FOOTBALL CONNECTIONS' INFLUENCE ON HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION: A

QUALITATIVE STUDY

by

Devin Allison

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVED BY:

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Abstract

The purpose of this case study was to understand the influences that playing high school football has on graduation. The theories guiding this study were the theory of connectedness and the theory of attachment and how students' connections to football helped them achieve the goal of graduation. Ainsworth and Bowlby and their theories of attachment were used to tie football as an extracurricular activity to graduation and why educators push for students to be involved. I attempted to show the benefits that involvement in football helps a student succeed in high school. Themes like connections, support, and academics were revealed through research that showed that with these themes as keys, the individuals who participated in this study were able to graduate from high school.

Keywords: extracurricular activities, attachment, connectedness, high school graduation, high school football

Copyright Page

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to God, for without You nothing is possible. He has helped me to be able to push through difficult times and to become the man that I am today.

I dedicate this to my friends and family who inspire me to pursue this degree and challenge me to never be afraid to step outside of my comfort zone.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge my committee chair, committee members, peers, editors, professors, and all the individuals that I had the opportunity to work with in order to complete my research. Without your constant support and willingness to be a part of this, it would not be possible. For that I greatly appreciate you, and I would like to say thank you.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Education and sports are tied together in so many ways. To participate in athletics, one must maintain a good standing in the classroom. This involvement can lead to great connections and the ability to form attachments. Prior studies (Chen, 2021; Collins and Feeney, 2000; Shelruff, 2010;2011; Skehri, 2019; Webb, 2021) have pointed out the positives of children being involved in sports and other extracurricular activities. Among these positives is being involved in extracurricular activities, which help students succeed in the classroom. One of the biggest accomplishments for many students and their families is reaching the goal of achieving high school graduation. For students, high school graduation is an accomplishment that gets rewarded with a celebration that may include fireworks, walking across a stage to cheers and claps, and gifts from family members before and afterward. High school graduation is the culmination of years of demanding work that translates into one degree that simply reads *High School Diploma.*

For many students, the story behind what it took to get to graduation tells a tale of many sleepless nights, hard work, and tears. What researchers attribute to this accomplishment are the connections and attachments that students made to stay on track to become successful. Students making attachments and connections through extracurricular activities are important to their success in a classroom (Massoni, 2011). In addition, when students are involved with extracurricular activities, they are focused, and this focus leads to success (Covay & Carbonaro, 2010). Students who participate in extracurricular activities, such as basketball, football, JROTC, and marching band have a higher success rate in high school (Daniyal et al., 2012).

Background

For many school systems, extracurricular activities are commonplace. These activities are seen as tools to help motivate students to get involved and stay in school (Im et al. 2016). Some districts even look at ways to encourage students to play a sport to help them achieve their graduation. With teachers pushing for students to be involved in extracurricular activities, it also makes one wonder if playing a sport helps a student feel like they are a part of something bigger than themselves. Sports are a way for an individual to make connections and for individuals to be involved in school (Hughes et al., 2016). The idea of being an athlete who performs well enough to receive a scholarship is the motivation that many students use to achieve success (Milton et al., 2012).

The success of an athletic program can be measured by wins and losses, but success can also be measured by the academic achievements the team has in the classroom. Many coaches would deem the off-the-field success and coaches are more concerned about academics than wins (Christensen et al. 2021). Examples of academic support are teams keeping up with their GPAs and submitting these to their schools. Schools also maintain graduation records and participation records that are used to maintain data. Depending on location, some states keep this data posted on their websites (e.g., Georgia Department of Education). In Georgia, data on athletics are posted on the Georgia High School Athletics website.

Teachers and coaches are tasked with building successful human beings who are prepared for the real world. Teachers and coaches must be able to provide real-world experiences and examples in their classrooms that students can relate to or that they can apply later in life. Students must be successful in the 9th grade to get to the 10th grade. Academic success means

that students must maintain good academic standing in the classroom and maintain grades that their school accepts as passing. The same can be said for a student working hard through their sophomore and junior years to get to their senior year. This standard was affirmed by the National Educational Longitudinal Study, in which arts and athletic participation were both related to continued enrollment into 12th grade. (Zaff, 2017, p.448).

Historical Context

Much discussion on the benefits and outcomes of extracurricular activities has taken place over the years. Physical education classes were added to the education school system in the 18th century (Guedes, 2007). These classes were a way to get students moving, to talk about hygiene, and to study how the human body functions. With this addition, students began to be interested in movements of the body and being active. Guedes also found that American society has long viewed physical education as "recess time," "leisure time," "sport," or "game classes." After Gulick (2005) labeled physical education as the "new profession," individuals began to select and make a career in the field of physical education. When the American Association for the Advancement of Physical Education was created, Gulick was the biggest advocate of physical fitness for youth, and he recommended a plan for integrating gymnastics and physical education into the daily lives of children. The main principle of Gulick's interest in physical activity was the enrichment of human life through education, health, and social engagement for children. Physical education has become a major part of the educational system. Fitness plays a significant role in the physical and mental health of all Americans. The results of a child receiving an appropriate physical education are better health, developed social skills, responsibility, and

leadership. The landscape of education has allowed programs to flourish as an integral part of the modern-day education school system.

Extracurricular activities were introduced into schools after physical education in the 19th century. In the beginning, these activities were regular parts of the school day but later became after-school activities. These activities were a benefit to all students and were added to help students with special needs. According to Sekhri (2019), children with disabilities who participated in sports and cultural activities and programs promoted physical, emotional, and social well-being. Co-curricular activities can make an enormous difference in the lives of children with special needs. Extracurricular activities are considered as additions to the school day but can be used to improve the social lives of those students involved. These activities included sports and clubs hosted by the school.

The issue today is that many students who are not connected with an extracurricular activity are not graduating from high school (Aslam et al. 2019; Thouin et al. 2022). These students may lack the motivation to be successful. When students are not attached to positive elements, such as extracurricular activities, they tend to be pulled into negative activities. These negatives could involve gangs, drugs, or any other forms of troublesome influences.

In many districts, money plays a significant role in how schools and athletics operate. The costs of having a sports season have continued to grow, and many schools that struggle financially do not see the benefits of keeping up sports programs that can be very costly. The benefits of sports in school could have a positive and negative impact on costs. Schools with students who are participating in sports have higher success regarding graduation (Abizada et al., 2020).

The focus of this research is to explore how extracurricular activities, specifically the sport of football, help students graduate from high school. Many former athletes and current students have been able to make many connections by playing sports (Shobe, 2008). Although many athletes' experiences are different, this researcher would like to see how connections and attachments help students who participate in extracurricular activities lead to graduation.

Social Context

High school students are being affected by a myriad of societal influences, from social media pressure to gang-related activities. One issue that students have little control over but that affects them is money. With many school systems being affected by budget cuts, athletics, and extracurricular activities are being removed. Furr (2022) stated that high school athletics are dying because participation is down. This problem is affecting many individuals who cannot afford to pay to play sports, and many schools use these extracurricular activities to motivate students for graduation.

Many low-income school systems and communities are affected by the issue of losing extracurricular activities. Student athletes are impacted by the loss of making connections when participating in these activities. To participate, students must maintain good academic standing. Extracurricular activities impact students, teachers, and parents. With eligibility requirements in place, coaches must monitor the progress of their athletes during a grading period. For the parents of these athletes, the monitoring means that now they have an extra set of eyes that are looking out for their well-being. With extracurricular activities in school systems, a village of people take on the responsibility of students being successful (Barber, 2021).

Woolever (2017) investigated the relationship between participation in high school sports and academic engagement in schools. The results of the study demonstrated that academic engagement led to engagement which led to the student becoming academically successful. Higher academic engagement at the higher levels of education is what Woolever believed had not been focused upon. Reginald Thompson (2012) collected data from 1081 female and male athletes and 1000 non-athletes in 10 public high schools in the Miami-Dade school district in Florida from 2002 to 2003 and found statistically significant differences between athletes earning higher cumulative GPAs and achieving higher test scores on the 10th grade Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test in reading and mathematics than non-athletes. The Thompson study showed the correlation between athletes and higher GPAs than non-athletes and passing scores on the state assessment. The social realities and conditions of removing these activities from school districts can hurt graduation rates across communities. The positive impacts of a school having extracurricular activities can play a significant role in the life of athletes who participate.

Theoretical Context

This study is guided by the attachment and connectedness theories. The connectedness theory began with the theory of social connectedness, created, and researched by Bowlby and Ainsworth (1992). This theory posited that every person is connected to others in their environment. With these connections, we can see that influences do not affect an individual and can come from people in many different areas. These influences can be either positive or negative.

The theory of connectedness states that people pay attention to who and what children are connected to and how a person can influence the life of that specific individual. It also states that everyone is different and so are their circumstances, but with connections, everyone is forming attachments. Karcher and Lee (2002) looked at the theories of adolescent connectedness and suggested that adolescents strive to become connected by engaging with and valuing the people, activities, and worlds in their social ecology.

The theory of attachment focused on the developmental history of children and how it connected to their lives as adults. Attachment is a strong and emotional bond that happens between a parent and a child. This bond affects the child's development and functioning. The way a parent interacts with a child has an immediate impact on how that child approaches the rest of the world. Parents are the first people from whom a child learns. Children can be influenced by many factors, but parents are the most important first connection in a child's life. Bretherton (1992) examined the blueprint that Ainsworth and Bowlby (1992) had set forth for the attachment theory. The focus on maternal loss, as well as personality development and how children view security, helped to map out the views that Bretherton had on attachment.

Ainsworth (1999) observed that securely attached infants used their parents as a secure base during times of exploration. If a child was out and the surroundings were not normal for the child, then the child would look to the parents for assurance. The assurance from the parents is what the child wanted and needed for their comfort to explore their surroundings. Children are willing to try new things if they feel safe when doing so. This safety is why children try to do things to bring pleasure or smile to their parents' faces. The smile and pleasure of their parents is also a reason that children choose to participate in certain activities. Children may play or

participate in certain activities because they enjoyed doing the activities with their parents. The approval and need to please parents can be a significant factor in why a student participates in certain types of activities. If a student does not have parents involved, then that attachment can come in other forms or through other people.

The idea of sports being a factor in a student's success comes into play when one examines the roles that sports can play in a student's life. No study has indicated that playing sports guarantees that an athlete will make connections or that an individual will graduate. However, this study focuses on the extracurricular activity of football that may help an individual achieve that goal of graduating from high school. Sports are not necessarily for every student; however, other extracurricular activities may appeal to non-athletes. Not every school district offers sports, and many do not offer the same sports. Ritchie (2018) explored the impact of academic co-curricular activity participation on academic achievement. The focus of the study was to examine if there were any types of connections between being involved in an extracurricular activity, like a sport, and a student's academic success. Making the connection gives a clear view in support of the theory that playing sports can help a student to achieve high school graduation.

The association between extracurricular participation and learning varies based on student gender and ethnicity. Similarities in gender and ethnicity are presently based on participation and on GPA. Among the many extracurricular activities, Ritchie (2018) described sports, drama, music, scouting, dance, and various subject-related clubs as being a key part of a student's school experiences. Although the students who choose to participate in activities were found to be more academically successful than those who did not participate, it is not clear

whether this finding is because the brighter and more energetic students are also the ones who more often participate in extracurricular activities.

The development of an individual is a critical aspect of one's life. Looking at how an individual was raised and what types of environments they grew up in can play a factor in the achievement of graduation. The relationship between a parent (caregiver) and a child can also be a factor in a student's achievement of graduation. What has the child seen or what has the child been influenced by? The attachments and comforts that a child can develop while they are growing up with their parents can help them establish connections later in life. Set (2021) connected the attachment theory to depression and how building relationships with others helps people to deal with depression. The people attached to others tend to have feelings of being able to deal with stressors. They can rely on themselves and their attachments to navigate through depression. When an individual has a secure attachment, they tend to have clear and positive interactions that allow them to better deal with anxious moments. Individuals who do not have someone around whom they can trust or rely on may hide their thoughts and feelings, and, although they may pretend to be fine and comfortable, they may be hiding their depression. Set explained this impairment is especially likely during the long term, because difficult experiences require an individual to actively deal with a problem and may resort to the individual seeking external support.

The relationships that individuals build can have both a positive and negative impact on their lives. The inability of an individual's self-object needs may activate hunger for these needs or to avoid them. A child who has parents that do not mirror enough, and who give incomplete, neglected, or inconsistent care may become an individual who struggles to provide those same

needs in return. This individual will-need others to increase his sense of being and feeling special. As children grow, they become attached and connected to their surroundings. If they feel as if they fit into the environment, they mirror the things they see, and this mirroring increases their sense of feeling special. When individuals look at the roles that others have in their life, their impact can influence how they turn out. Mirroring or giving the children a positive influence can be key to their success. Children who play sports are around other children who want to be successful, as well as positive role models, including their coaches.

