguished adult learning and all other forms of learning by determining the learning styles that best suit adults. Knowles stated that adults need to be involved in the planning, learning, and evaluation of their educational process and that experience is the basis of knowledge. He also stated that adults learn via problem solving rather than content, and self-concept motivates adults to move from dependence to independence.

The broad constructs of Knowles' (1968) theory are the adult's self-motivation and self-determination on the learning path. This independence of thought and action differs from that of a child or adolescent. Adult learning is motivated by the adult student's life experience, which is considered paramount. Adult learners have an independent concept that they can manage their own education and that they have a lifetime of experience which may be used for learning. Adult learners are also self-motivated to apply what they have learned immediately.

The individuals in this study dropped out of high school and returned as adults to pursue their studies. They planned their own educational path and began the journey by returning to school against many odds (e.g., poverty, homelessness, and addiction). Knowles (1973) stated that adult learners apply what they have learned immediately, and this may be accomplished in everyday life before returning to formal studies. In this study, I further expanded the understanding of adult learning theory by using it as a lens to examine the experiences of individuals who dropped out of school, returned as adults, and persisted to doctoral degree attainment.

Problem Statement

This study addressed the problem of consistently low persistence rates of doctoral students across disciplines and the need to study subpopulations in order to determine intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for persevering. Specifically, the motivating factors that drove former high school dropouts to carry out the difficult task of extending beyond their life circumstances in the pursuit of a doctoral degree in the Continental United States of America were not known. When students drop out of school and fail to return, the result may be lower wages (Grose & Sanchez, 2020; Hanson et al., 2016) and difficulty obtaining employment (McDermott et al., 2019; Villere, 2019). If students who previously chose to drop out return to school, studies show that the journey to a complete a doctorate degree may be fraught with high attrition rates at the undergraduate (AuCoin & Wright, 2021: Jones-Berry 2021) and doctoral level (De Clercq et al., 2019; Fiore et al., 2019; van Rooij, 2021). Researchers have examined perseverance in minority groups (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Webber, 2015), such as Native American women undertaking doctoral studies (Shotton, 2018), African American and non-African American doctoral students (Bryant et al., 2016), and other nontraditional students (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017; Veal et

al., 2012). However, there is no research that describes the lived experience of high school dropouts who returned to school to pursue their doctorate. This study encompassed many aspects, including perseverance, reasons for high school dropout, adult education, and the motivation to return to school without the financial ability to do so (Bottomley et al., 2020; Goldman & Bradley, 1996; Sverdlik et al., 2018).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of former high school dropouts in the Continental United States who were self-determined to persist in their studies until they had successfully completed a doctoral degree. I sought to address the obstacles faced by former high school dropouts when returning to seek a doctorate degree. Little was known about the self-direction, self-motivation, and self-perseverance, which must be exercised as former high school dropouts return to school and continue from undergraduate to graduate studies, culminating in a doctoral degree.

The first theory guiding this study was the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2008). According to SDT, the need to grow motivates an individual's actions and is a natural, intrinsic behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The theory further develops the concept that people feel the need to master difficult challenges, thus enabling development. Embracing new experiences is thought to be essential to one's personal fulfilment and is essential to motivate change and improvement. The second theory is the theory of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), which is the belief that one can accomplish a desired goal and that the very belief that one is capable enables them to do so (Bandura, 1977). Lastly, the theory of adult learning (Knowles, 1973) designates that adult learners have an independent concept that they can manage their own learning and that they have a lifetime of experience which may be used for learning. These theories provided a framework to examine the

self-determination, motivation, autonomy, and competence which adult learners must find in themselves when making the journey from high school dropout to doctorate degree attainment.

Significance of the Study

This research is important for many reasons. It is important to describe the self-determination and perseverance of individuals at every stage of life. This study describes the lived experiences of individuals who once dropped out of school but later returned to school and persevered until attaining the highest degree in their field: a doctoral degree. Attrition at every level is an ongoing concern in educational institutions (Roch & Sai, 2018; Wahlgren & Mariager-Anderson, 2017). Persistence and self-determination in lifelong learning while navigating the numerous impediments that prevent the completion of personal educational goals is a subject worthy of continued exploration and research. Various researchers (e.g., Bergman et al., 2014; Flores & Brown, 2019; Hart, 2017; Liem, 2017; Scott, 2004) continue to study the reasons individuals drop out of school and the necessary sustained motivation to return in connection with the theories relevant to self-determination, self-efficacy, and persistence.

Empirical Significance

Little was known about the lived experiences of high school dropouts who decided to return to school and undertake the difficult journey from dropout to doctorate. Research related to returning to school to pursue education is not new (Boylan, 2017; Camper et al., 2019; Gruen, 2018). However, prior to this study, a gap existed in the literature addressing the combined elements of high school dropouts, doctoral studies, and the demonstrated persistence and self-determination required to surmount personal obstacles when returning to school including, but not limited to, poverty, teenage pregnancy, addiction, learning impairments, and incarceration (Gazley & Campbell, 2019; Miles et al., 2019; Olvera, 2018; Windisch, 2016). This research has

closed the gap that previously existed in the literature concerning the required persistence and determination of high school dropouts who return to academia to complete doctoral studies. The study may also present an opportunity for further research and contribute to understanding the necessary persistence and motivation required of learners who desire to pursue a doctoral degree as former high school dropouts.

Theoretical Significance

Theoretically, I sought to discover the relationship between self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2008), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), and the persistence of adult learners (Knowles, 1973) who successfully navigated from high school dropout to doctoral degree attainment (Van Rooij et al., 2021). Deci and Ryan (2008) developed the SDT, which has often been employed in organizational research. The theory expounds upon the need for motivation and achievement, especially for intrinsic motivation. Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory emphasizes lived experience to bring about therapeutic change and mastery through successful performance. This study may assist in adding credence and relational relevance between the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2008), which states that the individual's need for connection, autonomy, and competence must first be met in themselves (Ryan & Deci, 2001); the self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977), which proposes the belief that one can accomplish a desired goal and that the very belief that one is capable enables them to do so; and Knowles' (1973) adult learning theory, which suggests that adults are self-directed in their pursuits and take responsibility for their own decisions.

Practical Significance

The practical significance of this study is extensive, as I aimed to discover the basis of the personal will and motivation which adult learners who were previous high school dropouts exercised to self-determine their educational path. By hearing the stories of individuals who have

overcome life's hurdles such as teenage pregnancy, incarceration, poverty, racial injustice, physical and mental abuse, and addiction, others may be motivated to follow their example.

This study may motivate academic engagement and lifelong learning among vocational and adult education students through self-direction in learning (Chukwuedo et al., 2021; Hodge et al., 2017; Kruszelnicki, 2020; Langshaw, 2017). This research may also inspire other students by showing that it is never too late to take up the challenge to return to school and finish what was seemingly lost in the immature and problematic years of adolescence. Lastly, the problem this study addressed was the perennially low rates of doctoral completion and the limited understanding of the lived experience of high school dropouts who persist to doctoral completion despite the odds against them.

Education is a door through which freedom and equality may be obtained. When previous high school dropouts see the outcomes—the sphere of influence achieved, the freedom from poverty, the respect of one's peers, the victory over addiction, and the liberty that education enables, even behind bars— the downward cycle may be broken. Findings from this study may transform lives and change destinies. Research such as this does far more than inspire educational success: it has the potential to motivate ongoing change for generations to come. Findings may also help to inform colleges and universities developing graduate and doctoral-level programs of the motivational factors that may contribute to successful graduation and the necessary persistence required.

Research Questions

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of former high school dropouts in the Continental United States who self-determined to persist to doctoral degree attainment. The research questions were created to ascertain the

experiences of this unique demographic. The questions also sought to discover the motivation and persistence required to achieve this difficult goal.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of former high school dropouts in the Continental United States who self-determined to persist to doctoral degree attainment?

Sub-Question One

What experiences shaped the self-efficacy of former high school dropouts who self-determine to persist to doctoral completion?

Sub-Question Two

What does the pursuit and attainment of a doctoral degree mean to individuals who dropped out of high school, later returned to studies, and persisted to doctorate degree attainment?

<div align="center">

Definitions

</div>

The following definitions are provided to ensure the clarification and meaning of key terms used in this research.

1. *General Education Development Test (GED) –* The GED test measures the skills of which a student is academically capable. The test focuses on the foundational knowledge and skills needed for career and college readiness (GED Testing Service, 2019).

2. *Motivation –* An individual's commitment when working toward the completion of personal goals (Tinto, 1993).

3. *Phenomenology –* "A phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon. Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they

experience a phenomenon" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 121).

4. *Qualitative research* – The use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks in research which provides information within the context of the study of research problems. Research problems are defined as the significance individuals and/or groups give to a social and/or human problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

5. *Transcendental phenomenology* – "Transcendental phenomenology is focused less on the interpretations of the researcher and more on a description of the experiences of participants" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 126).

Summary

The purpose of this study was to describe the lived experiences of former high school dropouts in the Continental United States who self-determined to persist to doctoral degree attainment. Primarily, I sought to discover the factors necessary for motivation and self-determination to follow through. It is not unusual for adult learners to return to school to complete studies in higher education, and research is currently available to determine the factors involved, enlisting such theories as the self-determination and self-efficacy. However, there is no research describing learners' progress on the difficult journey from high school dropout to doctorate. Many researchers acknowledge the vital role of persistence, especially when seeking advanced degrees (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Therefore, understanding the many reasons for attrition and the motivation and self-determination necessary to undertake graduate studies as an adult was necessary to encourage life-long learning and educational achievement of students who are deemed at risk.

Discovering the complexity of the necessary steps involved in a journey from high school dropout to doctorate graduate is a complex study involving many research aspects combined with a recognition of established theories. Researching the experiences of those who have dropped out of high school and then returned to school to continue their education was the first step in this effort (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016; Gubbels et al., 2019; Zaff Donlan et al., 2017). Understanding the necessary self-determination to overcome the numerous obstacles to return to school was the second step (Fairchild, 2017; Grau-Valldosera et al., 2019; Gruen, 2018). Lastly, examining the motivation and persistence required to continue to doctoral studies as an adult learner was the third and final step in this research (Carlsten & Olsen, 2019; O'Neill & Thomson, 2013; Rodrigues et al., 2020). By understanding the alternate educational paths available (Harris & Wihak, 2018) and the necessary persistence and self-determination required to pursue these paths, higher education administrators may provide individuals of all ages the opportunity to succeed and attain their educational goals.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this study was to describe the lived experiences of former high school dropouts in the Continental United States who self-determined to persist to doctoral degree attainment. A systematic review of the literature was conducted to explore the theoretical and empirical literature related to dropping out of high school and later persisting to doctoral degree attainment. I begin Chapter 2 by discussing the theories that form the theoretical framework for the study: SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2008), self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977), and adult learning theory (Knowles, 1973). Next, I provide a discussion of the current literature, identifying the factors associated with dropping out of high school, the path to return to school, and the persistence required to undertake higher education culminating in a doctorate degree. To conclude, a gap in the literature which existed prior to this study and the consequent need for further research is identified regarding the combined elements of high school dropout, adult learning, and doctorate completion.

Theoretical Framework

In this study of high school dropouts who returned to school and advanced to the successful achievement of a doctorate degree, the primary concept forming the theoretical framework was Ryan and Deci's (2001) SDT. However, Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory and Knowles' (1980) adult learning theory provided a complimentary lens through which to view a theoretical basis for this research. The goal of the following discussion is to provide a clear theoretical approach rather than a summary of existing literature (Maxwell, 2005).

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

SDT was developed by psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan in 1985. The two psychologists proposed that individuals are motivated by their own need to grow and seek personal fulfillment. More specifically, STD states that the individual's need for connection, autonomy, and competence must first be met in themselves (Ryan & Deci, 2001). One of the main points of this theory is that inherent rewards for chosen behavior play an important part in motivation and engagement.

Motivation and persistence are essential characteristics when former high school dropouts, who have faced great social-contextual determents, make the decision to return to school and persist from high school dropout to graduate studies, culminating in a doctoral degree. This research established that these unique individuals are goal directed by intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in which they find personal academic and social satisfaction. Returning to their educational pursuits satisfied their psychological needs by providing a sense of growth and achievement in the place of perceived prior failure.

Deci and Ryan's (2000) theory is applicable to the area of education promoting autonomy, an interest in educational pursuits, and the necessary self-confidence to surmount obstacles. Knowing what motivates doctoral students in their educational persistence is essential in determining completion of studies. Hands (2020) studied PhD motivation from the perspective of the SDT. The results suggested that PhD students are motivated by intrinsic motivation and regulation, which is a type of extrinsic, yet autonomous motivation. Intrinsic motivation and regulation enable an individual to see beyond the supposed benefits of an activity to the point at which it is deemed worthy of personal internalization and endorsement (Ryan & Deci, 2018). Self-determination and self-satisfaction, which produce a sense of well-being, better serve the

long-term interests of students as learning is autonomous instead of controlled (Ryan et al., 2009). Thus, the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2001) plays a fundamental role in examining and describing the motivation, self-confidence, and persistence of former high school dropouts in their completion of a doctorate degree.

Theory of Self-Efficacy

Another theory which provided a lens to investigate the lived experience of former high school dropouts and complements SDT is the concept of self-efficacy, or the belief that one can accomplish a desired goal and that the very belief that one is capable enables them to do so (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy theory was established on the basis that people will only undertake that which they feel they can accomplish and that a person's self-efficacy affects the decisions they make and the way in which they execute those decisions in performing tasks. These decisions and the way they determine outcomes continue to influence growth in future self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1997; Lent et al., 1994).

However, Bandura (1977, 1994) went a step further in his theory and stated that people with higher degrees of self-efficacy set for themselves challenging goals and, in the face of possible failure, they stick to the task until it is accomplished. Researchers continue to utilize the theory of self-efficacy with the understanding that an individual's belief in their own ability to perform a task directs how those individuals think, act, and feel in a manner which may differ depending upon the specific task (Haverback & Mee, 2015; Pajares, 1996).

Adult Learning Theory

The adult learning theory (Knowles, 1962) states that adults need to be involved in the planning, learning, and evaluation of their educational process and that experience is the basis for learning. The individuals in this study dropped out of high school and returned as adults to

pursue their studies. They planned their own educational path and began the journey by returning to school. Knowles (1973) stated that adult learners are self-motivated to apply what they have learned immediately, and they often do so even before returning to formal studies.

In summary, these theories help guide the research design, select, and interpret pertinent data, and offer explanations of cause and effect on an issue or topic. For millenniums, theories have helped to provide complex frameworks for conceptual understanding that may otherwise have been illusive or previously undiscovered. The SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2001), self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977), and adult learning theory (Knowles, 1980) served as a lens through which to examine the motivation that led former high school dropouts to become doctoral graduates.

Related Literature

The following related literature pertains to high school attrition, adult high school dropouts in the workplace, returning to school through a high school equivalency test (e.g., General Educational Development [GED] and the High School Equivalency Test [HiSET]), adult education and doctoral studies, Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR), and Recognized Prior Learning (RPL). These subjects are covered in the related literature review in the context of the self-perseverance and self-determination required of adult learners as they seek to return to school to continue their educational studies to the doctoral level. While there are many studies related to high school attrition and adult education, to date, none cover all the above elements in relation to the difficult journey from high school dropout to doctoral graduate.

High School Attrition

Researchers seek to understand and determine the reasons for high school attrition. This process is often challenging because students face diverse difficulties and require a wide variety

of interventions. Current research suggests that students leave school due to many reasons and lived experiences (Gatson & Enslin, 2021; Goodman & Intercultural Development Research Association, 2018; Zaff et al., 2017). Systematic reviews show the importance of the individual, family, school, and community support for persistence; sadly, these elements are often lacking, if not entirely absent.

It is interesting to note that one of the most common reasons for dropping out of school was stated as, "I was failing too many classes" (McDermott et al., 2019, p. 280). Failure frequently breeds failure and, without intervention, continued failure results in attrition. Studies have found that academic achievement is the strongest factor for dropping out, followed by school attendance rate (Ambrose et al., 2017; Balkis, 2018; Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016; Fraysier et al., 2020). Academic failure is frequently a precursor to a drop in attendance and initiates an ongoing snowball effect. Studies suggest that with the passage of time, school absenteeism may deteriorate, beginning with occasional days off to regular days off and then acute absenteeism until students drop out permanently (Gubbels et al., 2019; Robison et al., 2017).

Research also suggests gender plays a role in attrition, with females indicating that they left high school because of pregnancy, mobility, peers, health, crime, and other isolated or multiple reasons (Berg, & Nelson, 2016; Lavoie et al., 2019; Vázquez-Nava et al., 2019). Males indicate that their reasons for leaving high school were related to family, school engagement, and environment (McDermott et al., 2019). Although female students may have a greater burden of care for family members, almost double the number of male participants reported that school was not relevant to their lives, and they dropped out to support their families.

Additional risk factors include a negative attitude, substance abuse (Goulet et al., 2020; Gubbels et al., 2019; Maynard et al., 2015; Stoddard et al., 2020), and low parental involvement (Camper et al., 2019; Parr & Bonitz, 2015). Other reasons include poor general wellbeing, adverse childhood experiences, mother's age, large classes/schools, financial obligations, employment, family, illness, negative reactions to adolescent pregnancy (Sámano et al., 2019; Vázquez-Nava et al., 2019), learner disengagement, and learning disabilities.

Quantitative studies enlisting standardized instruments such as The Adverse Childhood Experience Scale (ACEs) and The Life Events Checklist (LEC) which measure psychological symptoms such as trauma and depression have found that childhood trauma caused by natural disasters places children at risk for maladaptive social-emotional functioning well into adulthood (Merrick et al., 2017). It was further found that children's recovery from such traumatic events is an ongoing and evolving process, which must begin with eradicating the cause of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs; Dass-Brailsford et al., 2021). ACEs continue to escalate, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic continues and international crises arise on every level, affecting people of all ages and, in many cases, impacting schools and institutions of higher education (Subramaniam & Wuest, 2021; Washington-Brown et al., 2021).

Yet an even greater pandemic and one that rarely receives the attention it deserves is the pandemic of trauma and ACEs in daily life. Childhood trauma and ACEs continue to impact children and adolescents worldwide, affecting learning at every stage of development. Such incidents pose a serious academic risk for attrition in both the public and private school sector. To date, public schools in the United States have made some progress in recognizing this sensitive subject and inspiring the need to establish broader assistance and education in student resiliency (Ellison et al., 2020; Subramaniam & Wuest, 2022). Unfortunately, many institutions

of higher education continue to lag behind.

Living in a single parent household and engaging in sexual activity at an early age resulting in pregnancy during adolescence are other ongoing factors associated with dropping out of high school (Vázquez-Nava et al., 2019). Other aspects associated with dropping out are demographic in nature. For example, racial/ethnic minority groups and English learner students are statistically twice as likely to dropout than White students and those who are proficient in the English language (Barrat et al., 2016; Brock & Brekken, 2019; Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016; Gubbels et al., 2019).

As the above factors are understood within their social and demographic settings, the need for change becomes clear; however, the attainment may only be possible if it is believed to be so. The theories of self-efficacy and self-determination (Bandura, 1977; Ryan & Deci, 2001) assert that an individual will be motivated to succeed in educational pursuits if they believe they are attainable, and that personal fulfilment is essential to motivate change and growth. If students feel a sense of failure and are not encouraged by teachers, parents, or peers to believe in their own ability, self-efficacy and self-determination may not be enough to dissuade attrition. When students fall off track, apathy and disillusionment set in, which may result in academic disengagement (Vaughn et al., 2020; Watt & Roessingh, 1994).

While high school attrition has been widely studied over the past 4 decades, there remain many untouched areas. One such example which is often ignored is the prevalent region of student emotional disturbance (ED). Feelings of self-doubt and self-imposed stigmatization are frequently compounded among students with emotional disturbances (Gårdvik et al., 2021; McGuire & Jackson, 2018; Sullivan & Sadeh, 2016). Sullivan and Sadeh found that in over 1,300 publications with 35 potentially applicable studies, only one relevant study was acceptable

to the researchers when seeking to understand this common but rarely researched phenomenon. The review identified only one study that systematically examined a dropout prevention program for students with ED and found that studies were so sparce that the researchers almost had an empty review (Sullivan & Sadeh, 2016, p. 251). From this disparity, one may conclude that this is an important area of practice in which rigorous intervention research is needed. More evaluations of programs and interventions are necessary to identify effective prevention approaches and guide practice for at-risk students with ED. As Sullivan and Sadeh (2016) highlighted, "For the past 30 years, the dropout rate for students with emotional disturbance has hovered around 50%, a rate substantially higher than the dropout rate for students with other disabilities and the general population" (p. 251).

Students with ED, whatever the cause may be, are often ignored or labeled as troublemakers and/or academic failures by an educational system that is overworked and understaffed. Sullivan and Sadeh (2016) stated that students with ED are among the students that most often drop out of school, but little is known regarding how to prevent dropout rates in this demographic. It is often the case that high school students are passed off as "troublemakers" when, in fact, they are simply trying to survive in their own circumstances, sometimes attempting to work their way through dire complications such as physical abuse, substance abuse, and poverty in their own homes (Kern et al., 2021; Mills & Sabornie, 2021; Sullivan & Sadeh, 2016). Research suggests that students with emotional and behavioral disorders and struggling with ED often lag behind other students in both regular and special education (Curran et al., 2021).

Approximately 30% of students with a Learning Disability (LD) present with concurrent behavioral problems and have several additional diagnoses, including emotional and behavioral

disabilities. Cortiella and Horowitz (2014) found in a study of 448 students that 62% of students with LD exhibited coexisting neuropsychological disorders, including anxiety, mood disorder, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Mayes and Calhoun (2006) reported that over 50% of students with ED also presented with LD. Research suggests that exposure to childhood trauma negatively impacts school achievement and may result in mental health disorders, which disengages students from academic achievement, and that such imbalances are common in pediatric mental health care in the United States (Larson et al., 2017; Margari et al., 2013).

Adolescent mental disorders are a growing concern among educators, as the suicide rate continues to escalate, especially during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Social isolation has intensified ACEs and technology addiction, which have been of great concern to students, parents, and educators alike (Gracia et al., 2021; Pincus et al., 2020; Yard et al., 2021). Teenagers who are transitioning into young adulthood already face many challenges, and these challenges are compounded by social and mental health disorders which contribute to reduced psychosocial function (Gårdvik et al., 2021).

Physical illness and disability may also make high school graduation a difficult accomplishment and are often associated with high school attrition (Ziemer et al., 2018). For example, in a recent study by Antoni (2021) referring to the COVID-19 pandemic, the author found that the turbulent context and disengagement experienced by marginalized high school students made it more likely that learners would be subjected to dropping out, or rather being pushed out of studies as they neared the end of their academic journey. Children who experience chronic illnesses, both mental and physical, face unnumbered challenges which affect their

attendance at school and, consequently, their grade retention and graduation (McKinley Yoder &

Cantrell, 2019).

When children with chronic conditions are not able to participate fully in education,

both graduation and opportunities for future health are adversely affected (McKinley Yoder &

Cantrell, 2019). It is often the case that chronic conditions are substantially associated with

heightened absenteeism, grade repetition, and high school dropout rates. Additionally, as

adolescent health conditions decline, there is an increased association with poorer educational

outcomes. During the 2014–15 school year in the United States alone, 6.6 million students with

learning difficulties received special education services due to a disability (McFarland et al.,

2017). In conclusion, studies show that students with chronic health conditions are at greater risk

of poor academic performance compared to healthy students (Crump et al., 2013; Maslow et al.,

2011).

Another reason for high school attrition is incarceration. Approximately 50 million

students attend elementary, middle, and high school each day in the United States (National

Center for Education Statistics, 2021). When zero tolerance procedures were instituted, the

school-to-prison pipeline was established and resulted in mandating policies within schools and

colleges with the application of predetermined consequences (Albritton et al., 2020; Kang-

Brown et al., 2013). Unfortunately, these policies, which were created to deter wrongdoing by

establishing that no form of unacceptable behavior would be tolerated under any circumstance,

were detrimental particularly to students of color who become involved in the juvenile justice

system and, later, the criminal justice system (Albritton et al., 2020; Mallett, 2016; Skiba et al.,

2006). Black and Latino students have been found to be overrepresented in school suspension

and expulsion rates compared to White students, given harsher punishment, and are more likely to enter the juvenile justice system (Skiba et al., 2011).

The incidence of dropping out of high school and incarceration also significantly impacts adult high school dropouts in the work force. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (2018), between 1980 and 2016, the incarceration rate in the United States rose from 0.22% to 0.67%, and the impact of this enormous increase fell disproportionately on black males and the less educated (Gordon et al., 2021). This disparity may explain a significant portion of the Black-White gap in lifetime earnings ranging from 44% of the gap for high school graduates and 52% of the gap for high school dropouts. First-time incarceration reduces expected lifetime earnings by 39% (Gordon et al., 2021). High school dropout rates remain high for Black and Hispanic students compared to White students in school districts distinguished by a large proportion of poor and ethnic minority students. The achievement gap between Hispanic students and their non-Hispanic peers also remains extensive, largely because Hispanics have the highest dropout rate (Chapman et al., 2011; Maynard et al., 2015; Obinna & Ohanian, 2020).

In one study of incarcerated women, researchers found that approximately 56% of women in state prisons entered without a high school diploma (Brock & Brekken, 2019). These women stated that poor academic performance was a by-product of their parents' neglect of interest; physical, sexual, and emotional childhood abuse; and even abandonment. Unremarkably, they credited these adverse factors to their lack of interest in school achievement. In their own words, they simply felt that "no one cared" (Brock & Brekken, 2019, p. 38). The concluding point is that there are many reasons why students drop out of high school, and the

stereotype that high school dropouts are academic failures wrongly infers that they are simply too self-indulgent or lazy to succeed.

Adult High School Dropouts in the Workforce

As of March 2021, there were approximately 150.8 million people working in the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics U.S. Department of Labor, 2021). It is significant to note that 38 million individuals in the workforce are adults who, although they have some college education, do not hold a formal degree (Belkin, 2018; Bowers & Bergman, 2016). These individuals will find it increasingly more difficult to obtain employment in the future as employers' academic expectations continue to increase. In today's competitive job market, at minimum, baccalaureate credentials have become an expected norm in the United States, while a master's degree is usually preferred (Achieve, 2019; Bowers & Bergman, 2016; Rios-Aguilar et al., 2018).

While Western countries generally have the highest educational attainments in the world, in the United States, 12% of Americans aged 25 and over reported that their highest level of education was less than high school graduation (Uppal, 2017). As previously noted, dropping out of high school has both individual and social consequences that may lead to unfavorable labor market outcomes. In one research study of Alaskan students' pathways from high school to postsecondary education and employment, it was found that on average, high school graduates earned $34,000 annually 6 years after high school. Students who obtained a 2-year college degree after high school earned an average of $40,800 annually, which was $7,000 higher than those who had attained a high school diploma only. It was also discovered that each quarter of work experience earned approximately a 2% increase in wages and that every additional year of schooling positively affected earnings (Hanson et al., 2016).

Even without a postsecondary education, a high school diploma correlated with increased wages, particularly for male students and Alaska Native students, compared with peers who left high school without a diploma (Hanson et al., 2016). Students attending high school who spent long hours in part-time jobs were more likely to drop out of high school than those who worked moderate hours or were not employed in the job force at all during their high school years, revealing adolescent employment as a risk factor for high school dropout (Staff et al., 2020).

High school dropouts are among the group of low-skilled workers who suffer the most when the economy regresses. For example, in 2006, the unemployment rate dropped below 6% at the height of the housing boom, but when the market took a turn for the worse, job opportunities for low-skilled workers declined, and unemployment of this class quickly rose to 15% as the economy crumbled (Villere, 2019). When construction, manufacturing, and retail jobs decline, high school dropouts in the work force will find it even more difficult to find employment. The lack of a high school diploma remains one of the main economic factors and precursors to job opportunity inequality. Research suggests that employers consider the attainment of a high school diploma as a signal for career readiness which, in turn, influences economic outcomes among individuals with no credentials (Grose & Sanchez, 2020; McDermott et al., 2019).

If self-educated individuals with more than adequate talent apply for an advertised job opening without, at minimum, a high school diploma, they will rarely be interviewed, and the risk of unemployment continues to increase as they age (Liu, 2017; Munyon et al., 2019). The lack of a high school diploma also affects further educational pursuits and job training opportunities. Correspondingly, studies establish that the risk increases due to incarceration, as

does the costs of social services and societal outcomes, such as lower tax revenue (Holleman &

Abell Foundation, 2019; Tapia et al., 2020). All these factors place a great burden not only on

individuals, but on families, communities, and society at large.

An aging population adds complexity to an already difficult and challenging set of

Circumstances. As individuals age, there is a close link between early retirement and the lack of

formal academic achievement. Researchers have found that educated individuals continue in the

workforce longer and have better working conditions, training opportunities, and working

environments and that discrimination against older workers, particularly for older women,

continues to be a social problem affecting millions of individuals (Bahn, 2019; McDermott et

al., 2019; Midtsundstad, 2019; Neumark, 2019). All these factors influence health, life

expectancy, and the ability to continue to work in senior years. As there exists a direct

correlation between the level of education and job opportunities, education also has a direct

impact on wage levels which, in turn, affects social security benefits and retirement options.

Involuntary retirement is often the outcome as older, seemingly less productive seniors are

involuntarily pushed out of the job market because of their lack of formal education (McDermott

et al., 2019; Midtsundstad, 2019).

Returning to School

Returning to school to obtain a degree should be a highly desired norm. There are,

however, many obstacles which must be overcome in the process of returning to school to obtain

a degree such as family responsibilities, financial obligations, medical concerns, and work

commitments (Carnasciali et al., 2017). Such obstacles increase exponentially depending upon

the level of previous educational attainment and educational aspirations. Pursuing a doctoral

degree as a former high school dropout and against many barriers such as self-doubt, poverty, addiction, and learning difficulties is a daunting task.

The 2011 National Adult Learners Satisfaction-Priorities Report stated that the number one reason for adult students deciding to return to school is academic reputation (Noel-Levitz, 2011). Adults who engage in school endeavors often have other pressing commitments such as family and work, which may necessitate a slower pace of learning and require a greater devotion to sustained perseverance. Approximately 60% of adult students enrolled in a 2-year college program do not earn their degree within 6 years (Kim & Baker, 2015). Further, while cost is an important consideration when returning to school, it is only one of many, such as course options, active learning, gender, age, previous academic achievement, and characteristics such as perseverance and motivation. Even so, adult students over the age of 24 now comprise more than 50% of all part-time students and more than 33% of total higher education enrollment in the United States (Bergman et al., 2014).

Distance Education

Fortunately for those desiring to return to their educational pursuits, distance education (DE) has opened the door for many adult learners seeking either to begin or continue their studies. After nearly two decades, online learning has become so popular that more than 50% of higher education students have chosen this method (Dahlstrom et al., 2015; Grau-Valldosera et al., 2019). The Internet, which has changed the face of education worldwide, has directly influenced the explosive growth of students seeking to return to school. The ability to study online and at one's own convenience has opened the door for millions of nontraditional learners to reengage and continue their education (Lansing, 2017).

