POST-SECONDARY ACADEMIC SELF-LIMITATION OF RURAL HIGH SCHOOL

STUDENTS IN NORTHEAST GEORGIA

by

Jeffrey William Lambert

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Liberty University

2016

POST- SECONDARY ACADEMIC SELF-LIMITATION OF RURAL HIGH SCHOOL

STUDENTS IN NORTHEAST GEORGIA

by Jeffrey William Lambert

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

2016

APPROVED BY:

Reginald Kimball, Ed.D., Committee Chair

Cristie McClendon, Ph.D., Committee Member

Terry Seehorn, Ph.D., Committee Member

Scott Watson, Ph.D., Associate Dean, Advanced Programs

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the phenomenon of academic post-secondary self-limitation of rural high school students in northeast Georgia. The theory guiding this study was based upon self-determination theory, as described by Deci and Ryan (2008). Most high school students must make a decision as to whether or not they continue their education into the post-secondary years. This transcendental phenomenological study examined post-secondary academic self-limitation of high school students in rural, northeast Georgia. This type of phenomenology suggests that the whole of human experience is descriptive and leads to absolute knowledge (Moustakas, 1994). This approach was appropriate because the researcher sought to describe how the identified phenomenon manifested itself in the lives of the subjects. The participants were purposefully selected to ensure that all research participants experience the phenomenon (see Appendix A). Therefore, the participants were students who had chosen not to pursue post-secondary education even though they may have had the academic and financial ability to do so. The participants were surveyed, individually interviewed, and interviewed in a focus group setting in an attempt to determine the essence of the phenomenon. The data were analyzed using methods such as phenomenological reduction, systemic coding, horizonalization, and thick descriptions, all considered appropriate for this qualitative study. The results supported major elements of self-determination theory, and suggested a strong link between the effects of parental values and support, and a student's values and motivational growth. The results of this study may be used to develop programs that will assist in decreasing the incidence of academic self-limitation among this population.

Keywords: self-limitation, achievement, value, self-determination theory, amotivation.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Abbreviations

Advanced Placement (AP)

Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPN)

Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET)

Causality Orientations Theory (COT)

Goal Contents Theory (GCT)

General Equivalency Diploma (GED)

Socio-economic Status (SES)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Northeast Georgia was once a prosperous area filled with manufacturing jobs which represented a number of different industries. Employment opportunities for the populace were reasonably plentiful and steady. Many of these positions were entry-level, while more advanced skills were acquired on the job. A high school diploma usually marked the end of a person's educational career and was sufficient for the types of work that were available. The 1980s saw a rapid, regional decline in these industries and, as a result, a decline in the number of available jobs (Stephens County Development Authority, 2014). Eventually, most of these businesses shut down completely and the area began a slow economic decay (Stephens County Chamber of Commerce, 2014).

Today, many residents of the region must seek out-of-town employment. Therefore, they must have the skills or education that will enable them to be a mobile commodity, qualifying them for the work that is available. More often than not, this requires some form of post-secondary education (Brown, 2014; Cobert, 2005). Many Georgia high schools offer a range of courses in order to meet the diverse needs of the students and prepare them for some form of college or technical school. These courses range from regular education to college preparatory courses, honors level, and Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Students who are considering going on to college are often advised by their high school counselors to take coursework that is designed to help them better make the transition from a secondary to a post-secondary setting. Research has identified a decline in the number of students choosing to take college preparatory high school courses (Ayotte & Sevier, 2010). According to research, as few as 40% of college-bound high school students are prepared for the rigors of college academics (Diament, 2005) and

are leaving high school without the necessary basic skills (Balduf, 2009). These skills are acquired through courses that have greater rigor than the minimum required for graduation. The literature does not, however, fully address the reason or reasons why this is so. The majority of extant research implies direct socioeconomic disadvantages as the driving cause. A few other studies touch on relationship-driven motivational issues. These address neither the complexity of relationships nor potential explanations for decreased motivation. Additional research into why many students choose to self-limit their education is clearly warranted.

Background

Over one million students each year leave high school without ever receiving a diploma (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). Others graduate from high school, but choose to self-limit their educational experience by eliminating post-secondary educational options altogether (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). This limiting behavior is most evident during high school, when students have some choice in the courses they take. Many students choose to take basic courses instead of those that prepare them for college. This occurs even among those students who have the academic ability to succeed in a post-secondary environment. In other cases, students of average-to-high academic ability who have taken challenging courses in high school still choose to end their academic careers upon graduation (Ayotte & Sevier, 2010).