Problem Statement

A problem that exists in many school districts is finding ways to motivate students to stay in school and graduate- (Case, 2020). Students drop out because of various factors. Dunn, Chambers and Rabren (2004) looked at a number of these factors that included the socioeconomic status of the family, a lack of books, learning disabilities, teenage pregnancy, prior academic failures, use of drugs, peer influences, and school size, all as factors for reasons students drop out. The impacts of budget cuts are felt in myriad ways including reduced extracurricular activities (Furda & Shuleski, 2019). The costs to have extracurricular activities have continued to grow for parents and families, and many schools that struggle financially do not see the benefits of keeping up with something that can be seen as very costly. Because of the decisions that districts must make when it comes to these cuts, many students are missing out on being able to participate in extracurricular activities. By doing so, students are missing opportunities to make connections and develop attachments with other students their age.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand how participation in a high school football program influences graduating from a high school in Northeast Georgia. A student's participation in an athletic program is critical to their academic success (King et al. 2021; Steinmann & Caro, 2019). The population of this study was high school graduates who played football in a rural area in Georgia. By showing student attachments to participation in a football program and their graduation rates may influence stakeholders and government officials to fund extracurricular activities.

Significance of the Study

Research on students' sports participation is significant because it is limited, and the findings are inconsistent (Alahmed et al., 2016). The views and attitudes of the athletes and coaches involved remain unknown. This study is significant because it allows coaches and educators to see the influence that athletics can have on students. This study can support reasons to encourage students to participate in these activities.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of recent graduates who participated in football for at least four years during high school?

Sub Question One

How did connectedness to a high school sports program influence motivation to graduate?

Sub Question Two

What are the academic experiences of high school athletes who played football?

Définitions

1. *Extracurricular activities are provided by the school.* These activities can be clubs or sports that do not count as a grade toward graduation. These activities are for all students, and some clubs do have requirements to be involved. Extracurricular activities are those that fall outside of the normal curriculum that a student must follow. These are not mandatory activities and have no bearing on if a student passes a class (Azar, Ulkar, Ainura, & Narmin, 2020).

3. *Attachment* is a strong emotional bond. These types of bonds were initially studied in children with their parents, but attachments can be included in other ways (Keller, 2018). Attachments can be seen in technology and in sports. *Connectedness* is the theory that every person is connected to another person or thing. Connections are said to help people to want to be involved. There are both good and bad connections, with the connections having significant impacts. (Hassall, 2021). The connections in this study are those that a student gains with his community while playing sports.

Summary

Student-athletes and school personnel are faced with many challenges when dealing with the struggles of high school students. Ainsworth and Bowlby (1992) use the theory of attachment to study how individuals grow because of relationships with others. Investigating the reasons that connections contribute to successful graduation rates can show these same connections and how they relate to high school students who participate in sports. By looking at the connections of

student-athletes and how they affect graduation rates, this study can contribute to the limited research on connections made through sports. This chapter included a brief overview of the historical, social, and theoretical context related to the challenges of student-athletes. It was followed by the history, the problem, the purpose, the significance of this study, the research questions, and the definitions of the key terms found in this research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This chapter's purpose is to review relevant literature related to extracurricular activities and academic success as measured by high school graduation. The information presented in this chapter provides an understanding of the related literature and is organized into three sections. The first section is a historical review of extracurricular activities used to understand why they started, how they have evolved, and the negative or positive impact on academic success. The second section is a review of the literature regarding how extracurricular activities have benefits for academic growth. The concluding section summarizes the literature discussed and the need for additional research.

Historical Review

A historical review of literature that relates to extracurricular activities indicates that these programs were important in early cultures. According to Casinger (2011), the first extracurricular activities started in the United States (U.S.) in the 19th Century at Yale and Harvard Universities. The activities began in the form of literacy clubs, which consisted of debate teams that provided academic and social activities for the students. In the U.S., though, students were interested in sports clubs and athletic clubs. At Yale and Harvard, these athletic clubs became popular, and fewer students were interested in the debate and literacy teams. Around the time that World War I began, these clubs took the form of other academic clubs, such as journalism and newspapers.

Extracurricular activities have been a long-standing tradition in schools since their inception. Extracurricular activities and sports participation have become a rite of passage for

those involved. Kingsman (2021) concluded that these extracurricular activities have been perceived as a positive factor that enhances the academic and social development of children. Students who are involved and choose to pursue sports participation are then labeled student-athletes. The term student-athlete was first coined in 1964 by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). (Kalman-Lamb et al., 2022). This term was used initially to prevent colleges and universities from paying athletes and has since become a term applied interchangeably with all students who play sports. Kalman-Lamb et al. explained that the term disguises a system in which the word *student* is put before the word *athlete* to indicate how the individuals are viewed. The focus is on the student who is an athlete and not an athlete who is a student.

Bartkus et al. (2012) described extracurricular activities as academic or nonacademic activities conducted under the school's supervision, but these activities occur outside of normal classroom time and are not part of the curriculum. The researchers also included that extracurricular activities do not involve a grade or come with a curriculum. Therefore, no academic grade is attached to participation. Lack of an academic grade keeps participation optional and allows anyone to take part.

High school extracurricular activities play a significant role in the lives of the young men and women who choose to participate in them. For some of these students, participation is about making connections before they graduate from high school. For others, participation in extracurricular activities in high school is an opportunity for them to achieve a sense of greatness and to help them to get an opportunity to participate at the college level or even the professional level. (Chu & Zhang, 2018). No matter the reason a student chooses to participate in

extracurricular activities in high school, extracurricular participation can have a lasting impact on how their life develops.

Theoretical Framework

Within extracurricular activities and attachments, the attachment theory is the study's theoretical framework. The attachment theory was developed in 1958 by Bowlby and later expanded by Ainsworth (Bretherton, 1992). Bretherton concluded that the theory of attachment stressed the existence of connections formed between a mother and a child and later looked at a child's ability to form connections with other individuals who were not their mother. These attachments, or lack of attachments, can play a significant role in the development of an individual as they begin to form their own thoughts, opinions, and behaviors.

For example, a student is not usually related to a coach or other members of a team, but these students form attachments and make connections together. In contrast, other students form bonds and relationships with team members not participating in the extracurricular activity. Major changes in one variable might make small changes in another. "The attachment theory enables the researchers to examine athletic participation and the development of attachments together" (Sukys et al., 2015).

Attachment Theory

The attachment theory is joint work done by Bowlby and Ainsworth (1991). The two theorists were able to take their separate ideas of children and development and tie them together into what is known today as *attachment theory*. Bowlby was originally focused on a child's separation from their mother. He was interested in what is now called *developmental psychology*. Bowlby, after following his peers, began to challenge some of their findings and looked at

children and family relationships. During this process, he also became interested in a child's separation from their family and the people the child felt close to. He stated that Bretherton explained that because separation is a clear-cut and undeniable event, these effects on the child and the parent-child relationship were easier to document.

Ainsworth (1940) began to explore connections between the parent and the child also. She began first with the security theory, which examined what makes a child feel safe and how a child feels safe. One of the major findings during that time was that a child needed to feel safe and secure, and this safety and security depended on the relationships established with parents before they were placed in unfamiliar situations. In her dissertation, Ainsworth (1940) described security as familial security in the early stages of life as a dependent type, forming a basis from which the individual can work out gradually, forming new skills and interests in other fields. Where familial security is lacking, the individual becomes handicapped by a lack of what might be called a secure base from which to work.

Ainsworth and Bowlby began working together in 1950 on Bowlby's work that had turned into the attachment theory. Ainsworth was exploring the early social behaviors of children and emulating the work she was seeing on her own. Together, and through work done on their own, Ainsworth and Bowlby were able to see connections between maternal separation and deprivation of young children. They looked at connections and attachments in the sense of a child and a parent. Infants and young children should experience a warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with their mother (or permanent mother substitute) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment from each other (Bowlby, 1951

Connections play a significant role in a student's desire to participate and succeed in an extracurricular activity and school. While multiple theories exist, the attachment theory, which focuses on relationships, is relevant to this study. The key components of the attachment theory include a safe haven, a secure base, proximity maintenance, and separation distress. These elements are the key tenants and major factors that are necessary and can be applied to determine what attachment looks like. These factors can help an individual form an attachment (Tropp, 2021).

Safe Haven

A safe haven, or a safe place/space, was described early in a child's life as being in the mother's or father's presence. (Verschueren, 2015; Zajac & Kobak, 2006). As children begin to grow, they find safety in other people and other places. Schools can be viewed as safe spaces for a child. For some individuals who grow up in difficult environments or do not have a stable home structure, these spaces can often be outside of the home. Collins and Feeney (2000) researched the attachment theory's perspective on social support processes. They examined how individuals found support in relationships. Collins and Feeney found that individuals were willing to speak on their issues, "those in better-functioning relationships engaged in more supportive interactions, and participants' perceptions of their interactions were biased by relationship quality and attachment style" (p.1053).

According to Zsolnai and Szabó (2021), schools can be viewed as a safe haven for many students. The researchers looked at three key turning points in an individual's life and when they occurred. The first turning point occurs at the age of two or three, which is when the tight connection between a child and their caregiver occurs. Bergin and Bergin (2009) described this

interaction with peers, as when others are around and if the child does not like the situation, can return to the caregiver. However, after turning three, the attachment begins to weaken because other people become more involved in their life. This period leads to the second turning point, early school age when the child begins entering school. At this age, many children find themselves in an unfamiliar environment, kindergarten, where, besides family attachments, new ones may develop with the educator and later also with peers (Sierra, 2012). The third turning point is at the adolescent stage. This stage is what Zsolnai and Szabó (2021) described as when children have an opportunity to find new attachment figures besides, or perhaps instead of, the first figure (who in most cases is the mother). Educators, teachers, and friends are all possibilities to form these new attachments.

Secure Base

A secure base is a place where someone can feel safe and able to relax (Zeifman & Hazan, 2008). Some individuals never get the experience of having a secure base, and this lack of a secure base can lead to problems as an adult. Leeanne (2012) observed the attachment theory and how secure bases worked through her work with a women's turnaround project. What she was able to determine about a secure base was that childhood attachment styles and the lack of a secure base in childhood can result in lack of self-esteem, poor trust in others, and a desire to find a secure base as an adult (Leeanne, 2012). The participants in the Leeanne study were women who were looking for secure bases and attachments in the wrong places. These experiences led to them building insecure attachments as they became adults. Leeanne was able to find that these women were looking for safe environments and key relationships. Leeanne

believed that secure bases created an environment of safety that promotes self-esteem, trust, self-reliance, and independence.

Oldfield et al. (2018) studied the emotional resilience of a secure base on attachments. Emotional resilience is the ability to deal with anxiety-related problems (Kozina, 2020). What Oldfield et al. (2018) found was that forming strong relationships with peers, but specifically on forming strong relationships with positive peers, is extremely effective to the mental health of an individual. They found that school connectedness was a significant predictor of mental health resilience when the outcome was total difficulties resilience (a global mental health measure). This relationship with peers demonstrated that increases in school connectedness predicted higher levels of resilient functioning.

Proximity Maintenance

Proximity maintenance is described as the closeness that a child has with their parents or other individuals that surround them. These roles could be filled by teachers, friends, coaches, neighbors, or other relatives. When a child does not have someone in this role, they feel alone and have trouble trusting others. Golish (2000) researched the proximity of children-parent relationships. Researchers who have studied close relationships have long realized that child-parent closeness is a critical component of human existence. Golish focused on how these relationships can change and some of the factors that may cause the change. She determined that seven different patterns can cause an individual's closeness with someone else to change over time. The seven factors are single major disruption, sustained low moderate degree of closeness, sustained, high degree of closeness, gradual increase in closeness, irregular cycle, disrupted

progress, and gradual decrease in closeness. These factors can all be described as ways in which the closeness of a relationship with a parent can change.

Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) explanation of "The Process Person Context Time," which looks at the amount of time that someone gets to be around someone else and the influences they can have on that individual, give a similar perspective as proximity maintenance. They described how a parent can be an influence regarding who is around their children unless the parents also are not around them. When the parents are not around, it leads to what Weiler et al. (2020) refer to as a broken village. In this situation, children are left with mentors who are there to lead them in whichever direction they see fit. Because of this situation, Ichikawa et al. (2017) mentioned that it is important for children to have positive role models.