Motivation is inspired by a student's personal goals and aspirations, that which they

believe they can achieve, and whether individuals within their immediate environment such as family, friends, co-workers, and school administration are supportive of those goals and aspirations. However, the degree to which motivation serves as a prompter for continued studies may also depend on a student's age. For example, the older the student is, the less inclined they may be to return to school (Abar et al., 2012; Tenenbaum et al., 2007; Zaff et al., 2017). Whatever the case may be, it is important to note that in 2020 alone, approximately 65% of job openings required some form of tertiary education (Bowers & Bergman, 2016).

Higher Education Increased Earning

Even when the economy is flourishing, studies show that workers who have degrees typically earn more and are more often employed than workers who have less education. For this reason, adult learners are frequently considered to be life-long learners who desire to, or already have made, career changes. Graduate education continues to encourage economic mobility and significantly improve opportunities related to health, wellbeing, job prospects, earning capacity, and civic participation (Carnasciali et al., 2017; Garcia & Center for Law and Social Policy [CLASP], 2018; Torpey, 2021).

Employees who have earned a bachelor's degree will average over a million dollars more in their career life than a high school graduate and more than $325,000 more than workers with an associate degree (Abel & Deitz, 2014). In the United States, high school graduates earn an average of $9,200 more per year than high school dropouts, while those who complete a college degree may expect to earn approximately $1 million more than individuals who did not graduate from high school over the course of their lifetime (Bridgeland et al., 2006). This disparity places individuals who do not have some form of high school equivalency at high risk of financial hardship.

In today's competitive workforce, middle-aged men and women are deciding to return to school in the hope of bettering their job prospects. Some 59% of community college students are nontraditional and over the age of 40, with a staggering 57% being women (Fairchild, 2017). Sadly, case studies indicate that many of these women feel undervalued and are troubled by anxiety due to their age as college students in what they perceive to be a youth-based educational environment. Even with these concerns, intrinsic motivation is most often cited as the reason for returning to school to complete either a high school diploma, GED, undergraduate, or graduate degree (Johnson, 2021).

Military Veterans

Another large group of adults seeking to return to school includes military veterans. The GED was originally developed during World War II by the U.S. Armed Forces Institute to aid veterans who had previously dropped out of high school to enter the military (Hutt & Stevens, 2017; Rose, 1991). In 1942, government officials, military, and academia worked collectively to design several tests to provide war veterans and military personnel the opportunity to return to the workforce after serving their country. It was deemed necessary that veterans, at minimum, obtain the equivalent of a high school diploma. This proved to be a helpful solution to a pressing historical problem, although today's critics may consider it an overt social/political decision rather than an academic achievement (Rose, 1991).

The armed forces continue to provide academic opportunities as incentive to gain enlistment. For example, many veterans from Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), and Operation New Dawn (OND) stated that they joined the armed forces to improve their chances of employment through continued education made available by government sponsored programs (Ellison et al., 2018; Kleykamp, 2006; Wilson et al., 2000).

These veterans face many physical and mental challenges such as PTSD due to war-related trauma, physical disabilities, cognitive skill deficits, side effects related to prescription medications, and flashbacks (Ellison et al., 2018). It is interesting to note that even today, 80 years after the original advancement of the GED, high school dropouts may enter the military through this enduring process, which continues to provide an educational pathway into the armed forces.

The High School Equivalency Test Process

Graduation from high school is a major educational milestone in the United States and has an immediate impact on society. Consequently, researchers consistently seek to understand the effect of high school graduation and high school equivalency attainment on life outcomes. Despite the many benefits of a high school diploma, nearly 7,000 students drop out of high school every day in the United States, with minority groups at the highest risk (Northeastern University Center for Labor Market Studies, 2009). As a result, between 3.5 and 6 million young adults aged 16 to 24 and up to 39 million Americans older than 24 years may be classified as high school dropouts (Northeastern University Center for Labor Market Studies, 2009; Rossi & Bower, 2018; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). One of the main purposes of the adult education system in every federal education bill is to establish the provision of high school equivalency. In recent decades, the educational system in the United States has made significant changes in the enactment of that purpose (McLendon, 2017).

Offering high school dropouts some type of educational alternative has been the goal of programs such as the GED exam, Pearson/VUE's GED® Testing Service, DRC/CTB's Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC™), and ETS's High School Equivalency Test (HiSET®). By undertaking any of these programs and passing a credentialing exam, individuals

who were prevented or unable to graduate with a high school diploma may find an alternate route into the work force or higher education (Rossi & Bower, 2018). The equivalency exams vary from state to state, and it is important to note that those who sit for the exam do not "earn" a diploma, but rather are awarded a high school equivalency by the state's education department in which the student sat for the exam (Gruen, 2018; McDermott et al., 2019; Rossi & Bower, 2018).

As previously stated, the GED was originally developed at the end of World War II by the U.S. government and the existing educational institutions. GI Bills spurred an unprecedented influx in American colleges and universities as veterans became students wishing to fulfill their American dream (Hutt & Stevens, 2017; Rose, 1991). At that time, 59% of Caucasian World War II veterans and 83% of Black veterans were high school dropouts, while an astounding 26% of White veterans and 55% of Black veterans had no high school education at all (Mettler, 2005; Smith, 1947). Since that time, the GED tests have continued to benefit both military veterans and civilian high school dropouts seeking to return to educational studies. It is estimated that approximately 15 million individuals have earned a GED since 1942 and, today, more than 95% of employers in America hire GED graduates in the same manner as traditional high school graduates (American Council on Education, 2001; Baldwin & American Council on Education, 1996).

In the 1980s and 1990s, countries began to feel the effects of globalization, which awakened an interest in understanding the economic and social returns of educational investment (Stein, 2017). On August 26, 1981, the Secretary of Education of the U.S. Department of Education in Washington, D.C., and the National Commission on Excellence in Education were directed to present a report on the quality of education in the United States. The resulting document and act were termed *A Nation At Risk* (United States, 1983). The report is considered

by many educators to be a landmark event in modern American educational history. The Secretary's concern centered in the public perception that something was seriously remiss in the educational system. *A Nation at Risk* was released in 1983 by the Reagan administration and described the failure of the American educational system to educate students. The act recommended such reforms as more rigorous standards and the evaluation of teacher preparation and wages. As a result, reforms were initiated, which spanned several decades and continue to exert strong influence on acts such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) while emphasizing standardization and accountability.

Since then, it has been the purpose of adult educators to prepare students to function competently within the goals of global workplace education programs. Helping the adult learner to develop basic skills in reading and math, thus enabling them to be more fully equipped to contribute to the workforce, was one of the initial aims of community-based programs (Stein, 2017). However, as time passed, it became apparent that the objective must be to do more than provide basic skills or even enable students to pass the GED test.

Adult educators and policy makers now sought to assist learners in the acquirement of skills and the accomplishment of personal goals so that they might be able "to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship" (National Education Goals Panel, 1991, Goal 6). It was now assumed that if citizens were expected to lead successful lives free of poverty and with employment opportunities, policymakers would need to expand educational opportunities. Thus, the provision of equivalency testing and basic skill competencies were more widely established (Millenky, 2016; Stein, 2017).

The GED test involves five subjects, including writing, reading, social studies, science, and mathematics, and while the standards for the GED test varies from state to state, they tend to

be similar (Chaney et al., 2020; Larson et al., 2016; Rice, 2019). The five subjects covered in the GED tests are presented in a multiple answer and short essay format and take approximately 8 hours to complete. The original tests were first released in 1942 and were followed by three more in 1978, 1988, and 2002, consecutively (Tyler, 2005, p. 47).

Recognition of Prior Learning

Assessing student learning outcomes has long been a process used by higher education institutions both in the United States and internationally. As college tuitions continue to increase while graduation rates decline, policymakers and educators have encouraged institutions to accept alternative evidence of student learning. In the United States, the Department of Education recognizes that adult learners may possess knowledge and skills acquired before enrollment in formal degrees, and this knowledge should be recognized via competency-based assessments (Klein, 2017; Liu et al., 2016). Recognized Prior Learning (RPL), Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) and prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) began in the United States in the 1970s after research showed that it was a viable educational practice to assess prior noncollege learning with college-level learning (Harris & Wihak, 2018; Keeton, 1976).

One way adult learners returning to school may fast track their education is through PLAR and RPL. Experiential learning, or alternative credit, are also processes that recognize prior learning experiences which may be nonformal, formal, and/or experimental (Harris & Wihak, 2018; Harrop et al., 2018; Rust & Brinthaupt, 2017). Educational institutions worldwide recognize that adult learners often have a wealth of educational experience which may have been gathered on the job, in everyday life, in the military, in courses taken but not finished, in self-study, hands-on learning, standardized exams, licenses, and certifications.

Whether students are former dropouts or are simply returning to school to continue formal education, these individuals often have acquired significant college-level learning outside of the classroom and, for these, postsecondary institutions provide the option of assessment or evaluation with the purpose of awarding credits known as PLA, credit for prior learning (CPL), or recognition of learning (Klein-Collins et al., 2020). All these learning experiences are valuable and may be recognized when seeking formal education through the PLAR and RPL process. By accessing PLAR and RPL, adult learners may graduate faster, improve motivation and validation, and pay less tuition by gaining recognized credit for previous learning, all of which may propel students on their journey to their final educational destination and graduation.

Historically, PLAR and RPL emerged in the 1970s in the United States and, over time, the practice has continued to develop in the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Scandinavia (Harris & Wihak, 2018). The effectiveness of the PLAR and RPL process has been researched, and it was found that approximately 11% of adult students returning to school have been awarded credits through the practice, many earning as much or more as a semester of full-time study (Klein-Collins, 2010; Klein-Collins et al., 2020). A wide breadth of assessment may be incorporated, and significant attention has been paid to quality assurance in PLAR (Van Kleef, 2014).

While universities vary in terms of the number of attainable credits, it may be possible to obtain up to 30 recognized undergraduate level credits in the United States. However, most universities will require students to pay a fee for awarded credits and portfolio assessment even before attending formal classes at the university. The PLAR process in the United States may be time consuming, complicated, and extensive, however the practice is not as expensive as course

credits obtained through classes, yet the assessment may require a considerable financial outlay from the prospective student.

The RPL process is quite different in the UK for mature age applicants over 24 years of age. Many established and well-recognized UK universities may even consider a prospective student's application and portfolio assessment in substitution for an undergraduate degree if it can be proven that the work and life experience of the applicant is equal to the learning which would have been obtained in pursuing a bachelor's degree (Fenwick, 2015; Reushle et al., 2016; Roxburgh et al., 2018). Once again, UK universities vary in the RPL assessment process, but in most cases, the university's review board will consider the application and supporting documents for admittance into a graduate degree and often without any fee to the student.

While it is rare for a student to be admitted into a UK graduate degree without a formal undergraduate degree, it is possible if the university's review board approves the application. RPL is based on the principle that valuable learning, worthy of recognition, takes place outside of formal education (Snyman & van den Berg, 2018). For seniors advancing in years, the RPL process may be the only hope of achieving a formal education before retirement renders the attainment of a degree useless in the workforce (Talbot, 2017).

Adult Education

Governments throughout the world recognize the need to provide educational opportunities for adult learners to maintain national prosperity. If mature adults are provided incentives to return to school, retirement and social services may be postponed (Cheng & Hackworth, 2021; Windisch, 2016). Ongoing changes in the U.S. economy and workforce require that adult education (AE) be more carefully considered in the federal public policy arena. Strategies regarding AE tend to be more flexible than other branches of education and largely

driven by economic crises and downward shifts, with policymakers hoping to provide ongoing stimulus for the economy (Helsinger et al., 2020; Roumell et al., 2018).

The population of seniors over 65 has increased in recent years and is predicted to continue to rise in the coming decades. The percentage of the population aged 65 and older has risen from less than 10% in 1960 to 17% in 2015 and is predicted to reach 28% by 2050 (OECD, 2017a, cited in OECD, 2018, p. 17). The U.S. Administration on Aging (2013) stated that there will be 72.1 million people 65 years of age or older in the United States by 2030. This increase in the number of senior citizens and longevity is an important incentive when considering the advantages of returning to school and pursuing academics.

As the years of retirement increase, there is a need to provide social services over a longer period; thus, extending careers becomes an even more desirable outcome. Research in recent years has helped to break the stereotypical mold that portrayed seniors in the workforce as individuals with a decline in cognition, activity, and overall engagement, and seniors returning to school are feeling a new sense of empowerment (Formosa & Galea, 2020; Gatti et al., 2017; Sila-Nowicka, 2016). Today, rather than presenting age as a barrier, maturity and wisdom in the workforce are often valued as resources essential to the building of stability and solidarity in social structure and community, especially considering that individuals can now expect to live longer and healthier lives (Krašovec et al., 2017; Sigg & Taylor, 2005).

Additionally, adults returning to studies later in life have mature cognitive capacities, life-long learning experiences, and motivations which younger adults may not possess to the same degree; therefore, returning to studies may benefit these individuals in terms of identity, health, and social capital (Manninen, 2017; Mestheneos & Withnall, 2016). Researchers have also discovered that positive associations are formed between adult education and civic

involvement (Hachem, 2020; Vera-Toscano et al., 2017). Lifelong learning, however, must be understood to be attainable if it is to be accessed, particularly by adult learners. Adult learners must understand that persistence and endurance are required to obtain a formal education, especially for those returning to school as previous high school dropouts.

Literacy and numerical weakness in adults who have not been formally educated is often a problem for many reasons. Such persons may have a negative opinion about school due to their past experience. They may also lack an understanding of their deficiencies or be embarrassed and unwilling to acknowledge them. Motivation to return to school as an adult learner may, therefore, be deficient (Lanford, 2021; Lucey, 2018). Even if it is not, such individuals may feel overwhelmed by the prospect of returning to school in their adult years. They may think it easier to continue in a minimum paid job position with low basic skills while struggling in the work force rather than return to school to seek a degree. Many adults, especially with families, find it difficult to designate time and/or financial resources to higher education (Clegg et al., 2020; Windisch, 2016).

The current digital domain and technological era presents yet another obstacle for adult learners over the age of 50, as computers were not a fundamental part of their early education. Many mature adults are not comfortable with the perceived learning curve of today's technology and are, therefore, at risk of being left behind. As the digital divide widens and retirement approaches, the prospect of returning to studies becomes even more daunting for some individuals desiring to achieve a more lucrative lifestyle (Teine & Beutner, 2016).

There are numerous obstacles which prevent adults from returning to school, especially as they age, and many may feel that it is easier to remain in their status quo rather than venture into unfamiliar territory. Even when seeking basic skills, adults must be motivated to return to

school, and persistence, self-determination, and grit are required over an extended period of time to succeed (Palmieri, 2017; Yamashita et al., 2019). Duckworth et al. (2007) defined grit as excitement and prolonged persistence for long-term achievement, with no distinct concern for rewards or recognition. Perseverance and grit are characteristics that are developed over time as students fully engage in their own predetermined goals. The characteristics of perseverance and grit often determine future success in academic outcomes (Yang et al., 2018).

Mentorship may be one answer to motivate and encourage continued perseverance of adult learners. If adult learners can be motivated to seek out mentorship either from school counselling services, friends, family, work associates or others who have earned degrees and formalize relationships with them, success rates may increase considerably. If learners seek out their own advisors who will share their learning activities, encourage outcomes, and establish milestones, stronger mentor relationships may be formed, and success increased (Cheng & Hackworth, 2021). One demographic of adult learners, especially those seeking a high school equivalency option, are motivated students whose key interest in returning to school is to mentor and serve minority groups and low income or disadvantaged populations (Gagnon & Komor, 2017).

Accelerated Education (AE) also relates to human rights in that immigrants, racial inequality and adult learning are fundamentally intertwined. AE programs have historically been closely linked to migration, and immigrants entering the United States as traditional higher education establishments often fail to meet the demand for migrant population education (Ugurel, 2021). Immigrants often face critical human rights issues and challenges, which AE services may help to mitigate. AE services may assist in supporting migrant integration into the U.S. workforce and build supportive learning environments (Larrotta, 2017; Robinson, 2021;

Ugurel, 2021). Mentorship relationships may serve as an ongoing support system to adult learners, which may encourage participation and perseverance and also help shift the learners' perceptions of self (Karmelita, 2018).

Graduate and Doctoral Studies

While distance education has increased access to higher education for nontraditional students, it is important to highlight that attrition for online programs remains 10% to 20% higher than on-campus studies (Fiore et al., 2019; Gardner & Gopaul, 2012). Such statistics present an even more challenging prospect of degree completion when it is understood that 50% to 75% of students drop out of doctoral studies before graduation (Jiranek, 2010; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014; Wollast et al., 2018). Stress during the doctoral path is cited as one of the key factors in attrition. Researchers found that stress significantly affected students to the extent that they expressed their intention to leave the doctoral program (Fisher et al., 2019; Volkert et al., 2018).

Stressors related to relationships between students and faculty and support issues, primarily the support of family and friends, constituted the highest level of stress, and female PhD students experienced significantly higher levels of distress than their male counterparts (Fisher et al., 2019; Volkert et al., 2018). Women often experience identity change during their doctoral studies, which may affect their families and the perception of established roles within the family dynamic. Female students who are also mothers may require the assistance of their spouse during their studies, especially during the dissertation phase of a doctorate degree (Webber, 2017). Such changes are not easily navigated and may produce added strain in an already difficult and stressful time of life (Parr, 2000; Webber, 2015, 2017). Managing multiple roles while facing increased financial and emotional demands elevates stress which, in some

cases, may result in the breakdown of family relationships (Wellington & Sikes, 2006). In all cases, clearly stated expectations may help decrease stress levels as students feel better prepared for the academic challenge.

In some instances, acceptance by peers also appeared to mitigate the stress of academic studies. While it is impossible to remove all stressors from a student's life, understanding environmental influences and incorporating more active support in institutions of higher learning may help offset the inevitable factor of stress that students seeking a doctorate degree face. Perseverance is certainly needed if one desires to undertake a doctorate degree; therefore, understanding the factors involved to persist when so many fail is a necessity. Studies reveal various reasons for doctoral perseverance, such as intrinsic motivation for a desire to learn; extrinsic, yet autonomous, motivation; the quality of social support; access to resources and support outside the program; individual resilience; facing challenges; receiving encouragement; advisor-advisee relationships; and accepting help (Chaney et al., 2020; Hands, 2020; Todoran, 2018; Trent et al., 2021). To navigate the long and arduous journey from high school dropout to doctoral graduate, students must persevere against many odds.

Considering one in two doctorate students, both of whom are the most prepared to complete graduate studies and who have spent many years as disciplined academics, fail to graduate with a doctorate degree (De Clercq et al., 2019; Fiore et al., 2019; Van Rooij, 2021), it is a courageous task to navigate the journey from high school dropout to doctoral completion. Because of this disparity, there is a need for further research to address educational pathways for adult learners who are seeking to return to formal education to navigate the journey from high school dropout to doctorate completion. Ascertaining the self-determination and necessary perseverance to achieve this incredible feat is an area worthy of study.

The doctorate degree has been described as the apex of academic qualification (Alexander & Davis, 2019), and it is interesting to note that women have now surpassed men in receipt of degrees at all levels from associate through doctorate in the United States (England et al., 2020; Longman et al., 2019). Job openings in academia remain limited and unlikely to increase soon. Even so, enrollments in doctoral degrees continue to rise as students' trajectories reach beyond positions in teaching to a broader business market and to healthcare positions such as nursing where a demand for doctorate-prepared nurses worldwide is greater than ever before (Guerin, 2020; Volkert et al., 2018). Conversely, researchers have also found that extrinsic factors such as funding and the perceived lack of employability may deter perseverance in doctoral studies, while motivational support has been shown to lead to better engagement, overall satisfaction, and academic persistence (Cossa & Barker, 2021; Hands, 2020).

Motivation, Self Determination, and Perseverance

Researchers view student engagement as an indication of motivation and successful classroom instruction, stating that students who are interested and engaged in their studies are likely to persist in the face of obstacles and generally accomplish their educational goals and aspirations (Czerkawski & Lyman, 2016; Trowler, 2010). Such engagement or willingness to persevere is also referred to as a student's need, compulsion, or desire to participate in the learning process and includes motivational factors such as autonomy, interest, and self-efficacy (Skinner et al., 2009; Yang et al., 2018). Furthermore, students with high-level outcome expectations are more likely to persist to degree completion verses students with low-outcome expectations and low self-efficacy (Aryee, 2017; Complete College America, 2014).

Other factors affecting motivation and perseverance may be external and include environmental, cognitive, and demographic reasons which influence a student's ability to persist

to graduation (Bolkan et al., 2021). Self-efficacy is another important factor in motivating

persistence in higher education (Bean & Eaton, 2001; Schneider & Preckel, 2017). It is theorized

that self-efficacy positively affects students who believe they can succeed in their academic

endeavors and, as a result, they are more likely to do so (Bandura, 1997). Bandura (2004) stated

that self-efficacy is the foundational principle in human motivation and is crucial in achieving set

goals. Bandura (1986a) further argued that self-efficacy is paramount in goal achievement and

persistence because individuals who do not feel they can achieve will typically avoid tasks which

they believe they are incapable of achieving.

SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2001) posits that individuals are motivated to grow through their own

self-determination and that the need for connection, autonomy, and competence must first be met

in the individuals themselves, thus establishing that inherent rewards play an important part in

motivation. When students believe that they can succeed, obstacles which incur stress may

motivate rather than hinder academic progress. Self-efficacy molds and propels motivation and

commitment in the form of aspirations and goals, academic persistence, and career objectives

(Byars-Winston et al., 2017). Stress generally, refers to undesirable emotions resulting from a

demanding or perceived difficult psychological situation. While stress is often viewed as a

negative emotion, some research suggests that stressors perceived as goal-appropriate and

controllable may increase motivation, performance, and persistence (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984;

Travis et al., 2020).

Summary

Attrition at every level is an ongoing concern in educational institutions. Persistence and

self-determination in lifelong learning while navigating the numerous obstacles that prevent the

completion of personal educational goals is a subject worthy of continued exploration and

research. It is important to persist in studying the reasons for dropping out of school and the necessary sustained motivation to return. Further, it is important to examine the relationships between self-determination, self-efficacy, persistence, and adult learning. Before this research, little was known about the experiences of high school dropouts who decide to return to school and undertake the difficult journey from dropout to doctorate.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to describe the lived experiences of former high school dropouts in the Continental United States who self-determine to persist to doctoral degree attainment. I examined the challenges faced when nontraditional learners self-determine to return to school and persist through the many steps necessary to earn an undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral degree. The theories guiding this study were the theory of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2008), and the theory of adult learning (Knowles, 1968), as they provided a framework to examine the self-determination, motivation, autonomy, and competence of adult learners who choose to make the journey from high school dropout to doctoral completion. Chapter 3 includes a discussion of the research design, research questions, research setting and participants, the researcher's positionality, interpretive framework, philosophical assumptions, procedures, permissions, recruitment plan, data collection plan, data synthesis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

Research Design

This phenomenological study was designed to describe the motivation and persistence of high school dropouts who chose to return to academia and overcome their own life obstacles and fulfill their educational aspirations. I chose a qualitative research design for this inquiry because (a) I wish to examine and explore an issue (Creswell & Poth, 2018), (b) quantitative statistical analysis does not provide a rich, textural descriptive experience or explore the problem (Creswell, 2015), (c) this group of individuals must be given a voice, and (d) there is a need to inspire and encourage learners to continue their education by enlisting personal persistence and perseverance (Creswell, 2013). A qualitative design was appropriate for this study as it allowed

me to explore the lived experiences of individuals who were once high school dropouts and went on to earn not only their GED, but also their undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral degree (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Five qualitative research designs have been listed by Creswell and Poth (2018) as follows: narrative, grounded theory, ethnography, case study, and phenomenology. I chose a phenomenological design given my interest in allowing a group of individuals to share their personal lived experiences of a common or shared phenomenon as well as my interest in explaining the "how" and "what" of their experience (Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenological design was appropriate for my dissertation topic as I sought to explore the lived experiences of 11 participants to discover their shared experiences in relation to the theoretical constructs of perseverance and self-determination (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998).

By selecting a phenomenological design, a fuller essence and meaning of human experience was discovered. The factors of behavior and experience of participants were illuminated through "careful, comprehensive descriptions" and, "vivid accurate renderings of the experience, rather than measurements, ratings and scores" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 105). By examining each participant's lived experience and constructing step-by-step analysis as outlined by Moustakas (1994), understanding of the necessary motivation, perseverance, and self-determination of former high school dropouts who have persevered to doctoral completion has been gained. In this study, I sought to discover the shared experiences of individuals who self-determined to walk the path from dropout to doctorate. My aim was to analyze their lived experiences in order to describe the universal essence of the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 157).

There are two phenomenological approaches: (a) the hermeneutic approach (Van Manen, 1990, 1997), in which the researcher collects empirical data via personal experiences, conversational interviews, and personal observation; and (b) the transcendental or psychological approach (Moustakas, 1994), in which the researcher brackets or puts aside, as much as possible, his or her own perspectives and seeks a fresh discovery of the phenomenon being examined. During the transcendental approach, researchers analyze the data by reducing it into significant statements or quotes and then combine the statements into groupings or themes (Moustakas, 1994). Creswell (2013) defined a transcendental phenomenological design as an investigation in which the researcher seeks to set aside their own experiences to gain a new perspective about the phenomenon under consideration. I chose the transcendental approach because it is focused on the experiences of participants rather than the interpretation of the experiences by the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This was important, given my own lived experience with dropping out of high school and pursuing a doctoral degree. Throughout the research process, I demonstrated reflexivity and engaged in bracketing to consciously dismiss my own interpretations through ongoing journaling (see Appendix K) and to set my story aside to develop descriptions of the lived experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). I sought to give a voice to individuals who overcame many personal and physical obstacles to pursue their education from high school dropout to doctorate.

Using the transcendental approach, I sought to discover the human experience of participants via multiple methods of data collection so that I could develop a composite description of the essence of the experience of all the individuals in the study. The composite description of the essence of the experience describes what an individual has experienced and how they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). A transcendental phenomenological design provides

the opportunity to discover the shared meaning of individuals and their lived experiences in a common phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018 p. 121). By doing this, I was able to discover the universal experience with the phenomenon— that is, to "grasp the very nature of the thing" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 177).

Data collection methods for this transcendental phenomenological study included a demographic survey, individual interviews, letter writing, and timeline data. The data was systematically analyzed moving from narrow units of analysis, such as significant statements, to broader concepts, such as conception and meaning (see Appendix G). The data was then summarized into detailed descriptions to understand the "what" and "how" of the group's lived experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). I analyzed the data from the demographic surveys, interviews, letters, and timelines by identifying "significant statements, meaning units, textual and structural description, and description of the 'essence'" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 165).

I then developed a synthesis of the fundamental nature of their experience. This synthesis consists of what they experienced and how they experienced the united phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 121). Thus, this transcendental phenomenological study discovered the necessary motivation of individuals who dropped out of high school but returned to persist to the successful completion of doctoral studies. The transcendental phenomenological method was the best suited method for this form of research, as philosophical assumptions are based on common experiences of individuals as well as the view that the experiences are conscience and may be described in essence (Van Manen, 1990). I sought to discover the participants' subjective experiences of the phenomenon and common objective experiences with other people. I then

positioned such in the context of the "essence" as being the concluding aspect of this phenomenological study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Questions

This research study was guided by the following research question and sub-questions:

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of former high school dropouts in the Continental United States who self-determined to persist to doctoral degree attainment?

Sub-Question One

What experiences shaped the self-efficacy of former high school dropouts who self-determine to persist to doctoral completion?

Sub-Question Two

What does the pursuit and attainment of a doctoral degree mean to individuals who dropped out of high school, later returned to studies, and persisted to doctorate degree attainment?

Setting and Participants

The focus of this research was on the shared experiences and motivations of individuals who returned to school after dropping out of high school. The participants eventually pursued and attained a doctoral degree. The study took place within the Continental United States.

Setting

The setting for this research was the Continental United States. An Internet search for media representation and contact information of adults who were previous high school dropouts and who returned to school to eventually pursue doctoral degrees was undertaken via the Google search engine. Persons were recruited via contact information found in a Google search within

the continental United States. Due to such factors as interviewee unavailability, budget restraints, geography, and time differences, Zoom, a communications platform that allows users to connect with video, audio, phone, and chat, was utilized to facilitate online recorded interviews.

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of individuals who reside in the continental United States. They were over the age of 21 and had previously dropped out of high school and returned to academia and persisted to the attainment of a doctoral degree (e.g., Doctor of Philosophy [PhD], Doctor of Education [EdD]), with the exclusion of an honorary doctorate if the recipient did not partake in doctoral coursework culminating in a doctoral capstone project or doctoral dissertation. Participants were not limited by race, gender, or political and social ideologies. All participants were individuals who had experienced the same phenomenon of being high school dropouts having returned to school via a traditional college or university degree path to pursue a doctorate degree and who could articulate their lived experiences in a meaningful and constructive way (Van Manen, 1990).