The difference in income potential between students earning only a high school diploma and a college diploma is substantial. This disparity can be seen in the average income of high school graduates versus two- and four-year college graduates. A high school graduate in 2009 was expected to earn an average of $19,540, while those with an associate's or bachelor's degree could expect to earn an average of $36,190 and $46,930, respectively (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). The researcher wanted to understand the participants' experiences in order to

discover what role academics played in their lives during the K-12 years. The researcher sought to explain what factors would cause some students to self-limit their educational experiences and end their formal education with high school commencement.

A person's motivation to pursue and accomplish a task such as post-secondary education is partly driven by the value system he has developed during his lifetime. Value can be described as the importance or usefulness of an idea or object. The object can be anything, including education (Briska, 2008). Some research suggests that a value system develops along with a system of motivation as a part of an individual's personality, and that these systems contribute heavily to the decision-making process (Briska, 2008), which would include whether or not to pursue a post-secondary education.

An individual's value of education is not developed in isolation from others, but is formed through interaction with both family and non-family members within that person's environment. Taken as a whole, the different interpretations of values suggest that they are conceptual constructs which arise from personal experience, giving them an entirely subjective nature. This makes measurement of all the possible influences difficult (Choi, Papandrea, & Bennett, 2007).

Situation to Self

As a veteran high school teacher, I have witnessed far too many students of ability self-limit their educational experience to that of only completing high school. An irony exists in that I was once one of those students. During high school, all I wanted was to graduate and move on, never seriously entertaining thoughts of pursuing a post-secondary education. I had the academic ability to attend college, and my family had the means to make it possible. However, it would be ten years before I decided to go to college, and I have always felt that it was ten years wasted.

My personal background places me into the same category as the subjects of my research. Making the decision to finally pursue a college degree changed my life in many positive ways, as I believe it would for most people. For this reason, I am intrigued by the phenomenon of academic self-limitation. However, before seeking to find a solution, I think that it is prudent to first understand the underlying causes of the problem. Thus, the lens through which this work is viewed is largely axiological, being centered on the knowledge that post-secondary education has value and can be advantageous to a person's future economic success and well-being. The paradigm guiding this study was constructivist, as I attempted to make sense of the participant's world as seen through their value systems.

Problem Statement

The problem that was researched is that many students self-limit their post-secondary options by choosing to end their academic careers after completing high school. In 2013, 30.5% of high school students in the United States did not go on to either college or trade school (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). In that 30.5% may be some of tomorrow's great thinkers and problem solvers. Both internal and external influences hinder a continuance of the educational experience beyond the secondary level for these students. Environmental factors may include, but are not limited to: socioeconomic status (SES), parental education levels, and family and other social relationships. Innate factors may include, but are also not limited to: ability (Ayotte & Sevier, 2010), sense of self-worth (Deci & Ryan, 2008), and value of education (Vallerand, Pelletier, & Koestner, 2008). The extant literature is heavy with explanations stemming from various facets of SES, and some research has examined the dynamics of various relationships between the student and his or her environment (Skaliotis, 2010). However, very little research has provided a holistic synthesis of these variables and any others that might come into play. Research was thin

in attempts to identify or directly relate any particular variable or combination of variables to the phenomenon of academic self-limitation. This research aimed to identify the most common variables related to the phenomenon that was studied in order to fill this gap in the research literature.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of students at one northeast Georgia high school regarding the factors that influenced their self-imposed limitations or desire to access postsecondary education. The information gained from this research may contribute to the current body of knowledge by giving direction for developing programs designed to alter the trend of student self-limitation in the face of student potential. These could be programs designed to encourage and enable high school students to continue their education into the post-secondary years by specifically addressing the factors that contribute to the phenomenon of academic self-limitation. The direct beneficiaries of this research and resulting programs are the students. As described earlier, obtaining a post-secondary education is likely to increase earnings and potential life satisfaction for the students. The central phenomenon is described as self-limiting behavior that is not conducive to post-secondary education. This self-limitation can include course choice, post-secondary plans, and off-task behavior during high school.

The focus of this research was largely centered upon the value nature of education as seen by the participants. This nature includes the way in which these values have been acquired and utilized by the participants to form their current views on education and what it means in their lives. It is my belief that the factor having the greatest impact on a student's value of education is the family, specifically the parents. Research has shown the influence of the mother to be of

particular importance (Farris, Burke, Borkowski, & Whitman, 2013; Van der Slik, De Graaf, & Gerris, 2002). It is in this familial social context that the student first acquires his opinion of both the value of self and of education. For this reason, the chosen theoretical framework for this study comes from self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Interactions between the participants and their social environments are responsible for developing the decision-making values and autonomy of self that are the foundation of the phenomenon under study. The student and his social environment are not isolated from one another. Instead, there is a constant and simultaneous interaction between both the psychological and the social facets of the environment working together to develop a sense of personal autonomy (Callison, 2001; Galvinic, Krpan, & Stankov, 2012). In the case of this research, the values being formed are related to self-perception and education. It is believed that these values are developed within a social context. The researcher produced a narrative derived from the participants that described their value statements on education as a whole and how they regard themselves in terms of pursuing education beyond that of which they are legally obliged. It is hoped that information gained from this study will give direction for developing programs designed to alter the trend of student self-limitation in the face of student potential.