Separation Distress

DeAnda et al. (2020) presented research that stated separation distress is associated with the child's ability to internalize or externalize their behaviors. This finding is based on how a child reacts to not being around a parent. Understanding this separation is critical to understanding children's adjustments to these situations where they may lose a parent. Attachment to a parental figure has been shown to promote social well-being for a child in college and can still be true for them later in life. Wright and Lyon (2021) believed that, by building on the effectiveness of social relationships and support among students, which may in turn increase their continued engagement and academic persistence, the separation distress will be less of an issue and struggle.   the separation distress will be less of an issue and struggle. the separation distress will be less of an issue and struggle.

Webb (2021) looked at separation distress from how children dealt with the loss of parents because of incarceration. In her research, Webb identified how exposure to parental incarceration affected children and ways that could help identify new and additional means to assist in developing positive life skills to influence positive behavior. The stresses and the issues of not having a parent can affect the emotional outcomes of many individuals. Webb examined these effects on children and found that involvement in extracurricular activities helped them to cope with the losses of parents due to incarceration. What she found was that the involvement in extracurricular activities did not replace the parent but instead helped the children to build relationships that impacted them positively.

Many children experience seeing a parent become incarcerated and the rate at which it happens continues to rise (Warren, et al., 2019). A concern that stems from this experience is young men who need positive role models. With their fathers in jail, these young men must turn to other sources for this positive interaction. Children who witness a parent's incarceration often live in distress and, because of this distress, they have trouble forming attachments (Nichols & Loper, 2012). These insecurities led to research that was done by Poehlmann-Tynan et al. (2017). The ability to have contact with positive individuals can play a significant role in how a child develops. Not all positive interactions come from the home. Sometimes parents place their children in programs to help them build relationships with others. Poehlmann-Tynan found that extracurricular activities, as well as other programs, were beneficial in helping males make positive choices to be productive members of society, avoid incarceration.

In many cases, attachments are formed between children and people who are not their parents. Attachment is the connection that one makes with something or someone. Moawad and

Ebrahem (2016) conducted research that showed these same attachments can be to video games, parents, cell phones, sports, and other objects. Developing connections can influence one's interests and how one likes to spend time (Su et al, 2009), a student who has become attached to or connected to a football team will understand the processes involved with being a member of that team and will take care of the necessary steps to remain a part of that team (Pollock, 2021).

Related Literature

This portion of the literature review provided a conceptual synthesis of existing literature relating to the influences of extracurricular activities.

Extracurricular Activities

Fischer and Theis (2014) explored the impact of extracurricular involvement in a school. They believed that being involved in extracurricular activities helped an individual to develop a sense of attachment to a school and the community. The main finding in their research was that this connection and form of attachment also depended on the quality of a school. In particular, the effects a student may have through extracurricular activities depended on how well those extracurricular activities were handled. Students and parents wanted to be in places where they felt comfortable, and the environments were positive.

Peer pressure can have both negative and positive effects on an individual. Facompré, Bernard, and Waters (2018) conducted research that examined the negative and disorganized attachments with individuals. The theoretical framework was the theory of attachment, which suggested that all individuals develop patterns of behavior and ways to process situations through the attachments gained from their mothers. Facompré et al. found that attachments could be odd or disorganized because of behaviors that were seen by parents. These types of

disorganized behaviors could include aggression. Therefore, aggression could be the way that the student deals with tough and uncomfortable situations, leading to problems forming connections and making attachments.

Research by Kulp, Pascale, and Grandstaff (2021) revealed that extracurricular activities have been a major part of high school and added to college students' campus life. First-year college students who participated in extracurricular activities were more prone to have higher attendance in class and to come back for a second year, the third year, and eventually graduate. The pressure that is put on schools from multiple stakeholders keeps today's higher education administrators accountable to justify spending and provide more support for students with fewer resources. While it is well known that student involvement in campus activities is positively associated with student outcomes, such as GPA, persistence, and retention, it is less understood how participation in certain types of events is related to these outcomes (Kulp et al, 2021).

What Kulp et al. (2021) found was a connection between participation and attendance. They realized that student involvement and engagement, with a specific focus on campus life activities, had a positive impact, as well as a positive relationship, with one another. Students who were involved tended to want to be engaged in the school, and because of this desire, they did what is needed to maintain that ability to stay in school. Staying in school requires students to maintain good grades to stay academically eligible to participate in campus life activities.

According to Pence and Dymond (2015), extracurricular activities for students were what made attending school fun. These activities give students a break throughout the day. These activities can range from the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC), where students push themselves physically with hopes of joining the armed forces after high school or even after

college (Meyer & Rinn, 2022). Students can also join something less physically demanding, such as an art club or chess club. Some students have other dreams of playing a professional sport, so their activity of choice is a sport that may allow them a scholarship to attend college for free or at a reduced cost. In all instances, students who participate in an extracurricular activity are surrounded by other students who share that common interest (Gallagher, 2018). Because of these special relationships, connections can be formed, and special tasks can be accomplished.

Negative attachments can and do happen quite often. Lo Coco (2016) determined that individuals who avoided attachments did so because they had negative relationships in the past. This avoidance of groups was seen both inside and outside the workplace. These failed and negative relationships can impact how an individual looks at future relationships. People who experience failure or negative relationships can be resistant to being a part of a group or avoiding attachments to protect their feelings. This avoidance can be an issue that students must deal with because of circumstances out of a teacher's control or the leader of the extracurricular activity control.

Academics

Extracurricular activities provide an outlet for students. Barrett (2021) investigated the effects of eliminating sports on graduation rates. From the findings, the author concluded that the elimination of sports could negatively affect graduation rates. The data showed that some parents who could afford to or who had other options chose to send their children to schools where sports were an option. Barrett's (2021) findings are consistent with research conducted by the U.S. Department of Health Services (2008). which revealed that sports played a vital role in graduation rates. Barrett (2021) also mentioned a significant problem they view with many

students who use sports as motivation to get to graduate stating that if sports is taken away, many students will lose interest in school. Taking the opinions of students into account is necessary regarding maintaining extracurricular activities in schools. If leaders do not consider the interests of students, they should at least provide other options for students who want to participate (Kravchenko & Nygård, 2022).

Lee (2008) researched the effects of students who participated in extracurricular sports and the effects that it had on their grades when they are in season and out of season. He determined there was a significant relationship between academic performance, measured by GPA, and athletic participation. Lee determined that athletic participation had a positive impact on academic performance and that impact may be attributable to the difference between male in-season and out-of-season performance, showing that males who were participating in an extracurricular sport were more likely to maintain good grades.

The impact of academics and extracurricular activities was examined by Ritchie (2018). Academics are the key to graduation, and because of the importance of academics, students must be successful in the classroom to graduate. So how do extracurricular activities impact grades? Sports teams, drama clubs, music, scouting, dance, and various subject-related clubs are a key part of the student school experiences. Although students who participate in activities are found to be more academically successful than those who do not, it is not clear whether participation is because the brighter and more energetic students are also the ones who more often participate in extracurricular activities. Ritchie (2018) looked at several variables regarding students and academic success while playing sports. The data were collected from the high school guidance office via the student information system. Student learning, the dependent variable, was

measured via the GPA for the 2013-2017 academic years. This information was included in the

student information system and published in the students'-report cards and progress reports. The

results supported the notion that extracurricular activities influenced student learning. This

analysis was based on the overall GPA averages for the students. This research was completed

with a mixed student population. Ritchie pointed out that a study that focuses on graduation rates

would be beneficial, as the Ritchie study focused on GPA. According to Ritchie, research

continues to indicate that participation in extracurricular activities affects student performance.

Ritchie (2018) looked directly at high school athletics and academics. The researcher

pointed out some of the similarities and connections needed to tie the benefits of extracurricular

activities to academics. His study is significant because there is a body of research regarding

public high school students and their participation in academic co-curricular activities and their

learning. Little or no data existed regarding this relationship in the Catholic high school

population. The study was completed within a Catholic school so the focus could be tied to

religious aspects also.

What impact do extracurricular activities have on a student's grade point average (GPA)?

Nix (2020) developed some answers to this question in his quantitative research completed with

high school students. Nix was able to find relationships between extracurricular activities,

school-sponsored sports, and academic achievement. The academic achievement looked at was

based on ACT scores, attendance, and class rank, with GPA also being a factor the researcher

considered. The researcher used 30 athletes and 30 non-athletes from two different high schools,

all participants from the same six classes. Based on the analysis of variance (ANOVA) used by

this researcher, Nix was not able to find any significance in connecting a sport to academic

achievement regardless of gender or with the genders. The researcher pointed out that the research was conducted at a predominately white school where all participants were white. Lack of diversity may have affected the outcome and was, therefore, a limitation.

Participation in Athletics

Rovie (2002) studied a sense of community and persistence in an asynchronous learning network. These networks were the connections and the attachments that an individual makes while being a student on campus. Rovie looked at students who were not on campus and tied their connections to what they were doing to promote their success. The researcher's main purpose was to determine if a relationship existed between a sense of community and learning in an educational environment. The researcher examined the connections that happened on campus among students, teachers, counselors, and other staff. These connections could be made online and in person. The ability to make a connection to what is happening on campus made people feel as if they were more involved in what was going on around them. This sense of connectedness helped individuals feel like they had a support system around them. With no support system, students tended not to care, and they did not want to be in that environment. A lack of support systems would lead to dropouts and students transferring to other institutions. Rovie established that this type of relationship can be built in person and with online students if the correct measures are taken amongst the staff to develop these relationships.

The theory of attachment, which is directly tied to the theory of connectedness and how students deal with connections, is also tied to sports psychology (Pantzer et al, and this connection impacts the development of a healthy sense of self and relationships in adulthood (Set, 2021). How athletes can handle being students, as well as athletes, and the responsibilities

that come with them can help students to achieve success. Some of these pressures are no different than what the average student experiences. Set examined attachment theory regarding relationships and how they can help one deal with depression. Set believed people attached to other people tended to have feelings of being able to deal with stressors. They can rely on themselves and their attachments to navigate through depression. However, development plays a crucial role in every individual, including how the individual was raised and what environment they grew up in. The relationships that the student has with the parent (guardian) as a child, what the child has seen, or what the child has experienced may influence how they react to certain difficulties. Learned behaviors begin with the parents at home, but, if a child is not getting skills that are useful at home, their reaction outside of the home can result in bigger issues.

When examining individuals, the roles that others have in their lives can influence how they turn out. Mirroring or giving the students a positive influence can be key to students' success. Students who play sports are around other students who want to be successful; they are also around coaches that serve as positive role models. A good coach or a good teacher can have a major influence on a child. These connections allow individuals to be a mentor to a student who may be experiencing a demanding situation (Sybing, 2019).

Rovai (2002) explored the connections that students make with others on campus. This connection can even be achieved with online students. He boldly stated that students become tied to their campus. Students make many connections within the campus because the campus becomes its community whether online or in person. Students spend many hours a day on campus, whether in high school or in college, and the connections that are made become particularly important. Rovai's correlation design was used to measure the strength and direction

of the relationship between variables. To determine the accuracy of perceived cognitive learning, multiple regression procedures were applied to the connectedness and learning sub-scales of the Classroom Community Scale. This article focused on the connections that can be made to keep students involved. It focused on how a community plays a part in success. The results indicated that the null hypothesis should be rejected, and the second alternative hypothesis was valid because there was a statistically significant positive relationship between a sense of community and cognitive learning in an online graduate school environment.

Students want to feel as if they belong to something (Ahn & Davis 2020). All people want to feel like they are successful at contributing to the success of a cause. When one cares about others, they try to give extra effort to excel in tasks so that others may be proud of their accomplishments. Hewitt (2020) tried to address the perfectionism theory and the attachment theory. Perfectionism comes in a way as an attempt as humans to please others. It is striving to be perfect. Babies begin to strive for perfection when they are young, and the strive for perfection continues to be a part of people as they age. Hewitt believed an understanding of perfectionism is an ever-evolving process and one that is continuously informed by all the streams of research. This effort can be seen in extracurricular activities and in the classroom, but it can also be seen in how one carries themselves in life.

Children want to fit in and feel as if they belong to something. When students are involved in school, they tend to enjoy themselves more than students who are not involved. King et al. (2021) explored the relationships between student success and their participation in extracurricular activities. The qualitative research design focused on interviews and surveys with over 600 students. They found that the ability to make connections played a significant role in

how students viewed their community and how it contributed to their success. King stated that one strategy for balance is finding friends and community through on- and off-campus extra-curricular activities. Friendships and peer relationships are positively associated with students' ability to deal with the stresses of attending university, a finding broadly supported in the literature.