As the researcher, I gathered qualitative data from individuals who dropped out of high school and later enrolled in higher education. The participants eventually pursued and graduated with a doctorate degree. I chose to use a purposeful convenience sample. In phenomenology, the number of participants ranges from 1 to 325 (Padilla & Perez, 2003; Polkinghorne, 1989); however, this is very broad, and Dukes (1984) recommended studying 3 to 10 participants. In accordance with institutional requirements, I enlisted 11 participants and ceased sampling when I reached thematic saturation, meaning no new themes or findings would emerge with the addition of new participants.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Survey – Final Sample

Name	Avery	Anna	Cora	Dan	Eli	Grace	Vincent	Phil	Van	Walker	Melany
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Male	Female	Female	Male	Male	Male	Male	Female
Age	39	40	68	58	48	51	65	66	45	76	36
US Resident	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Race	African American and Asian American	White	Black	White	White	White	White	White	Latino	Puerto Rican – American	White
Marital Status	Married	Separated	Divorced	Married	Married	Married	Married	Widow	Married	Widow	Married
Dropout to Doctorate	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Degrees	GED	GED	GED	GED	GED	GED	GED	GED	High School Diploma	GED and High School Diploma,	GED
	Bachelor of Criminology, Two Masters	Bachelor of Science (B.Sc.), Sociology	Bachelor Criminal Justice	Bachelor Psychology	Bachelor in English Allied Language Arts,	Bachelor of Arts in English,	Bachelor HR Admin	Bachelor of Arts in English	Bachelor of Arts Human Development	Bachelor Psychology	Bachelor of Science Geological and Earth Science
	Master of Information Technology Master of Public Administration,	Two Masters Masters in education Master of Arts (M.A.), Sociology	Two Masters Masters Political Science, and Yale Law School,	Masters in School Psychology, Specialist Degree School Psychology	Masters in Reading and Writing Specialist.	Masters (None)	Masters Human Resources Development	Master's Education and Human Development	Master's Comparative Ethnic Studies	Two Masters Masters Sociology Masters Geography,	Masters Geology, Earth Science
	PhD Biomedical Informatics	PhD Sociology	PhD Political Science	PhD School Psychology	EdD Curriculum and Teaching	PhD in Communications	PhD Computing Technologies in Education	EdD Education and Human Development	PhD Comparative Ethnic Studies	PhD Medical Sociology, Criminology	PhD Earth Science UC Santa Barbara
Completion Date of Doctorate	2020	2013	1989	2005	2020	2002	1989	1999	2005	2009	2022

Career Field	Data scientist	Research	Retired Professor – currently self-employed	School Psychologist	Professor	Professor and Author	Program Coordinator	Professor	Associate Dean and Professor	Medical Sociologist and Author	Geology Scientist Volcanology
Employment Status	Employed	Employed	Employed	Employed	Employed	Employed	Employed	Employed	Employed	Employed	Employed
Highschool Dropout – Age	15	14	14	16	14	16	17	17	14	12/13	17
GED or Return to School – Age / Diploma	20	16	21	18	17	23 Awarded GED after Bachelor	20	34	17 No GED returned to high school	18 High School Diploma age 21	18
Associates Degree – Age	N/A	20	23	N/A	N/A	N/A	29	N/A	N/A	N/A	22
Bachelor Degree – Age	26	22	28	30	31	22	30	39	23	49	25
Master's Degree – Age	1st Masters-30 2nd Masters 32	1st Masters 27 2nd Masters 38	1st Masters 29 2nd Masters 35	Master/Doctorate combined studies EdS 33	38	No Master's degree Accepted into PhD with grad courses	36	40	24	1st Masters 52 2nd Masters-52 (Studied simultaneously)	28

	38 PhD	31 PhD	34 PhD	40 PhD	45 EdD	31 PhD	42 PhD	43 EdD	27 PhD	65 PhD	36 PhD
Doctorate Degree – Age											
FINAL SAMPLE											
Females	X	X	X	X	X	X					X
Males							X	X	X	X	
Current Age Range 21 – 40	X	X									X
Current Age Range 40 – 60				X	X	X			X		
Current Age Range 60 – 80			X				X	X		X	

Researcher Positionality

As the researcher in a qualitative study serves as the human instrument and is vital in the qualitative research process (Creswell, 2013), it was important for me to articulate my positionality within the study. I have related the interpretive framework and philosophical assumptions that inform this research. I also undertook steps (i.e., journaling) to bracket my own understanding and biases out of the experience and instead concentrated on describing the lived experience of the participants (Moustakas, 1994).

The theory of adult learning (Knowles, 1973) asserts that adults need to be involved in the planning, learning, and evaluation of their educational process and that experience is the basis for learning. I have found self-determination to be an absolute necessity in my own educational path. As an adult working in a career field without a high school certificate, I always felt a degree of self-stigmatization and a feeling of inferiority, which was constantly confirmed every time I was passed by on a job which I knew my work experience was more than adequate to handle. Without the "piece of paper," the expected degree, my talents and experience fell short in a competitive job market. I came to understand that if I wished to obtain my desired career, I must return to school and work toward a formal degree. This was my self-imposed difficult challenge which would enable me to grow. In this research, I sought to understand similar challenges which have been presented in the lives of other individuals who have made the journey from dropout to doctorate.

The concept of self-efficacy was applicable to this research because although the journey from high school drop out to doctorate is unique, smaller accomplishments, such as passing the GED, provided the courage for previous high school dropouts to attempt the larger accomplishments, such as undertaking graduate studies without a high school certificate. I

foresaw this because I have taken the path from high school dropout to GED and, ultimately, PhD studies. I believed I could succeed on a graduate level because of my perseverance and life experience. Through this research, I then sought to discover the motivation and perseverance of others who have chosen this same journey to determine the common meaning of individuals and their lived experiences regarding this phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 121).

Interpretive Framework

I hold a social constructivist worldview, and, in this study, I sought to understand the way in which persistence and self-determination shaped and motivated individuals to pursue a doctoral degree as high school dropouts returning to higher education after an absence from school. A constructivist approach allowed me to collect data from the participants through an individual perspective with perceptions as they relate to the social constructivism worldview (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 60). For social constructivists, an understanding of the world in which an individual exists is sought. Subjective meaning in one's own setting is coveted, and broad and often complex subjective meaning of experiences is gathered. This framework relies on the participants' understanding and views of their given situations. These views are often formed in connection with and through interactions with others and, in this way, the views are socially constructed. Historical and cultural norms are combined with personal and social interaction, creating meaningful constructs and views that are then put into operation in everyday life (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Philosophical Assumptions

Philosophical assumptions are the guiding philosophical beliefs which influence decisions made in research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2000, 2005, 2011). In quantitative studies, researchers often choose not to disclose their assumptions; qualitative researchers, on the other

hand, openly discuss the nature of their philosophical assumptions and the way in which they guide the research. Philosophical assumptions may be discerned in the researcher's bias, subjective quotes, the emerging design, developing themes, and broad generalizations (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 57). In the following section, I discuss the nature of my philosophical ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions and how they informed my design selection and analysis.

Ontological Assumptions

Ontology relates to the nature of reality and the way the researcher, participants, and even the reader of the study discern or embrace reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative researchers hold the ontological assumption that there are multiple realities, and they seek to discover the nature of reality as it is viewed and reported though many different views (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 54). In accordance with a qualitative approach to ontology, I documented the way in which individual participants view their experiences differently, accounting for each participant's uniquely lived experience while searching for the commonalities (i.e., essence) of the experience across all participants (Moustakas, 1994).

Epistemological Assumptions

Epistemology relates to the value and meaning of knowledge and its relationship to both the researcher and the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The qualitative researcher seeks to lessen the distance between themselves and the participant by collaborating and becoming a part of the participants' world. The qualitative researcher participates with the participant by spending time in the field and collecting data such as direct quotes related to the phenomenon under inquiry (Wolcott, 2008a). Subjective data are collected and assembled in the field, such as the participant's place of employment, recreation, or home. By spending a great deal of time in

the participant's world, the researcher seeks to discover the participant's knowledge and make it their own (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 55).

Epistemological assumptions informed my research practices, as I already have a deep affinity to the demographic studied. As a high school dropout, myself, I have also returned to school seeking a doctoral degree. I entered my participants' world and engaged in an interchange over time. While bracketing my own opinions and bias, I nevertheless have a foundational understanding of their lived experience on which I built.

Axiological Assumptions

Axiological assumptions relate to the researcher's bias, values, and beliefs and how they situate themselves within the framework of the same. The qualitative researcher states his or her own social position such as age, gender, race, political bias, and professional stance (Berger, 2015). In the axiological philosophical assumption, the researcher recognizes and acknowledges that personal bias is represented by the researcher's values and, therefore, an open discussion of the values that shape the study is presented along with those of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The key question to be answered with this assumption is, "What is the role of values?" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 55). To answer that question, I identified but put aside my own opinions and understanding to allow for a new perception of the phenomenon being studied (Moustakas, 1994). To do this, I discovered the participants' lived experiences; collected and analyzed the data from the participants; and constructed textual and structural descriptions of their experiences. Lastly, I combined the analysis and textual descriptions and created a structural description of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

In this study, I described the extent to which my own values as the researcher were brought into the research and bracketed them to the best of my ability to seek accuracy of information and data during the research and while composing my final report. This approach allowed me to collect data on the individual participants through open-ended interviews and their responses in an individual perspective with perceptions as they relate to the social constructivism worldview (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

Methodological Assumptions

There exists a close tie between a researcher's philosophy and the research methods employed to the point that often the problem and questions are shaped by existing assumptions which are deeply rooted in training and society (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Huff, 2009). Aspects which I have included are a personal social position including gender, age, and race as well as personal experiences and political and professional beliefs (Berger, 2015). I desired to understand the role of values in connection with the motivation, perseverance, and persistence required to make the giant academic leap from high school dropout to doctorate graduate.

Researcher's Role

As the researcher of a transcendental phenomenology design, I sought to bracket myself out of the study through journaling so that a fresh perspective into the self-determination and persistence of participants and their journey from dropout to doctorate could be gained. The individual lived experiences are descriptions consisting of "what" they experienced and "how" they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). I sought, to the best of my ability, to concentrate on the lived experiences of the participants and not on my own experiences when analyzing the data and forming themes to further develop textural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). The textural and

structural descriptions were then considered in the final analysis to describe the essence of the research.

In this study, I sought to enter the participants' lived experience as well as listen to and analyze their narrative without imposing my own assumptions and theories. Husserl (1859-1938) placed an emphasis on connection and intentionality. He sought to understand the world outside and apart from his own perceptions of it. To undertake such a process, he sought to bracket out all preconceived assumptions about the world and, in the process, he developed a method which is known as epoché (Moja-Strasser, 2016). The rule of epoché is to put aside preconceived perceptions and notions about an experience and enter into the immediate experience itself. The rule of description follows and is defined as describing the events as they are without theorizing. Lastly, the rule of horizontalization, or equalization, is to place all data as equal in importance and standing (Husserl, 1982).

As the study was conducted using a transcendental phenomenological design, I sought to discover the common meaning of individuals and their lived experiences of the phenomenon. Through ongoing reflection and journaling, I bracketed my own personal, intellectual, and spiritual understanding as it has been constituted throughout my own lived experience. I sought to describe the accumulation of my participants' varied life experiences which motivated their self-determination to undertake and complete doctoral studies as previous high school dropouts.

Procedures

A Google search was employed to discover contact information for persons living within the continental United States who fit the criteria of having dropped out of school and later returned to complete a doctoral degree. After I received all necessary approvals to conduct the study, including Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (see Appendix A), participants were

recruited via email or phone to assess their interest in participation. After participants expressed interest and willingness to participate, an informed consent form (see Appendix B) was sent via email. After receiving informed consent, I then scheduled interviews via Zoom. All interviews were recorded using a digital video recorder and reviewed by experts in the field of education.

After the interviews were conducted, I asked the participants to create their own timelines of events detailing their individual lived experience. A demographic survey was used to permit each future reader the benefit of visualizing the participants and to gain an overview of the research (Creswell, 2015; Gall et al., 2007). Participants were asked to complete the demographic survey. Questions in the demographic survey included the following information: Name, Age, Gender, Race, Marital Status, Degrees Earned, Completion Date of Doctorate, Employment, Doctorate, Employment Status. I transcribed and analyzed the data in a three-step process: (a) I transcribed and organized data for analysis; (b) I reduced the data into themes; and (c) findings were represented in writing, through tables, and via oral discussion (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

My final data collection was in the form of a "Dear Abby" letter (see Appendix J), in which participants were invited to give recommendations to others who may desire to undertake a similar course. I analyzed data from interviews, letters, and timelines. Triangulation was achieved by enlisting the above-mentioned open-ended interviews, timelines, letter writing, observations, questionnaires, and supporting documents.

Permissions

Participants were all adults over the age of 21 who were able to give their informed consent to participate. No data were collected until IRB approval was gained from Liberty University to conduct the study.

Recruitment Plan

Creswell (2013) stated that the researcher must determine the best type of purposeful sampling to use. The sample pool for this study was derived from individuals who live in the continental United States and dropped out of high school, returned to school via the GED or similar process, and continued studies to the point of earning a doctoral degree. I also undertook snowball sampling via friends and Google search and by asking current participants if they knew of other individuals who might fit the research criteria.

I chose a convenience sampling method because participants had to (a) meet the criteria stated above, (b) represent individuals that I could access, and (c) because this sampling method saved time and money (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Huberman & Miles, 1994). Only those candidates who were willing to sign and return the informed consent form were enlisted in this study. The final sample comprised 11 participants, and I ceased sampling when I reached thematic saturation and no new themes could be identified with the addition of new participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Varpio et al., 2017).

Data Collection

No data were collected from participants until approval was gained from the IRB and informed consent was provided by participants. To begin data collection, I identified participants who met the study criteria. After receiving informed consent from participants who met the study criteria, I proceeded with the following data collection methods: demographic survey, interviews, timeline, and self-reflective writing. Transcendental phenomenological research is designed to derive the essence of the phenomena under question which, in this study, was closely connected to the self-determination and perseverance required to journey from dropout to doctorate completion. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), "The important point is to describe the

meaning of the phenomenon for a small number of individuals who have experienced it" (p. 228).

Demographic Survey

A demographic survey was used in addition to individual interviews, observations, and letter writing (Creswell, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gall et al., 2007). The demographic survey was used as a supplement to permit each future reader the benefit of visualizing the participants and gaining an overview of the research (Creswell, 2015; Gall et al., 2007). Questions in the demographic survey included the following information: name, age, gender, race, marital status, degrees earned, completion date of doctorate, and employment status.

Individual Interviews

The most effective and primary form of data collection in a transcendental phenomenological research design is the open-ended interview using a semi-structured interview guide (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). This method was my primary source of data collection (Patton, 2015). Each participant was individually interviewed regarding their past and present experience with the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants were contacted via email, text, or phone to schedule the interview. Interviews for this research were conducted online via visual chat using Zoom. Interviews were scheduled at a time convenient to both the participant and myself. Interviews were recorded via video conferencing technologies and later transcribed for analysis and checked for accuracy (Patton, 2015). Individual timelines were discussed together with the participants to examine key events and experiences.

The following questions were developed based on a review of the empirical and theoretical literature on the topics of self-determination, self-efficacy, and doctoral persistence.

Committee members conducted a peer/expert review of the questions to examine for content validity.

Individual Interview Questions

3. Please describe your educational background and career through your current position. (CRQ)

4. Describe the challenges that you faced in high school and the reason(s) for dropping out. (SQ1)

5. Describe the period between dropping out of high school and going back to school. (CRQ)

6. Please describe your experiences returning to school. What motivated you to return to school? If you can, please recreate for me the exact moment you decided to return to school or seek a way to earn your GED. (SQ1)

7. What challenges did you experience trying to return to school or earn your GED? How did you overcome them? (SQ1)

8. What were your experiences upon returning to school? What were your feelings and aspirations at this time? (SQ1)

9. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences at this period in your life? (SQ2)

10. Describe successful practices used to help you when you earned your GED which assisted in getting you through your undergraduate and graduate studies. (SQ2)

11. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences during this period of your life? (SQ2)

12. When did you decide to pursue doctoral studies and what was your motivation? (CRQ)

13. Describe your challenges when you decided to begin doctoral studies and the methods you used to persevere. (SQ1)

14. Describe successful practices you used when working on your doctoral studies. (SQ1)

15. What were your emotions, plans and aspirations during this period in your life? (SQ2)

16. What part did self-determination and perseverance play in your educational journey? (SQ1)

17. What part did family and friends play in motivating you to begin and/or persevere? (SQ1)

18. Please describe what it meant to you to earn your doctoral degree? Where do you think you would be today if you did not return to school? (SQ2)

19. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences from dropping out of school to the completion of doctoral studies? (CRQ)

Questions 1 through 4 addressed the educational background and motivational force of the participants. Compared to other higher education degrees, the rate of doctoral degree completion is the lowest (De Clercq et al., 2021; Sverdlik et al., 2018). Therefore, understanding the motivation that inspired former high school dropouts to complete doctoral studies was pertinent to this research.

Questions 5 and 6 were open-ended and addressed the trials of returning to school and how those challenges were overcome. Question 5 and 6 were an open-ended invitation for further discussion regarding points covered and allowed the participants time to further reflect. Ryan and Deci's (2001) SDT was used to explain why the participants were able to persist to completion.

Questions 7 and 8 further addressed the participants' experience, their aspirations, and the successful practices that supported their determination to return to school through the GED or

other related process. Researchers (e.g., Jepsen et al., 2017) found that the GED increases the

likelihood of postsecondary attendance and course completion and was, therefore, relevant to this

study.

Question 9 was an open-ended invitation for self-reflection and further discussion

regarding points covered. Question 10 through 12 addressed the motivation, challenges, and best

practices experienced by the participants as they entered doctoral studies. Delayed graduation

and best practices in doctoral education are common themes for ongoing research in doctoral

completion worldwide (Fetene & Tamrat, 2021). For this reason, I inquired into these important

topics.

Questions 13 through 15 discussed the participants' emotions, plans, aspirations, and self-

determination during the closing years of their doctoral educational journey. These questions

continued to discover the problem and support of the theoretical framework of the research.

Many doctoral graduates aspire to careers in academia and other opportunities such as corporate

employment while others are uncertain of their future directions (Ganapati & Ritchie, 2021;

Monk et al., 2012). Questions 16 and 17 concluded with two open-ended questions to prompt

self-reflection about the participants' academic journey from dropout to doctor.

Individual Interview Data Analysis

I chose the Modified Van Kaam method instead of the Modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen

method for the data analysis because I wished to bracket my own personal experience as much as

possible (Moustakas, 1994). By keeping an ongoing journal (see Appendix A), I bracketed my

own concepts and ideas, to the best of my ability, to allow for the development of fresh

perspectives, concepts, and themes (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994).

To analyze the individual interview data, I began by reading the transcripts of each in-depth, open-ended interview, keeping notes to memo participants' ideas, significant concepts, and statements which were then analyzed for corresponding relationships, similarities, and differences. This data was further analyzed to discover common themes. All data was analyzed in the following manner.

First, I identified significant statements and coded each statement (see Appendix A). There are many methods which may be employed during the coding process. Saldaña (2013) stated, "No one, including myself, can claim final authority on coding's utility or the 'best' way to analyze qualitative data" and coding itself is "just one way of analyzing qualitative data, not the way" (Saldaña, 2013 p. 25). When coding, I sought to concisely construct the various attributes which were interpreted by creating relevant meaning to patterns and detected categories and theories as they were discovered and developed. As coding is primarily an interpretive act and a transitional process between data collection and data analysis (Saldaña, 2013), descriptive coding was used for data both during and after collection to assist with analysis.

Moustakas (1994) uses the term horizontalization to refer to this process of listing and coding every significant statement relevant to the lived experiences. During this process, invariant constituents in expression were tested by determining if a moment of the experience had a sufficient principle component for the understanding of it. Expressive components were labeled. If these two elements were not discovered, the expressions were eliminated. Exact, descriptive terms were used, and all repetition of expression and vague expressions were eradicated or reformulated into preferred descriptions and terms.

The next step in the analysis involved aggregating and reducing codes into themes. I identified salient themes or patterns in the data and identified patterned regularities (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 251). Marginal notes were written, summaries of field notes were drafted, and relationships among the categories were noted (Huberman & Miles, 1994). Data were then "segregated, grouped, regrouped and relinked in order to consolidate meaning and explanation" (Grbich, 2007, p. 21). The coding took place utilizing Microsoft Word using the comment function to highlight and code significant statements. Tables were created for categorization.

Self-Reflective Writing / Self Reflective Video Recording

Self-reflective writing allowed participants to reflect upon their own motivation and perseverance. By using this method of data collection, previously undocumented information was forthcoming as participants reflected upon their own academic journey and lived experiences. Thought provoking tips and advice, personal conflicts, and motivational strategies for persistence were relayed through their own lived experiences. The self-reflection writing practice allowed the participants time to reflect upon his or her experience with the phenomenon (Patton, 2015).

Participants were asked to write a "Dear Abby" letter to students who dropped out of high school and were returning to academia to pursue graduate studies. This letter of advice gives encouragement; offers guidance, suggestions, and cautions; and provides persistence and self-determination instruction, strategies for self-motivation, and tips on how to avoid pitfalls. The letter also allowed participants an opportunity to relay their own lived experiences in words of wisdom to others.

Self-Reflective Writing Data Analysis Plan

To analyze the letter-writing data, I began by bracketing my own concepts and ideas, to

the best of my ability, to allow for the development of fresh perspectives, concepts, and themes (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994). The data was carefully considered and analyzed in the same manner as the interviews, which were accompanied by memos considering corresponding relationships, similarities, and differences. This data was further analyzed to discover common themes. Like the interview transcripts, all data collection was analyzed in the following manner: identifying and coding significant statements; labeling and organizing the qualitative data to identify various themes and their relationships; horizontalization, in which equal value is given to all participants' statements; grouping similar codes into themes (Buetow, 2010); and identifying salient themes or patterns by assessing the degree to which each code recurs, otherwise known as "patterned regularities" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 251). Marginal notes were written, summaries of field notes were drafted, and relationships among the categories were noted (Huberman & Miles, 1994).

Timeline and Digital Data Collection

Participants were asked to create a timeline of their life events in a chronological order, which highlighted and depicted their individual key events from birth to the present time, specifically identifying ACEs and points of starting and stopping studies. Timelines allowed participants to organize remembered events and reduce confusion. This method also permitted the collection of supplementary data (Lawler-Heavner et al., 1999).

A timeline of events is acceptable as a data collection method because new forms of qualitative data frequently appear in research and literature (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Warren & Xavia Karner, 2015). Cross-checking and the collection of digital files are a recommended data collection method (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015).

Timeline and Digital Data Collection Analysis Plan

When analyzing the timeline, I sought to identify the collective experience as a cultural identity within the group limitation. The data was considered and analyzed within the context of the participants' collective experience as well as their personal, social, and economic contexts. Specifically, participant timelines were analyzed after conducting interviews. Additional findings beyond the initial interview questions were synthesized and placed within associated themes (Patton, 2015).

Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend that data be prepared in a three-step process: (a) transcribed and organized for analysis; (b) reduction of the data is then required into themes through a coding process; and (c) findings are to be represented in writing, by figures, tables, and oral discussion (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The demographic survey was visually graphed into a table according to age from the youngest to the oldest with the following headings: Name, Age, Gender, Race, Marital Status, Completion Date of Doctorate, Working/Not Working. The graph was added to the findings. All data collection was analyzed in the following manner: identifying and coding significant statements, identifying salient themes or patterns, noting patterns and themes, and identifying patterned regularities (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 251). Marginal notes were written, summaries of field notes were drafted, and relationships among the categories were noted (Huberman & Miles, 1994).

Data Synthesis

Final identification of the invariant constituents, which are defined as the "core themes of the experience" of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121), and validation took place as the invariant constituents and themes were checked against the participants' complete experiences. They were reflected and triangulated by combining theories, methods, and observations.

Triangulation helped to ensure that central biases, which may occur from using a single method or a single observer, was overcome (Noble & Heale, 2019) across data sets. Individual recorded descriptions of the experience were constructed using the validated invariant constituents and themes. Verbatim examples from the transcription were included. Individual descriptions were constructed based on the individual recorded descriptions and imaginative variation.

Textural descriptions, which are "narrations of the participants' perceptions of a phenomenon" (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 180-181), were developed. In this step, descriptions of the participants' lived experiences were extracted verbatim from their interviews. Structural descriptions examined the social, emotional, and cultural connections between the participants' narratives. The context and settings that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon were described as they were extracted from the recorded interviews. Textural-structural descriptions, "a descriptive integration of the invariant textural constituents and themes of each research participant" (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 180-181), were constructed for each participant based on the meanings and essences of each participant's experience. Invariant constituents and themes or nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping constituents were clustered into themes (Moustakas, 1994) and incorporated. Complete descriptions were developed for each research participant as well as for the group as a whole in order to describe the essence of their lived experience.

Triangulation was used to provide a reliable test for consistency (Guba, 1978; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative research is established using methods and techniques of data collection which take place within the research framework, and which explore diversified perspectives and theoretical opinions. In this research, among other data collection methods, group or in-depth individual interviews based on autobiographical narration were procured, and ethnography, letter

writing, and observations were enlisted in participant timelines as methods of visual sociology (Mazurek-Łopacińska & Sobocińska, 2018).

Microsoft Word was used to organize the analyzed data to keep track of preidentified themes. Individual data elements and structural themes were synthesized into broader integrated textural and synthesized structural descriptions, concepts, and themes, thus representing all participants as a collective. When this was accomplished, I established the meaning and essence of the phenomenon as a whole (Moustakas, 1994), categorizing themes according to the research questions they addressed. Once individual textural and structural descriptions were assembled, a composite textural and a composite structural description representing the participants as a group was produced. The final outcome of the analysis was a description of the essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole (Moustakas, 1994).

<div align="center">**Trustworthiness**</div>

The aim of this transcendental phenomenological study was to discover and make sense of the lived experience of individuals who were once high school dropouts but went on to earn doctorate degrees in their field. Rigorous assessment of the participants' individual and collective life experiences was undertaken to increase the trustworthiness of findings (Guba, 1978; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I sought to ascertain trustworthiness by taking steps to increase credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. These are parallel qualitative terms used by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as an alternate for the positivists' terms of reliability and objectivity.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the confidence which may be applied to the study and to the extent that reality is accurately conveyed, at least to the perceptions of the participants involved

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To establish credibility, I first clearly stated my own biases and values and then bracketed them as much as possible during every phase of the research through reflective memoing and journaling. I then made every effort to achieve data saturation by obtaining a sufficient sample size and triangulating all data in order to generate themes that addressed the main and secondary research questions.

Ongoing comparisons and analyses were conducted in accordance with Moustakas' (1994) procedures for conducting a transcendental phenomenological study. Rich, thick descriptions were generated to provide significance and understanding to the reader. All interviews were recorded using a digital video recorder via Zoom, and procedures were audited by my dissertation committee. Triangulation was used to provide a reliable test for consistency (Guba, 1978; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and has been made between the individual in-depth interviews, observations, timelines, and letter-writing, which provide data from varying perspectives and multiple viewpoints.

Transferability

Transferability addresses the extent that the findings may be applied in other contexts and situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability has been increased by providing rich descriptions of the participants, procedures, and study findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I sought maximum variation in the sample in terms of broad representation regarding race, gender, age, and discipline, minimizing the limitations to transferability (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). This information is described in the demographic questionnaire. It is important to note that the researcher cannot assure transferability: only the reader of the research may determine the final judgment when choosing to apply study findings to new samples and settings.

Dependability

To establish dependability, findings must be shown to be consistent and repeatable while discounting changes which could not have been predicted in emergent research designs (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I sought to demonstrate dependability through extensive and thorough descriptions of the research procedures, thus creating an audit trail. Lastly, dependability was established by means of an inquiry audit by the dissertation committee and the Qualitative Research Director at Liberty University.

Confirmability

Confirmability is achieved when the researcher puts aside his or her own interests, perceptions, ideas, motivations, interests, and concepts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By comparing these texts, a deeper understanding of the research as a whole is revealed. Confirmability enabled the combined data to more fully describe the phenomenon in its entirety.

Ethical Considerations

The description of three ethical principles governing research is described in the Belmont Report (2018). These three principles are listed as (a) respect for persons, (b) beneficence, and (c) justice. Respect of persons is defined as the autonomous agency of all individuals. Individuals with diminished autonomy and vulnerable categories are to be provided special protections. Beneficence ensures that all individuals are treated in an ethical manner by respecting their decisions, protecting them from harm ("do no harm"), and by making efforts to secure their well-being. Justice ensures that reasonable, nonexploitative, and well-considered procedures are applied in research fairly and equally between all subjects.

To ensure that respect for persons, beneficence, and justice were maintained throughout the research, IRB approval was sought and gained before any data were collected from

participants. Additionally, informed consent was obtained, and the voluntary right of the participants to withdraw from the study at any time was explained. The participants' confidentiality was maintained at all times by way of pseudonyms and the securing of all research data, both physical and electronic. Physical data were stored in a locked cabinet, and electronic data were kept on a password-protected computer and database. The risks and benefits of the research were discussed with participants along with necessary mitigation procedures, if needed.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to discover the factors that motivated former high school dropouts to carry out the difficult task of extending beyond their life circumstances in the pursuit of a doctoral degree in the Continental United States. A qualitative, transcendental phenomenological research design was selected as the method to discover the unique lived experiences of participants. The data was gathered via a demographic survey, in-depth individual interviews, timelines, observations, and letter writing. Data was analyzed and synthesized following the framework stated by Moustakas (1994) in which bracketing, reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis are employed. I did not commence with the study until obtaining IRB approval, and ethical research principles were followed throughout the duration of this research.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of former high school dropouts in the Continental United States who self-determined to persist in their studies until they had successfully completed a doctoral degree. I sought to address the obstacles faced by former high school dropouts when returning to pursue a doctorate degree through this rare path. Little was known about the self-direction, self-motivation, and self-perseverance which must be exercised as former high school dropouts return to school and continue from undergraduate to graduate studies culminating in a doctoral degree. In Chapter 4, I present the findings of the research beginning with a description of the 11 doctorate participants who were former high school dropouts. I then present the emerging themes which were collected via a demographic survey, interview questions, timelines, and reflective writing. The emerging themes are presented within the context of the research questions and are detailed, including narrative participant descriptions in themes, sub-themes, codes, and tables concluding in a summary statement.

Participants

This study included 11 former high school dropouts who returned to academia and persisted to the attainment of a doctorate degree. All participants met the research criteria and were willing participants in the study providing written consent. Participants reside in the Continental United States and are over the age of 21. The participants included seven females and four males from the following races: African American/African Asian, Black, Latino, Puerto Rican American, and White Caucasian. The GED test was utilized for reentry to academia by 10 of the 11 participants. One participant dropped out of high school but later returned and gained a

high school diploma rather than a GED. Another participant who obtained a GED later returned to school and obtained a high school diploma.

All participants excelled in their studies. Four participants obtained not one, but two master's degrees and one a specialist degree before continuing to complete doctorate degrees, which included a total of nine PhD degrees and two EdD degrees. The immensity of their accumulated success may only be rightly understood when viewed against the backdrop of their adversity. While the participants came from a variety of backgrounds, 10 of the 11 stated that poverty was a factor either before or during their educational pursuits. Teenage pregnancy was another common denominator in four of the seven female participants, with three becoming pregnant at the age of 16. Substance abuse was present in the lives of seven of the participants, either through parental or self-abuse. Homelessness was experienced in five cases, while four participants struggled through undiagnosed Learning Disorders (LDs) which were not understood or accommodated for until well into their doctorate degrees. Two of the 11 participants were involved in street gangs and crime in their adolescence, and one participant served 10 years in jail for murder in the second degree.

The participants' careers vary greatly and include a former professional ballerina turned school psychologist; a volcanology scientist; a data scientist; four university professors, three of whom studied and taught in Ivy League universities; a researcher fighting the cause for teenage mothers; three authors; and two political activists. Without overstatement, it may be said that all 11 participants in this study have revolutionized the world in which they live. While the various participants are unknown to each other, they have one common denominator: together, they have changed the lives of thousands of individuals who are now, like themselves, fighting for the benefit of future generations. Each participant forged their path through America's educational

system and triumphed over their own seemingly insurmountable obstacles. This study is *their*

accumulated voice, which is so worthy of being heard.