Significance of the Study

The contribution that this study makes to the current body of knowledge is both psychological and economical. Research has shown that on average, persons with a college degree earn significantly more that those with only a high school diploma (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). Therefore, students with a college degree are in a better position to contribute to the overall economic health of the nation. Also, students who earn significantly more are themselves in a better personal economic position, and research suggests that economic freedom

can translate to personal happiness (Gropper, Lawson, & Thorne, 2011). The direct benefit of continuing education into the post-secondary years is increased quality of life for those who pursue more education. A review of the literature shows that scant research has been conducted to determine why students often choose to disconnect from academics after high school. By understanding what some of the impediments to higher education are for these participants, policy makers may be in a better position to encourage students to continue in their studies and earn a degree.

Research Questions

The overarching question that guided this study is the following: What are the social and academic impediments that cause many high school students from rural northeast Georgia to choose not to pursue post-secondary education? The literature has shown that many factors can cause a person's confidence to grow or be reduced, which, in turn, affects perceived ability (Filippin & Paccagnella, 2012). According to Bandura's (1997) social learning theory, people avoid tasks at which they do not feel confident. It is reasonable to assume that this could include the pursuit of post-secondary education. The most common among the factors affecting confidence are family influences (Malatras & Israel, 2012) and access to appropriate resources (Pishghadam & Zabihi, 2011).

The following sub-questions were developed to more thoroughly explore the phenomenon of academic self-limitation:

Question 1: What value does post-secondary education have for the participants? According to the literature, the decision to consider something as valuable, such as education, is often developed within particular social settings such as the family unit and peer groups (Carbonaro, 2005). However, the extent of social influence in decision making has long been

debated (Skaliotis, 2010). The financial burden of pursuing post-secondary education may also be an important factor in determining its value (Ekber & Havva, 2012), as students must weigh the cost of education against any future benefit.

Question 2: How would access to additional resources, both at home and within the community, enhance the participants' lived experiences so that they might aspire to post-secondary education?

The availability of resources within the home or community has a profound effect on academic decisions (Chabra & Kumari, 2011). Ekber & Havva (2012) found a direction connection between limited resources and negative academic outcomes. However, the presence of resources is no guarantee of success. Ram & Hou (2003) determined that some communities, though rich in various assets, had difficulty connecting those in need with the resources.

Question 3: What are some ways in which life experiences might hinder students from aspiring to post-secondary education?

While many students may have the desire to pursue post-secondary, others do not. Some research has suggested that this lack of desire comes from a diminished sense of motivation (Eitam, Kennedy, & Tory-Higgins, 2013). Again, the influence of family, peers, or other social groups may play a role in the development of self-determination and perceptions of autonomy, from which motivation arises (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Research Plan

This study was qualitative in nature and followed a transcendental phenomenological research design. Transcendentalism is a philosophy that seeks to describe phenomena in order to find meaning while limiting the bias of the researcher (Moustakas, 1994). This approach is appropriate when searching for a common meaning between the people and the shared experience

of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). A transcendental approach was chosen over a hermeneutical one for this study because the researcher sought to describe the phenomenon, and, in doing so, the views of the researcher must be eliminated to establish contact with the essence of its meaning (Moustakas, 1994). The hermeneutical researcher would approach his or her work with certain insights already established and included in the research as he or she seeks to interpret a phenomenon. The phenomenon under study was the limitation that many high school students place upon themselves in terms of their academic and thus employment futures. For the purposes of this research, self-limitation was defined as students choosing to not pursue post-secondary education. This definition aligns with the research purpose of explaining the phenomenon through the lived experiences of several subjects, all of whom live in a small community in rural northeast Georgia. I have described the shared experience of self-limitation, possible obstacles that hinder participant academic progress, and possible resources to encourage the participants to continue their academic careers beyond high school.

Delimitations and Limitations

Although the culture of the participants was important to the study, it was the actual phenomenon of self-limitation that was the central focus of this research. It is for this reason that an ethnographical study would not have been as appropriate as a phenomenological one. Another boundary was the participants themselves, who were all high school students from the same community, ranging from 16 to 19 years of age. This age range was appropriate since the phenomenon under study involved high school students who chose not to pursue post-secondary education. Involving participants from the same community helped to limit some of the environmental variables. For example, an inner-city student will likely have different resources available to him than a student from a rural community. Being from the same general community

helped isolate the shared experiences of the participants, as they tended to have more in common with one another.