Students expressed that participating in on-campus activities helped them to connect with other students. This connection helped them to become more interested in what was going on in school. The research completed by King et al. (2021) indicated that all students should have the opportunity to participate in out-of-class activities. This research does not reflect that all students will participate, only that they should have the opportunity to do so.

With students wanting to attach themselves to something, teachers and schools can provide positive opportunities for the students. Providing these opportunities is the responsibility of the schools and the community to give back to the students. One of the suggestions given by King (2021), as his research described ways for universities to encourage student engagement, is to formally support, or in some cases, continue to support, campus organizations that offer opportunities for students, including student unions, student-led groups, sports and recreation programs, and student support groups. Even though King's research focused on college students, the study can also be relevant to high school students' participation in extracurricular activities.

The connections and attachments that students make can lead to positive and negative relationships. These relationships can hold significant importance in students' lives. Students need relationships with their parents, but they also need relationships with other students,

coaches, teachers, and school personnel. However, some students may encounter relationships that set them up for failure.

Graduation

The significance of graduating and what it means to student-athletes and parents is incredibly special. For some students, they will be the first in their family to graduate from high school, and for all high school graduates, graduation is a step toward whatever the next stage in their life will be. (Vargas-Madriz, & Konishi, 2021). What graduation means in terms of productivity as a citizen is that graduates are ahead of some other people already. In the hierarchy of paperwork, a high school diploma is viewed as higher than a GED, including someone who has not graduated from high school. (Hoang, 2020).

Morris, (2020) was interested in finding ways to meet the needs of black male student-athletes, ways to help students be successful and not just because of their abilities. "The results found that the current literature does not adequately address or focus on Black male students' literacy development" (p. 29). Particularly, there are courses that some students tend to struggle with. For Morris, being able to identify these courses and provide the necessary assistance for students helped to improve the already below-average success rate of black male student-athletes.

Sanderson et al. (2018) explored the use of collegiate athletics and how athletic programs have helped college students to continue success at their level. The student involvement and feeling a part of something was a major part of their reaching college graduation. The health of the students who participated in athletics was also positive because they had a support system to lean on. This support system was also a factor in the students wanting to participate in athletics.

The author noted that participation was a big reason the academic success was higher for the student-athletes.

Heath et al. (2022; 2018) acknowledged that extracurricular activities in high school can carry a student into college. Some of these same clubs and sports are available to students on a college campus. However, students must graduate from high school to get to a college campus to participate. In fact, how can one's participation in high school extracurriculars impact the completion of a bachelor's degree? This question was asked by Gardner et al. (2020). What they found was that students who participated in three or more activities in college tended to take longer than the average of four years to graduate from college. Gardner et al. found positive outcomes between students who participated in extracurricular activities and their academic outcomes.

Students who are not treated fairly or are not a part of something often struggle in high school, and these struggles may lead to them dropping out. Maltreated students have a higher dropout rate than other students (McDermott et al., 2019). School connectedness plays a large part in how successful an individual student can be. Lemkin et al. (2018) studied abused children and looked at their experiences in school. Seeing elements, such as lower reading scores and poor academic outcomes, were just a few of these results. Because of these specific reasons, Lemkin et al. saw that students who suffered in school often looked at dropping out as their only option. Lemkin et al. noted that school connectedness, including supportive relationships with adults at school and participation in school clubs, may help support educational success for youth who have been maltreated.

Parent Involvement

According to Patterson et al. (2021), it is important for parents to be involved in a child's education. In many cases, parents are heavily involved in their child's education, but in some cases, the responsibility for education lies primarily with the teachers and school personnel. What can parents do? What role does a parent play in a child's life when it comes to their education and participation in activities? How are parents involved in intricate factors in a child's life? Children are attached to their parents at an early age. Children want to please their parents and with their success, they make their parents happy (Kohlhoff et al., 2020).

Duman et al. (2018) examined some of the factors that parents look for when sending their children to school. The findings of this study revealed that parents choose schools for their children based on the following reasons. The children were better served in the school because of the programs. The programs and features offered by schools appealed to most of the participants. The schools had strong academic programs that would help the student after school. A good and strong school climate and culture were present for the parents to witness. The setting embraced diversity and multicultural atmospheres that made the environment welcoming for many students. A safe and secure place was present for the students. Lastly, the instruction was focused on a small and caring environment. According to the case study by Duman et al., the perception of parents is key when choosing schools. The research was based on 22 multi-racial parent responses about school climate and the choice of school. Duman et al. interviewed these parents and collected the information. The most significantly reported values were teachers' quality, academic program, and discipline and safety. Parent involvement and communication, school culture, and class size were reported as being especially important in

addition to the extracurricular activities. Duman et al. concluded that parents value strong academic programs for their children.

How parents are involved with their child's education, with the work they do with schools to support academic success and development, impacts the educational success of the child (Hill et al., 2016). Mohebbi et al.(2016) studied parental involvement and how parent involvement may influence the relationships that a student builds in school. The mental health of a student and how they handle certain situations can be impacted by what they see and experience. The influences and how situations have been handled around them become particularly important. Mohebbi et al. regarded parental bonding as a factor when it came to bullying in schools. The perpetrators of bullying reported lower levels of maternal and paternal care than victims of bullying and non-involved students, higher levels of paternal overprotectiveness than non-involved students, higher levels of paternal authoritarianism (or lower levels of autonomy) than victims and non-involved students, and higher levels of maternal authoritarianism than victims. For students who were able to show signs of school bonding, perpetrators of bullying reported lower levels of school and teacher attachment than the other two groups and victims reported lower levels of school and teacher attachment than non-involved students.

What children experience at home reflects how they are outside of the home is a true statement for some individuals (Marsh et al., 2020). Relationships and early life events can affect the behavioral tendencies of children. Christian et al. (2016; 2017) believed that specific life events contributed to the development of certain characteristics. They believed that more research was needed to look at the environment of individuals and how these environments could

influence current and future traits, looking at, not just their childhood, but what school is like for them.

Parents and families are also affected by the funding and budget cuts that come from school systems that remove sports. In fact, when schools experience budget cuts, parents, families, and community members must cover the costs of the students' participation. According to Singer (2015), the University of Michigan Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health, 51% of families with an annual household income of $60, 000 or more could afford to have their children participate in high school sports, while only 30% of students with a household income of less than $60, 000 were able to fund their children's participation in such activities. The children from low socioeconomic households were on the sidelines because their household incomes could not be stretched to accommodate sports-related expenses. The key message is that schools should continue to work to minimize the negative impact of sports participation fees by communicating the rationale for participation fees, ensuring that low-income families are aware of waiver options, and developing options for children who do not meet waiver criteria but are at risk of dropping out of sports. Budgets for extracurricular activities are important in many communities.

A student who lives in a one-parent household may not have some of the advantages that a two-parent household can afford. Life may be difficult, and they may miss certain amenities that others can afford. Due to students having to *pay to play,* which is a term used by Eyler et al. (2019, p. E27) in their study on participation fees, less fortunate students cannot participate. This situation is difficult for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and for parents who want their children to have positive experiences. For this reason, funding for these types of programs

is critical. The funding for these programs can help keep a good student from making poor decisions.

Coach/Teacher Involvement

According to Enskär et al (2021; 2020;) for some students, the support they receive from people outside of the home is all the positive interaction they encounter. The conditions of the school provide them with meals and a safe environment. A school can also provide students with a vacation, of sorts, to get away from some of the troubles that they encounter at home. This safe space is created by the environment that teachers and coaches create for students to be successful in (Christensen et al., 2021).

Students achieve more when teachers and coaches create a positive learning environment that allows them to get involved and is intertwined throughout daily learning tasks. This involvement allows students to learn to think positively about themselves, their peers, and the material they are learning. According to research by Premo et al. (2018), a positive learning environment is one that means that a student feels comfortable, has a sense of rapport with their teacher and peers, and believes they can be successful. The data analysis showed that those students who received these types of support performed higher academically than other students.

Somerset and Hoare (2018) researched students who participated in athletics, and they concluded that children who participate in sports have shown to be advantaged academically. An effective teacher or coach who implements a positive learning environment, supports the promotion of psychological safety, a positive self-image, feelings of belonging, purposeful behavior, and a sense of personal competence (Tas, 2016) helped students become successful.

Thomas (2022) examined the lack of male role models in the lives of many young males. He referenced a spiritual man in his research by stating that coaching is a ministry of sorts, and it is not religious in the terms that many of us would quote the Bible. However, it is a way for many young men to learn, be guided, and be surrounded by men who live righteously. In fact, Thomas stated that what teachers and coaches alike do is lead and put others' wants and needs before their own. These teachers and coaches do it through their love and their actions toward the children.

Peer Relationships

Participation in organized activities may be one way to promote friendships (Ettekal et al, 2019). Sekhri (2019) described some of the benefits of participation in athletics as having better overall fitness, better emotional and psychological health, and improved social skills. These new and improved social skills can be used to meet and talk to people who share the same interests. The role that sports can have on an individual builds self-esteem by helping to give individuals a sense of connection and accomplishment in achieving a goal.

The key components of social bonding and attachment to family and school come from the commitment to the pathways used for achievement. (Homer et al.,2020). Students being able to socialize and make friends come from the belief that these connections become valuable to one's success. When children see parents in a positive light, they learn that these bonding moments are safe and good. They also learn how to trust others and how to have a good relationship with others in different environments, such as school. When parents have not built this foundation, students struggle to trust other students also.

Through participation in extracurricular activities, students developed strong relationships with peers and their adult coaches, strengthening their appreciation for challenging aspects in the learning process (Gorski, 2021). Peer relationships are a large component when participating in sports and going to school, and these peer relationships have a major impact on the academic development of a student (Ariani, 2017). Peer groups can provide opportunities for further interactions with other students. These interactions can lead to friendships with similar peers. Developed friendships can help build confidence in individuals they need to succeed.

Summary

The literature review presented connections, attachments, and studies relevant to the current topic. The theories of connectedness and attachment tie into high school graduation and how playing a sport can assist with making these connections. These connections and attachments do not imply that by playing a sport a student will graduate. However, playing sports is one method that can contribute to a student achieving the goal of graduation. If sports participation leads to graduation, then sports should be a tool that is continued to be used. This use of sports is tied to the phrase used by principals that emphasizes walking across the field for graduation, "Meet me at the 50." (Morris, 2020, p. 27). The use of funds that school systems receive should continue to be used to help students participate in extracurricular activities. By removing these funds, a student's success and hope of graduation may be removed.

The Bible tells us that people should help one another and treat their neighbors like they wish to be treated. "Whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him." (Colossians 3:17). Children need considerable attention and time to be successful, but the most essential elements they need are love and

relationships. Positive relationships and the attachment to positive activities can help a student

achieve the goal of high school graduation (Fitzgerald et al.,2019).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand how participation in high school sports influences high school graduation. The theory guiding this study is that students who play sports or participate in an extracurricular activity have a better chance of achieving graduation because of attachments and connections that are made. This study was focused on a high school in Northeast Georgia. Interviews and group discussions were held to get responses from individuals.

Research Method and Design Appropriateness

A qualitative case study was best for this research because it looked at a group of individuals and how they are affected by what is happening around them (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth described a case study as an in-depth study of a bounded system. In a case study, the researcher must look for patterns of an individual, a group, or multiple groups. Creswell and Poth suggested selecting accessible cases, ordinary, or unusual cases. The researcher reported the meaning of the case and whether the meaning comes from learning about the issue or learning about the unusual situation.

Sensitivity to the case's needs or multiple cases being studied is also important, and the researcher must be able to access data and report on the cases being studied. Care must also be given to ensure that all cases feel comfortable and willing to talk in these interviews. For one-on-one interviews, the researcher needs the participant to not be hesitant and to share more details. The less articulate and shy participant will produce a challenge that will lead to insufficient data.

This type of research is useful to look at the influences of extracurricular involvement on high school graduation. The theory of attachment reflects the connections made by high school students through their participation in extracurricular activities, based on research done by Ainsworth and Bowlby (1992). Through their research, Ainsworth and Bowlby found that connections and attachments allow people to find meaning in the activities they participate in, and because of this participation, people form bonds and build relationships. This research explores these relationships as motivation for athletes to graduate from high school.

Qualitative research was appropriate for this design because the focus was to understand the influences of individuals who are involved in a football program in high school. A case study allows for the exploration of individuals and to explore the individual reasons, opinions, motivations, and thoughts. To get these opinions and thoughts, I used a focus group and in-depth one-on-one interviews which will provide rich, thick descriptions of athletes' experiences and their motivations for finishing high school. The focus group discussion allowed me to hear the thoughts and opinions of the participants as they converse with one another about the influences that participating in football in high school had on their persistence to graduate. The interviews will allow for freedom in their responses and allow for more openness.