Table 2

Participants Degrees and Current Employment

Name	Avery	Anna	Cora	Dana	Eli	Grace	Vincent	Phil	Van	Walker	Melany
GED Educational Re-entry	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
High School Diploma Eventually Completed									X	X	
PhD Degree	X	X	X	X		X	X		X	X	X
EdD Degree					X			X			
Degree Content Area	Biomedical Informatics	Sociology	Political Science	School Psychology	Curriculum and Teaching	Communications	Computer Technologies	Education and Human Development	Comparative Ethnic Studies	Medical Sociology, Criminology	Earth Science
Current Employment	Data scientist	Research	Writer and Political Activist	School Psychologist	Professor	Professor and Author	Program Coordinator	Professor	Professor and Dean	Medical Sociologist and Author	Geology Scientist Volcanology

Participants were not limited by age, gender, or race and were found through a purposeful

convenience sampling via a Google search using the key words, "High school dropout –

doctorate," except for one participant who was a referral. The data collection methods provided a

total of 28 possible candidates, all of whom were contacted via email using IRB-approved

contact and follow-up letters sent 1 and 2 weeks after the initial contact. There were 14 positive

responses, with one cancelation, one withdrawal, and one individual who responded too late to

be included in the final analysis. At the final count, 11 participants followed through to the completion of the study. All specified data was collected except for two reflective writing "Dear Abby," letters which were repeatedly sought by the researcher but not provided by the participants. All participants expressed extreme time limitations, which made perseverance in data collection a necessity; however, all participants were enthusiastic, helpful, and cooperative.

Avery

Avery is a 39-year-old woman of African American and Asian American descent who left home and consequently dropped out of school at age 16. She was raised by her grandmother who was also a guardian for several other grandchildren in what Avery described as a "terribly abusive background." The home was so violent that there were times Avery feared for her life. She finally decided that she must leave and escape to a place of relative safety if she wished to see her 18th birthday. Avery shared the following;

> I found myself in terrible situations at home a lot, and I wasn't able to really concentrate. There was drug use and alcohol abuse. Um, there was, abuse, physical and emotional abuse in the home. And so, I couldn't concentrate. I was unhappy and I didn't see the value in education at that time. I wanted to just escape and get away. So, I decided when I was 16, that I was going to walk away from that life. So, I put what I could in a backpack, and I left home. Uh, I, viewed it as if I was going to have any chance in this life I needed to leave.

After leaving her grandmother's house, Avery found a temporary home with a family friend who was aware of the abuse she was suffering. After gaining employment in various retail stores, she instinctively knew that to compete in society, she would need to return to school and obtain an education. Avery received her GED at age 20 and then continued with her studies and received a

bachelor's degree at age 26, her first master's degree at age 30, a second master's degree at age 32, and a PhD degree at age 38. Even though she faced "immediate discrimination" in school due to her gender and mixed race, she determined to seek out resources which would enable her to continue the studies she had quickly grown to love.

Anna

Anna is a 40-year-old White Caucasian female who grew up in a family that valued life-long learning. Even though Anna's mother was disabled, and family members worked through LDs, they supported each other in their educational endeavors. At age 16, three life-changing events transpired in Anna's life: she left home for Hawaii to marry her boyfriend and sit for her GED exam, which she successfully passed. After taking a couple of community college courses, she became pregnant in the same year with her first child. In her own words Anna, "grew up really fast." She shared the following:

> Then, you know, when I got pregnant and then I, I found out about student financial aid, I realized that it was, um, cheaper actually to, or not cheaper, but like basically I made minimum wage going to school with financial aid and I made minimum wage at my minimum wage job <laugh> and um, one felt like it was taking me somewhere and one felt like it was going nowhere. Um, and you know, at that time, like my classes were $38 a credit and you know, aid wasn't that much worse than it is now, <laugh> like to be honest. And so, the dollars I think, stretched further and, so, you know, I started going to school and really kind of began caring about it for real.

Anna worked as a file clerk in the mornings and attended college full time in the afternoons and evenings until her second child was born 19 months later. With her mom cheering her on as her "learning buddy" and supporting her in every way she could, Anna worked her way through

school while raising two children, obtaining an associate degree at age 20, a bachelor's degree at age 22, her first master's degree at age 27, her PhD at age 31, and a second master's degree at age 38. Anna now works as a researcher in higher education while encouraging and mentoring student moms.

Cora

Cora is an energetic 68-year-old Black female who retired from a professorship in political science and law and began her own business as a professional speaker and author, educating on the Constitution and the Judeo-Christian values and principles which were the historical, societal foundation of the United States. Cora was raised in a large, poverty-stricken, and abusive family of 12 children. She lived in a shack without running water and slept on two beds with her 11 other siblings. Cora dropped out of school in ninth grade at age 14 due to "poverty and the need for survival," but determined that she would sit for the GED test when she was old enough to meet the state requirement of age 20. Cora followed through on this decision and successfully obtained her GED at age 21. Cora shared,

> It was always an embarrassment to me that I didn't have a high school diploma or high school equivalency. And so, when my children were born, I had to put on the birth certificate, the highest educational level grade completed by the mother. And I think with the first one I put down 9th and I may have put down 10th with one, but I lied on those applications because I was so embarrassed. So, there was a source of great embarrassment that I didn't have a high school diploma. But I think the turning point was when people were graduating from school that were not as smart as I was. You know, I knew that they weren't.

Cora entered college with the GED, which she earned at age 20, and obtained an associate degree at age 23, a bachelor's degree in criminal justice (graduating Magna Cum Laude) at age 28, her first master's degree in political science at age 29, a PhD in political science at age 34, and a second master's degree in law from Yale University at age 45.

Dana

Dana is a 58-year-old White female who was a traditional student until the seventh grade when she became serious in the field of ballet. She soon found that the demands of school and dance did not coincide, as many hours a day were devoted to attending dance lessons and travelling to and from classes. Dana auditioned and was accepted into a "very famous, prestigious ballet school in New York City, which was basically training ground for New York City Ballet." While receiving entry into this illustrious school of dance was an exciting development, it quickly placed demands on Dana that culminated in a decision to drop out of high school. Dana shared the following:

> Each year I had to leave school a little bit earlier. So, like the sophomore year I had to
> leave at 11 o'clock. So, I basically, I just, I didn't do some of the electives and I didn't
> have lunch <laugh>, they worked with me to get my schedule, but then… the next year,
> my last two years of high school happened to coincide with a September birthday when
> I turned 16. I then had to be in New York City for classes that started at 10 o'clock in
> the morning. So, there was no way to go to school at that point. And it was serious, this
> was where it would wind up being a career. So, this is then that point where I was like,
> okay, and I went in and talked to my principal with my mom. And really, we said the
> only option for me then was to, I just turned 16 a week into school, was to basically
> drop outta school.

Dana dropped out of high school and entered the school of American Ballet in New York City, which led to a successful career as a professional ballerina for the next 14 years. Dana, however, never forgot the promise she made to her mother of one day returning to school. She tried several times to accommodate both school and dance and found it was impossible. However, she did successfully sit for the GED test 2 years after dropping out of high school at age 18. Eight years later, after her mother's death, Dana fulfilled her promise and returned to school as a nontraditional student. Dana found her new passion in psychology and graduated with a bachelor's in psychology at age 30, a combined masters and E.Ds. doctorate at age 33, and then went on to earn a PhD in school psychology at age 40.

Eli

Eli is a 48-year-old a White female who was raised in a "very, very religious" family. Her parents were prolific readers and instilled their love of literature in their children. Eli grew up in a sheltered home in which church took center stage. Television was banned for Eli's first 13 years, but was replaced by board games, reading, math, and science lessons in the home setting. While informal learning was emphasized, formal schooling was not. Eli attended a "very small rural country, Southern school, kindergarten through eighth grade in the same building" but happily dropped out after graduating from the 8th grade with a deep-seated feeling that she simply "didn't belong." Eli shared,

> My parents just were like, well, you know, you can stay home, and we'll homeschool you. And so of course, you know, I'm gonna choose that. Like, yes, that's what I wanna do. You know? And then obviously that just kind of, I think we did it for a couple months over the summer and it just kind of fell by the wayside, like nobody ever enforced it and I'm not gonna enforce it. So, it just, it just wasn't a thing. Um, so that was kind of my

schooling, I guess. Yeah. And it wasn't like a blame thing. It wasn't like my parents were

actually going through a really hard time themselves at that time. I was the youngest of

five children. And I think by the time they got to me, honestly, they're just tired. They're

just like, do what you want. You're good. You're smart. Just keep it up. You know, that's

kinda that feeling you get. And then I got married when I was 16.

Eli's mother was delighted with her decision to marry and enjoyed the pomp and ceremony of

her daughter's church wedding and, for the first time in her young life, Eli felt a sense of

freedom she had never known before. Within months, the teenage bride became pregnant with

her first child, making her parents doubly proud. Eli felt a sense of dissatisfaction in her new life,

"learning how to make pork chops and mashed potatoes." She longed for something more.

Her newfound freedom opened the door to friends whose conversation centered on the

topic of graduating from high school. As the young soon-to-be-mother listened, she thought, "I

wanna do that!" And so, at age 17, and three weeks before her baby was born, Eli successfully

completed the GED exam. A decade and a divorce later, she returned to school to help support

her family. With a long-desired sense of self-affirmation, Eli graduated with a bachelor's degree

in English Allied Language Arts at age 31, a master's degree as a Reading and Writing Specialist

at age 38, and an EdD in Curriculum and Teaching at age 45.

Grace

Grace is a 51-year-old White female who grew up in a problematic home from the start.

She describes her early years as unstable and nomadic; homelessness was par for the course, and

on the rare days when she did go to school, it was at her own instigation. Schools were buildings

that doubled as revolving doors that, some years, she would change two or three times. At age

16, Grace was "kicked out" of high school and did not even know it until she returned, self-

prompted, the next year. Drugs and broken relationships were the norm for Grace's mother who continued as her guardian for the majority of her upbringing.

> My mom was in a, you know, a series of violent relationships, um, and often dependent on, um, the men on the men that, you know, her boyfriends, um, she didn't work. And, um, and at a certain point she got convicted of welfare fraud. And so, we didn't qualify <laugh> because she failed to, uh. I lived with my dad one year when I was in fourth grade and she continued getting welfare that year and they found out, and she had to do a certain amount of community service to pay back the money that she had been living off of while I was not in the house, and she didn't finish the community service. And so eventually she just said, no, I'm not even gonna go and apply. You know, and that kind of made our lives even more abject <laugh> because we weren't even getting, you know, monthly, we weren't getting food stamps or anything. And, um, so yeah, so… it was always about survival, you know? And kind of living in the moment and where are we gonna sleep tonight?

Grace loved her mother but also understood that she was a totally unfit parent. While her mother and her boyfriends seemed content to live in a chaotic world of drugs, physical abuse, homelessness, and poverty, Grace was not. As soon as she turned 18, Grace left her mother's "care" for good to make her own way in life. While her educational path has been anything but "traditional," Grace earned a bachelor's degree in English based on college credits at age 22. Grace successfully attained her GED at age 23, continued to an uncompleted master's degree but was nevertheless accepted into a PhD degree in Communication Research, graduating as a Doctor at age 31. With over 14 published articles and books, Grace is now a renowned author and an expert on the history of media coverage of sex trafficking.

Vincent

Vincent is a 65-year-old White male who dropped out of high school at age 17 to follow in his father's footsteps, finding employment working at the same factory as his dad declaring, "if it's good enough for him, it's good enough for me." The young man soon realized he disliked the textile industry, but thankfully, there remained another family favorite in the Forces. Vincent's dad had been a proud submariner in the Korean war and his brother a submariner in Vietnam, so, with blue jeans and long hair swaying in the wind, he eagerly headed off to the Navy recruitment center. Sadly, disappointment awaited the hopeful high school dropout as he failed the entry exam and did not make the grade.

True to character, Vincent found an alternative path (something he would do throughout his long and distinguished career) two weeks later while passing a billboard featuring a magnificent boat sailing over the breach of a wave. The words "Coast Guard" and the promise of rescuing individuals in danger beckoned his enthusiastic heart and soul. Other than the billboard's promise, Vincent knew nothing of the coast guard. Nevertheless, he fronted up and braved yet another entry exam which was no small feat for the 17-year-old with undiagnosed Dyslexia.

So, I went into the recruiter and uh, he says, son, you need to take a test. The ASVAB, the basic battery test. I said, uh-oh, again? <laugh> So, I took the same exam right after I had taken it the week before. And uh, after I finished the exam, I came out and said, did I pass? He says, well, you just barely made it. He said, but your mother has to sign for you to come in. I said, no problem at all. My mother will sign for me to go in <laugh>. So, I joined the coast guard and the day that I swore in, a message came in and said, no more high school dropouts can come in. So, I made it right under the wire. Once I was inducted

into the coast guard, when I went to bootcamp, every week we had to take progress tests,

I could not pass the written progress test. And so, I remember really distinctly my chief,

who was my commanding officer called me in his office at night. And I would stand at

attention in front of his desk, and he would ask me the questions and I would be able to

answer the, the questions that he was asking me for the test to pass the test. And that's

how I passed from week to week to week.

Vincent enjoyed a long and flourishing career in the coast guard with the encouragement of his

wife and a "Captain who really liked me" as they worked together though his learning disability.

Early in the game, at age 20, he sat for and obtained his GED. He shared, "I had passed the GED

uh, from the state of Texas. And, once I realized that, the stars were the limit, then everything

from there moving on was great." At his wife's bidding, the newlyweds scrapped enough money

together to buy Vincent a small tape recorder which he used to record ongoing test material.

With this new audio-learning method, he quickly made his way up the enlisted ranks to Chief

Warrant Officer. During his years in the coast guard, Vincent developed the first Coast Guard

Learning Center and effectively assisted more than 1,000 individuals in gaining their degrees via

credits for prior learning (CPL). In his personal educational endeavors, Vincent received a

bachelors in HR administration at age 30, a master's in human resources development at age 36,

and a PhD in computing technologies in education at age 42.

Phil

Phil is a 66-year-old White male who dropped out of school in his senior year, 6 months

before graduation, drawn by the ocean's call and a "slick surfboard." As a paid surfer and a

Chuck Norris karate student, he saw no correlation between education and success. He tried his

hand at a variety of jobs from changing light bulbs to selling real estate, which eventually

enabled him to buy his coveted Rolls Royce. When it was all said and done, Phil, who respected honor and honesty above the almighty dollar, cried out to God for a meaningful career that would be instrumental in changing people's lives. At his father's prodding, he made his way down to a local university where he took up his lamenting prayer once more. While sitting on the university bench in the presence of a huge relief sculpture of "the horseman of the apocalypse," he made a decision that would change the entire course of his life: he would now return to school.

> I sat on this bench, and I prayed, and I kind of complained to God, like, why can't I do something that is valuable to me, that's profitable, that will be able to enable me to help someone else at the same time? So, I was complaining and praying and kind of, you know, how, how that goes… I was complaining to God and going, you know what, what is, what is the deal? Why can't I do something that's valuable that will be profitable, that will also help other people during this process? This real estate thing is nothing about other than getting rich to me… And, uh, I was out there for probably two or three hours of sitting there on the bench. I came back, I decided that I wanted to go to school.

Phil did return to school and obtained his GED at age 34, his bachelors in English with a minor in religious studies at age 39, his master's in education and human development at age 40, and his EdD at age 43. Phil went on to become a Director of Special Projects and computer facilities and a professor with tenure running a PhD program in organizational leadership and human resource development. He is also a visiting assistant professor at Oxford University. Phil made the incredible journey from high school drop out to professor on tenure track in less than 10 years, to which he gives God all the glory.

Van

Van is a 45-year-old Latino male who grew up in a poor area of Oakland, California. From an early age, Van did not hold much hope for an education. The schools were violent, and the quality of teaching was poor in his estimation. He exited himself from academia for the first time in eighth grade. Helping to feed the family and make his mom's job as a single parent a little easier seemed the practical route. Van left school in the spring and pushed lawnmowers for a few weeks. Spring turned into summer and summer into fall when he enrolled in high school only to leave again in the spring semester of his freshman year and again in the fall semester of his sophomore year. Van felt disengaged at school but connected in the streets where a gang became the family he longed for. His mother, dealing with her own stress, was either at work or drinking with friends and neglecting the children. In Van's words, "she wasn't equipped to be a good, solid parent." With no sense of purpose in the home and zero connection at school, he spent his time in the streets fighting, dodging bullets, and getting arrested. All sa'd, it was a very vulnerable time for the young teenager. Van shared,

> There was a lot of tragedy when I was on the streets. A lot of, uh, friends and family that passed away. And I think one of the pivotal moments, the turning points, was when my best friend was shot and killed. And this is when I kind of had a moment to reflect that maybe I didn't wanna end up dead or in prison, like a lot of people around me, and maybe I wanted a little bit more hope for myself in the future. So, I went back to school to look for a teacher that I did connect to, and that teacher was, uh, her name was Ms. B. And this teacher was one of the few teachers that I ever really connected with. I didn't actually like her in 9th and 10th grade, she was kind of… kind of almost tried too hard to connect with kids and I didn't like it. I didn't appreciate it. And so, I wanted her out of my, you know,

life, and out of my business. And, uh, but I remembered how much she did care when I

was ready. You know, I remembered how much she cared, so I went to go look for her and

she ended up helping me out. She's the one that helped me get back into school.

Van now found himself hungry to learn as the first rays of purpose dawned in his young soul.

From that point on, he set his heart on helping "his people," both his family and the Latino

community he grew up with. Even at this early age, he understood that the direction for his life's

mission would be found in the pathway of education. Van returned to high school and linked

himself to mentors who would help guide his steps and "dream on his behalf." Because of one

dedicated teacher who saw opportunity in Van, as someone that would one day accomplish great

things, he was enabled to dare the dream for himself. In his own words, "It meant the world to me

that I was hopeless, but someone saw hope in me."

Van worked his way through school, picking up the pieces he had lost and forging a path

that others would one day follow. He finished high school and proudly received his diploma at age

17 on time with his class by working doubly hard to catch up with his peers. He then moved on to

complete a Bachelor of Arts in Human Development at age 23, a master's degree in comparative

ethnic studies at age 24, and a PhD in comparative ethnic studies at age 27, both masters and PhD

from the University of California, Berkeley. His teacher's dream has been repeatedly realized, and

it is important to note that his early years with all the attending trials and pain are not lost on Van.

I wouldn't take me dropping outta school back, and I wouldn't take me getting a doctorate

back. One does not go without the other. And, and who I am now is because of both, both

events that happened in my life, the dropping out and getting the most advanced degree I

possibly could get.

Van has since become a renowned lecturer, professor, and Dean of Social Sciences with seven published books and countless articles. Along with numerous awards and selected fellowships, he has initiated policies for "at promise kids" and has shared his story to thousands.

Walker

Walker is a 77-year-old Puerto Rican American who experienced hell on earth from his earliest of days, although he would never phrase it that way— quite the contrary. When looking back from the vantage ground of his 77 years, he declared positively, "you know, I've had a wonderful life… a very good life." Walker's mother dropped out of school in kindergarten and his father in first grade. Walker himself had his first job at age nine. Growing up in New York City, he and one of his nine siblings forged their own trade in gun manufacturing. There was always a market in the street for illustrious entrepreneurs such as himself. All of Walker's brothers had done time in prison, and in such an environment, it seemed that his own fate was preordained from the start, "as I've often said, I came from a very criminal family."

A heroin addict, gang member, and dealer by age 12, Walker did whatever he had to do to support his habit and stay alive. Although small, only 5'5" in stature, Walker was a natural fighter and knew how to take care of himself. On one inescapable day, he could not dodge quick enough. The tough kid from the streets was beaten at a party by a group of guys from another gang who had been eagerly waiting for the opportunity. Some three weeks later, while refereeing a street fight between gang members (something Walker was well known for doing), an incident that would forever change his life occurred:

> So, I went to this, to this site, to, to, to be the referee and the guy was there that had beat me up with all his friends, and I called a fair fight. Um, he, he agreed. And, and everybody circled us, and we started fighting. Um, I was fairly good with my, with my fists, even

though I was tiny… Um, and I knocked them down twice. Uh, and like most idiots, you know, I turned around to my fellows and I was grandstanding, you know. And one of them said, one of them yelled out. They used to call me Willie back then. One of 'em yelled out, Willie, watch out. And I turned around. A guy was pulling a gun from inside his jacket. And when he did, I pulled a knife and lunged at him, and then all, hell broke. People started shooting, stabbing, you know, um, it was pretty bad.

The other young man died from wound complications a few weeks after the street fight, and it was only a matter of time before the police tracked Walker down through a mutual contact. The police beat him brutally until he confessed,

Um, and then they came in, got me. And, and the way they got my confession was they hooked me up. They stood me on a bench, uh, put my hands and handcuffs in a cage, and kicked a bench out from under me. So, I was hanging from my wrist. Um, and then they, they grabbed a black jacket and started hitting me in my testicles until I confessed to the crime. I was beat up so badly… my ribs were, were, were badly bruised and my head was almost cracked, and they kicked me all over the place.

After the police brutality was over, Walker was sent to juvenile detention hall, and 6 months later, he was charged with second degree murder. Walker spent a total of 10 years in jail, but even in hell, God sent "an angel of light" in the form of a teacher. Walker shared,

So, I, in prison… a man, a teacher, taught, taught me, uh, to read, uh, I was really leery of him cuz he was a white guy, and I was scared of white people. Um, but I accepted, yeah. I accepted his, his, uh, offer. And we started working together. He was marvelous. Um, and it changed my life. Hmm. You know because I always thought I was stupid. I couldn't read… What happened when I passed the GED, was the teacher almost forced me, cuz I, I

refused to do it. I thought I was so stupid that, you know, I would fail. And, and he said, you have to do this. And I said, no, I'm not gonna. And he kept on badgering me until I, I finally gave in, and I took the exam, and I got a fairly decent grade on it. Uh, and he said to me, he said, you see, you're not stupid. He said, You're just ignorant. And everybody in the world is ignorant. I mean, the only person that would know everything is God and you're not God. You know? So just remember that you're not stupid. You're learning and, and as long as you're learning, you're not stupid. You're just ignorant. And that changed my life. I started thinking, Wow, I'm not stupid. I'm not stupid.

As an adult, Walker was diagnosed with Dyslexia and hyperopic astigmatism, being nearsighted in one eye and farsighted in the other eye. Walker's life can, and soon will, fill three books, as well as an already published autobiography. For now, it is enough to say that the ex-adolescent heroin addict turned murder and felon completely turned his life around. Once out of prison, he led a long and productive career in a multitude of leadership positions including county administrator, city manager, director of health and human services, health and wellness director, chief operations officer, and an executive director for numerous companies and organizations. Equally impressive are Walker's educational accomplishments: he received a GED in prison at age 18, his high school diploma while still in prison at age 21, a bachelor's degree in psychology at age 49, a master's degree in sociology at age 52, a second master's degree in Geography (which was undertaken simultaneously with the first) at age 52, and a PhD in sociology and criminology at age 65.

Melany

Melany is a 36-year-old White Caucasian female who has overcome a multitude of obstacles, including high functioning autism, which was not diagnosed until well into her PhD studies. Despite a tumultuous childhood conflicted by physical and emotional abuse, Melany has

achieved the momentous accomplishment of becoming one of a very rare kind: a research volcanologist. Melany's teenage years were spent "couch surfing," "smoking a lot of weed," and being "involved in like, a bunch of unsavory stuff." Melany's parents, who did not know how to manage their own life, knew even less about handling their free-spirited daughter. Her parents divorced and made the decision to legally emancipate Melany, effectively initiating her adulthood at age 15. Without parents to enforce school attendance, she simply stopped going. Her decision to obtain her GED and return to school was a very practical one. Melany shared,

> Um, I got, well, I got pregnant. I was working at a grocery store and then I ended up getting a job as a secretary for a lawyer because I knew that I needed to make more money. Like, I was never gonna be able to support myself and my daughter on like, $8 an hour it's just not possible. Um, so my main motivation for going back to school was to be able to make a living wage. Right. Um, so originally after I got this job as the secretary at this lawyer's office, um, I was like, oh, this isn't that hard. I can, like I can totally do this. Like this is not, not that difficult. And,I started, I started at the local community college… and, um, I went for an associates of applied science in paralegal technology. Um, because I figured like, well, I don't have to go, like, I can go to law school eventually, but for right now, like if I can just get a paralegal degree, then that means that I can get a higher paying position as an actual paralegal, not a legal secretary.

After Melany returned to school, one course led to another until she found herself mesmerized by a class "called mineralogy where you just like learn about all the shiny minerals." Melany was totally hooked and threw the idea of becoming a lawyer to the winds. Her compass was now reset to become an environmental scientist, which subsequently evolved into geology and, ultimately, into volcanology.

We were watching the YouTube, it was like a YouTube video of the volcano scientist in

the silver suit, like right next to the volcano and there's lava everywhere. And I literally

just thought it was like the coolest thing I had ever seen in my life. And I couldn't believe

that that was something that like you could actually go and do. And like, get paid for. And

so, I was like, well how do I, I asked the teacher, how do I do that? Like how do you get to

do that job? And she said you had to get a PhD in Vulcanology. So, I did that.

While Melany's matter-of-fact statement makes obtaining a PhD in Volcanology at age 36 sound

simple, it was anything but. Melany bravely fought her way through her PhD studies raising her

daughter, working during the day, and studying at night until she achieved her dream of becoming

a volcanologist. Melany received her GED at age 18, a bachelor's degree in geological and earth

sciences at age 25, a master's degree in geology and earth science at age 28, and a PhD in geology

in scientist volcanology at age 36. Melany is now actively seeking a postdoctoral degree in

Volcanology.

Results

This transcendental-phenomenological design allowed for an exploration of the

motivation and persistence of 11 high school dropouts who chose to return to academia and

overcome their own life obstacles to fulfill their educational aspirations. The phenomenological

design of the study was appropriate for exploring the lived experience of these individuals who

were former high school dropouts and persisted to the successful completion of a doctorate

degree within the continental United States.

The participants' shared experiences were studied through the theoretical constructs of

perseverance and self-determination (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). Careful, comprehensive

descriptions and vivid, accurate renderings with textual and structural descriptions of the

"essence'" have been enlisted (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 165; Moustakas, 1994, p. 105). The aim throughout the research was to analyze the 11 participants' lived experiences and describe the "universal essence" of their combined experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 157).

Data collection methods for the study included a demographic survey, in-depth 50-to-60-minute recorded interviews via Zoom, "Dear Abby" letters to future students with advice and personal insights, and a timeline of each participant's life journey as it related to their educational pursuits and the research questions at large. The study consisted of one central question and two sub-questions as follows:

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of former high school dropouts in the Continental United States who self-determined to persist to doctoral degree attainment?

Sub-Question One

What experiences shaped the self-efficacy of former high school dropouts who self-determine to persist to doctoral completion?

Sub-Question Two

What does the pursuit and attainment of a doctoral degree mean to individuals who dropped out of high school, later returned to studies, and persisted to doctorate degree attainment?

Theme Development

The invariant constituents known as the "core themes of the experience" of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121) were validated by cross checking the participants' complete experiences using a combination of all collected data. Triangulation was achieved by combining the theories, methods, and observations, thus overcoming central bias from a single

method (Noble & Heale, 2019). Textural descriptions which are "narrations of the participants' perceptions of a phenomenon" (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 180-181) were extracted verbatim from the interviews, and invariant constituents and themes or nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping constituents were also clustered into themes (Moustakas, 1994). Microsoft Word was enlisted in the organization and analysis of the data as the data were assembled into themes, subthemes, and codes. The final analysis of all data is a description of the phenomenon as a whole (Moustakas, 1994). Lastly, to establish credibility, I kept an ongoing log and journal during the data collection and analysis process to bracket my own bias and perceptions as much as possible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The major themes of this study are (a) personal suffering increased self-determination, (b) overcoming negative childhood experiences motivated academic accomplishment, and (c) the pursuit and attainment of a doctoral degree was life-changing and accomplished through faith. Physical, emotional, and financial hardship were present in the lived experiences of participants who were high school dropouts and who self-determined to persist to doctoral degree attainment. Resilience was developed through personal suffering and created a solid determination to achieve academic goals. It was found that overcoming ACEs motivated academic accomplishment in most participants, as they found meaning and hope in educational pursuits that they did not find in their home environment. The pursuit and attainment of a doctoral degree was life-changing and accomplished through faith. Table 3 depicts a list of the major themes and corresponding subthemes found in the research.

Table 3

Themes and Subthemes for all Data Sources

Theme	Subtheme	Codes
Theme 1: Personal suffering increased self-determination	Negative impact of home-life had a positive impact on future educational outcomes	Early Childhood Violence Poverty Teenage Pregnancy Homelessness Crime Lack of family, friends, and academic support
	Substance abuse and crime were incentives in seeking an education	Substance Use – Personal Substance Use – Parents/Guardians Survival
	Abuse and perceived failure motivated the desire to prove themselves	Love of Learning Need for Self-Affirmation Self-Doubt Learning Disabilities Academic Struggles Family, friends, and academic support Inspiration from other people's experience
Theme 2: Overcoming negative childhood experiences motivated academic accomplishment	Drive for self-sufficiency and autonomy Self-determination and perseverance	Lesser achievements build self-confidence to attain greater academic achievements Self-determination and perseverance Need for financial stability Family provision
Theme 3: The pursuit and attainment of a doctoral degree was life-changing and accomplished through faith	Emotional and financial security through faith in God and their ability to succeed Career satisfaction and job placement Motivation to create a positive self-image	Belief in the ability to provide for oneself Belief in a greater power – God sustaining and guiding through the process Need for direction and purpose

Note. Outlier Data: Education was a matter of life and death; education was credited with saving the participant's life.

Theme 1: Personal Suffering Increased Self Determination

The drive for self-sufficiency and autonomy is the first of the three major themes in this study. Personal suffering in the form of physical, emotional, and financial hardship was present in the lived experiences of 10 of the 11 participants who were high school dropouts and who self-determined to persist to doctoral degree attainment. The sub-themes of this first theme are (a) negative impact of home-life had a positive impact on future educational outcomes, (b) substance abuse and crime were incentives in seeking an education, and (c) abuse and perceived failure motivated the desire to prove themselves. Resilience was developed through personal hardship and created a solid determination to succeed. Rather than deter academic accomplishment, the participants' pain throughout the many difficult years during their educational endeavors only increased their desire to persist. For example, childhood violence was present in the lives of 6 participants, poverty was experienced by 10 participants, 4 experienced undiagnosed learning disorders, four participants were teenage mothers, 5 participants experienced substance abuse in their own lives or their parents, 5 were periodically homeless, and 7 expressed the need to simply survive. Anna embodied the general sentiment in the following statement:

> I was so damn stubborn and anytime that anybody told me that I wasn't gonna make it or, um, uh, you know, had some sort of like disparaging comment, um, it just would make me more stubborn. Um, and I was gonna, I was gonna do it and I was gonna do it that much harder.

Negative Impact of Home Life had a Positive Impact on Educational Outcomes. The effect of unfavorable conditions on educational outcomes was a motivation to continue rather than a deterrent. Personal suffering increased the participants' self-determination as they found

meaning and hope in educational pursuits that they did not find in their home environment. The negative impact of home life had a positive impact on educational outcomes, as was experienced by 10 of the 11 participants who experienced personal suffering as a result of personal trials that they believed would be alleviated by returning to school. Avery stated, "I loved learning… I thought of it as an escape from poverty; an escape from all the terrible situations I'd been dealt up to that point." Eli echoed the same: "I think the biggest impact on me going back to school were my children because we had no money." Van spoke of the transformational power he found because a teacher believed in him when he could not believe in himself, saying, "And, you know, I, I didn't have the opportunity to dream for myself cuz I, I was so busy surviving on the streets, but my teacher dreamed on my behalf."