A focus group was used instead with one-on-one interviews to create a feeling of togetherness. Having a large group conversation can be more efficient in some areas. According to O.Nyumba et al. (2018), the use of focus groups and group discussions have helped in several qualitative research settings. Coenen et al. (2012) compared interviews to focus groups and some of the advantages of focus groups are that it generates more ideas, including participants supporting one another in sharing sensitive information. The one-on-one interviews can be the

more personal thoughts and feelings that are shared by the individuals. The main topic of

discussion in the O.Nyumba et al. (2018) article is establishing what role the researcher takes in

these discussions. Does the researcher ask questions like an investigator or does the researcher

facilitate and moderate the discussion? In my role as the researcher, I will blend the two

methods, moderating and investigating, to ask questions that can steer the conversation.

I will also record the group discussion. While recording this discussion, I will take notes

about meaningful words and phrases that are mentioned during the conversation. Recording and

note-taking will allow me to watch the discussion and pull-out essential elements for analysis.

The third method of data collection was journal entries. Each participant was asked to write

down how they felt about their experience playing football in high school. Getting a journal from

each individual participant will give me some of the basic information required like age and

whether they enjoyed playing football over their four years of high school. This journal was read

and examined for common themes and similar experiences.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of recent graduates who participated in football for at least four

years during high school?

Sub Question One

How did connectedness to a high school sports program influence motivation to

graduate?

Sub Question Two

*What are the academic experiences of high school athletes who play football?***Site**

The location of this research was a high school in Northeast Georgia. The reason I chose this location was because they have had issues where funding has been decreased and the threat of eliminating extracurricular activities has come up at board meetings. This high school is also designated as a Title One school, which means that additional funds are needed based on the low-income of families in the district. The high school's population, grades 9-12, is 1,928 students, and it offers opportunities to participate in many extracurricular activities. Among this population of students, 51% are male and 49% are female. White (56%), Black (15%), Hispanic (17%), Asian (6%), Multiracial (5%), and Native American/Alaskan Native (1%). Students with Special Needs (14%), Gifted (18%), and Limited English Proficient (3%).

Participants

Participants for this study were recent high school graduates who participated in the school's football program. All participants are over the age of 18. The group discussion was held online which allowed them to remain at home in a safe and secure area so that the students can feel comfortable.

The participants in this study were 6-10 athletes, recent graduates, who participated in the football program at a high school in Northeast Georgia. The students were selected at random from a school in Northeast Georgia. These students' ethnicities were varied to reflect the school's demographics as much as possible.

Researcher Positionality

I am a special education teacher, co-defensive football coordinator, and head track and field coach, and I have been working in special education since 2012. My educational career began as

a paraprofessional and coach. I have since entered the classroom as a full-time special education teacher. Since I have been a teacher, I have also coached both football and track and field. I have served as the co-defensive coordinator for the football program since 2019 and am incredibly involved with the recruiting process for both sports football and track and field. I have served as the recruiting coordinator since 2017. These positions have helped me to meet with many college coaches and help students get the opportunity to play sports to continue their education at a higher level. Sports participation could change the circumstances of a student's future.

Interpretive Framework

In social constructivism, individuals seek an understanding of the world in which they live and work, developing subjective meanings of their experiences (Creswell and Poth, 2018). This study can be used to show the importance of making connections and forming attachments. The theory of attachment focuses on connectedness, which shows how individuals can be successful due to the connections that they make (Daniels & Wang, 2019). As graduation rates are always a concern, finding ways to improve graduation rates can be critical (Mills, 2021). The sense of feeling connected can play a critical role in one's success. By looking at the use of extracurricular activities as motivation and ways to make connections, the benefits of participation become apparent. The researcher must rely solely on the participants' views and experiences in this situation.

I was able to talk to students who participated in football. From these interviews, I gathered a sense of why they participated and what they got from this activity. I am interested in hearing the ideas and thoughts that these students have on their own success. By giving them a platform

to have a discussion, I will hopefully allow them to be comfortable and express their opinions on what they feel got them to graduate from high school.

Philosophical Assumptions

The ontological issues related to this study came from the participants' different realities. By having multiple participants participate in interviews and group discussions, different perspectives may be given on the outlooks of how they feel. A researcher must also report on the differences that are described by the participants in the study and not just the similarities (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

From the epistemological assumption of conducting qualitative research, the researcher can have a relationship with the participants. In fact, they are encouraged to become as close as possible. Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that it is important for researchers to conduct research where the participants live and work. This closeness gives a better understanding of what the participants are saying. The longer the researcher is in the environment, the more they will know what they know from first-hand experience.

The axiological assumption in qualitative research brings the values of the researcher to the study. The researcher is allowed to "position themselves" into the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 47). The researcher's presence should be felt in the text, and the storied voice should be an interpretation and presentation of the participants. The researcher must be willing to admit that some values are present, and if they have biases, they must be able to state them as well.

Researcher's Role

My role in this research is to facilitate and ask questions. As a teacher and a coach, I have authority over students, but I have no impact on the grades of the students that I work with or

control over their playing time based on their participation. The only authority that I have is that of a mandated reporter in the state of Georgia. If a student does something that could be harmful to I or someone else, I have a responsibility to report it. As someone who coaches, and as a former student athlete, I do believe that this research on how the athletes feel is needed because it will give a better understanding of why extracurricular activities are an important part of schools. I have been able to develop good relationships with my coworkers and the students in the building. Due to this connectedness, students enjoy being able to talk to me and to join the organizations.

Procedures

Internal Review Board (IRB) approval must be requested and granted to begin this study. Once this research project had been granted ethics approval from Liberty, the research began After gaining permission, the next step was to send out emails to former students about participating. Once the emails were answered, I sent out the sample interview questions so that the participants could see the questions. Once we scheduled the group discussion, I asked students the questions listed and listen to the responses in the moment. My role was to facilitate, ask questions, and to listen more than I interjected. I recorded the conversations so that I could listen to them again later. Once the conversation ended, I transcribed the recording so that I could start analyzing the focus group data.

After the group discussion, I reached out to the participants by phone to request one-on-one interviews. This one-on-one time allowed someone who may have felt left out or that they left something out to be able to get their voice heard. Creswell and Poth (2018) also describe this one-on-one time as an opportunity for a participant to be more open and vulnerable.

Recruitment Plan

My plan for recruitment was to contact former football players by email and telephone to gain participants to request one-on-one interviews. I only reached out to individuals who were 18 years of age and older and were no longer a part of the program. They must also have graduated from high school to participate.

<p style="text-align:center;">**Data Collection Plan**</p>

In this research, the data collection plan included focus group discussion, one-on-one interviews, and journal entries.

Interview Questions

Individual questions were asked through one-on-one interviews. These interviews were completed via online video call. This method of data collection gave participants an opportunity to explain how participation in the high school football program influenced their academic success. Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that one-on-one interviews can be beneficial because the interviews allow participants to relate to the content and the researcher. With the connections, the participants are more likely to give rich, thick responses to the interview questions.

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your sports participation in high school. - CQ

2. Tell me about your academic grades in high school while you were playing sports. - SQ2

3. How did playing football motivate you to keep your grades up? - SQ2

4. How did playing football help you to feel connected with your community? - SQ1

5. How did playing football help you to feel connected with your school? - SQ1

6. How did playing football help you make friends? - SQ1

7. What was your ultimate goal of playing sports while in high school? - CQ

8. What were your other activities outside of school? (Work, chores, none?)- CQ

9. How much of your time (hours) did your sport occupy? - CQ

10. How much of your time did your academic study occupy outside of class? - SQ2

11. Tell me about the support you received from your parents. - SQ1

12. What else would you like to contribute to this study on sports participation and graduation? - CQ

Interview Question *Data Analysis Plan*

Each interview were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts weresent to the participants for verification of accuracy. After each transcript was verified, analysis began. Each transcript was read multiple times, and significant words and phrases were coded. The coded data was transferred to a codebook in Excel. The codes were collapsed into categories, and cross-case analyzed with each transcript. The categories were then be collapsed into themes to answer the research questions.

Focus Group

The focus groups was conducted with four participants. I recorded the responses and the interactions of the group. This process was transcribed through a video transcription application. This process allowed me to focus on the responses given to facilitate the conversation as opposed to simply sitting and taking notes. I asked associated questions to those that were in the interviews, but the participants had a platform to elaborate in a group setting. This process allowed for an open, deep, and reflective conversation. Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that this

kind of environment may allow individuals to be more open because they are comfortable, but it could also have a negative effect, and the shy participants will not give as much information.

Focus Group Questions

1. What was your experience like being a football player? - CQ

2. What did you gain from playing football? - SQ2

3. How did playing a sport help you make friends? - SQ1

4. How did being connected to the football program influence your motivation to graduate? -SQ1

5. How did playing sports motivate you to keep your grades up? - CQ

   a. Good grades are necessary for graduation. I want to start off by acknowledging the outlook on the importance of graduation and grades.

6. What were the academic experiences of high school athletes who play football? - SQ2

7. How did playing a sport help you to feel connected with your community? - CQ

8. What was the support like as a football player and who supported you? - SQ1

9. What else would you like to contribute to this study on sports and graduation? - CQ

Focus Group Analysis Plan

Data analysis in this qualitative research study will occur through collecting data in the form of interviews and focus groups. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), case studies allow researchers to focus on key issues for a better understanding of the case. One strategy is to look at issues that are common in each case. With multiple cases, a detailed description of each case, with analysis, followed by a thematic analysis across the cases, called a cross-case analysis, and assertions or an interpretation of the case's meaning. The researcher look edfor keywords used by

the cases in the study. The researcher also compared the experiences of the cases. The goal was to understand the case, how it worked, what it was, and how it interacted with the real world.

Journal Entry

The journal entry prompt was for the participants to describe their time playing football in high school. Having the participants provide a journal allowed them to write their feelings about their football experience. I was able to see what their thoughts were. I used the journal entry to understand the thoughts of the participants and get some background information on who they are. Specifically, I used the journals to gain knowledge of the participants and look for similar words that they may used to describe their experience as student-athlete.

Journal Data Analysis Plan

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the key is to define a case that can be bounded or described within certain parameters, such as a specific place and time. Typically, case study researchers study current, real-life cases that are in progress so that they can gather accurate information about what is happening in real-time. A journal writing prompt allows the researcher an in-depth look at the process of how past athletes viewed their experience. The researcher made notes on the tone, language, and vocabulary used in these journals. The researcher reviewed these writings looking for similar experiences among the former students. After the journaling was completed, I reviewed the journal data and start the coding process. The codes were examined and collapsed into categories and themes.

Data Synthesis

Data analysis from this study came in the form of collecting data from journals, a focus group, and one-on-one interviews. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), focus groups

are advantageous and the interactions among the interviewees will yield the best information. When all data has been collected and analyzed, the data from all three sources will be merged and triangulated. By using the journal, one-on-one interviews, and focus group there was information from them all that related to one another and can be compared. Looking of similar language that was used or similar experiences will be how the data will be triangulated using the methods. The similarities will increase the validity and reliability across the methods.

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

Adler (2022) contended that trustworthiness is crucial to assessing qualitative research and that its most important aspect is transparency. Not only should the research techniques being used be precise, but also the epistemological and theoretical bases of the work must be explicitly apparent. Thus, the data, the analysis, and the conclusions are all generated from the researcher.

Credibility

McGinley et al. (2021) stated that credibility is the first criterion for trustworthiness. I can include member checking and peer-debriefing. This approach includes taking data, analyses, and interpretation back to the participants to assess the findings' accuracy and credibility (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Dependability and Confirmability

For this research, I used data from multiple sources including a journal writing prompt, one-on-one interviews, and a focus group discussion. According to Forero et al. (2018), the goal of dependability is to ensure that the findings of this qualitative inquiry are repeatable if the inquiry occurred within the same cohort of participants, coders, and context. In this study, I used video recordings to retrace the process of my research findings. I also used a transcription device

included in the video recordings to make the transcription process easier. Confirmability is also described by Forero et al. (2018) as a method to extend the confidence that the results would be confirmed or corroborated by other researchers.

Transferability

The criterion of transferability helps to establish the applicability construct, which describes research that can apply findings to people other than the researchers themselves or those specific individuals who participated in the study, as expressed by Hammarberg et al. (2016). Transferability is completed by giving a descriptive set of results and findings that fully describe the work that was being completed in detail. Information received from this research could be used for future research, as it pertains to extracurricular activities and motivation to graduate. The findings of this study will be beneficial to educators and educational stakeholders.