Substance Abuse and Crime were Incentives in Seeking an Education. Substance abuse and crime, both personal and parental, created an environment of suffering that participants desired to escape. Education was perceived as a pathway to overcome addiction and corruption. The personal suffering which was experienced due to the unfavorable conditions which resulted from substance abuse and crime acted as a motivator in persistence. The following statement by Avery is a powerful expression of the desperation that became the life-long impetus and motivation throughout her educational endeavors:

> I was in survival mode in my mind, I was trying, just trying to survive. When I left home at 15, I was surviving. I wanted to survive a home that was abusive and problematic. And uh, I took that survival mindset with me to school… I thought I'm going to survive and I'm going to somehow get what I need. I wanted it so badly. I just wanted to survive. I wanted to live… And I carried that through all those degrees.

Abuse and Perceived Failure Motivated the Desire to Prove Themselves. The negative impact of ACEs created a strong incentive for participants to prove to themselves and others that they could and would succeed. Abuse and perceived failure motivated the desire to prove themselves and, despite former failures, participants were determined to demonstrate their capability and self-value. As Cora stated, "My personality has been when someone said I couldn't do something, I was gonna show them that I could." Vincent echoed this need for self-affirmation, saying, "My motivation was again, to prove to myself that I could do it."

The three subthemes above enabled a detailed exploration of the key theme. Negative impact of home-life had a positive impact on educational outcomes and increased personal suffering which, in turn, increased self-determination. Rather than deter their persistence, the struggles participants faced only served to increase their self-determination. The same was true of substance abuse and crime, which were further incentives in seeking an education. Lastly, abuse and perceived failure motivated the participants' desire to prove themselves in their educational endeavors. All elements provided motivation and incentive for self-determination in the persistence of the participants' chosen degrees.

Theme 2: Overcoming Negative Childhood Experiences Motivated Academic Accomplishment

Overcoming negative childhood experiences motivated academic accomplishment is the second of the three major themes. The participants' unfavorable childhood experiences, which resulted in dropping out of high school, created a drive for self-sufficiency and autonomy. The subthemes are (a) drive for self-sufficiency and autonomy and (b) self-determination and perseverance. These motivational factors were expressed by participants as key reasons for returning to school and their persistence to degree completion. The need for safety, financial

security, and self-worth outweighed almost every other consideration and proved to be driving forces in academic accomplishment.

The lack of early childhood stability and safety was related by Grace in this way: "It was always about survival, you know? And kind of living in the moment and where are we gonna sleep tonight?" Van also portrayed the stark reality of his childhood and his drive for something better when he stated,

> Yeah. Uh, there was a lot of tragedy when I was on the streets. A lot of, uh, friends and family that passed away. And I think one of the pivotal moments, the turning points was when my best friend was shot and killed. And this is when I kind of had a moment to reflect that maybe I didn't wanna end up dead or in prison, like a lot of people around me, and maybe I wanted a little bit more hope for myself in the future.

Drive for Self-Sufficiency and Autonomy. Participants who suffered from abuse, poverty, discrimination, and homelessness were strongly motivated to rise above the obstacles that created their personal suffering. Overcoming negative childhood experiences motivated academic accomplishment. Education became a form of empowerment and provided the opportunity for increased autonomy and self-sufficiency. The drive for self-sufficiency and autonomy were paramount in the participants' educational journeys. For instance, at every step of her educational journey, Avery sought to distance herself from childhood poverty and abuse, sharing, "I was unhappy at work. So, I viewed this doctoral degree as the catalyst to something better… I felt like the (doctorate) degree, it, uh, it gave me credibility that somehow my master's degree didn't give." Grace stated, "I, you know, recognized education as a way to escape my circumstances." The struggle for self-sufficiency and the desire to provide a better life for their children was also a strong motivation for perseverance. Eli stated, "I gotta make a better life for

'em (her children) somehow… I never wanted them to have a life that I had and just struggle every day. It was just like, why does it have to be so hard?"

Self-Determination and Perseverance. When participants received little or no support from family or friends, they used it as a catalyst rather than a disincentive. Adversity only served to increase self-determination and perseverance. For all 11 participants, as the years rolled by, they developed both a love for learning and a determination to persist. This self-determination and tenacity are expressed by Melany in this way:

> There's part of me that was like, I'm gonna do this because, you know, screw you. You said that I couldn't. And then part of it is I'm gonna do this because, oh my God, this is the coolest, like I just, I want to be doing this for the rest of my life.

Phil so succinctly stated, "So, um, yeah, discipline, like, I'm going to do this. So, I, I did it."

The subthemes enabled a detailed exploration of the key theme of overcoming negative childhood experiences which motivated academic accomplishment. The drive for self-sufficiency and autonomy increased the participants' desire to succeed. Self-determination became characteristic of the participants' experience. Each participant was motivated to continue to persevere in overcoming negative childhood experiences. The desire to overcome, in turn, motivated academic accomplishment by increasing self-determination and the drive for self-sufficiency and autonomy.

Theme 3: The Pursuit and Attainment of a Doctoral Degree was Life-Changing and Accomplished through Faith

The pursuit and attainment of a doctoral degree was life-changing and accomplished through faith is the third and last major theme in this study. All participants expressed that the pursuit and attainment of a doctoral degree was a life-changing experience which provided

emotional and financial security, resulting in superior job placement, self-worth, purpose, and positive self-image. Subthemes of this theme are (a) emotional and financial security through faith in God and their ability to succeed, (b) career satisfaction and job placement, and (c) motivation to create a positive self-image. Cora believed in the country that provided her educational opportunities, and that belief was realized: "I believed, uh, in the American dream and I believed that hard work and education would make all the difference in the world. And it did."

Emotional and Financial Security through Faith in God and Their Ability to Succeed. Participants believed that emotional and financial security would be attainable through their personal faith in God. Participants also expressed that faith gave them the ability to succeed. Eli believed the educational path she pursued was ordained by God and was her ultimate destiny. Cora expressed faith in both God and country saying,

> As a person of faith, I believe that God ordered my footsteps. He sent me in a direction that I didn't see. I didn't know anything about it… I believe in God. And so, you know, whatever God has planned for me, that's what I was always supposed to be… This is your destiny. Like, this is what you're supposed to be doing.

Vincent also believed that his life and education were intimately directed by God, sharing,

> All the way through I pushed myself, but I knew that, um, that God had given me the strength to be able to do this and, uh, to persevere. That's where my strength comes from. I don't do this for myself, I do this for the Lord and, uh, whatever person that I'm able to touch.

This subtheme enabled a detailed exploration of the key theme which was the pursuit and attainment of a doctoral degree was life-changing and accomplished through faith.

Emotional and financial security through faith in God was a deciding factor in degree attainment. Participants believed in their own ability to succeed, and that belief combined with faith in a Higher Power gave them the self-motivation to push past obstacles, of which there were many. Faith, or belief, played a major part in the participants' academic success.

Career Satisfaction and Job Placement. Not surprisingly, the pursuit of higher education was credited as an avenue to career satisfaction and the hope of advanced job placement. When asked if the attainment of a doctorate degree had accomplished the desired outcomes, 10 of the 11 participants whole-heartedly agreed. Dana, realizing the value of a doctorate degree, said, "But I wouldn't have been able to have done probably half of the other experiences if I hadn't had the doctorate because that is sometimes the ticket into some of these other, you know, positions." Grace echoed the same, sharing, "It (education) opened so many possibilities, so many openings and or possibilities for me in my life that I wouldn't have had otherwise." Van believed the reason thousands of individuals have listened to his advice is directly related to his obtaining a doctorate degree: "So the only reason they listen to me is because I have a doctorate and because of, you know, of course my story. But, if I didn't have a doctorate, they wouldn't be listening to me."

Motivation to Create a Positive Self-Image. The negative impact of ACEs created feelings of low-self-esteem. Dropping out of high school was damaging to the participants' self-image, who subsequently felt the need to prove to themselves and others their ability and self-worth. As a high school dropout and teenage mother, Melany felt the necessity to be something more than a "stereotype," as she stated, "And I think I just didn't wanna be a stereotype. I didn't wanna be the, you know, single mom, high school dropout, stuck in a crappy job for the rest of their lif'. I wanted to be something else'" Avery expressed the destructive effect of early

childhood abuse to her self-image and her desperate desire to prove her worth through educational pursuits in these words:

> I don't even know how I did it. It's just this burning desire to live and to be human, uh, and to feel human. And I know that not everyone possesses it, um, but sometimes being put in terrible situations, I guess it makes you very hungry.

The attainment of a formal education and the perceived respect associated with the acquirement of degrees was a transformational experience for every participant. Prior to the successful attainment of undergraduate and graduate degrees, especially the doctorate degrees, participants expressed varying levels of self-doubt. During their many years in higher education, all 11 participants gained confidence with each academic achievement. As undergraduate and graduate degrees were successfully completed, greater career opportunities were afforded, and self-respect replaced self-doubt. Participants realized that they had both the ability and the motivation to succeed and excel, and this they did repeatedly until it became their own self-perception. They no longer saw themselves as inadequate. Over time, their self-awareness evolved, and they finally viewed themselves as capable, talented, and intelligent individuals in control of their own destiny.

Outlier Data

Outlier data were also discovered following theme development. The outlier data include the following themes: (a) education was a matter of life and death and (b) education credited as saving life. These themes are discussed in the following paragraphs.

When developing this research, I did not expect the extent to which education would affect the lives of those who persisted from high school dropout to doctorate. Education was so impactful that it was credited as sustaining life itself. There were expected statements of purpose,

such as Avery's, "I didn't view dropping out as an option because I found that going to school gave me purpose. I felt like I now had a purpose." However, the full impact of the importance of educational achievement became evident when Melany, thinking she might not achieve her doctorate, contemplated suicide. Melany's sense of identity had become so intertwined with the completion of her studies and subsequent graduation that there appeared no reason to live if she could not fulfil her dream. She shared,

> So, I was almost done. And, and he (the Chair) just kept moving the goal posts and, and you know, every time I felt like I would present him with something, he would say like, no, no, you have to go back and do this, or no, you have to go back and do this or, and, and I, I like thought about suicide.

Melany stated that she did not know where she would be without education, sharing, "Probably in jail. No lie. Um, probably in jail or, I don't even know. I really don't." Avery believes that her passage from high school dropout to doctorate saved her from a "downward path" in which she could see only prolonged pain from her early childhood. Her learning accomplishments gave her purpose, financial security, and enlarged her thinking processes. She stated, "It, it was more than going to school for me. It was the only healthy outlet. I think I had, uh, in a way that I could evolve, I could evolve myself." Without it, she stated, "I can't guarantee I'd even be alive." Walker, who spent 10 years in prison for second degree murder, said,

> Well, if I hadn't learned in prison to read and write and sought the college programs in prison, I'd probably be dead long time ago. Because I probably would've gone back to the ghetto. I probably would've kept using heroin… I mean, my, I owe my life to education.

Such sentiments reinforce the power of education and its life-changing, life-sustaining impact.

Research Question Responses

Central Research Question

The central question to be answered by the participants was, "What are the lived experiences of former high school dropouts in the Continental United States who self-determined to persist to doctoral degree attainment?" All 11 participants were open and frank in describing their lived experience in detail. This intimate retelling of their personal events was centered around (a) their reason for dropping out of high school, as when Melany stated,

Um, so I dropped out of high school when I was 17. Um, truthfully, I wasn't going, I just wasn't going. I was involved in like, bunch of unsavory stuff and just, I was just hanging out with the wrong people and being stupid and more interested in boys and, you know, being dumb.

Personal events also centered around (b) their motivation to return to school and the process used to do so, as Eli stated,

I look back and I think it really was this kind of like maybe some grit and determination, even though you don't really articulate that you don't know what it is. You're just like, I want that and I'm gonna go get that.

Participants also discussed their motivation for persistence to the successful completion of a doctorate degree, which was often centered in the pure joy of learning. Grace stated, "I felt like I was really just hitting my stride educationally… you know, I had learned how to study. I had learned how to get good grades, um, and I didn't want to stop learning."

Ten of the 11 participants dropped out of high school because they were experiencing some form of physical or mental abuse, instability, poverty, or homelessness while under their parents and/or guardians care, or they were simply disinterested and disconnected from the

school experience. The following statement made by Avery encapsulated the experience of many

of the participants:

> I was unhappy, and I didn't see the value in education at that time. I wanted to just escape
>
> and get away. So, I decided when I was 16, that I was going to walk away from that life.
>
> So, I put what I could in a backpack, and I left home. Uh, I, I viewed it as if I was going
>
> to have any chance in this life, I needed to leave… Um, I wish that, that wasn't a decision
>
> I was making at, you know, 15 and 16, but, um, the house I was living in was so
>
> dangerous.

The one exception was Dana, who left school at age 16 with her mother's permission to attend a

ballet school in New York City to become a professional ballet dancer. Dana explained the event

in this way:

> I went in and talked to my principal with my, with my mom. And really, we said the only
>
> option for me then was to, I was just turned 16, a week into school, was to basically drop
>
> outta school. And so <laugh>. So, at that point, then I dropped outta school and within a
>
> week, couple, maybe it was a month or two, um, I moved into New York City in an
>
> apartment with four, I think there were four of us who were other, you know, ballet
>
> students, all attending the School of American Ballet.

The motivation to return to school and to persist to the completion of a doctorate degree

was prompted by each participant's desire to be self-sufficient and financially independent and

able to provide for themselves and their family. For example, Cora stated so succinctly, "I

believed, uh, in the American dream and I believed that hard work and education would make all

the difference in the world, and it did." They also expressed the need to contribute in a

purposeful and productive manner in their community. Phil said,

I sat on this bench, and I prayed, and I kind of complained to God, like, why can't I do

something that is valuable to me, that's profitable, that will be able to enable me to help

someone else at the same time? …so anyway, I, I decided, um, then, you know what? I

think I want to go to school. I think that's, I think that's what I want to do.

Participants felt the need to prove to themselves and others that they were able to succeed and

could rise above previous failure. Avery illustrated this point in the following statement:

Um, there seems to be this assumption that you can only do well, if you have all the

resources well, you can do well, you probably will do well, but if you have a start like

mine, there's an assumption that this person has no future and, um, they're a lost cause.

But, um, I think that only the person can determine that. And I determine that I, I want to,

I don't want to be a lost cause.

Participants also stated that they wished to glorify God and fulfil what they believed to be their

heaven appointed destiny. Cora shared,

I also believe in a spiritual sense, is that we are not in as much control of our lives as we

think we are, like, we may think that we are pulling the levers and we are planning

everything, but I don't think it works that way… This path that propelled me to where I

am today is not one that I consciously chose… I believe in the call on people's lives. And

I believe that there's certain people that are set aside and that God has a plan for them.

Lastly, participants were motivated by the personal need to restore their self-image, which had

been damaged to some degree as high school dropouts. Eli stated,

Um, and even if nobody had ever said that to me, they never said that to me. I felt that for

some reason I had that feeling, that people, when they looked at me, they knew I was a

high school dropout. Like even if that has never been said, I felt that. And I was just

determined. Like I didn't wanna feel that way. I didn't wanna have that.

To return to school, 10 of the 11 participants completed their GED, and one participant returned

to high school and completed studies and graduated with a high school diploma. One other of the

participants who had re-entered school with a GED later felt the need to also complete a high

school diploma and did so.

Sub-Question One

Sub-question one asked, "What experiences shaped the self-efficacy of former high

school dropouts who self-determine to persist to doctoral completion?" The desire to overcome

negative childhood experiences, such as Van, whose key motivation was to help other struggling

youth, stated,

Being a, a dropout and, and, and having that baggage, you know, um, the, the poverty, the

abuse, uh, what I kept telling myself when I ever would struggle academically is imagine

what other kids that are younger than you are going through right now and the struggle

they have to deal with.

For other participants, faith in God helped shape self-efficacy. Vincent stated,

God is just so incredible… Um, and, uh, it, it's just, uh, it's amazing how, how God puts

you in places that you never think about... All the way through I pushed myself, but I

knew that, um, that God had given me the strength to be able to do this and, uh, to

persevere.

Career satisfaction, and anticipated job placement motivated academic accomplishment and

shaped self-sufficiency in 9 of the 11 participants. Dana explained her anticipated need in this

way:

I wanted the doors open for my career, so I didn't just have to work in the schools. And

I've worked in a lot of places besides just the schools. And I also at that point didn't

know if I wanted to be a faculty and I knew I'd have to have the doctorate for that piece.

Cora expressed her desire to be an independent woman with her own financial means, sharing,

I don't think I ever prayed this, but I wanted to be able to support myself without a man's

income, because I had been in two unhappy marriages that I felt like I couldn't afford to

leave, even though it was dangerous situations.

Finally, Avery stated, "I was unhappy at work. So, I viewed this doctoral degree as the catalyst

to something better."

All 11 participants expressed the necessity to prove to themselves and/or others that they

could attain a doctorate degree as the highest academic degree possible. Van acknowledged his

insecurities and his drive to overcome them, stating,

So, I always felt dumb, uh, but I had an attitude that like, you know, uh, I might be dumb

right now, but I'm not gonna be dumb forever. You know, that's what I always, always

tell myself, you know, I'm not gonna be dumb forever.

In every interview, it was found that participants were self-motivated because of the experiences

which shaped their self-efficacy as former high school dropouts who self-determined to persist to

doctoral completion.

Sub-Question Two

Sub-question two asked, "What does the pursuit and attainment of a doctoral degree

mean to individuals who dropped out of high school, later returned to studies, and persisted to

doctorate degree attainment?" The pursuit and attainment of a doctoral degree meant financial

security, physical safety, provision for themselves and their family, the restoration of a positive

self-image, and self-worth. Avery addressed the credibility she believes the attainment of a doctorate gives by saying, "I felt like finally now I knew I had value. I knew I had value before, but I felt like, uh, now I'm being taken seriously. I wish it didn't take a PhD." Lastly, the pursuit and attainment of a doctorate degree gave meaning and purpose to their lives. Van shared the following:

> I wanted to achieve, I wanted to become a professional. I wanted to do it to help my family and to help my community, you know, wanted to go into social services to end the violence in the community, and to uplift, uh, the young people. And in my community. I remember that, that that became my purpose. And, and, and because that was my purpose, I knew I needed an education to accomplish it.

In a few cases, the attainment of a doctorate degree even prevented self-harm and personal destruction. Melany, who contemplated suicide if she failed to successfully complete her dissertation, spoke about the transforming effect of education in her life, stating,

> Like I said, if, if 16-year-old me were to meet me now, they wouldn't have any idea who I was because I pulled a complete 180 and really became this person that was the opposite of what I was. And I really like who I am now.

Summary

In conclusion, the findings of this study revealed that resilience and perseverance were motivated primarily by adversity. Negative childhood encounters or simple disconnect created a drive to overcome pain and failure and provide a better life for the participants, their families, and society at large. The desire to create a positive self-image, assist others, and obtain physical, emotional, and financial stability sustained the participants' motivation through the many years of study and trial. The passage from high school dropout to doctor, though not without

challenges, was in every instance a positive, life-changing experience that was acknowledged as such and appreciated. It is paramount to understand that participants not only overcame adversity but used it as a catalyst to develop self-determination and self-efficacy while planning and pursuing their own educational path as adult learners. Adversity created a settled determination to exert control over the participants' environment, behavior, and social attitudes. When self-doubt was present, they found confidence and encouragement in previous attainments and actively sought assistance wherever it could be found. Lesser accomplishments provided self-confidence and the determination to prove to themselves and others that they could attain greater goals. The pursuit of a doctorate degree inspired a sense of accomplishment that was perceived as life-changing and even life-sustaining. In every case, the participants expressed that the attainment of a doctorate degree, while not originally sought, was achieved through self-determination motivated by the desire to overcome difficult circumstances.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of former high school dropouts in the Continental United States who self-determined to persist to doctoral degree attainment. The study was undertaken because prior research was lacking on the necessary motivation, self-determination, and perseverance of high school dropouts who returned to school to pursue graduate studies to the doctoral level. This study filled this gap in the literature by undertaking an exploration of the essence of the phenomenon to discover the self-motivation and persistence of individuals who graduated with a doctorate degree as former high school dropouts despite the many obstacles that they faced. In Chapter 5, I present the findings relevant to the 11 participants who shared their lived experiences as they returned to academia and undertook the long and challenging journey from high school dropout to doctoral completion. This chapter includes a discussion of the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of the study, including delimitations and limitations, and concludes with the most significant implications of this transcendental phenomenological study.

Summary of Findings

The central question to be answered was, "What are the lived experiences of former high school dropouts in the Continental United States who self-determined to persist to doctoral degree attainment?" For former high school dropouts returning to academia to undertake and complete the arduous journey to doctorate completion, their lived experiences consisted of overcoming adversity in a multitude of forms. Obstacles surmounted included childhood domestic violence, poverty, teenage marriage, adolescent pregnancy, learning disabilities,

substance abuse (both parental and personal), homelessness, crime, self-doubt resulting in the necessity for self-affirmation, academic struggles, and the simple desire to survive.

The participants reshaped their self-identity through academic accomplishments and developed a sense of self-worth and autonomy with each degree attainment. The need not only to survive early childhood drama but to use it as a catalyst for persistence was present in nine of the 11 participants. While the two other participants were not self-motivated by early childhood trauma, they also sought to redefine themselves through academic attainment. In every case, the participants' motivation to persevere increased with every passing year and the determination to succeed superseded all other incentives. In 10 of the 11 cases, the GED test was successfully utilized for re-entry to academia and inspired the initial belief that their goal for higher education was attainable.

The first sub-question was, "What experiences shaped the self-efficacy of former high school dropouts who self-determine to persist to doctoral completion?" Self-efficacy describes an individual's belief in their capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific personal accomplishments through their own efforts (Bandura, 1977, 1986b, 1997). This self-efficacy was reflected in the participants' ongoing faith in their ability to overcome the many obstacles that life presented. Adversity created a settled determination to exert control over their environment, behavior, and social constructs. When self-doubt was present or the disbelief of friends and relatives was expressed or perceived, they found encouragement in previous attainments. Lesser accomplishments provided self-confidence and the determination to prove to themselves and others that they were more than capable of attaining greater academic goals. This self-efficacy, once discovered, acted as a primary motivator to persist beyond standard academic

achievement, resulting in not one, but two master's degrees in four of the 11 participants prior to or after the completion of their doctorate degree.

The second supporting question in this study was, "What does the pursuit and attainment of a doctoral degree mean to individuals who dropped out of high school, later returned to studies, and persisted to doctorate degree attainment?" The pursuit of a doctorate degree inspired a sense of accomplishment that culminated in the persistence to achieve personal goals. All participants expressed that the attainment of a doctorate degree meant broader career opportunities and a sense of financial security. Positive self-identity was achieved by all 11 participants and was understood to be a direct result of the successful completion of the doctorate degree. Influence and respect were understood to have been boosted by the completion of the doctorate and, in every instance, participants credited the achievement as life-changing, as education broke the cycle of poverty, abuse, homelessness, and crime and, in some instances, was credited as being life-sustaining.

Discussion

In this section, I examine the research findings in conjunction with the empirical and theoretical literature reviewed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. The outcomes are discussed in relation to the interpretations of findings with empirical and theoretical sources and their connection to existing literature. The discussion also includes how the findings fit within the theoretical frameworks of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2001), Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory, and adult learning theory (Knowles, 1968).

Interpretation of Findings

Chapter 2 included a discussion of the theoretical and structural framework of this study, which is comprised of SDT, self-efficacy theory, and adult learning theory. SDT was undertaken

to explore the way individual participants were motivated to grow through their own self-determination while advancing through undergraduate and graduate degrees (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory was used to understand why participants felt capable of accomplishing their academic goals and how, when faced with possible failure, they nevertheless stuck to the task until it was accomplished. Lastly, the adult learning theory (Knowles, 1968) allowed for an examination of the distinction between the way in which participants were involved in their own planning, learning, problem solving, and evaluation of their experiences after returning to school as adult students. Viewing the results of this study through these theoretical lenses resulted in three interpretations or researcher assertions, which are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Adversity Prompted the Development of Self-Determination

It was found in all 11 participants that the negative impact of their home-life and/or the perceived stigmatization of a being a high school dropout positively impacted their persistence toward educational outcomes. Adversity prompted the development of self-determination. Seeking faith through the Judeo/Christian religion during times of adversity was a common denominator for 5 of the 11 participants, with four of the 5 crediting faith in God as the ultimate enabling power in the accomplishment of their academic goals. For 10 of the 11 participants, early childhood violence, poverty, teenage pregnancy, homelessness, crime, lack of support from family, friends, and academia, substance abuse, self-doubt, learning disabilities and academic struggles due to learning gaps had adversely affected their self-esteem and confidence. However, the smaller accomplishments, such as passing the GED test and their strong desire not only to survive, but to thrive were strong incentives which created a growing self-determination to prove themselves. Self-direction, self-motivation, and self-perseverance were habitually exercised as

these former high school dropouts pursued their chosen path from undergraduate to graduate studies, culminating in a doctoral degree. This finding affirms the central tenets of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2008), which posits that the need to grow is said to motivate an individual's actions and is a natural, intrinsic behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2001). This theory further explains the concept that people feel the need to master difficult challenges, and such was the case in the lived experiences of the participants in this research. Embracing new experiences was essential to their personal fulfilment and was an indispensable element motivating each to transform and improve their lives through higher education.

Prior research suggests students drop out of school for a variety of reasons and lived experiences (Gatson & Enslin, 2021; Goodman & Intercultural Development Research Association, 2018; Zaff et al., 2017). While systematic reviews discuss the importance of family, school, and community support for persistence, in this study, 10 of the 11 participants stated that these elements were lacking, if not entirely absent. On the contrary, abuse in a multitude of forms was often present and acted as a driving factor in dropping out of high school. Risk factors for attrition were present in 10 of the 11 participants, which included a negative attitude toward education, substance abuse (Goulet et al., 2020; Gubbels et al., 2019; Maynard et al., 2015; Stoddard et al., 2020), and low parental involvement in school (Camper et al., 2019; Parr & Bonitz, 2015). ACEs, financial obligations, the need for employment, family influence, negative reactions to adolescent pregnancy, learner disengagement, and learning disabilities were all present (Sámano et al., 2019; Vázquez-Nava et al., 2019).

The importance of the GED cannot be overstated, as 10 of the 11 participants in this study re-entered academia through this process and, in every case, were inspired by hope after its successful accomplishment. Vincent stated, "I had passed the GED uh, from the state of Texas.

And, uh, once I realized that, the stars were the limit, then everything from there moving on was great." The GED was originally developed during World War II by the U.S. Armed Forces Institute to aid veterans who had previously dropped out of high school to enter the military (Hutt & Stevens, 2017; Rose, 1991). However, its current nationwide utilization provides an open door to the 7,000 students who drop out of high school every day in the United States, with minority groups at the highest risk (Northeastern University Center for Labor Market Studies, 2009). By undertaking and passing a credentialing exam such as the GED exam, Pearson/VUE's GED® Testing Service, DRC/CTB's Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC™), and ETS's High School Equivalency Test (HiSET®), individuals who were prevented or unable to graduate with a high school diploma may find an alternate route into the work force or higher education (Rossi & Bower, 2018), as was the case for 10 of the 11 participants in this study.

Another form of adversity experienced by participants was undiagnosed disabilities, which were present in four of the 11 participants and were not discovered until well into their doctorate studies. All three participants who struggled with LDs had concurrent behavioral problems, which coincides with research by Cortiella and Horowitz (2014), who found in a study of 448 students that 62% of students with LD exhibited coexisting neuropsychological disorders including anxiety, mood disorder, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). This study confirmed previous research, which suggests that exposure to childhood trauma negatively impacts school achievement and may result in disengagement of students from learning (Larson et al., 2017; Margari et al., 2013).

Having overcome so many obstacles which are often attributed to attrition, these 11 exceptional individuals were directed by intrinsic and extrinsic incentives to find personal satisfaction both academically and socially not only through adversity, but because of adversity,

thus developing resilience. Resilience may be defined as an individual's ability to rise above obstacles and adversity (Wiig & Fahlbruch, 2019). Consistent with standard resilience models and in confirmation of the significance of resilience processes, Luthar et al. (2000) and Rutter (2000) found that resilience evolved from the way in which doctoral candidates managed adverse situations and made decisions, influenced by early childhood experiences which created "a chain of indirect linkage that foster[ed] escape" (Rutter, 1985, p. 608) or the "way out" of adverse situations, such as poverty.

This point cannot be overly stressed: adversity became the motivating force in the development of participants' self-determination. Returning to their educational pursuits satisfied their psychological need by providing a sense of growth and achievement in the place of perceived failure, abuse, neglect, incarceration, teenage pregnancy, homelessness, and poverty. Intrinsic motivation and regulation even enabled participants to see beyond their hoped-for financial security to the point at which their studies were deemed worthy of personal internalization and endorsement regardless of monetary outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2018).

The theories of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) and self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2001) state that an individual will be motivated to succeed in educational pursuits if they believe they are attainable, and that personal fulfilment is essential to motivate change and growth. The findings of this research substantiate these two theories, as each successful academic endeavor provided hope for success with the next. Thus, SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2001) played a fundamental role in investigating and defining the motivation, self-confidence, and persistence of these former high school dropouts in their completion of a doctorate degree.

Overcoming Childhood Adversity Developed Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is the belief that one can accomplish a desired goal, and the very belief that one is capable enables them to do so (Bandura, 1977). Bandura also stated that people with high self-efficacy set for themselves challenging goals, and, in the face of possible failure, they stick to the task until it is accomplished. All 11 participants faced periods of self-doubt, times when the task seemed daunting, and external encouragement was sparce or lacking altogether. At these times, they actively sought help through school programs, mentorship, and for those who identified as Christians, faith in a higher power. They did not wait for opportunities to come to them but were active in researching and acquiring the assistance they needed. Unlike so many doctoral students who doubt their capabilities and consider quitting when they believe they lack the necessary skills to succeed (Van der Linden et al., 2018), the participants in this research persisted at their self-appointed task until it was accomplished. Although it was often daunting, they believed they could attain their goal and this very belief, or faith, enabled them to do so.

Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory has often been employed in organizational research. The theory emphasizes lived experience to bring about therapeutic change and mastery through successful performance, and such was certainly the case with everyone who participated in this study. Prior research suggests that first-time incarceration reduces expected lifetime earnings by 39% (Gordon et al., 2021), and that the achievement gap between Hispanic and non-Hispanic peers remains extensive largely because Hispanics have the highest dropout rate (Chapman et al., 2011; Maynard et al., 2015; Obinna & Ohanian, 2020). It is, therefore, of interest to note that four of the participants in this study were of Latino, Black, African American/Asian American, and South American descent, and three of the four expressed some form of prejudice while undertaking studies while two of the four experienced crime and

incarceration. Nevertheless, all participants developed self-efficacy through their lived experience as students in higher education, which completely transformed their life in a therapeutic and meaningful way. As graduates with a doctorate degree, their earnings increased as they obtained employment in leadership positions. Prior to returning to school, the participants were among the 38 million adult individuals in the workforce who, although they had some college education, did not hold a formal degree (Belkin, 2018; Bowers & Bergman, 2016).

A review of the literature revealed that high school dropouts are among the group of low-skilled workers who suffer the most when the economy regresses. For example, in 2006, the unemployment rate dropped below 6% at the height of the housing boom, but when the market took a turn for the worse, job opportunities for low-skilled workers declined, and unemployment of this class quickly rose to 15% as the economy crumbled (Villere, 2019). Due to their return to school and the pursuit of both undergraduate and graduate degrees culminating in a doctorate degree, all participants were currently employed at the time of this research either in their own business, in a university setting, or in the job force. The one exception was Melany, who, having graduated with her PhD earlier this year, felt she was underemployed, but was grateful "to get a paycheck and not think a lot," stating, "my brain just really needs to decompress right now." Melany is presently seeking a post doctorate position.

Having developed self-efficacy through their educational pursuits, participants were enabled to accomplish their desired goals. They believed that they could, and they did, as was proposed by Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory. In every case, this positive outlook lessened stress and lowered the risk of depression.

Self-Reliance was Developed by Adult Learning

Knowles' (1968) adult learning theory provided a needed lens to examine the lived experiences of former high school dropouts who returned to school as adults and persisted to the completion of a doctorate degree. Adult learning theory (Knowles, 1968) expounds upon the difference in learning methods and styles between adults, young children, and adolescents and describes the distinction between adult learning and all other forms of learning by defining the styles which best suit adults. According to this theory, adults need to be involved in the planning, learning, and evaluation of their educational development and find that experience is the basis of knowledge.

Knowles (1968) stated that adults learn via problem solving rather than content, and self-concept inspires adults to move from dependence to independence. Such was found to be the case in the narratives of all 11 participants who took part in this study. As diverse as their backgrounds were, each participant developed self-motivation and self-determination on the learning path. Although 9 of the 11 participants were carrying the scars of their youth, they determined as adults to forge a new route both for themselves and their children.

Their independence of thought as adults and their previous experiences gave the participants a sense of maturity in their educational processes and methods that differed essentially from that of a child or adolescent. Each self-determined to direct their own educational path, choosing the steps to be taken to achieve their desired outcomes. Having discovered that education could provide the freedom from adversity and poverty that they so desired, they tirelessly researched and actively sought avenues and opportunities which would enable them to continue their academic journey. They planned and executed their own way which, in many cases, became the road less traveled. Their life experience was paramount in the

decision-making process, and they conceived and managed their own education self-guided and self-directed at every step in the journey.

For those participants who returned to school in the maturity of adulthood, managing their own education based on their life experience was not only desired, but was deemed an absolute necessity. They used their experiences, many of them difficult and challenging, as a compass to guide them beyond the life they had known to a life they anticipated with faith and hope. These adult learners were self-motivated to apply what they had learned immediately to improve their living circumstances and benefit those around them by providing better work environments and educational opportunities to colleagues, family, and friends alike. The individuals in this study dropped out of high school and returned as adults to pursue their studies, planning their own journey, and returning to school against great odds (e.g., poverty, homelessness, and addiction). Knowles (1973) stated that adult learners apply what they have learned immediately, and this was accomplished in their everyday lives even before returning to formal studies.

As individuals age, there is a close link between early retirement and the lack of formal academic achievement. Individuals with higher education continue in the workforce longer and have better working conditions and a better working environment. Discrimination against older workers, particularly for older women, continues to be a social problem affecting millions of individuals (Bahn, 2019; McDermott et al., 2019; Midtsundstad, 2019; Neumark, 2019). Because of these factors, health may be compromised and the ability to continue to work in senior years lessened. As a result, involuntary retirement is often the outcome as older, seemingly less productive seniors are involuntarily pushed out of the job market because of their lack of formal education (McDermott et al., 2019; Midtsundstad, 2019). However, such was not the case for the

11 former high school dropouts represented in this study. Five of the 11 participants were between the ages of 55 and 76 and continued in the workforce either in their own business or were employed by others. Their education stimulated a desire for life-long learning and developed motivation to seek new endeavors that have not been diminished by age.

Implications for Policy or Practice

I sought to understand the lived experiences of 11 former high school dropouts who continued to the attainment of a doctorate degree and shed light on the low persistence rates of doctoral students across disciplines and the need to develop and support policies that specifically address at-risk students, such as those who may be struggling with undiagnosed LDs and ACEs. As this research revealed the motivating factors that drove former high school dropouts to carry out the difficult task of extending beyond their life circumstances in the pursuit of a doctoral degree, I found that 9 of the 11 participants struggled with some form of LD and ACEs.

Implications for Policy

I hope that the findings from this study may inspire parents, teachers, and school administrators to seek the incorporation of policies, laws, and regulations to promote a greater level of examination into such causes of attrition, such as LD and ACEs, and that testing for such may become more readily available earlier in life in grade school and high school. I also hope that a greater awareness by school faculty members of the prevalence of undiagnosed LDs and ACEs will be sought. The significance of this study may be of assistance to postsecondary institutions when creating policies and discovering the basis of the personal will and motivation which previous high school dropouts exercised to self-determine their educational path. By hearing the stories of the research participants who have overcome great obstacles such as teenage pregnancy, incarceration, poverty, racial injustice, physical and mental abuse, and

substance abuse, they may find inspiration to develop policies to offer greater support, counselling services, and assistance to those in their student body and encourage others to be motivated to follow their example.

Implications for Practice

This study may motivate academic engagement and lifelong learning among vocational and adult education students through self-direction in learning (Chukwuedo et al., 2021; Hodge et al., 2017; Kruszelnicki, 2020; Langshaw, 2017). Academic institutions may enlist this research to inspire prospective students by showing that it is never too late to take up the challenge to return to school and finish what was seemingly lost by high school dropouts in the problematic years of adolescence. Lastly, this research addressed the perennially low rates of doctoral completion and the limited understanding of the lived experience of high school dropouts who persist to doctoral completion despite the odds against doing so.

Educators themselves may be moved to a greater belief in their own ability to support and mentor students who struggle in school due to difficult and troubling circumstances and backgrounds. Both teachers and students alike may be reminded that education in the United States remains a door through which freedom and equality can be obtained in even the most discouraging of instances. This study may challenge the stigma associated with high school dropouts who too often view such through a negative lens as a statistic rather than individuals with unlimited potential.

Lastly, previous high school dropouts who see lives changed by returning to school and witness the sphere of influence gained, the poverty relieved, the respect acquired, the victory over addiction won, and the liberty that education gives even for those incarcerated behind bars, may break their own downward cycle, and hope again. The findings of this study, if put to

practical use by academic institutions and individuals, may provide the first step in transforming lives and changing destinies. Research such as this does far more than inspire educational success: it has the potential to motivate ongoing change for generations to come. Findings may also help inform colleges and universities developing graduate and doctoral-level programs of the motivational factors that may contribute to successful graduation and the necessary persistence required. This study has the potential to further expand the understanding of the adult learning theory by using it as a lens through which to examine the experiences of individuals who dropped out of school yet returned as adults and persisted to doctoral degree attainment.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

The findings of this study add credence to the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2008), which states that the individual's need for connection, autonomy, and competence must first be met in themselves (Ryan & Deci, 2001). It furthers the self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977), which proposes the belief that one can accomplish a desired goal and that the very belief that one is capable enables them to do so. Knowles' (1973) adult learning theory, which suggests that adults are self-directed in their pursuits and take responsibility for their own decisions, was validated by the study's findings.

Prior to this research, there existed a gap in the literature concerning the lived experiences of high school dropouts who decided to return to school and undertake the difficult journey from dropout to doctorate in the Continental United States. Research related to returning to school to pursue studies is not new (e.g., Boylan, 2017; Camper et al., 2019; Gruen, 2018). However, before this research, there was no literature addressing the combined elements of high school dropouts, doctoral studies, and the demonstrated persistence and self-determination

required to surmount personal obstacles when returning to school including poverty, teenage pregnancy, addiction, learning impairments, and incarceration (Gazley & Campbell, 2019; Miles et al., 2019; Olvera, 2018; Windisch, 2016).

This study has closed the gap in the literature concerning the required persistence and determination of high school dropouts who return to school to complete doctoral studies. It is difficult to find literature on topics addressing adversity and doctoral persistence, such as the research undertaken by Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2014), who addressed poverty and the relationship among major losses in childhood which are later transformed into positive, motivating, attributes developed in individuals in their pursuit in a doctoral program. Such studies seek to understand the effect adversity has on developing resilience and persistence. Resilience is most simply defined as success despite adversity (Cefai, 2004; Luthar et al., 2000), and students and faculty alike will benefit from a deeper understanding of this motivational process. This study also presents an opportunity for further research and contributes to understanding the necessary persistence and motivation that learners who desire to pursue a doctoral degree as former high school dropouts will require.

Limitations and Delimitations

Both limitations and delimitations are present in this research. Limitations could not be anticipated or controlled, as they were events which could not be foreseen by the researcher. The delimitations were intentional and decided upon when planning the framework of the study. Limitations and delimitations should be understood and considered when generalizing the findings of this study. Each is discussed in the following paragraphs.

Delimitations

Delimitations were intentionally set and included the geographical confines of the study to the Continental United States of America, and the age of participants, which was restricted to adults over 21. Gender, race, ethnicity, and social class were not limited. The participants' former educational status was a factor in delimitations, as eligibility was confined to individuals who had formally dropped out of high school and returned to academia and continued to complete a doctorate degree. Individuals with honorary doctorates were excluded from the study. All participants returned to school with the desire to continue their education but did not initially or intentionally choose to persist to a doctorate degree when returning to their studies. As time passed, each participant decided in their own way and time that they would continue to successfully complete a doctorate degree. The GED test was enlisted by 10 of the 11 participants as they re-entered academia, and one returned to high school and graduated with a high school diploma after previously dropping out several times.

Limitations

The limitations of qualitative phenomenological research were inherent in the design. One such limitation was that of myself as the researcher. I attempted to follow the process of practicing epoche (Moustakas, 1994) by keeping a personal journal of my ongoing reflection, attempting to exclude my own bias as the primary instrument in the data analysis and instead concentrate on describing the lived experience of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). In this study, I sought to enter the participants' lived experience and listen to and analyze their narrative without imposing my own assumptions and theories (Husserl, 1982). All emergent themes were based upon my attempts at keeping an unbiased assessment and understanding of the participants' experience with the phenomenon.

I purposefully chose a transcendental phenomenological study as I wished to describe the lived experiences of former high school dropouts in the Continental United States who self-determined to persist in their studies until they had successfully completed a doctoral degree. I chose the Modified Van Kaam method instead of the Modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method for the data analysis because I wished to bracket my own personal experience as much as possible (Moustakas, 1994). As a high school dropout, myself, I also returned to school seeking a doctoral degree and have a deep affinity to the demographic studied. While bracketing out my own opinions and bias, I nevertheless have a foundational understanding of the lived experience on which to build. I was intentional to set my story aside in order to document the way in which the participants viewed their unique experiences, accounting for each participant's lived experience while searching for the commonalities (i.e., essence) of the experience across all participants (Moustakas, 1994).

I hold a social constructivist worldview, which motivated me to collect data from the participants through their individual perspective and understanding of the world in which they live their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 60). For social constructivists, subjective meaning in one's own setting is coveted, and broad and often complex subjective meaning of experiences is gathered. Within this framework I sought to rely on the participants' understanding and views of their given situations. However, these views were formed in connection with and through their personal interaction with others within the Continental United States and, in this way, their views were socially constructed and may not represent similar views of former high school dropouts in other countries. The participants' historical and cultural norms as U.S. citizens were combined with personal and social interaction creating meaningful

constructs and views (Creswell & Poth, 2018) that were then put into operation in their lives within this geographical setting.

Recommendations for Future Research

ACEs, LD, and symptoms of a mental health disorder (e.g., depression, anxiety, emotional disturbance) impacted 9 of the 11 participants of this study during their formative years and had a negative effect on learning that continued throughout their adult life and education. Previous research suggests that such incidents promote attrition (Ellison et al., 2020; Subramaniam & Wuest, 2022). While the participants in this study rose above or learned strategies to cope with their diagnoses, there remains a great need for U.S. public schools to develop programs to recognize the effects of early ACEs, LD, and ASD in elementary and high school and to establish broader evaluation practices, testing, and practical assistance. For instance, in the United States alone, one in every 68 children are affected by autism. While some studies suggest that 75% of children diagnosed with autism are male, new research suggests that the criteria for diagnosing autism spectrum disorder (ASD) routinely overlooks girls as the research data sets are taken almost entirely from studies undertaken with boys (Begeer et al., 2013). As a result, females such as Melany are often diagnosed much later in life than their male counterparts. This research confirmed that the feeling of self-doubt and the self-imposed stigma of being a high school dropout was compounded among participants who continued in educational pursuits (Gårdvik et al., 2021; McGuire & Jackson, 2018; Sullivan & Sadeh, 2016).

Students displaying symptoms of a mental health disorder (e.g., depression, anxiety, emotional disturbance) are far too often ignored or labeled as agitators and academic failures. These students, who are too often passed off as "troublemakers," were among the majority of participants in this research, and it was found that they were simply trying to survive in their own

circumstances while working their way through dire complications, such as physical and emotional abuse, substance abuse, poverty, and homelessness (Kern et al., 2021; Mills & Sabornie, 2021; Sullivan & Sadeh, 2016). They deserved, but in many cases were not given, the opportunity for evaluation, mentorship, and practical assistance which would have explained so many unanswered questions and may have prevented their original push/pull out of high school. Further research in connection with high school dropouts who persisted to doctoral degree attainment utilizing a different design or method or expansion in countries other than the United States may provide a broader understanding of this important topic. Lastly, further research to examine the topic from the theoretical or conceptual framework of resilience may provide insight into why some students falter under adverse circumstances while others overcome and excel.

Conclusion

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of former high school dropouts in the Continental United States who self-determined to persist to doctoral degree attainment. This study sought to address the ongoing and necessary motivation, self-determination, and perseverance of high school dropouts who returned to school to pursue studies to the doctorate level. The participants' lived experiences were gathered and investigated through interviews, timelines, and letters of advice in order to discover the essence of their essential universal experience.

It was found that every participant in the study restructured their self-identity through academic success and developed a sense of self-value and self-sufficiency. The participants' need to excel and move beyond the circumstances that initiated their high school attrition served as a catalyst for persistence throughout the long and arduous years of study at the undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral levels. All participants reshaped their self-identity through academic

References

Abar, B., Abar, C. C., Lippold, M., Powers, C. J., & Manning, A. E. (2012). Associations between reasons to attend and late high school dropout. *Learning and Individual Differences*, *22*, 856–861.

Abel, J. R., & Deitz, R. (2014). Do the benefits of college still outweigh the costs? *Current Issues in Economics and Finance*, *20*(3).

Achieve, I. (2019). *How do assessments matter–And for whom? Making sense of the high school student's assessment experience*. Achieve, Inc.

Albritton, K., Cruz, K., & Townsend, C. (2020). Disrupting the preschool to prison pipeline: School psychologists as change agents. *Communique*, *49*(4), 4–8.

Alexander, D. E., & Davis, I. R. (2019). The PhD system under pressure: An examiner's viewpoint. *Quality Assurance in Education: An International Perspective*, *27*(1), 2–12.

Ambrose, A. R., Moore, G. W., Slate, J. R., & Martinez-Garcia, C. (2017). Differences in dropout rates as a function of high school size for students in poverty: A Texas multiyear, statewide study. *School Leadership Review*, *12*(2), 55–67.

American Council on Education. (2001). *The GED advantage: The international high school completion test.* General Educational Development Testing Service of the American Council on Education.

Angrosino, M. (2007). *Naturalistic observation*. Bibliovault OAI Repository, the University of Chicago Press.

Antoni, J. (2021). Disengaged and nearing departure: Students at risk for dropping out in the age of Covid-19. *Planning & Changing*, *50*(3/4), 117–137.

Aryee, M. (2017). College students' persistence and degree completion in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM): The role of non-cognitive attributes of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and interest [Doctoral dissertation, Seton Hall University]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

AuCoin, D. J., & Wright, L. A. (2021). Student perceptions in online higher education toward faculty mentoring. *E-Learning and Digital Media*, *18*(6), 599–615.

Badulescu, A., & Csintalan, C. (2016). Decreasing school dropout rate as a factor of economic growth and social empowerment. Theoretical insights. *Annals of the University of Oradea, Economic Science Series*, *25*(1), 457–464.

Bahn, K. (2019). How monopsony impacts older women workers: When women have few choices in selecting employers, this can translate into lower lifetime earnings and less ability to save for retirement. *Generations*, *43*(3), 90–92.

Baldwin, J., & American Council on Education, W. D. G. T. S. (1996). *Who took the GED? GED 1995 Statistical Report*.

Balkis, M. (2018). Academic amotivation and intention to school dropout: The mediation role of academic achievement and absenteeism. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, *38*(2), 257–270.

Baltar, F., & Brunet, I. (2012). Social research 2.0: Virtual snowball sampling method using Facebook. *Internet Research*, *22*(1), 57–74.

Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, *84*(2), 191–215.

Bandura, A. (1986a). The explanatory and predictive scope of self-efficacy theory. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, *4*(3), 359–373.

Bandura, A. (1986b). *Social foundations of thought & action: A social cognitive theory*. Prentice Hall.

Bandura, A. (1994). Self-efficacy. In V. S. Ramachaudran (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of human behavior* (Vol. 4).

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. Freeman.

Bandura, A. (2004). Health promotion by social cognitive means. *Health Education & Behavior*, *31*, 143–164.

Barrat, V. X., Berliner, B., Regional Educational Laboratory West (ED), National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (ED), & WestEd. (2016). *Characteristics and education outcomes of Utah high school dropouts who re-enrolled. REL 2017-206*. Regional Educational Laboratory West.

Bean, J., & Eaton, S. B. (2001). The psychology underlying successful retention practices. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 3, 73–89.

Begeer, S., Mandell, D., Wijnker-Holmes, B., Venderbosch, S., Rem, D., Stekelenburg, F., & Koot, H. M. (2013). Sex differences in the timing of identification among children and adults with autism spectrum disorders. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *43*, 1151–1156.

Belkin, D. (2018, April 10). One year of 'college' with no degree, but no debt and a job at the end. *Wall Street Journal – Online Edition*, 1.

Belmont Report. (1978). *Ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of human subjects of research.* The Commission.

Berg, N., & Nelson, T. D. (2016). Pregnancy and dropout: Effects of family, neighborhood, and high school characteristics on girls' fertility and dropout status. *Population Research and Policy Review*, *35*(6), 757–789.

Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, *15*(2), 219–234.

Bergman, M., Gross, J. P. K., Berry, M., & Shuck, B. (2014). If life happened but a degree didn't: Examining factors that impact adult student persistence. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, *62*(2), 90–101.

Berktold, J., Geis, S., Kaufman, P., & Carroll, C. D. (1998). *Subsequent educational attainment of high school dropouts.* U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

Billingsley, G. M., Thomas, C. N., & Webber, J. A. (2018). Effects of student choice of instructional method on the learning outcomes of students with comorbid learning and emotional/behavioral disabilities. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, *41*(4), 213–226.

Bloom, D., Gardenhire-Crooks, A., Mandsager, C., & MDRC. (2009). *Reengaging high school dropouts: Early results of the National Guard youth challenge program evaluation. Full Report*. MDRC.

Bolkan, S., Pedersen, W. C., Stormes, K. N., & Manke, B. (2021). Predicting 4-year graduation: Using social cognitive career theory to model the impact of prescriptive advising, unit load, and students' self-efficacy. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, *22*(4), 655–675.

Bottomley, K., Schumacher, J., Burleigh, C., & Lindsay, P. (2020). Supporting online doctoral students to increase persistence and completion. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, *23*(4), 1–11.

Bowers, A., & Bergman, M. (2016). Affordability and the return on investment of college completion: Unique challenges and opportunities for adult learners. *Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, *64*(3), 144–151.

Boylan, R. L. (2017). Routes and reasons out, paths back: The influence of push and pull reasons for leaving school on students' school reengagement. *Youth & Society*, *49*(1), 46–71.

Bridgeland, J. M., DiIulio, J. J., & Morison, K. B. (2006). *The silent epidemic*. http://www.civicenterprises.net/MediaLibrary/Docs/the_silent_epidemic.pdf

Brock, K., & Brekken, D. (2019). "No one cared": A case study of incarcerated women's educational experiences resulting in their decision to drop out of high school. *Journal of Correctional Education*, *70*(2), 31–48.

Bryant, C. J., Hilton, A. A., & Green, P. A. (2016). Mentoring as professional development for African American Ph.D. students pursuing the professoriate. *Western Journal of Black Studies*, *40*(1), 61–71.

Buetow, S. (2010). Thematic analysis and its reconceptualization as "saliency analysis." *Journal of Health Services Research & Policy*, *15*(2), 123–125.

Bureau of Labor Statistics U.S. Department of Labor. (2021).

Burnell, I., Roffey-Barentsen, J., & McMahon, A. (2021). Widening graduate employment opportunities for students on Education Studies degrees: A case study at a School of Education in one London university. *Widening Participation & Lifelong Learning*, *23*(1), 178–190.

Burning Glass. (2014). *Moving the goalposts: How demand for a bachelor's degree is reshaping the workforce.* VOCED Plus. http://hdl.voced.edu.au/10707/330252.

Byars-Winston, A., Diestelmann, J., Savoy, J. N., & Hoyt, W. T. (2017). Unique effects and moderators of effects of sources on self-efficacy: A model-based meta-analysis. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *64*(6), 645–658.

Camper, B. M., Jr., Hickman, G. P., & Jaeckle, T. F. (2019). A case study analysis among former urban gifted high school dropouts. *Journal of At-Risk Issues*, *22*(2), 23–30.

Carlson, G. C. (1993). Cultural factors of North American adults. In K. O. Gangel & J. C. Wilhoit (Eds.), *The Christian educators handbook on adult education.*

Carlsten, T. C., & Olsen, D. S. (2019). Lifelong learning among older professionals: How competence strategies and perceptions of professional learning affect pastors' participation. *European Journal of Education*, *54*(1), 93–102.

Carnasciali, M.-I., Ciston, S., Mikel, T. K., Morales, A. M., Sehgal, S., & Whitson, M. L. (2017). A three-year study of adult undergraduate engineering students. *Proceedings of the ASEE Annual Conference & Exposition*, 3715–3721.

Cefai, C. (2004). Pupil resilience in the classroom: A teacher's framework. *Emotional and Behavioral Difficulties*, *9*(3), 149–170.

Chapman, C., Laird, J., & Kewal Ramani, A. (2011). *Trends in high school dropout and completion rates in the United States: 1972– 2009 (NCES 2012-006)*. National Center for Educational Statistics.

Cheng, T. L., & Hackworth, J. M. (2021). The "cs" of mentoring: Using adult learning theory and the right mentors to position early-career investigators for success. *The Journal of Pediatrics*, *238*, 6–8.

Chuang, H. L. (1994). An empirical study of re-enrolment behavior for male high school dropouts. *Applied Economics*, *26*, 1071–1081.

Chukwuedo, S. O., Mbagwu, F. O., & Ogbuanya, T. C. (2021). Motivating academic engagement and lifelong learning among vocational and adult education students via self-direction in learning. *Learning and Motivation*, *74*.

Clegg, T., Boston, C., Preece, J., Warrick, E., Pauw, D., & Cameron, J. (2020). Community-driven informal adult environmental learning: Using theory as a lens to identify steps toward concientización. *Journal of Environmental Education*, *51*(1), 55–71.

Complete College America. (2014). *Four-year myth*. Author.

Conant, J. B. (1961). *Slums and suburbs*. McGraw-Hill.

Cortiella, C., & Horowitz, S. H. (2014). *The state of learning disabilities: Facts, trends and emerging issues.* National Center for Learning Disabilities

Cossa, J., & Barker, L. (2021). Motivation to pursue a PhD in computing: Black students in historically black colleges and universities. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Education*, *10*(1), 139–159.

Council of Graduate Schools. (2008). *Ph.D. completion and attrition: Analysis of baseline program data from the Ph.D. completion project*.

Creswell, J. (2015). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (5th ed.). Pearson Education, Inc.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.

Crump, C., Rivera, D., London, R., Landau, M., Erlendson, B., & Rodriguez, E. (2013). Chronic health conditions and school performance among children and youth. *Annals of Epidemiology*, *23*(4), 179–184.

Curran, F. C., Bal, A., Goff, P., & Mitchell, N. (2021). Estimating the relationship between special education de-identification for emotional disturbance and academic and school discipline outcomes: Evidence from Wisconsin's longitudinal data. *Education and Urban Society*, *53*(1), 83–112.

Czerkawski, B. C., & Lyman, E. W. (2016). An instructional design framework for fostering student engagement in online learning environments. *TechTrends*, *60*(6), 532–539.

Dahlstrom, E., Brooks, C., Grajek, S., & Reeves, J. (2015). *ECAR study of undergraduate students and information technology* [Research report]. EDUCAUSE. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED564481

Dass-Brailsford, P., Thomley, R. S. H., Jain, D., & Jarrett, E. S. (2021). The mental health consequences of Hurricane Matthew on Haitian children and youth: An exploratory study. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, 1–11.

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1994). Promoting self-determined education. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, *38*(1), 3–14.

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The" what" and" why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, *11*(4), 227–268.

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2008). Self-determination theory: A macrotheory of human motivation, development, and health. *Canadian Psychology*, *49*(3), 182–185.

De Clercq, M., Devos, C., Azzi, A., Frenay, M., Klein, O., & Galand, B. (2019). I need somebody to lean on: The effect of peer, relative, and supervisor support on emotions,

perceived progress, and persistence in different stages of doctoral advancement. *Swiss Journal of Psychology*, *78*(3/4), 101–113.

De Clercq, M., Frenay, M., Azzi, A., Klein, O., & Galand, B. (2021). All you need is self-determination: Investigation of Phd students' motivation profiles and their impact on the doctoral completion process. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, *16*(1), 189–209.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*. Sage.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2000). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2011). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed., pp. 1–19). Sage.

Dinham, S., & Scott, C. (1999). *The doctorate: Talking about the degree*. ERIC. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED435305

Dorn, S. (1993). Origins of the "dropout problem." *History of Education Quarterly*, *33*(3), 353–373.

Dorn, S. (1996). *Creating the dropout: An institutional and social history of school failure*.

Duckworth, A. L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M. D., & Kelly, D. R. (2007). Grit: Perseverance and passion for long-term goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *92*(6), 1087–1101.

Dukes, S. (1984). Phenomenological methodology in the human sciences. *Journal of Religion and Health*, *23*(3), 197–203.

Ecker-Lyster, M., & Niileksela, C. (2016). Keeping students on track to graduate: A synthesis.

of school dropout trends, prevention, and intervention initiatives. *Journal of At-Risk Issues*, *19*(2), 24–31.

Elka, T. (2021). *Education pays, 2020*. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Ellison, D., Wynard, T., Walton-Fisette, J. L., & Benes, S. (2020). Preparing the next generation of health and physical educators through trauma-informed programs. *The Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, *91*(9), 30–40.

Ellison, M. L., Reilly, E. D., Mueller, L., Schultz, M. R., & Drebing, C. E. (2018). A supported education service pilot for returning veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder. *Psychological Services*, *15*(2), 200–207.

England, P., Levine, A., & Mishel, E. (2020). Progress toward gender equality in the United States has slowed or stalled. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, *117*(13), 6990–6997.

Entwisle, D. R., Alexander, K. L., & Olson, L. S. (2004). Temporary as compared to permanent high school dropout. *Social Forces*, 82, 1181–1205.

Eva, S. (2020). Initial and continuing adult education, a requirement for economic growth. *Annals of the University of Oradea, Economic Science Series*, *29*(2), 126–134.

Fairchild, S. D. (2017). Breaking the silence, reimagining justice: Voices of returning women students in community college. *Feminist Teacher: A Journal of the Practices, Theories, and Scholarship of Feminist Teaching*, *28*(1), 1–16.

Fenwick, S. (2015). Equity-minded learning environments: PLA as a portal to fostering inclusive excellence. *Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, *63*(1), 51–58.

Fetene, G. T., & Tamrat, W. (2021). The Phd Journey at Addis Ababa University: Study Delays, Causes, and Coping Mechanisms. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, *16*(1), 319–337.

Fiore, T. D., Heitner, K. L., & Shaw, M. (2019). Academic advising and online doctoral student persistence from coursework to independent research. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, *22*(3), 1–14.

Fisher, A. J., Mendoza-Denton, R., Patt, C., Young, I., Eppig, A., Garrell, R. L., Rees, D. C., Nelson, T. W., & Richards, M. A. (2019). Structure and belonging: Pathways to success for underrepresented minority and women PhD students in STEM fields. *PloS ONE*, *14*(01), 1–14.

Flores, M. E., & Brown, C. G. (2019). An examination of student disengagement and reengagement from an alternative high school. *School Leadership Review*, *14*(1).

Formosa, M., & Galea, R. (2020). Critical educational gerontology at a senior center in Malta: Possibilities and limitations for critical consciousness. *Educational Gerontology*, *46*(2), 59–71.

Fraysier, K., Reschly, A., & Appleton, J. (2020). Predicting postsecondary enrollment with secondary student engagement data. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, *38*(7), 882–899.

Gagnon, N. L., & Komor, A. J. (2017). Addressing an overlooked science outreach audience: Development of a science mentorship program focusing on critical thinking skills for adults working toward a high school equivalency degree. *Journal of Chemical Education*, *94*(10), 1435–1442.

Gall, M. D., Gall, J. P., & Borg, W. R. (2007). *Educational research: An introduction* (8th ed.) Pearson.

Ganapati, S., & Ritchie, T. S. (2021). Professional development and career-preparedness experiences of STEM Ph.D. students: Gaps and avenues for improvement. *PloS ONE*, *16*(12), 1–25.

Gangei, K. (2005). "Education for renovation": An executive summary of Dr. Dallas Wllard's presentations at the 2004 NAPCE conference. *Christian Education Journal*, *2*(1), 154–161.

Garcia, R., & Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP). (2018). *Making college more affordable for low-income students. CLASP Priorities for the Higher Education Act.* Center for Law and Social Policy, Inc. (CLASP).

Gardner, S. K., & Gopaul, B. (2012). The part-time doctoral student experience. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 7, 63–78.

Gårdvik, K. S., Torgersen, T., Rygg, M., Lydersen, S., & Indredavik, M. S. (2021). Suicidality, function and associated negative life events in an adolescent psychiatric population at 3-year follow-up. *BMC Psychiatry*, *21*(1), 109.

Gatson, D. H., & Enslin, C. (2021). Resiliency and goals: A phenomenological exploration of African American male attrition in high school. *Qualitative Report*, *26*(10), 3067–3090.

Gatti, F. M., Brivio, E., & Galimberti, C. (2017). "The future is ours too": A training process to enable the learning perception and increase self-efficacy in the use of tablets in the elderly. *Educational Gerontology*, *43*(4), 209–224.