Ethical Consideration

To ensure proper ethical considerations, I have first obtained IRB approval before collecting any data for this study. I also received permission from the interviewed participants. I collected consent forms from each research participant and asked their permission to record videos. Ethical considerations for this research study consist of privacy, data storage, and confidentiality of the participants. Because of this, I made sure that all documents obtained were kept confidential. I also used pseudonyms to identify the site and all participants. The participants were informed that there were minimal risks associated with this study, and if desired, they could withdraw from the study at any time. The participants were also informed that their personal information, such as name, home address, and contact information, would be kept confidential. I conducted this research study with participants whom I do not hold any

supervisory control. All data transferred electronically, such as notes and audio recordings, were stored and password protected.

Summary

This chapter presented the methods used for this study. l. Included in this chapter were the research design, research questions, setting, and researcher's role. The chapter also included a discussion of the participants' selection and how they were chosen to participate. A description of the instrumentation and data collection was also discussed. Data were collected through individual interviews, a focus group, and journal entries. This chapter concluded with a discussion of trustworthiness, the credibility of findings, dependability and confirmability, transferability, and ethical considerations of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR: Data Analysis and Results

Overview

The purpose of chapter four is to present the findings of the interviews, journal entries, and focus group to provide an in-depth understanding of the viewpoints pertaining to how participation in football for four years influenced athletes' ability to graduate from high school. The data collection and data analysis methods took place over a one-month period and were previously described in Chapter Three. This chapter provides a detailed narrative about individual participants, using pseudonyms, and how the themes were developed. Additionally, in chapter four, I present and describe the themes uncovered by the research and the research questions used to guide this research. Themes that emerged through the analysis of the data include:

- Connections

- Academics

- Support

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how former high school students perceived participation in four years of high school football influenced their ability to graduate from high school. The central research question guiding this study was:

What are the experiences of recent graduates who participated in football for at least four years during high school?

SQ1: How did connectedness to a high school sports program influence motivation to graduate?

SQ2: What are the academic experiences of high school athletes who played football?

Participants

Participants for this study were recruited through a social media post on Twitter. The study included former student-athletes that played football for four years at a high school in Northeast Georgia. Seven participants who played four years of football at the high school were interviewed. In addition, all seven participants were asked to answer a journal writing prompt. Four of the seven former football players participated in a focus group. All the participants were male, and their ages ranged from 18 to 32. Each of the participants involved in the interviews and focus group are described, using pseudonyms.

JS is an African American male who was 19 years old at the time of the interview. He is currently a first-year student in college. Based on his interview and journal writing, he played several sports including football, basketball, and ran track in high school. He also worked for two years at a local restaurant during his high school years. He was able to maintain a GPA of 3.8. He mentioned that he was motivated by football because he wanted to play in college and because of that goal, he knew he had to maintain his grades. The connections he felt were in the building with other students as they would come and speak to him and show him respect for what he was able to do. Playing sports was a way of helping him get his name out in school and in the community. He referred to the friends that he made playing football as a family. He used football to keep himself busy, and his parents supported his decision to do so. They gave him chores and instilled responsibility in him. He mentioned that those responsibilities helped him with his grades and playing football. Although he acknowledged the time constraints, he understood how to balance academics, work, and athletics. He wanted to contribute that his main goal was getting to college, so he had to stay out of trouble.

OS is an African American male who was 19 years old at the time of this interview. He is currently a first-year student in college. In high school, he participated in football, ran track, and played basketball. During his high school years, he recalled making As and Bs and never making a C. He described a drop in his grades while he was playing sports, but at the end of the season, he would always get them back to where they needed to be. His motivation to play sports was also his motivation to keep his grades up. He wanted to play football in college but also knew that just having good grades would open other doors and help him. He worked a job for two years while in high school, and that commitment took up some of the time that he normally would have to study. He stated that paying attention in class made it easier for him not to have to study. He believed his connections with administration and teachers were more of an element of respect. OS knew that if he were to get in trouble that his coaches would be made aware of it. The support he received from his family was important to him, and it came from his parents and his siblings. He believed that playing a sport motivated him to keep his grades up. It was about being able to go somewhere in life. The friends he had in high school were like family to him as well. They all had the same goals.

AC is an Asian American male who was 19 years old at the time of this study. He is currently a first-year student in college, and he plays football and runs track collegiately. In high school, he participated in football, wrestled, and ran track. While in high school, he was an Advanced Placement student and would study one to two hours a night to maintain his academic standing. He said that a foundation was set at home that if his grades were not good, then he was not going to be playing any sports. He described the connections with the community and in the building as feeling a part, because the athletes were always doing activities outside of athletics

for others. He felt like the support that he received was because he was an athlete. People he did not know would speak to him and spark conversations with him about the games. He said playing football helped him make friends and that most of his current friends are still those with whom he played high school football. His goal was to play football in college, and because of that goal, he knew he needed to take care of his academics and perform well athletically. His parents allowed him to work if his grades did not suffer. AC had a lot of support at home. He believed that being a multi-sported athlete can be beneficial, but it requires the student to have to stay on top academically and athletically fit. The coaches can contribute but the individual must to do the work.

TH is an African American male who was 18 years old at the time of this interview. He participated in wrestling, football, and ran track in high school. Academically his guardians were both educators, so they stayed on top of him about his grades. However, he stated that he did not study unless his grades were slipping, and his guardians would require him to study for one to two hours nightly. He was a B and C student who was motivated to do his schoolwork because he wanted to be able to help the team while playing sports. TH's goal was to play football in college. He viewed the community and school connections as fans and as an element of popularity. The people he considered his true friends were the ones with whom he played football. He believed that those friends were friends for life. His family instilled values in him, so he worked a job, participated in community activities, and mentored the younger kids' and students around him. His family supported him even when they did not agree with his decisions. TH contributed that playing a sport placed people around him who cared about his success. It gave him an opportunity to meet good people and make good connections.

HA is a Caucasian male who at the time of this interview was 30 years old. While in high school he participated in competitive cheerleading, wrestling, baseball, and played football. Academically, he graduated with a 4.0 GPA and stated that he just paid attention in class and did not study much. The connections he made in the community were great; he would go to local schools and perform community service. He mentioned that community involvement was a huge deal. He indicated that he received some special treatment because of who he was as an athlete, but overall, the other kids respected him. HA felt like a symbol/representation for the school. He built strong relationships with his teammates as he called them part of his family. HA felt like football was a wonderful place to make friends because the team spends so much time together. His overall goal was to be able to play football in college, but it did not work out for him. His family dynamics were unconventional; his dad lived in Florida, and his mom worked late hours as a nurse. Both parents planned around his schedule and were able to make it to all his football games. His father would stay in town every weekend to hang out with him. HA believed that academics and athletics go hand in hand because a football player cannot play if they are not eligible. The ability to play a sport is a big motivator, and the player can use the motivation to up their grades.

ZC is a Caucasian male who at the time of the study was 32 years old. He participated in wrestling, baseball, and football while in high school. He did not feel like the standards were terribly high for academics while in high school. ZC did not struggle to maintain good grades. He would study an average of five to six hours a week to maintain good grades. The connection he had to the community as a member of the team was that people knew who he was. Because of that recognition, he was held to a high standard in the community and inside the building. He

mentioned being booed at a local parade because the team was not playing well that season.

When the team was successful, the support was better in the community and in the building. The

connections and friendships he made while playing football were more so with his position group

because they spent the most time together. The players still call and check on each other from

time to time and get together when they can. ZC described the football team as a family. His goal

started as getting an opportunity to play in college, but later ZC just wanted to make sure he was

doing what was best for the team. He described his family support as they had his back 100% of

the time. He felt like it was too much of a flaw, as he wished they would have told him to be

more realistic about his dreams. His parents encouraged him to write down his goals, work and

maintain good grades, and to be a good person. He saw the structure of sports being a key factor

to his getting good grades and being on a team.

     AC is a Hmong American and 23 years old at the time of this study. He participated in

track and football in high school. Academically, AC was an Honors level student who maintained

a 3.8 GPA. He said he studied when he felt it was necessary because his mom was strict about his

grades. He said he did not pay attention to the connections in the community, but he remembered

getting discounts at certain restaurants because he was a team member. AC also stated that he

worked and got discounts because he knew people in the community. He felt like he made some

good friends in high school but that he chose his friends because of how they carried themselves,

not because of the sports they played. He spent time together with most guys who played sports.

His family supported him in many ways. He felt that because he was the oldest child that played

sports in his family that he was a role model to his younger brother. AC felt that playing sports

helped him to keep his grades up. Playing football provided structure, but it also required him to manage his time in a constructive way when he was not working and hanging out.

Focus Group

The focus group consisted of four football players who participated for four years in high school football. All four of the participants played at the same high school and had similar experiences as they played around the same time. Three of the participants were African American and the one other participant was Asian American. The focus group was an energetic but calm group of young men whose ages ranged from 18-19. They were familiar with one another, so they were not shy to speak about their experiences.

During the focus group conversation, these gentlemen seemed to enjoy being able to spend time together. They did not have any issues expressing their feelings and their love for one another. What was said in the one-on-one interviews was repeated in the focus group discussion as well. The connections that they all recounted and described mentioned the themes of connections, academics, and the support that came from all areas of their life. AC described that "always knew I had my family's support. I mean if I wasn't taking care of business in the classroom, I would have them plus my coaches on my back. Then my coaches made sure my teammates held me accountable, so I did not want to let them down." This statement described all the themes and how they intertwined together.

It was explained during the focus group setting that the experiences they had as student-athletes were important. Hearing these young men talk about what it was like in the classroom for them as well as what it was like as a member of the team was especially important. Their first-hand accounts of their experiences helped us to know how they felt. Getting to graduation

was as much an internal motivator for these young men as it was an external factor for their families. AC said that "I knew I had to have good grades to do whatever I wanted to do in life. My mom was gone be on me if ever my grades were not good."

Participants

Participant	Years Played	Sports Played	Grades	Age
JS	4	3	A-B	19
OS	4	3	A-B	19
AC	4	3	A	19
TH	4	3	B-C	18
HA	4	4	A	30
ZC	4	3	A	32
AC	4	2	A	23

Results

This study's purpose was to have the participants describe how their grades were influenced by their participation in football. Participants in this study were selected through random sampling. A social media post directed those football players who wanted to participate to sign up and write a journal entry from a writing prompt. Participants signed the informed consent documents before their interviews took place. The data in this study were first collected

through the writing prompt that was emailed after they signed up for participation. Data was then collected through interviews, followed by a focus group. Transcriptions of the interviews and the focus group allowed the data to be analyzed and coded by hand. This information was supplemented by my own personal notes from the interviews and the journal entry responses. All interviews took place in a quiet setting and were held through a virtual meeting platform. The focus group was also held in a quiet setting through a virtual meeting platform. The transcripts of the interviews were sent to each participant, and they provided the opportunity to review and provide feedback with any changes if needed. No changes were made. Data analysis for this study was conducted to interpret information and develop relevant themes. (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Throughout the course of analysis of the date, several consistent themes emerged.

Theme Development

Themes	Codes	Participant Quotes

| Connections | Teammates
Special Treatment
Community service/Role Model | "Because I was the oldest sibling to play sports, I was a role model to my younger brother"
"I was held to a certain standard in the community and inside the building. I couldn't be a stupid teenager because so many eyes were on me."
"The connections I made in the community were great, we would go to local schools and perform community service. The coaches I played under made sure that community involvement was a huge deal."
"I did receive and see some special treatment happening because of who I was as an athlete but overall, the other kids respected me, and I felt like a symbol or representation for the school."
"The connections and friendships I made while playing football were more so with my position group because we spent the most time together. We still call and check on each other from time to time and get together when we can. They are more like a family to me."
"The community and school connections I looked at more as like them just being fans and as a popularity thing."
"The friends I made and that I consider as true friends are |

Academics	Studying Self-motivation/Goals in season vs out of season Goals Time management Structure	"Playing sports provided structure. It required me to manage my time in a constructive way when I wasn't working and hanging out." "I saw the structure of sports being a key factor to me getting good grades and being on a team." "I did not struggle to maintain good grades. I would study an average of 5-6 hours a week to maintain good grades."

Support	Family	"The support I received from his family was the most important to me." "My main goal was getting to college so my parents made sure that I was doing things that would keep me out of trouble." "My parents would have me write down my goals every school year and season about what I wanted to accomplish." "I built strong relationships with his teammates we were part of a family." "The friends that I made while playing football are like family to me."

Theme 1: Connections

The results of the study indicated connections between athletes and the community which included students, teachers, administrators, and other community members. These connections were both positive and negative. Each participant had different perspectives and experiences.

How participants were treated by other students was different than how other students were treated by their peers. TH described the other students as treating players as if they were

fans. "On a Friday, you come to school, and everybody gives you cheers. The different people start like becoming fans and want to be with you and want to hang with you. It's like a popularity type of thing." The other students would see the football players play on a Friday and because of seeing the players in the games, the students would act as if they knew the players personally. Because of the participants' affiliation with a team, other students would use that affiliation to start conversations. Students would ask the participants about the game plans for the next game or just congratulate them on the win. This interaction was also the same when the participants lost a game. Other students would let their feelings about the team and the outcomes of games be known. Students would boo the members of the team at the local parade or even in the building. ZH responded, "You feel that connection more when you're winning. I mean, I think it was my junior year we actually got booed at our own homecoming parade because we were pretty bad. But then turn around to our senior year, we had a little bit of success early on in the season and you know you feel the entire school was behind you."

The word *respect* was often used when the participants spoke about the way they were treated by students, teachers, and administration. Special treatment was highlighted by HA, "You got special treatment, but I guess you know your name is kind of more circulated around you know administration and things." Participants did not feel as if they were above the rules, but they did acknowledge that they could get away with certain behaviors because the punishment was handled by their coaches and not with a disciplinary referral. The football players were considered on the administration's radar because of who they were and being part of the football team. This affiliation meant that they had to set an example in the classroom and in the building. This special treatment also led to them getting free food in the community.

How the outside community perceived them did not play a significant role in their academic outcome. However, it did affect what the participants did in the community. Being able to spend time outside of school reading to the younger students at other schools was a common connection. HA indicated, "We did a lot of, you know, visiting different elementary schools, like, especially on game day with their jerseys on. I went to elementary schools and just kind of I think like opened car doors and things and facilitated like kids just kind of getting in in the mornings. The varsity football team in terms of the rec league sports was huge." Being able to participate in different community service activities at local elementary schools was mentioned. TH further explained, "I've been a part of going to the schools in town to read to kids and also just being involved in different things that happen in the community." The athletes felt they were responsible for mentoring those younger than them. They wanted to ensure they represented the program positively and were not reckless teenagers. Community service time was an activity that participants felt immensely proud of for their participation.

Friends of the athletes were often their teammates. Several of the participants talked about being close to individuals that they were with all the time. The players would spend summers together going to camps and then training and playing together all fall. Those were relationships that participants -other people were meaningful. Participants also described their teammates as being like family. OS commented, "The guys who I played with are family to me. We still have a group text that we all still stay connected in." In addition, AC stated, "I'm still in touch with a lot of my old teammates and we really look at each other like family. We always check in on each other and try to get together whenever we can." The players said that they would still set aside time after graduating to go and hang out and just call to see how the other

football players were doing. The word *family* was used by all the participants when they described their teammates and friends who they played football with. JS elaborated, "I mean it's a family really. That is you group of people who you talk to the most and you go through so much with, it's like a big family."

Theme 2: Academics

Studying was a topic mentioned by most participants, but not much was done among them. Most of the participants relied on paying attention in class but not studying outside of class. The participants mentioned studying before a test; on average, they said that they would study between five and eight hours a week. This studying happened at night or in the morning before a test was scheduled to take place.

Time management could be an issue because of the commitments and priorities of all the participants. Many of them not only participated in football but also played other sports during the school year. Due to the socioeconomic status of some of the participants when they were in high school, they also had to work a job. Some were fortunate enough to only work in the summer while others had to leave practice and go straight to work. These commitments required time management because they had to have a balance to accomplish school, sports, and work. Finding time to manage the commitments that they had at school, with their teammates, and with their families could be a difficult ordeal.

In-season grades versus out of season grades did not seem to be an issue. Grades were mentioned because several of the participants described their grades both -. One comment by AC was that during the season their grades were higher than when they were out of season. "My grades would dip a little bit when I was not in season. When I was in season, I was able to have a

set structure and because of time, I could not slack off. In the off season when I had more free time Id push things off because I could do it later." The reason was explained to be because of the structure of the season. Once participants were able to get a little free time, they would relax and let their grades slide a little but not to a point where grades were significantly affected. For several of the participants, there were only a few weeks out of season because they were involved with other sports.

The structure of the football programs was particularly important to all the participants. ZH's thoughts about structure included, "Having that involvement in that structure. You know from athletics, I think it helps a lot of kids where they're doing their school stuff because they have to, at least initially, and then, you know, maybe later on it kind of clicks where they find this object that they enjoy or thrive in, that if it wasn't for them having to pay attention and do the work for sports, they may not have found that " The structure at home and the structure that they received from playing football contributed to the participants' academic success. All players credited structure as being key to their academic success. Parents had a structure at home and coaches had a structure in place to compete and participate. The school requirements for participation were not a major issue for any of the participants because they maintained high GPAs. The structure was a key factor for the success of the participants because it set a tone for how things were going to be and gave rules that needed to be followed to be successful. AC discussed structure by adding, "My parents always set rules and had structure for us. So, when you play a sport, and you have the structure there too, it is hard for you to go off track. For some people they do not get the structure at home, so you must learn it somewhere."

Academics was an important piece to get to graduation. Without the grades necessary the students would not have been able to participate in any sport. OS stated that "I knew I had to take care of business in the classroom because of the rules that were set to play. My parents had other rules as well about me playing so I had to get good grades." The grades were necessary to graduate because there were also minimum requirements set up by the school.

Theme 3: Support

Family support proved to be a key factor for each participant. Whether it was describing being a role model for their siblings or a father traveling from another state to be there at every game, family support was a strong motivator for academic success. Having family around was especially important. Families were not only a support system for the participants but their motivation to be successful and set goals for themselves was tied to the family support system. ZH said he wished his parents would have been more honest than supportive of him chasing his dreams. "I mean they had my back 100%. I mean to a flaw where, you know, I had certain dreams that it would have helped at some point if they had been like, hey, like, you don't run a 4-5, you are not particularly big, you are not particularly strong like this. You know, there is no shame in being more realistic." Having a balance between dreaming and reality, the participant felt, would have helped him to make some different decisions and allowed him to play football a little longer.

One of the participants was not being raised by his biological parents and for him, his family structure was not the norm. This participant acknowledged that his guardians did not always agree completely with him, but he always knew that they supported him. That feeling of someone having their back was mentioned by others as well. OS indicated, "My parents always

supported me. They always believed in me. My dad, mom, sister, and brothers were always there." The sense of security, feeling loved, and feeling supported was a factor in the participants not wanting to let their parents/guardians down. AC said, "My parents had rules about my grades and everything so even if I wanted to slack off, I knew it wasn't going to be tolerated."

Self-motivation/Goals were the biggest influence and factor regarding everyone being successful in the classroom. All participants had personal goals they set for themselves, and because of this goal setting, they were academically successful. ZH described his goals, "I had a poster board above my bed. On the ceiling. That would have, you know, those goals." Of course, the structure and families which ZH talked about more mentioned their contributions stating that, "my dad was big on setting goals. So, before every season I would set football goals and academic goals for myself." ZH believed that having the structure played a significant role in these goals, but the players had to successfully execute the actions leading to achieving the goals.

Each athlete had the dream of going on to play college football as indicated by TH, "The goal was of course to go and play college football." A few of them were successful in making that happen but not all athletes received the opportunity. The grades of each individual participant allowed them to be in good standing if the opportunity were to present itself. Grades are key for anyone who wants to attend a college or university. Because of needing high grades, a high school student must maintain a certain GPA. By having goals, like attending a college or university, the participants had to be aware of the requirements and maintain good standing.

Self-motivation by anyone can be important to their success. With good grades, even if a college football opportunity did not present itself, the participants still had the opportunity for academic scholarships and could still attend college. Just because the opportunity to play college

football was not available did not mean that all college attendance was out of their futures.

Having supportive parents allowed these participants to believe in themself and set goals that

were obtainable. TH stated that "my parents made me set goals and having them believe in me

was a big contributor to me setting my own personal goals." The support of a network allowed

the participants to have structure and achieve their goals.

Research Question Responses

Central Question

The central question that guided this research asked, what are the experiences of recent

graduates who participated in football for at least four years during high school? The experiences

that were given were all positive. Each participant was happy with the decisions and choices that

they made. The only regret that did come up was not taking advantage of further opportunities to

continue to play football for the ones who passed it up. The participants felt as if the treatment

they received from classmates, teachers, administrators, and community members was positive.

The academic rigor did not seem to have any effect on the participants as they all mentioned they

had good grades. The support from the people around them was a big part of the participants'

success, along with their own personal goals and working hard to make sure these goals were

accomplished.

Sub-Question 1

The first sub-research question guiding this study asked, how did connectedness to a high

school sports program influence motivation to graduate? The most common word that was used

amongst every participant was *family*. The participants viewed their teammates as family. They

were able to build long-lasting friendships and relationships that for some had lasted over 10

years. The support of their teammates and wanting to all accomplish the same goals and have similar dreams helped them make these connections. Teammates' support also kept the participants on track when things got tough. They had others who were going through similar struggles to lean on.

Sub-Question 2

The second sub-research question guiding this study asked, what are the academic experiences of high school athletes who play football? This question was answered by theme 2, Academics. The participants all mentioned that they had good grades. Some of them studied far less than the others, but studying did take place when it was needed. The requirements to participate in high school athletics are not always a strenuous factor, but some students do find it difficult to maintain eligibility. With the dream of playing at the collegiate level being on the minds of all participants, they understood that their grades were important. For them, they had parents who made clear the importance that grades would have on their success.

Conclusion

Chapter four included a detailed description of the experiences of the former athletes. The participants' experiences as student-athletes were primarily positive. As data collected through individual interviews, a journal, and the focus group interview was transcribed and analyzed, three themes began to emerge: (1) connections, (2) academics, and (3) support. The feedback received from the participants was that they enjoyed their time as high school students and athletes. They experienced tremendous support from their family at home and from their football family. The participants expressed their own self-determination and focused on achieving their

goals. This focus was the biggest factor in the participants' success as they navigated through

high school.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how former high school students perceived participation in four years of high school football influenced their ability to graduate from high school. Data were collected from journals, individual interviews conducted with former student-athletes, and a focus group with former student-athletes. This chapter summarizes the findings, along with a summary of the central question and sub-question answers. This chapter also presents the discussion of the findings related to the empirical and theoretical literature that is reviewed in Chapter Two. A section that contains the study's implications, an outline of the delimitations and limitations, and recommendations for any future research.

Discussion

The purpose of this section is to discuss the study's findings considering the developed themes. Typically, findings are discussed in such a way as to highlight the voice of the researcher, who is now an expert in this topic. Still, supporting the interpretations of findings with empirical and theoretical sources along with hard evidence from the study is required. The discussion section has five major subsections including: (a) Interpretation of Findings; (b) Implications for Policy or Practice; (c) Theoretical and Empirical Implications; (d) Limitations and Delimitations; and (e) Recommendations for Future Research.

Interpretation of Findings

This study's guiding research question asked, "What were the experiences of recent graduates who participated in football for at least four years during high school?" A summary of

the findings and conclusions are organized by the themes to present an understanding of the motivation process for student-athletes. The presentation of themes includes the transcribed interviews and focus group data. The researcher presents the themes of the study.

Summary of Thematic Findings

This section provides a summary of the findings based on the research questions. The responses received from the research questions provided an understanding of how participation in a high school football program influences graduating from a high school in Northeast Georgia. The following research questions were used to guide this study:

Central Question: What are the experiences of recent graduates who participated in football for at least four years during high school?

Research Question 1: How did connectedness to a high school sports program influence motivation to graduate?

Research Question 2: What are the academic experiences of high school athletes who play football?

To answer the central question regarding the experiences of recent graduates who participated in football for four years, the resulting themes consisted of the following: (1) Connections (2) Academics (3) Support.

Theme #1 - Connections.

Bowlby and Ainsworth (1992) both felt as if connections between a child and their parent were critical. In this study, we found similar findings about a child's connection with their parent. But we also found that other connections were just as important. The common connection that they all shared and spoke highly of our teammates. JS described in the focus group talk when

asked about his teammates that "We are all locked in, and we all stay in touch and talk often. We stay connected cause that is my family. What became apparent was that parents are important but the use of the word "Family" to describe everyone involved in the process of school.