Gazley, J. L., & Campbell, P. B. (2019). It's not just the last straw: Reframing resilience as an embodied resource. *Conference Papers – American Sociological Association*, 1–35.

Gearing, R. (2004). Bracketing in research: A typology. *Qualitative Health Research*, *14*(10), 1429–52.

GED Testing Service. (2019). *GED® Educator Handbook: Everything you need to prepare students for the GED test. Edition 5.0*. GED Testing Service.

Goldman, J. D. G., & Bradley, G. L. (1996). A profile of Australian high school dropouts who return to studies in the education of adults. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, *28*(2), 185.

Goodman, C. L., & Intercultural Development Research Association. (2018). *Texas public school attrition study, 2017-18. IDRA Report*. Intercultural Development Research Association.

Gordon, G., Jonesz, J. B., Neelakantan, U., & Athreya, K. (2021). Incarceration, earnings, and race. *Working Papers Series (Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond)*, *21*(11), 1–72.

Goulet, M., Clément, M.-E., Helie, S., & Villatte, A. (2020). Longitudinal association between risk profiles, school dropout risk, and substance abuse in adolescence. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, *49*(5), 687–706.

Gracia, R., Pamias, M., Mortier, P., Alonso, J., Pérez, V., & Palao, D. (2021). Is the COVID-19 pandemic a risk factor for suicide attempts in adolescent girls? *Journal of Affective Disorders*, *292*, 139–141.

Grau-Valldosera, J., Minguillón, J., & Blasco-Moreno, A. (2019). Returning after taking a break in online distance higher education: From intention to effective re-. enrollment. *Interactive Learning Environments*, *27*(3), 307–323.

Grbich, C. (2007). *Qualitative data analysis: An introduction.* Sage.

Grose, N. J., & Sanchez, J. E. (2020). An exploratory analysis of international baccalaureate diploma program: 11th- and 12th-grade high school students' expectations. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 1.

Gruen, R. (2018). Authoring self: GED students transforming their identities in a composition makerspace. *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice*, *67*(1), 131–146.

Guba, E. G. (1978). In Baker E. L. (Ed.), *Toward a methodology of naturalistic inquiry in education evaluation.* UCLA Graduate School of Education.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1982). Epistemological and methodological bases of naturalistic inquiry. *Educational Communication and Technology*, *30*(4), 233–252.

Gubbels, J., van der Put, C. E., & Assink, M. (2019). Risk factors for school absenteeism and dropout: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Youth & Adolescence*, *48*(9), 1637–1667.

Guerin, C. (2020). Stories of moving on HASS PhD graduates' motivations and career trajectories inside and beyond academia. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, *19*(3), 304–324.

Hachem, H. (2020). Putting educational gerontology principles to the test: A quantitative confirmation of the empowering benefits of liberal arts courses. *Educational Gerontology*, *46*(10), 653–665.

Hands, A. S. (2020). What's your type? An examination of first-year doctoral student motivation. *Education for Information*, *36*(4), 371–387.

Hanson, H., Pierson, A., Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest, National Center for
    Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, & Education Northwest. (2016). Alaska
    students' pathways from high school to postsecondary education and employment. REL
    2016-114. In *Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest*. Regional Educational
    Laboratory Northwest.

Hanson, M. (2021). *College graduation statistics*. EducationData.org.
    https://educationdata.org/number-of-college-graduates

Harris, J., & Wihak, C. (2018). The recognition of non-formal education in higher education:
    Where are we now, and are we learning from experience? *International Journal of E-
    Learning & Distance Education*, *33*(1).

Harrop, J. A., Casey, R., & Shelton, M. (2018). Knowles, Kolb, and Google: Prior learning
    assessment as a model for 21st-century learning. *Journal of Continuing Higher
    Education*, *66*(2), 129–133.

Hart, L. M. (2017). *Factors contributing to academic resilience of former homeless high school
    students: A phenomenological study* [Doctoral dissertation, Sam Houston State
    University].

Haverback, H. R., & Mee, M. (2015). Reading and teaching in an urban middle school:
    Preservice teachers' self-efficacy beliefs and field-based experiences. *Middle Grades
    Research Journal*, *10*(1), 17–30.

Hayes, M. J. (1984). Integration of the story: A philosophical foundation for adult religious
    education. In N. A. Parent (Ed.), *Christian adulthood: A catechetical resource* (pp. 20–
    24). United States Catholic Conference.

Hodge, B., Wright, B., & Bennett, P. (2018). The role of grit in determining engagement and academic outcomes for university students. *Research in Higher Education*, *59*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-017-9474-y.

Hodge, S., Holford, J., Milana, M., Waller, R., & Webb, S. (2017). Vocational education and the field of lifelong education. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *36*(3), 251–253.

Holleman, M., & Abell Foundation. (2019). Adult high school diploma attainment in Baltimore: Status, consequences, opportunities, and recommendations. *The Abell Report*, *32*(3). Abell Foundation.

Huberman, A. M., & Miles, M. B. (1994). Data management and analysis methods. In M. B. Miles & A. M. Huberman (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 428–444). Sage.

Huff, A. S. (2009). *Designing research for publication*. Sage.

Husserl, E. (1931). *Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology* (D. Carr, Trans.). Northwestern University Press.

Husserl, E. (1980/1989). *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy*. The Hague.

Husserl, E. (1982). *Cartesian meditations: An introduction to phenomenology* (7th ed., D. Cairns, Trans). Kluwer Boston, Inc. (Original work published 1929).

Hutt, E. L., & Stevens, M. L. (2017). From soldiers to students: The tests of general educational development (GED) as diplomatic measurement. *Social Science History*, *41*(4), 731–755.

Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. §1400. (2004).

Jepsen, C., Mueser, P., & Troske, K. (2017). Second chance for high school dropouts? A regression discontinuity analysis of postsecondary educational returns to the GED. *Journal of Labor Economics*, *35*, S273–S304.

Jiranek, V. (2010). Potential predictors of timely completion among dissertation research students at an Australian faculty of sciences. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, *5*, 1–13.

Johnson, S. L. (2021). Why seniors leave and why they return: An exploratory case study. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, *23*(1), 78–95.

Kang-Brown, J., Trone, J., Fratello, J., & Daftary-Kapur, T. (2013). *A generation later: What we've learned about zero tolerance in schools.* Vera Institute of Justice, Center on Youth Justice.

Karmelita, C. E. (2018). Exploring the experiences of adult learners in a transition program. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, *24*(2), 141–164.

Karner, T. X. (2017). Doing qualitative research online. *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, *42*(2), 215–218.

Kasworm, C. (2003). Adult meaning making in the undergraduate classroom. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 53, 81–98.

Keeton, M. T. (1976). Experiential learning: Rationale, characteristics, and assessment. ERIC. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED147350

Kern, L., Evans, S. W., Lewis, T. J., State, T. M., Mehta, P. D., Weist, M. D., Wills, H. P., & Gage, N. A. (2021). Evaluation of a comprehensive assessment-based intervention for secondary students with social, emotional, and behavioral problems. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, *29*(1), 44–55.

Kim, K.-N., & Baker, R. M. (2015). The assumed benefits and hidden costs of adult learners' college enrollment. *Research in Higher Education, 56*(5), 510–533.

Klein, G. A. (2017). *Sources of power: How people make decisions*. MIT Press.

Klein-Collins, R. (2010). *Fueling the race to postsecondary success: A 48-institution study of prior learning assessment and adult student outcomes*. Council for Adult and Experiential Learning.

Klein-Collins, R., Taylor, J., Bishop, C., Bransberger, P., Lane, P., Leibrandt, S., Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), & Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE). (2020). *The PLA boost: Results from a 72-institution targeted study of prior learning assessment and adult student outcomes. Revised. Executive Summary*. Council for Adult and Experiential Learning.

Kleykamp, M. (2006). College, job or military? Enlistment during a time of war. *Social Service Quarterly*, 87, 272–290.

Knowles, M. (1973). *The adult learner: A neglected species*. American Society for Training and Development.

Knowles, M. S. (1962). A theory of Christian adult education methodology. In L. C. Little (Ed.), *Wider horizons in Christian adult education* (pp. 73–87). University of Pittsburgh Press.

Knowles, M. S. (1968). *Andragogy, not pedagogy*.

Knowles, M. S. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy* (Rev. and updated ed.). Cambridge.

Knowles, M. S. (1990). *The adult learner: A neglected species* (4th ed.). Gulf Publishing.

Krašovec, S. J., Golding, B., Findsen, B., & Schmidt-Hertha, B. (2017). Special issue: "Getting of wisdom", learning in later life. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, *57*(3), 307–314.

Kruszelnicki, W. (2020). Self-directedness and the question of autonomy: From counterfeit education to critical and transformative adult learning. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, *39*(2), 187–203.

Laird, J., Kienzl, G., DeBell, M., & Chapman, C. (2007). *Dropout rates in the United States: 2005*. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

Lanford, M. (2021). In pursuit of respect: The adult learner attending community college in the "new economy." *Educational Forum*, *85*(1), 34–48.

Langshaw, S. J. (2017). *Relationship between the self-efficacy and self-directed learning of adults in undergraduate programs* [Doctoral dissertation, Capella University]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

Lansing, J. (2017). A new model of college choice for distance learners. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, *45*(3), 365–389.

Larrotta, C. (2017). Immigrants to the United States and adult education services. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, *2017*(155), 61–69.

Larson, K., Gaeta, C., & Sager, L. (2016). *GED test changes and attainment: Overview of 2014 GED test changes and attainment in Washington State*. Washington Student Achievement Council.

Larson, S., Chapman, S., Spetz, J., & Brindis, C. D. (2017). Chronic childhood trauma, mental health, academic achievement, and school-based health center mental health services. *Journal of School Health*, *87*(9), 675–686.

Lavoie, L., Dupéré, V., Dion, E., Crosnoe, R., Lacourse, É., & Archambault, I. (2019). Gender differences in adolescents' exposure to stressful life events and differential links to impaired school functioning. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, *47*(6), 1053–1064.

Lawler-Heavner, J., Ruttenber, A. J., Yin, M., & Wade, T. D. (1999). Timelines and computer-based visual editing: New techniques for assessing exposure in epidemiologic studies. *Journal of Exposure Analysis and Environmental Epidemiology*, *9*(2), 150–157.

Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. Springer.

Lent, R. W., Brown, S. D., & Hackett, G. (1994). Toward a unifying social cognitive theory of career and academic interest, choice, and performance. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *45*(1), 79–122.

Liem, G. A. D. (2017). "Why do I study and what do I want to achieve by studying?" Understanding the reasons and the aims of student engagement. *School Psychology International*, *38*(2), 131–148.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (2000). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The handbook of qualitative research* (second edition) (pp.163–188). Sage.

Liu, D.-C. (2017). The discouraged worker and suicide in the United States. *Social Indicators Research*, *134*(2), 771–787.

Liu, O. L., Liu, H., Roohr, K. C., & McCaffrey, D. F. (2016). Investigating college learning gain: Exploring a propensity score weighting approach. *Journal of Educational Measurement*, *53*(3), 352–367.

Longman, K. A., Drennan, A., Beam, J., & Marble, A. F. (2019). The secret sauce: How developmental relationships shape the leadership journeys of women leaders in Christian higher education. *Christian Higher Education*, *18*(1–2), 54–77.

Lucey, K. (2018). *The effect of motivation on student persistence in online higher education: A phenomenological study of how adult learners experience motivation in a web-based distance learning environment* [Doctoral dissertation, X]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

Luthar, S. S., Cicchetti, D., & Becker, B. (2000). The construct of resilience: A critical evaluation and guidelines for future work. *Child Development*, *71*(3), 543–562.

Mallett, C. A. (2016). The school-to-prison pipeline: A critical review of the punitive paradigm shift. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, *33*(1), 15–24.

Manninen, J. (2017). Empirical and genealogical analysis of non-vocational adult education in Europe. *International Review of Education*, *63*(3), 319–340.

Margari, L., Buttiglione, M., Craig, F., Cristella, A., de Giambattista, C., Matera, E., Operto, F., & Simone, M. (2013). Neuropsychopathological comorbidities in learning disorders. *BMC Neurology*, *13*(1), 1–6.

Markham, A. N., & Baym, N. K. (2009). Introduction: Making smart choices on shifting ground. In A. N. Markham & N. K. Baym (Eds.), *Internet inquiry: Conversation about method* (pp. vii-xix). Sage.

Maslow, G. R., Haydon, A., McRee, A. L., Ford, C. A., & Halpern, C. T. (2011). Growing up with a chronic illness: Social success, educational/vocational distress. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *49*(2), 206–212.

Maxwell, J. A. (2005). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Mayes, S. D., & Calhoun, S. L. (2006). Frequency of reading, math, and writing disabilities in children with clinical disorders. *Learning and Individual Differences*, *16*, 145–157. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2005.07.004

Maynard, B., Salas-Wright, C., & Vaughn, M. (2015). High school dropouts in emerging adulthood: Substance use, mental health problems, and crime. *Community Mental Health Journal*, *51*(3), 289–299.

Mazurek-Łopacińska, K., & Sobocińska, M. (2018). Triangulacja W Badaniach Jakościowych. *Research Papers of the Wroclaw University of Economics*, *525*, 11–20.

McDermott, E. R., Donlan, A. E., & Zaff, J. F. (2019). Why do students drop out? Turning points and long-term experiences. *Journal of Educational Research*, *112*(2), 270–282.

McFarland, J., Cui, J., Holmes, J., Wang, X., National Center for Education Statistics (ED), & American Institutes for Research (AIR). (2020). *Trends in high school dropout and completion rates in the United States: 2019. Compendium Report. NCES 2020 117*. National Center for Education Statistics.

McFarland, J. B., Hussar, C., de Brey, T., Snyder, X., Wang, S., & Wilkinson-Flicker, S. H. (2017). *The condition of education 2017 (NCES 2017–144)*. U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics.

McGuire, A., & Jackson, Y. (2018). A multilevel meta-analysis on academic achievement among maltreated youth. *Clinical Child & Family Psychology Review*, *21*(4), 450–465.

McKinley Yoder, C. L., & Cantrell, M. A. (2019). Childhood disability and educational outcomes: A systematic review. *Journal of Pediatric Nursing*, *45*, 37–50.

McLendon, L. (2017). High school equivalency assessment and recognition in the United States: An eyewitness account. *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education*, *2017*(155), 41–49.

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2015). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Merrick, M. T., Ports, K. A., Ford, D. C., Afifi, T. O., Gershoff, E. T., & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2017). Unpacking the impact of adverse childhood experiences on adult mental health. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *69*, 10–19.

Mestheneos, E., & Withnall, A. (2016). Ageing, learning and health: Making connections. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *35*(5), 522–536.

Mettler, S. (2005). *Soldiers to citizens: The G.I. bill and the making of the greatest generation*. Oxford University Press.

Midtsundstad, T. (2019). A review of the research literature on adult learning and employability. *European Journal of Education*, *54*(1), 13–29.

Miles, J. K., Creely, E., & Pruyn, M. (2019). From "year 9 dropout" to doctoral candidate: An autoethnographic journey of becoming (with friends). *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *38*(6), 602–614.

Millenky, M. (2016). Connecting high school dropouts to employment and education: An impact study of the National Guard Youth Challenge Program. *IZA Journal of Labor Policy*, *5*(1), 1–17.

Mills, B., & Sabornie, E. (2021). Variables that predict graduation for students with emotional disturbance: An examination across high schools. *International Journal of Disability, Development & Education*, 1–15.

Mirick, R. G., & Wladkowski, S. P. (2019). Making it work: Pregnant and parenting doctoral students' attributions of persistence. *Advances in Social Work*, *19*(2), 349–368.

Moja-Strasser, L. (2016). Considering the epoché as an attitude rather than as a method. *Existential Analysis: Journal of the Society for Existential Analysis*, *27*(1), 49–57.

Monk, J., Foote, K., & Schlemper, M. B. (2012). Graduate education in U.S. geography: Students' career aspirations and faculty perspectives. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, *102*(6), 1432–1449.

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods.* Sage.

Mukminin, A., & McMahon, B. J. (2013). International graduate students' cross-cultural academic engagement: Stories of Indonesian doctoral students on American campus. *Qualitative Report*, *18*(35), 1–19.

Munyon, T. P., Madden, L. T., Madden, T. M., & Vigoda-Gadot, E. (2019). (Dys)functional attachments: How community embeddedness impacts workers during and after long-term unemployment. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *112*, 35–50.

National Center for Education Statistics. (1998). The condition of education, 1998. https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=98013

National Center for Education Statistics. (2019). *Digest of education statistics*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/ tables/dt18_105.20.asp

National Center for Education Statistics. (2021). *Home*. https://nces.ed.gov/

National Education Goals Panel. (1991). *Statement of national education goal 6*. http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/negp/page3-13.htm

Nettles, M. T., & Millett, C. M. (2006). *Three magic letters: Getting to Ph.D*. John Hopkins University Press.

Neumark, D. (2019). Age discrimination in the U.S. labor market: Reviewing direct and indirect evidence of age discrimination in employment. *Generations*, *43*(3), 51–58.

Nilsson, K. (2016). Conceptualization of ageing in relation to factors of importance for extending working life – A review. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*, *44*, 490–505.

Noble, H., & Heale, R. (2019). Triangulation in research, with examples. *Evidence-Based Nursing*, *22*, 67–68.

Noel-Levitz, I. (2011). *National adult learners' satisfaction-priorities report. Research Report, 2011*. Noel-Levitz, Inc.

Northeastern University Center for Labor Market Studies. (2009). *Executive summary— Consequences of dropping out of high school: joblessness and jailing for high school dropouts & the high cost for taxpayers* [Doctoral dissertation, Northeastern University].

Obinna, D. N., & Ohanian, M. M. Z. (2020). Uncertain aspirations: Latino students and dropout in the United States. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, *23*(5), 654–672.

OECD. (2017a). *Health at a glance 2017: OECD indicators.* Author.

OECD. (2017b). *Pensions at a glance 2017: OECD and G20 indicators*. Author.

OECD. (2018). *Care needed: Improving the lives of people with dementia*. Author.

O'Grady, G., Clandinin, D. J., & O' Toole, J. (2018). Engaging in educational narrative inquiry: Making visible alternative knowledge. *Irish Educational Studies*, *37*(2), 153–157.

Olvera, M. S. (2018). *Women who have had pervasive crises and completed doctoral studies: A phenomenological study* [Doctoral dissertation, X]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

O'Neill, S., & Thomson, M. M. (2013). Supporting academic persistence in low-skilled adult learners. *Support for Learning*, *28*(4), 162–172.

Padilla, A. M., & Perez, W. (2003). Acculturation, social identity, and social cognition: A new perspective. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, *25*(1), 35–55.

Pajares, F. (1996). Self-efficacy beliefs in academic settings. *Review of Educational Research*, *66*, 543–578.

Palmieri, C. (2017). Belonging, idealized self and wellbeing: Key motivators among adult learners of Italian in Sydney. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*, *40*(2), 176–193.

Parr, A. K., & Bonitz, V. S. (2015). Role of family background, student behaviors, and school-related beliefs in predicting high school dropout. *Journal of Educational Research*, *108*(6), 504–514.

Parr, J. (2000). *Identity and education: The links for mature women students*. Ashgate.

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). Sage.

Pincus, R., Hannor-Walker, T., Wright, L., & Justice, J. (2020). COVID-19's effect on students: How school counselors rise to the rescue. *NASSP Bulletin*, *104*(4), 241–256.

Polkinghorne, D. E. (1989). Phenomenological research methods. In *Existential-phenomenological perspectives in psychology* (pp. 41–60). Springer.

QS World University Rankings. (2022).

Reushle, S., Antonio, A., & Keppell, M. (2016). *Open learning and formal credentialing in higher education: Curriculum models and institutional policies*. IGI Global.

Rice, K. M. (2019). *Improving the general education development (GED): Retention and completion rates of low-income adults* [Doctoral dissertation, Walden University].

Rios-Aguilar, C., Wells, R., Bills, D., & Lopez, D. D. (2018). The (mis)match between sub-baccalaureate credentials and middle-skill jobs: A community college spatial research agenda. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, *180*, 39–58.

Robison, S., Jaggers, J., Rhodes, J., Blackmon, B. J., & Church, W. (2017). Correlates of educational success: Predictors of school dropout and graduation for urban students in the Deep South. *Children & Youth Services Review*, *73*, 37–46.

Roch, C. H., & Sai, N. (2018). Stay or go? Turnover in CMO, EMO and regular charter schools. *Social Science Journal*, *55*(3), 232–244.

Rockinson-Szapkiw, A. J., & Spaulding, L. S. (2014). *Navigating the doctoral journey: A handbook of strategies for success.* Rowman & Littlefield.

Rockinson-Szapkiw, A. J., Spaulding, L. S., & Lunde, R. (2017). Women in distance doctoral programs: How they negotiate their identities as mothers, professionals, and academics in order to persist. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, *12*, 49–71.

Rockinson-Szapkiw, A. J., Spaulding, L. S., Swezey, J. A., & Wicks, C. J. (2014). Poverty and persistence: A model for understanding individuals' pursuit and persistence in a doctor of education program. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, *9*, 181–190.

Rodrigues, F., Teixeira, D. S., Neiva, H. P., Cid, L., & Monteiro, D. (2020). The bright and dark sides of motivation as predictors of enjoyment, intention, and exercise persistence. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports*, *30*(4), 787–800.

Rose, A. D. (1991). Preparing for veterans: Higher education and the efforts to accredit the learning of World War II servicemen and women. *Adult Education Quarterly*, *42*(1), 30–45.

Rossi, R. J., & Bower, C. B. (2018). Passed to fail? Predicting the college enrollment of GED® passers. *Adult Education Quarterly: A Journal of Research and Theory*, *68*(1), 3–23.

Roumell, E. A., Salajan, F. D., & Todoran, C. (2018). A survey of U.S. education policy regarding the education of adults. *Educational Policy*, *34*(5), 785–815.

Roxburgh, M., McCallum, J., McCrossan, G., & Smith, F. (2018). A process of developing a national practice assessment document. *Nurse Education in Practice*, *33*, 17–20.

Rust, D. Z., & Brinthaupt, T. M. (2017). Student perceptions of and experiences with a PLA course and portfolio review. *Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, *65*(2), 115–123.

Rutter, M. (1985). Resilience in the face of adversity: Protective factors and resistance to psychiatric disorder. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, *147*(6), 598–611.

Rutter, M. (2000). Resilience reconsidered: Conceptual considerations, empirical findings, and policy implications. In J. P. Shonkoff & S. J. Meisels (Eds.), Handbook of early childhood intervention (pp. 651–682). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511529320.030

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and new directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, *25*(1), 54–67.

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2001). On happiness and human potentials: A review of research on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *52*(1), 141–166.

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2008). A self-determination theory approach to psychotherapy: The motivational basis for effective change. *Canadian Psychology*, *49*(3), 186–193.

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2018). Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation. *Theory and Research in Education*, *16*(3), 378–381.

Ryan, R. M., Williams, G. C., Patrick, H., & Deci, E. L. (2009). Self-determination theory and 172 physical activity: The dynamics of motivation in development and wellness. *Hellenic Journal of Psychology*, *6*, 107–124.

Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage.

Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage.

Sámano, R., Martínez-Rojano, H., Chico-Barba, G., Sánchez-Jiménez, B., Sam-Soto, S., Rodríguez-Ventura, A. L., Mejía-Luna, L., & Sclavo-Melo, S. (2019). Sociodemographic factors associated with the knowledge and use of birth control methods in adolescents before and after pregnancy. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *16*(6).

Schneider, M., & Preckel, F. (2017). Variables associated with achievement in higher education: A systematic review of meta-analyses. *Psychological Bulletin*, *143*, 565–600.

Scott, K. W. (2004). Congruous autonomy: The "pull" of personal commitment to extraordinary involvement in a pursuit. *Journal of Adult Education*, *33*(1), 7–18.

Shotton, H. J. (2018). Reciprocity and nation building in native women's doctoral education. *American Indian Quarterly*, *42*(4), 488–507.

Sigg, R., & Taylor, R. (2005). Reforming social security for a long-life society: What impact on women? *Gender Issues*, 22(3), 79–96.

Sila-Nowicka, K. (2016). Older learning engagement in the modern city. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *35*(5), 490–508.

Skea, D. (2016). Phenomenological enquiry and psychological research in caring and quality of life contexts: Acknowledging the invisible. *International Journal of Caring Sciences*, *9*(3), 1134–1146.

Skiba, R. J., Horner, R. H., Chung, C. G., Rausch, M. K., May, S. L., & Tobin, T. (2011). Race is not neutral: A national investigation of African American and Latino dis-proportionality in school discipline. *School Psychology Review*, *40*(1), 85–107.

Skiba, R. J., Reynolds, C. R., Graham, S., Sheras, P., Conoley, J. C., & Garcia-Vasquez, E. (2006). *Are zero tolerance policies effective in schools? An evidentiary review and recommendations*. American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force.

Skinner, E. A., Kindermann, T. A., & Furrer, C. J. (2009). A motivational perspective on engagement and disaffection: Conceptualization and assessment of children's behavioral and emotional participation in academic activities in the classroom. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, *69*(3), 493–525.

Smallwood, C. (2006). The bumpy path to the Ph.D. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, A21–A22.

Smith, M. (1947). Populational characteristics of American servicemen in World War II. *The Scientific Monthly*, *65*(3), 246–252.

Snyman, M., & van den Berg, G. (2018). The significance of the learner profile in recognition of prior learning. *Adult Education Quarterly*, *68*(1), 24–40.

Spaulding, L. S., & Rockinson-Szapkiw, A. J. (2012). Hearing their voices: Factors doctoral candidates attribute to their persistence. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, *7*, 199–219.

Staff, J., Yetter, A. M., Cundiff, K., Ramirez, N., Vuolo, M., & Mortimer, J. T. (2020). Is adolescent employment still a risk factor for high school dropout? *Journal of Research on Adolescence (Wiley-Blackwell)*, *30*(2), 406–422.

Stoddard, S. A., Hughesdon, K., Khan, A., & Zimmerman, M. A. (2020). Feasibility and acceptability of a future-oriented empowerment program to prevent substance use and school dropout among school-disengaged youth. *Public Health Nursing*, *37*(2), 251–261.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research*. Sage.

Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. M. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research*: *Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Sage.

Subramaniam, P. R., & Wuest, D. A. (2021). Trauma-sensitive physical education teacher education. *International Journal of Physical Education*, *58*(2), 2–14.

Subramaniam, P. R., & Wuest, D. A. (2022). Trauma-sensitive physical education teacher education. *International Journal of Physical Education*, *58*(2), 2–14.

Sullivan, A. L., & Sadeh, S. (2016). Does the empirical literature inform prevention of dropout among students with emotional disturbance? A systematic review and call to action. *Exceptionality*, *24*(4), 251–262.

Sutton, A. (2017). Preparing for local labor: Curricular stratification across local economies in the United States. *Sociology of Education*, *90*(2), 172–196.

Sverdlik, A., Hall, N. C., McAlpine, L., & Hubbard, K. (2018). The Phd experience: A review of the factors influencing doctoral students' completion, achievement, and well-being. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, *13*, 361–388.

Talbot, J. (2017). Repurposing MOOC learning for academic credit: A survey of practice in university work-based learning departments in England and Wales. *Widening Participation & Lifelong Learning*, *19*(3), 113–136.

Tapia, M., Blalock, D., Choi, J., & Ochoa, E. (2020). Dropout and incarceration: Extending the school-to-prison pipeline (STPP) construct. *Justice Policy Journal*, *17*(2), 1–24.

Teine, M., & Beutner, M. (2016). Conceptualizing an m-learning system for

    seniors. *International Association for Development of the Information Society*, *9*.

Templeton, R. (2016). Doctorate motivation: An (auto)ethnography. *Australian Universities'*

    Review, *58*(1), 39–44.

Tenenbaum, H. R., Porche, M. V., Snow, C. E., Tabors, P., & Ross, S. (2007). Maternal and

    child predictors of low-income children's educational attainment. *Journal of Applied*

    Developmental Psychology, *28*, 227–238.

Thelin, J. R., & American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research. (2010). *The attrition*

    tradition in American higher education: Connecting past and present (Working Paper

    2010-01). American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research.

Tinto, V. (1993). Building community. *Liberal Education*, *79*(4), 16–21.

Todoran, C. (2018). *Figured worlds: A comparative analysis of international doctoral students'*

    experiences in the U.S. academic setting [Doctoral dissertation, North Dakota State

    University]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

Travis, J., Kaszycki, A., Geden, M., & Bunde, J. (2020). Some stress is good stress: The

    challenge-hindrance framework, academic self-efficacy, and academic outcomes. *Journal*

    of Educational Psychology, *112*(8), 1632–1643.

Trent, F., Dwiwardani, C., & Page, C. (2021). Factors impacting the retention of students of

    color in graduate programs: A qualitative study. *Training & Education in Professional*

    Psychology, *15*(3), 219–229.

Trowler, V. (2010). Student engagement literature review. *The Higher Education Academy*, *11*,

    1–15.

Tyack, D. (1974). *The one best system: A history of American urban education*. Harvard

University Press.

Tyler, J. H. (2005). The general educational development (GED) credential: History, current research, and directions for policy and practice. *Review of Adult Learning and Literacy, 5*, 45−84.

Ugurel Kamisli, M. (2021). Acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women in the United States: Intersectionality of nationality, religion, gender, and refugee status. *Adult Learning*, *32*(3), 103–114.

United States. (1983). *A nation at risk*: *The imperative for educational reform*.

Uppal, S. (2017). *Young men and women without a high school diploma. Insights on Canadian society*. Statistics Canada.

U.S. Administration on Aging. (2013). *Aging statistics*. http://www.aoa.gov/Aging_Statistics/

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2009). *Annual averages — household data — Tables from employment and earning: Employment status of the civilian noninstitutional population by age, sex, and race*.

U.S. Department of Education. (1998). *National Center for Education Statistics. Subsequent Educational Attainment of High School Dropouts, NCES 98-085*.

U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2018).

Van der Linden, N., Devos, C., Boudrenghien, G., Frenay, M., Azzi, A., Klein, O., & Galand, B. (2018). Gaining insight into doctoral persistence: Development and validation of doctorate-related need support and need satisfaction short scales. *Learning and Individual Differences*, *65*.

Van der Linden, N., Devos, C., Boudrenghien, G., Frenay, M., Azzi, A., Klein, O., & Galand, B. (2018). Gaining insight into doctoral persistence: Development and validation of

doctorate-related need support and need satisfaction short scales. *Learning & Individual Differences*, *65*, 100–111.

Van Kleef, J. (2014). Quality in PLAR. In J. Harris, C. Wihak, & J. Van Kleef (Eds.), *Handbook of the recognition of prior learning: Research into practice* (pp. 206–232). NIACE.

Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. State University of New York Press.

Van Rooij, E., Fokkens-Bruinsma, M., & Jansen, E. (2021). Factors that influence PhD candidates' success: The importance of PhD project characteristics. *Studies in Continuing Education*, *43*(1), 48–67.