The results of the study indicated that connections for student-athletes were important to their academic success. The connections the participants mentioned were teammates, community members, family members, and people in the building. The theme of connections was supported by Krolikowska et al. (2020) "Social bonding brings personal meaning to a physical environment through shared memories and special connections with others." (p. 2841). The standards set by coaches for athletes meant they had to behave in a certain way to remain eligible to play football because they represented the program. This representation meant they were tasked with being role models for younger athletes in the building and in the community. Being a person that younger students could emulate was instilled in the participants by the coaches. Smith and Casper (2020) supported this study's conclusion by indicating, "These efforts are underpinned by an aim to cultivate a sense of togetherness, unity, and shared values during uncertain times." (p. 337). These participants could see themselves in the athletic arena and in their schools reading, opening car doors, and participating in community service activities.

Theme #2 – Academic.

The academic experiences of student-athletes influenced their motivation to graduate. The research based on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) suggested that different internal working models of attachment are associated with distinctive characteristics of social, academic, emotional, and behavioral competencies that may interfere with the quality of relationships that young people establish in school, especially with teachers, and influence their academic

performance. Studying is a part of the academic process. "Self-efficacious students exhibited more effort in their academic work and also exhibited more intrinsic reasons for studying." (Wilby, 2022. p. 825). Studying was mentioned by all the participants; however, studying for long hours was not a big trend among the participants. TH indicated, "I would study as needed but it would really only be when my grades started slipping."

The individuals were all goal-oriented and self-motivated. "Motivation is the force that helps an individual to achieve their goals from the beginning to the completion of a goal" (Wilby, 2022. P 824). Each participant had their own personal goals to go along with those set up by their teams. This self-motivation also came because of their own dreams to achieve an athletic scholarship offer. They understood that if they are not in good standing academically, they would not be eligible for an athletic scholarship. Self-Motivation helped them accomplish the goals they had set and continued to add new goals based on circumstances.

According to Wolters and Brady (2021), "Time management is a significant self-regulatory process through which students actively manage when and for how long they engage in activities deemed necessary for reaching their academic goals." (p. 1319). Having structure in their lives provided the participants with a system of how they should handle things. The participants described the amount of time they were required to be in school and perform their athletic duties. School lasts seven hours, Monday through Friday, and then athletes practice two to three hours after school. Finding the balance to handle everything else they may have to do was necessary for students to be academically and athletically. Several participants worked jobs during the summers and the school year. Having to leave practice and go directly to work could hinder how participants would manage time to study.

Theme #3 - Support

Support from family or familial-type systems was also a theme that proved to be important to the participants' success. According to Naeem et al (2022), "While it has been historically thought that the infant's attachment to the caregiver was innate, we now understand attachment is a learned process that can occur between non-biologically related individuals." Family for the student-athletes was used to describe the friends they made playing football. These relationships were built during their struggles and working together to accomplish the goals of winning football games but have transformed into friendships that for some of the participants have lasted over 10 years. "In humans, diverse caregiving across different cultures all support attachment between the child and caregivers, suggesting that the evolutionary pressures on human attachment likely did not focus on one specific parental behavior to support attachment formation" (Naeem et al, 2022).

Human attachments can come from several types of people. Bowlby (1951) focused on the attachments of a mother and her child. The participants all mentioned parents and guardians as being supportive. The participants acknowledged their feelings about their parents and how they supported their goals as they maneuvered through high school. Bowlby and Ainsworth (1991) looked at the quality of attachments between a parent and child. These attachments can affect a child both positively and negatively depending on the type of relationship.

The participants also recognized the support that came from people in the community and inside of the school building. "People would just talk to you. Tell you congrats on the game. They were like fans." OS said during his one-on-one interview and made a similar statement in the focus group when he said, "It's really the support you get from everybody that makes you

want to be successful." Support was around them in many areas of their lives. Having a good support system was having administrators, teachers, neighbors, parents, and coaches all involved in getting a kid to graduation.

Implications for Policy or Practice

This qualitative case study explored the experiences of recent graduates who participated in football for four years. The target population was former student-athletes from a high school in Northeast Georgia. The data collection methods for this case study included a guided interview, a focus group, and journal responses to identify themes. The theoretical, practical, and future implications are addressed in the following sections.

Practical Implications

This study provided a detailed account of the perspectives of individuals who attended a high school in northeast Georgia and participated in football for four years. The analysis of data indicated the influences that participation in football had on their academic experiences. Based on the interviews with the participants and the findings from the literature, I have several recommendations for school administrators, teachers, parents, and coaches.

1. School administrators can include more sports and programs in the school to appeal to students who would not normally participate in sports. This would provide more activities.

2. The administration can use this research to promote athletic participation to students in their buildings

3. This research can be used to help teachers become more aware and open to learning about their students and what they are interested in.

4. Teachers and coaches could collaborate with one another to help student-athletes achieve academic success.

Limitations and Delimitations

A limitation of this study was that participants had to play football for all four years of high school. Because some athletes did not play football for four consecutive high school years, some football players were excluded from the study. Participants of the focus group were also faced with the same limitations as they had to play football for four years. Another limitation was that the participants' grades were all remarkably similar. It was not a true representation of all students who may participate in football. Not all kids will have As & Bs and take honors and advanced placement courses. Sometimes in a high school setting, a student may have played a sport for four years, and for some reason they do not graduate. The population of students who volunteered for this study did not represent this type of student. This study was also conducted with students who attended the same high school. Using students from the same high school reflected how athletics and academics were organized and maintained in their area and school, but these considerations may not be the same at other schools.

Because this study is qualitative, I served as the human instrument for data collection and analysis. This direct involvement can lead to research bias. Although I do not work with these participants, I do personally believe in providing a strong athletic program that supports academics. To reduce research bias, I allowed the participants to speak freely about their experiences and only asked questions. This awareness allowed participants to lead the conversation and give the details they felt comfortable giving.

Recommendations for Future Research

Further studies are needed on the influences of playing high school football on graduation. The results could lead to a broad application in other schools and areas with future research or similar studies. I recommend the following for future research:

1. This study could be replicated in different regions of the country. Through replication, the study could provide more in-depth data for future research in the field of football and academics. This replication study could provide greater validity to the findings.

2. A similar study could be completed that includes more students. My research only involved students who had graduated high school and were successful academically. However, there are students who manage to play all four years and do not graduate.

3. A quantitative study could be completed to look at data on graduation rates of high school football programs.

4. A similar study could be completed that includes students who compete in multiple sports.

Conclusion

Qualitative research focuses on finding meaningful conclusions or as Creswell (2013) calls them "assertions" (p. 99). Qualitative researchers seek to understand how individuals interpret their experiences and the meanings of those experiences. Based on this study's results, I was able to investigate and learn how the participants involved in football viewed the influences their experiences playing football had on their academic experience. I was able to gain an understanding of the viewpoints of the participants and explore the various views that came with athletic participation.

Through my research, I was able to identify three major themes supporting my research questions. For research question one, the student-athletes felt that connections with teammates and other community members helped them to uphold team rules and standards that were set in place by coaches. Being a member of the football program put the participants in a position to receive some form of special treatment but also allowed them to be role models and participate in different community service activities. For question two, the participants looked at their own academic successes and how they were able to set their own goals because of their self-motivation to achieve their goals. Having time management and a structure that was set in place was what they needed to stay on the right track to graduate. Lastly, for question three, the student-athletes spoke highly of the support they received from their parents and how their teammates are looked at as family members. This support system allowed the student-athletes to relate to others who had gone through similar circumstances.

As evidenced by the data for this research study, participation in football for four years in high school positively influenced student-athletes' academics overall. These influences benefited the individuals involved in many ways as detailed by the themes discovered in this study: Connections, Academics, and Support. Given the current structure of high school athletics and its range of available sports for students to be involved in, I hope that more students consider participation. All students deserve the best opportunity to achieve academic success, and participation in extra-curricular activities is one avenue that can lead to success.

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Appendix A

Trustworthiness Section

To do this type of research, I must first establish and build a relationship. No personal

information nor the names of the athletes will be used. I was able to record the group discussion

and rely on that audio for referencing. I also gave the student-athletes information about myself

so that they knew who I am and what I am doing. This process increased the study's reliability

because it allowed the participants to see what was being studied.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) responded to criticism from positivists about a perceived lack

of rigor, reliability, and objectivity by conceptualizing parallel terms for these characteristics of

qualitative research, specifically, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

This section describes the measures taken to assure a rigorous study through the lens prescribed

by Lincoln and Guba. While these terms are, in many cases, synonyms for terms used in

quantitative scholarship, these have different meanings and implications for the quality and rigor

of a qualitative study.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which the study's findings accurately describe reality, at

least according to the perceptions of participants, as a proximation of the truth of the

phenomenon in question (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I achieved credibility in three ways: (a)

triangulation, (b) peer debriefing, and (c) member-checking.

Triangulation

In this study, I undertook triangulation of qualitative methods, data collection methods, sources, and theories to explore the stories told by student veterans About their success. The methods included aspects of life history (Polkinghorne, 1995) narrative inquiry (Chase, 2005) a hybrid method created for this study in which I did not seek the entire life history of student veterans, but their influences from their military service on their experiences in college and I took up the role of narrator for the veterans' stories as they may not be prepared to tell their own stories (Chase, 2005). Data collection methods triangulation was achieved through using individual interviews of veterans, their success influencers, and focus groups of veterans. Source triangulation was achieved by using the veterans and their staff or faculty success influencer's perspectives on the phenomenon of student veteran success. Theory triangulation was achieved using Astin's (1980) I-E-O theory and Vacchi's conceptual model of student veteran support (Vacchi & Berger, 2014) as both organizing frameworks and analysis frameworks.

Peer Debriefing

A technique I used frequently during this study was peer debriefing (Marshall & Rossman, 2015) which allowed me to discuss emergent findings with colleagues to ensure my analyses were grounded in the data. Ideally, I would have had military veteran scholars triangulate results during this study through peer debriefing, but I did not have ready access to those kinds of peers. Still, there is some data available in the modest literature that provided some corroboration for my findings, in addition to peers in my academic program who are familiar enough with my research to provide important perspectives that helped elucidate my study's findings.

Member Checking

Having undergone many of the same experiences and transitions myself that student veterans experience before and during college gave me an insider's connection with my participants (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). This insider's, or *emic* perspective, which Rossman and Rallis (2016) suggest can be an advantage for researchers, allowed me to reflect back the meaning of the participants' words during the interviews; this immediate member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was important because, during the interviews, I confirmed some concepts by asking questions from various perspectives to ensure I captured the essence of an experience. After transcription, I clarified specific elements of data with the participants, thus ensuring I accurately reflected their stories of success, which can also serve as member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Still, I was wary of falling into the trap of believing that I automatically understood what participants meant and forced myself to explain some concepts in participants' words that I believed I already understood. For further member checking, I provided willing participants a copy of their transcript, which they reviewed for accuracy. I also provided a copy of what I believed to be the main points of each participant's interview that participants also checked for accuracy.

Transferability

Transferability shows that the findings may have applicability in other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which is achieved using thick descriptions when describing research findings (Geertz, 1973). The descriptions I used to describe the experiences of student veterans at one public, and one private research university painted a robust picture of what success in college meant for my participants. The alignment of participant testimony across these two institutions was so similar as to suggest that a college setting's specific context may not be the primary factor

in what contributes to student veteran success. While a single institution of each type does not necessarily facilitate transferability of findings, the literature offers no insights into factors influencing veteran degree attainment, so this study may offer an exploratory first step toward an improved understanding of student veteran success.

Dependability

Dependability shows that the findings are consistent and could be repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Descriptions of my procedures, particularly the adaptation of the study once I discovered the significance of the success influencer, were comprehensive enough that this study could be replicated. Specifically, descriptions of the method I developed to undertake this study are straightforward and supported by the literature, in addition to being fairly simple enough to repeat for student veterans, but this study could be replicated for any population. My committee thoroughly reviewed these procedures and deemed them sufficient to demonstrate mastery of the method as I designed it.

Confirmability

Confirmability is a degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I employed three techniques to ensure the confirmability of this study. First, I created a detailed audit trail through which my procedures, raw data, analyzed data, and the final report could be transparently tracked if necessary. Second, I employed the numerous aspects of triangulation described above, and finally, I was reflexive in the undertaking of this study. Reflexivity is an attitude of attending systematically to the context of knowledge construction, especially to the effect of the researcher, at every step of the research process (Cohen & Crabtree,

2006). To achieve reflexivity, I drafted numerous memos comprising a reflexive journal of sorts.

Memoing in this way helped to bracket my bias in this study, which was not difficult as my

undergraduate experience was not as a student veteran, so I merely had to bracket my

perspectives that veterans are successful and be open to contributing factors to their success. The

fact that the success influencer emerged during data collection, and I changed the study to

include the voices of these influencers, reflects that I had no preconceived notion of the

contribution of these success influencers.