Varpio, L., Ajjawi, R., Monrouxe, L. V., O'Brien, B. C., & Rees, C. E. (2017). Shedding the cobra effect: Problematising thematic emergence, triangulation, saturation and member checking. *Medical Education*, *51*(1), 40–50.

Vázquez-Nava, F., Vázquez-Rodríguez, E. M., Vázquez-Rodríguez, C. F., & Ortega Betancourt, N. V. (2019). High school dropout: Association with family structure, maternal employment, and health-risk habits among female Mexican adolescents. *Journal of Child & Family Studies*, *28*(12), 3307–3314.

Veal, J. L., Bull, M. J., & Miller, J. F. (2012). A framework of academic persistence and success for ethnically diverse graduate nursing students. *Nursing Education Perspectives*, *33*(5), 322–327.

Vera-Toscano, E., Rodrigues, M., & Costa, P. (2017). Beyond educational attainment: The importance of skills and lifelong learning for social outcomes. Evidence for Europe from PIAAC. *European Journal of Education*, *52*(2), 217–231.

Villere, P. (2019). This is why it's so hard to find skilled labor: Confident consumers are a double-edged sword. *Concrete Construction*, *64*(4), 20.

Volkert, D., Candela, L., & Bernacki, M. (2018). Student motivation, stressors, and intent to leave nursing doctoral study: A national study using path analysis. *Nurse Education Today*, *61*, 210–215.

Wahlgren, B., & Mariager-Anderson, K. (2017). Improving completion rates in adult education through social responsibility. *Adult Learning*, *28*(1), 20–26.

Wao, H. O., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2011). A mixed research investigation of factors related to time to the doctorate in education. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, *6*, 115–134.

Warren, C. A., & Xavia Karner, T. (2015). *Discovering qualitative methods: Ethnography, interviews, documents, and images* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Washington-Brown, L., McKinney, B., Fair, T. W., White, S. L., & Washington, L. (2021). Psychological impact of Covid-19 on inner-city children. *Journal of Cultural Diversity*, *28*(4).

Watt, D., & Roessingh, H. (1994). Some you win, most you lose: Tracking ESL dropout in high school. *English Quarterly*, *26*(5-7).

Webber, L. (2015). Mature women and higher education: Reconstructing identity and family relationships. *Research in Post Compulsory Education*, *20*, 208–226.

Webber, L. (2017). Supporting professional doctorate women students through identity change and turbulent times: Who cares? *Pastoral Care in Education*, *35*(3), 152–165.

Wellington, J., & Sikes, P. (2006). 'A doctorate in a tight compartment': Why do students choose a professional doctorate and what impact does it have on their personal and professional lives? *Studies in Higher Education*, *31*, 723–734.

Wiig, S., & Fahlbruch, B. (2019). Exploring resilience–An introduction. In *Exploring resilience* (pp. 1–5). Springer, Cham.

Wild, S., & Schulze Heuling, L. (2020). Student dropout and retention: An event history analysis among students in cooperative higher education. *International Journal of Educational Research*, *104*.

Wilson, M. J., Greenlees, J. B., Hagerty, T., Hintze, D. W., & Lehnus, J. D. (2000, January). *Youth attitude tracking study: 1998 propensity and advertising report*. Defense Manpower Data Center.

Windisch, H. (2016). How to motivate adults with low literacy and numeracy skills to engage and persist in learning: A literature review of policy interventions. *International Review of Education*, *62*(3), 279–297.

Wolcott, H. F. (2008a). *Ethnography: A way of seeing* (2nd ed.). AltaMira Press.

Wollast, R., Boudrenghien, G., Van der Linden, N., Galand, B., Roland, N., Devos, C., De Clercq, M., Klein, O., Azzi, A., & Frenay, M. (2018). Who are the doctoral students who drop out? Factors associated with the rate of doctoral degree completion in universities. *International Journal of Higher Education*, *7*(4), 143–156.

Xing, Y., Zeng, A., Fan, Y., & Di, Z. (2019). The strong nonlinear effect in academic dropout. *Scientometrics*, *120*(2), 793–805.

Yamashita, T., Cummins, P. A., Millar, R. J., Sahoo, S., & Smith, T. J. (2019). Associations between motivation to learn, basic skills, and adult education and training participation

among older adults in the USA. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *38*(5), 538–552.

Yang, D., Lavonen, J. M., & Niemi, H. (2018). Online learning engagement: Critical factors and research evidence from literature. *Themes in ELearning*, *11*(1), 1–22.

Yard, E., Radhakrishnan, L., Ballesteros, M. F., Sheppard, M., Gates, A., Stein, Z., Hartnett, K., Kite-Powell, A., Rodgers, L., Adjemian, J., Ehlman, D. C., Holland, K., Idaikkadar, N., Ivey-Stephenson, A., Martinez, P., Law, R., & Stone, D. M. (2021). Emergency department visits for suspected suicide attempts among persons aged 12-25 years before and during the COVID-19 pandemic - United States, January 2019-May 2021. *Morbidity & Mortality Weekly Report*, *70*(24), 888–894.

Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage.

Zaff, J., Donlan, A., Gunning, A., Anderson, S., McDermott, E., & Sedaca, M. (2017). Factors that promote high school graduation: A review of the literature. *Educational Psychology Review*, *29*(3), 447–476.

Ziemer, K. S., Pires, B., Lancaster, V., Keller, S., Orr, M., & Shipp, S. (2018). A new lens on high school dropout: Use of correspondence analysis and the statewide longitudinal data system. *American Statistician*, *72*(2), 191–198.

Appendix A

IRB Approval

Date: 11-28-2022

IRB #: IRB-FY21-22-1123
Title: FROM DROPOUT TO DOCTORATE: A PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE SELF-DETERMINATION OF INDIVIDUALS WHO PERSISTED TO COMPLETION
Creation Date: 5-23-2022
End Date:
Status: Approved
Principal Investigator: Nancy Hamilton
Review Board: Research Ethics Office
Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Exempt	Decision	Exempt

Key Study Contacts

Member		Role		Contact	
Member	Lucinda Spaulding	Role	Co-Principal Investigator	Contact	███████████
Member	Nancy Hamilton	Role	Principal Investigator	Contact	███████████
Member	Nancy Hamilton	Role	Primary Contact	Contact	███████████

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

Title of the Project: From Dropout to Doctorate: A Phenomenology of the Self-Determination of Individuals Who Persisted to Completion
Principal Investigator: Nancy Hamilton, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must reside in the continental United States, be over the age of 21, dropped out of high school, returned to academia, and persisted to the attainment of a doctoral degree, a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), Doctor of Education (EdD) or other professional doctorate, culminating in a doctoral capstone project or doctoral dissertation, with the exclusion of an honorary doctorate. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to describe the lived experiences of former high school dropouts in the Continental United States who self-determined to persist in their studies until they successfully completed a doctoral degree.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:
1. Answer demographic questions (5 minutes)
2. Participate in an interview either in person or via Microsoft Teams or Zoom. All interviews will be recorded using a digital video recorder and will take approximately 45 to 60 minutes.
3. Create a timeline of events detailing your lived experience including photographs as available (30 minutes).
4. Write a "Dear Abby" letter in which you will give recommendations to others who may desire to undertake a similar course (10 minutes).
5. Member checking: you will be given the opportunity to review your interview transcript for accuracy (10 minutes).

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include the discovery of the basis of the personal will and motivation which adult learners who were previous high school dropouts exercised to self-determine their educational path. By hearing the stories of individuals who have overcome life's hurdles such as teenage pregnancy, incarceration, poverty, racial injustice, physical and mental abuse, addiction, and many such barriers, others may be motivated to follow their example.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study include the possibility of emotional disturbance by re-visiting life's historical events; some of which may have been traumatic. The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be video recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Nancy Hamilton. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at ▋▋▋▋▋▋▋▋. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Lucinda Spaulding, at ▋▋▋▋▋▋▋▋▋▋.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered

and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

 The researcher has my permission to video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

Appendix C

Demographic Survey

Demographic Survey and Screening Questions

• Are you 21 years of age or older?

• Do you live in the Continental United States of America?

• Did you drop out of high school, return to academia, and persist to the attainment of a doctoral degree-a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), Doctor of Education (EdD), or other professional doctorate--culminating in a doctoral capstone project or doctoral dissertation with the exclusion of an honorary doctorate?

Name: _____

Age: _____

Gender: _____

Race: _____

Marital Status: _____

Degrees Earned: _____

Completion Date of Doctorate: _____

Employment (Career Field): _____

Employment Status: _____

Appendix D

Timeline Protocol

Timeline and Digital Data Collection

Please create a timeline of your life events in a chronological order which highlights and depicts the individual key events from birth to the present time, specifically identifying adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and points of starting and stopping studies. Please feel free to add any diagrams or digital data (photographs) that you might deem relevant.

Appendix E:

Interview Protocol

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please describe your educational background and career through your current position. (CRQ)

2. Describe the challenges that you faced in high school and the reason(s) for dropping out. (SQ1)

3. Describe the period between dropping out of high school and going back to school. (CRQ)

4. Please describe your experiences returning to school. What motivated you to return to school? If you can, please recreate for me the exact moment you decided to return to school or seek a way to earn your GED. (SQ1)

5. What challenges did you experience trying to return to school or earn your GED? How did you overcome them? (SQ1)

6. What were your experiences upon returning to school? What were your feelings and aspirations at this time? (SQ1)

7. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences at this period in your life? (SQ2)

8. Describe successful practices used to help you when you earned your GED which assisted in getting you through your undergraduate and graduate studies. (SQ2)

9. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences during this period of your life? (SQ2)

10. When did you decide to pursue doctoral studies and what was your motivation? (CRQ)

11. Describe your challenges when you decided to begin doctoral studies and the methods you used to persevere. (SQ1)

12. Describe successful practices you used when working on your doctoral studies. (SQ1)

13. What were your emotions, plans and aspirations during this period in your life? (SQ2)

14. What part did self-determination and perseverance play in your educational journey? (SQ1)

15. What part did family and friends play in motivating you to begin and/or persevere? (SQ1)

16. Please describe what it meant to you to earn your doctoral degree? Where do you think you would be today if you did not return to school? (SQ2)

17. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences from dropping out of school to the completion of doctoral studies? (CRQ)

Questions 1 through 4 address the educational background and motivational force of the participants. Compared to other higher education degrees, the rate of doctoral degree completion is the lowest (De Clercq et al., 2021; Sverdlik et al., 2018); therefore, understanding the motivation that inspires former high school dropouts to complete doctoral studies is pertinent to this research.

Questions 5 and 6 are open-ended and address the trials of returning to school and how those challenges were overcome. Question 5 and 6 are an open-ended invitation for further discussion regarding points covered and allow the participants time to further reflect. Deci and Ryan's (2000, 2001) theory of self-determination (SDT) explains why the participants were able to persist to completion.

Questions 7 and 8 further address the participant's experience, their aspirations and the successful practices that supported their determination to return to school through the GED or

other related process. Researchers (Jepsen et al., 2017) found that the GED increases the

likelihood of postsecondary attendance and course completion and is therefore relevant to this

study.

Question 9 is an open-ended invitation for self-reflection and further discussion regarding

points covered. Question 10 through 12 address the motivation, challenges and best practices

experienced by the participants as they entered doctoral studies. Delayed graduation and best

practices in doctoral education are common themes for ongoing research in doctoral completion

worldwide (Fetene & Tamrat, 2021). For this reason, the research inquiries into these important

topics.

Questions 13 through 15 discuss the participants emotions, plans, aspirations, and self-

determination during the closing years of the participants' doctoral educational journey. These

questions continue to discover the problem and support of the theoretical framework of the

research. Many Doctoral graduates aspire to careers in academia and other opportunities such as

corporate employment while, yet others are uncertain of their future directions (Ganapati &

Ritchie, 2021; Monk et.al., 2012). Questions 16 and 17 conclude with two open-ended questions

to prompt self-reflection about the participants academic journey from dropout to doctor.

Appendix F

Recruitment Email

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of the study is to describe the lived experiences of former high school dropouts in the Continental United States who self-determined to persist in their studies until they successfully completed a doctoral degree, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be individuals who reside in the continental United States of America, over the age of 21, and previously dropped out of high school and returned to academia and persisted to the attainment of a doctoral degree, earning a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), Doctor of Education (EdD) or other professional doctorate, with the exclusion of an honorary doctorate, culminating in a doctoral capstone project or doctoral dissertation. Participants, if willing, will be asked to do the following:

1.   Complete an interview either in person or via Microsoft Teams or Zoom. All interviews will be recorded using a digital video recorder and will take approximately 45-60 minutes. The interview transcripts will be reviewed by the participants.

2.   Participants will be asked to create their own timelines of events detailing their individual lived experience including photographs as available (30 minutes).

3.   A demographic survey will be used to permit each future reader the benefit of visualizing the participants and gain an overview of the research. Participants will be asked to complete the demographic survey prior to the interview. Questions in the demographic survey will request the following information: Name, Age, Gender, Race, Marital Status, Degrees Earned, Completion Date of Doctorate, Employment, Doctorate, Employment Status (5 minutes).

4.   Participants will be asked to write a "Dear Abby" follow-up email in which they will give recommendations to others who may desire to undertake a similar course (10 minutes).

Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please contact me at █████████████████████ or call/text at █████████ to complete the screening survey and schedule the interview.

A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you are determined to be eligible based on your screening

survey responses and choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me before or at the time of the interview.

Sincerely,

Nancy Hamilton

Doctoral Candidate at Liberty University

Appendix G

Analysis Overlapping Themes

Table 4

Overlapping Themes

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Name	Avery	Anna	Cora	Dana	Eli	Grace	Vincent	Phil	Van	Walker	Melany
Childhood Domestic Violence	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Gang violence	Gang violence	Yes
Poverty	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Teenage Marriage	No	Yes - 16	Yes - 16		Yes - 16	No	No	No	No	No	Yes - 18
Teenage Pregnancy	No	Yes - 16	Yes - 16	No	Yes - 16	No	No	No	No	No	Yes - 18
Learning Disabilities	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Substance Use - Personal	Hinted	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Substance Use - Parents	Yes	Not stated	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Survival – stated need to survive.	Yes	Not stated	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Not stated	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Homelessness	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Crime	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Love of Learning	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Need for Self-Affirmation	Yes	Not Stated	No	No	Yes	Not Stated	Yes	Yes	Not stated	Yes	Yes
Experienced large degree of Self-Doubt	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Academic Struggles	Yes	Yes	Yes	Marginal	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Encouragement from others	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Minimal	Minimal	Yes	Yes	Yes	Minimal	Minimal
Impact of Education on Life	Significant	Significant	Moderate	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant

Improvement of Career Opportunities	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant

Non-Repetitive Non-Overlapping Themes

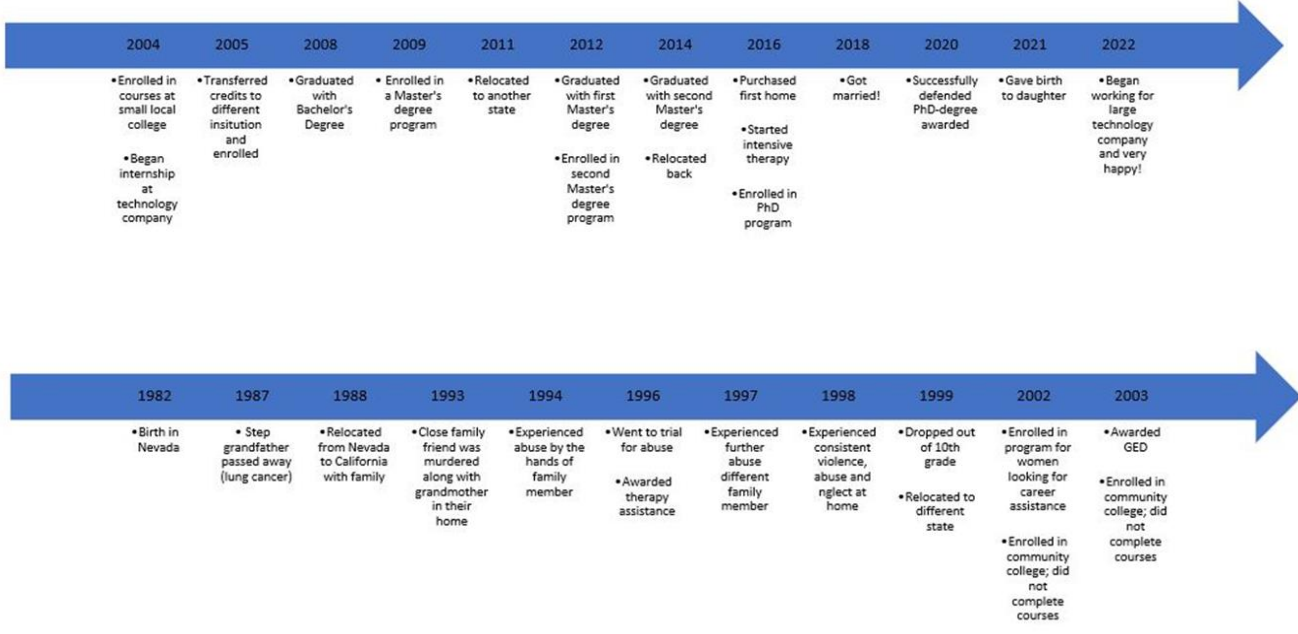		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Name	Avery	Anna	Cora	Dana	Eli	Grace	Vincent	Phil	Van	Walker	Melany
Non-Repetitive theme	Raised by Grand mother	Help and assistance from disabled mother.	Expressed that the PhD was not consciously chosen and it may have limited career opportunities and financial gain.	Dropped out of high school with parents' permission to attend the American School of Ballet.	Never attended high school - homeschooled until 8th grade in small rural town.	Didn't complete high school or the GED until after attainment of Bachelors.	Entered and remained in the Coastguard with the help of ongoing oral testing by commander.	Happy childhood with supportive parents.	1/ Violent high school environment 2/ Returned to high school after dropping out to completed high school Diploma.	1/ Heroin addict aged 12. 2/ 12-year Jail sentence. 3/Manslaughter. 4/Learned to read in prison. 5/ Nine siblings	1/ Volcano Scientist 2/Expressed suicidal thoughts when she doubted, the ability to obtain the PhD degree.

Appendix H

Significant Statement Sample

Participant	Name	Reasons for dropping out of School	Motivation for returning to school	Motivation for Persisting
1	Avery	"So, I, I come from a, an abusive background. I was raised by my grandmother, and she just didn't really have a lot of skill and resources. Uh, she was overwhelmed. She had multiple grandchildren; she was taking care of. And, uh, I, I found myself in terrible situations at home a lot, and I wasn't able to really concentrate. There was drug use and *alcohol abuse. Um,* there was, uh, abuse, physical and emotional abuse in the home. And so, I couldn't concentrate. I was unhappy and I didn't see the value in education at that time. I wanted to just escape and get away. So, I decided when I was 16, that I was going to walk away from that life. So, I put what I could in a backpack, and I left home.	"I was searching for something. I was searching for answers and solutions." "I looked and saw people studying and reading. Something about that energy, I just said; I need to be doing this. And I can't exactly explain what it was, cuz I don't think I could articulate it, but I just went, I need to be doing this. This is what I want to do. I want to read books and I want to study, and I want to, um, I wasn't even necessarily thinking about what I was gonna do in the future. I just thought right now I need to be doing this. It, it felt like this was something that will give my life purpose. I didn't feel I like I had any purpose at that time I was working retail jobs and I wasn't going anywhere. I felt like it was what I needed to do." "I loved learning. Learning was my... I thought of it as an escape from poverty; an escape from all the terrible situations I'd been dealt up to that point." "But if you have a start like mine, there's an assumption that this person has no future and, um, they're a lost cause. But, um, I think that only the person can determine that. And I determined that I don't want to be a lost cause so, um, it was challenging, and it was tough, but I decided to keep going, because I thought there's something at the end of this tunnel." "And I wanted to know what it was like. I wanted to know what it was like to, to feel safe and to have a good job and, uh, to feel like you have value and purpose, not saying that the job gives me that, but it	"Um, I guess I feel that where you start doesn't have to be where you end. Um, there seems to be this assumption that you can only do well, if you have all the resources well, you can do well, you probably will do well, but if you have a start like mine, there's an assumption that this person has no future and, um, they're a lost cause. But, um, I think that only the person can determine that. And I determine that I, I want to, I don't want to be a lost cause so, um, it was challenging, and it was tough, but I, uh, it was very hard actually. Um, but I decided to keep going, because I thought there's something at the end of this tunnel. And I wanted to know what it was like. I wanted to know what it was like to, to feel safe and to have a good job and, uh, to feel like you have value and purpose, not saying that the job gives me that, but it does help if you have something that you do every day that you're proud of." "And I knew doors were closing, but I, I thought I'm going to survive and I'm going to somehow get what I need. I wanted it so badly. I just wanted to survive. I wanted to live. So, I, I think so. And I carried that all through all those degrees. Now I'm at a point where I don't need to be in survival mode. Um, but I look back and go, I sometimes I don't even know how I did it. It's just this burning desire to live and to be human, uh, and to feel human. And I know that not everyone possesses it, um, but sometimes being put in terrible situations, I guess it makes you very hungry."

			does help if you have something that you do every day that you're proud of."	"I was 36 when I got married and then had my daughter at 38 going on 39. And, um, it was a conscious decision that I wanted her to know as much good things as I could possibly give to her, and my husband agreed… I want her to have exactly the opposite of what I had and I want to give her the things I didn't get, um, which aren't necessarily material things." "I thought I would love to earn a PhD in this. And because I had a coworker who I had a PhD in physics, I thought, I think I can do that. And I want to work in this field, and I want to do research. And that was exactly what I was thinking. And I, uh, applied for the PhD program in 2016 and I was accepted, and I was just overjoyed."
Participant	Name	Reasons for dropping out of School	Motivation for returning to school	Motivation for Persisting
2	Anna	"So, I got, I was a person who was really smart and got straight A's, but also, um, really wasn't interested in like the power dynamics of school and, and the way that, um, I don't know, I, I wrote somewhere that school was just so boring, and life was just so fun." "Yeah. So I think, High School was more about like learning to respect and defer to authority that I really didn't want to do. Um, I also was just kind of itchy to be an adult." "I was much more interested in the social world than the academic world um, especially in high school because, um, so they, they kicked me out of the eighth grade cuz they said that I wasn't being challenged and I was bored. And so, they sent me to the ninth grade. Um, and, uh, so I started the ninth grade when I was 14, um, and uh, made it Probably just that year, uh, in ninth grade. Um, and not great. Like by the second term, I was only taking	"Like, it was all about age restrictions and, you know, things for me back then. And, uh, so I, I couldn't legally get married in Oregon where it was my home state, uh, when I was 16, but I could get married in Hawaii. Um, and so we went to Hawaii, um, and, uh, um, when we got back from Hawaii, I immediately took my GED exams. Um, uh, Charlie and I actually went and signed up for the pretest together, but, um, I didn't need to take the classes or do any prep. Um, and so I just took them, I passed 'em and then in the, um, GED like when they send your thing, um, there was an envelope in there with a certificate for, I think it was for free classes at the community college. Um, it's the program that they now call college promise. Um, but at the time it was just a gift certificate for some classes. And I decided that, um, I could take some of those classes that I really liked, you know, that,	"Um, what did I use to persevere? Stubbornness Um, <laugh> uh, yeah, um, uh, I, I was really, really stubborn. Um, and if you told me that I couldn't do something, I was gonna do, I was gonna do it and I was gonna blow it outta the water. Um, I also, like I said, I, I had like a really supportive mom who really encouraged my education, um, the whole time." "Well, I mean, like I said, my mom would read and I would read, and then we'd, we'd talk about it on the phone. So even though she was in Oregon and I was in Boston, like she was kind of my learning buddy and, um, um, that helped, um, I also was really good at thinking it, like, I mean, like, I I'm, I'm such a social learner." "I also had; I had had faculty that championed me." "I was so damn stubborn and anytime that anybody told me that

three classes. I took like the ones I wanted, which were honors English, um, uh, photography and, uh, honors English, photography and art. Um, and <laugh>, um, uh, kind of, um, weren't legally allowed to drop out of school and get your GED until you were 16, um, in my state at that time. And so, I, um, just kind of dribbled along until I was 16. Like I registered as a homeschool student but wasn't really doing anything as a homeschool student."

"I wasn't taking classes to meet my high school diploma requirements. So that's kind of the point at which I feel like I dropped out, even though like I was still taking honors English <laugh>, but, um, uh, you know, I was like, I came at 10:00 AM. I took my honors English class. Then I went out to the smoker's corner and met up with friends, went and smoked pot and, um, hung out with stupid people that would buy Jack Daniels and go on adventures. And, you know, but like I said, it was, you know, the world kind of outside of the prescribed kind of teenage world was much more fascinating and interesting to me."

that I was missing, um, after leaving school."

"And um, I was working and um, I don't know, I just was something to do, I guess <laugh> um, and then, you know, when, um, when I got pregnant and then I, I found out about student financial aid, I realized that it was, um, cheaper actually to, or not cheaper, but like basically I made minimum wage going to school with, from financial aid and I made minimum wage at my minimum wage job <laugh> and um, one felt like it was taking me somewhere and one felt like it was going nowhere."

I wasn't gonna make it or, um, uh, you know, had some sort of like disparaging comment, um, it just would make me more stubborn. Um, and I was gonna, I was gonna do it and I was gonna do it that much harder. Um, so this person in, in my department, for some reason, copped an attitude with me. And so, like my response was that as my chair and my advisor were going to bat for me, that I would, um, I would give them ammo. So, I, I got an AUW fellowship I got, I applied for and received almost every award in the department. <laugh> like, you know, I was like, okay, well you're gonna doubt me, fine. You know, let, let's see what's up. <laugh> and uh, so I was, you know, I was pretty stubborn that way.

Appendix I

Participant Sample Timeline

2004	2005	2008	2009	2011	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2021	2022
• Enrolled in courses at small local college • Began internship at technology company	• Transferred credits to different insitution and enrolled	• Graduated with Bachelor's Degree	• Enrolled in a Master's degree program	• Relocated to another state	• Graduated with first Master's degree • Enrolled in second Master's degree program	• Graduated with second Master's degree • Relocated back	• Purchased first home • Started intensive therapy • Enrolled in PhD program	• Got married!	• Successfully defended PhD-degree awarded	• Gave birth to daughter	• Began working for large technology company and very happy!

1982	1987	1988	1993	1994	1996	1997	1998	1999	2002	2003
• Birth in Nevada	• Step grandfather passed away (lung cancer)	• Relocated from Nevada to California with family	• Close family friend was murdered along with grandmother in their home	• Experienced abuse by the hands of family member	• Went to trial for abuse • Awarded therapy assistance	• Experienced further abuse different family member	• Experienced consistent violence, abuse and nglect at home	• Dropped out of 10th grade • Relocated to different state	• Enrolled in program for women looking for career assistance • Enrolled in community college; did not complete courses	• Awarded GED • Enrolled in community college; did not complete courses

Appendix J

Sample Dear Abbey Letter

Dear Abby: I want to encourage all the doctoral students that are "Stuck" to look for a mentor that will guide them and encourage them to continue on to completion of their dissertation.

Here are some tips that I can share with struggling doctoral students:

1. Write one page a day. I tell all my doctoral students to write 1 page a day and some days will only feel to write 1 page a day and other days they will write 30 pages, but just write 1 page a day.

2. Another tip is to read at least 5 dissertations in the area that the doctoral student is passionate about and also read at least 15 journal articles. This way they are very well versed in the research on their topic.

3. Another tip is - how do you find a dissertation topic. You just simply go to Chapter 5 of the dissertations that you are interested in and read the section Recommended Further Research. There you can chose an area of research that is recommended and all you must do is change one variable and you have a replication doctoral study.

4. The last tip is to Mindmap your Doctoral Research Dissertation Proposal. This way you can visually see how each section is aligned. As it is important to ensure that your Problem Statement, Topic Statement, Research Questions and Methodology are clearly aligned.

Ensure that you have acquired a strong and supportive team of friends, colleagues, and family.

Appendix K

Sample Journal / Bracketing

12/20/2022

In the axiological philosophical assumption, as the researcher I recognize and acknowledge that my personal bias is represented by my own values and therefore I will here openly discuss the values that shape this study, or at least my desire and motivation to undertake the study. Now after all the years in formal education I no longer believe the attainment of any number of degrees somehow equals superior intelligence as was inferred. Instead, my personal belief is that perseverance, not giving up, or becoming overwhelmed, is the key to formal educational attainment. For years my personal moto has been, "Be an ant". That is, don't look at the mountain just move one grain every day and eventually the entire mountain will be moved. Now more fully than ever before I am confident through my learned experience of God's grace that I will achieve my desired goal.

8/28/2022

Today at 12pm EST I undertook my first Research Interview. I found myself deeply moved throughout Avery's interview. Relating to the participants story was all too easy even though I feel her journey was much more difficult than my own. Even taking the time now to go through the paces of typing my thoughts when all I really want to do is walk and digest it all, is very difficult. But I feel the need to record this while it is fresh before my own emotions ebb. The immensity of this one precious and courageous life, this beautiful human being, this extraordinary mixture of vulnerability and rock like strength is very rare indeed. The raw honesty, the deep reflection and willingness to share something so personal has left me humbled and honored. I see me own journey, to some degree in this journey; the motivation, the

perseverance, and the reasons for ploughing through around and over obstacles are similar in many ways to my own.

9/4/2022

It was such a joy to interview Eli! She was like a breath of fresh air, so real and kind! I found myself again relating to many aspects of her experience but from a different perspective: as she spoke of her homeschool experience until she was 16 and how little she knew of the world, because of her Bible centered world. I thought of my own daughter. I too tried to shelter my daughter from the big, bad world and to this day she tells everyone she grew up under a rock. Things changed drastically as Eli progressed though the various chapters of her life and educational experience and I could relate very deeply to those changes also.

9/8/2022

Keeping things organized and in order takes quite a bit of time and work especially as I juggle my full-time job. I am very pleased with the response so far to my very real plea for help as I have only been able to find a total of 28 individuals who even qualify! So far, I have 13 positive responses, but we will see if the follow through happens. To date I have six scheduled interviews which really is quite astounding, and I am very grateful to God for answering my prayers and moving on their hearts to help and participate.

2/1/2023

This will be my last journal entry as I successfully defended my dissertation on January the 27th, 2023. My Chair, Dr. Spaulding has asked me to express what it means to me, a fellow High School dropout, to complete this long and difficult journey. In all honesty when the defense was over and I heard the words, "Congratulations Dr. Hamilton" from the mouth of my most

respected professor, I was beyond even knowing how to express my emotions. I felt like a "happy train wreck" as I stated on social media. I could say much more but for the sake of brevity, this has been the most exciting and fulfilling endeavor of my career life! I will forever be grateful, on so many levels, for the privilege of living in a country where the poor can become rich, and I say that in the sense of knowledge and wisdom – the greatest of all treasures. Simply put, this is the ultimate affirmation! By God's grace, and with the help of many - I did it!