Attrition is always a limitation in this type of study. During the school year, students move away or quit school altogether. Also, students were able to exercise their right to stop participating in the study at any time.

Summary

Over the years, there has been a decline in employment opportunities in the northeast Georgia region (Stephens County Development Authority, 2014). Much of the remaining work available requires some form of post-secondary education (Brown, 2014; Cobert, 2005). Almost one third of area high school graduates choose not to avail themselves of post-secondary education in any form (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). This percentage is significant when the potential difference in annual earnings is calculated between those with and those without post-secondary education (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). This differential becomes a quality of life issue for the students and is important in formation for policy makers to determine and better understand ways to encourage students to pursue post-secondary education. Many potential factors influence some students' choice not to pursue additional education, but very little research has been conducted that considers a synthesis of these factors and what meaning they may hold in the lives of the students. For this reason, a qualitative, transcendental phenomenological research method was chosen for this research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

There are many reasons why a student may fail to thrive academically or choose not to continue his or her studies into the post-secondary years. The literature places most reasons into a handful of categories such as parental or other family influences, environmental influences, or an assortment of latent factors. There has been abundant research into the effects of each of these elements separately, but very little has been done to combine them and their effects into a collective explanation of student self-limitation, thus providing a gap for further research. The available research has been very inconsistent, demonstrating a wide variety of opinions regarding the effects that parental involvement, peer influence, socio-economic status, or other factors have on academic success and the decision of whether or not to pursue post-secondary education. The literature review section includes discussions of the theoretical framework, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, parental involvement, parental education, socio-economic status, sibling influences, peer influences, teacher influences, other factors, and summary.

Theoretical Framework

Self-determination theory provides the theoretical framework which guided this study by providing the construct of amotivation for post-secondary education. Self-limitation may arise from diminished motivation. This is not to be confused with laziness, but is motivation that was not nurtured during its development (Eitam et al., 2013). Self-determination is herein framed as a process of shared and learned experiences which impact the development of psychological well-being and decision making processes.

Occasionally, everyone struggles with limited motivation. Some people find adequate motivation through external stimuli such as rewards, social opinions, or grades (Deci & Ryan,

2008). Others discover motivation through intrinsic factors such as the satisfaction of a personal interest. It is upon the common ground found between these dichotomous elements that self-determination theory is centered. There is interplay between culture, social environment, and life goals which determines the relative strength of intrinsic versus extrinsic factors (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Thus, the quality of motivation has a greater impact on predicting psychological autonomy than the quantity of motivation. The quality of self-motivation is related to the formative environment (Vallerand et al., 2008). The way that others behave towards us affects our self-satisfaction, and thus our level of motivation (Vallerand et al., 2008).

People are born with the innate ability to achieve and to grow. This ability develops as a person meets challenges and evolves a competent sense of self (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Social interactions either support or diminish the development of the autonomous self, as evidenced by the social and psychological well-being of the individual (Deci & Ryan, 2008). However, it is important to note that the environment itself is not the sole determining factor in this development. From a constructivist point of view, the context is the more important factor, or what the environment or social setting means to the individual (Vallerand et al., 2008). For example, a particular meaning for the student may be inculcated by immersion in an oppositional culture (Carbonaro, 2005) that not only does not value academic success, but may actively work against it. The influence of the associated anti-school sub-culture tends to disenfranchise the student, creating a pattern of disengagement and low academic achievement (Carbonaro, 2005). Whether or not a particular environmental setting meets the social and psychological needs of the individual to develop an increase in self-determination is highly subjective. In order to support the development of positive adaptive behaviors, the environment needs to create a balance between competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Vallerand et al., 2008).

Recent research has been conducted that connects self-determination theory to the decision making process of adolescents in terms of whether or not to pursue post-secondary education (Jung, 2013). Specifically, certain intrinsic and extrinsic factors that are thought to influence motivation were examined. Jung's research sought to link the constructs of amotivation and indecision to the making of major decisions such as whether or not to attend college. His findings indicated that both motivation and amotivation toward post-secondary education were linked to the value placed on education by the student and his or her family, but no causality was determined. Jung pointed out that significant gaps in the literature exist in terms of how adolescents reach a decision whether or not to enter college. Gaps also exist in connecting other social issues affecting adolescent decision making to college enrollment. These issues include the influences of peer groups and teachers. Jung noted that little interest has been shown in determining how these various predictors are related in the thought processes of students.

Self-determination theory is broken down into five mini-theories. These are Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET), Organismic Integration Theory (OIT), Causality Orientations Theory (COT), Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPN), and Goal Contents Theory (GCT). CET and OIT tend to deal with the intrinsic and extrinsic factors, respectively, in terms of why people accept or reject particular belief systems and goals. GCT relates the effects of intrinsic and extrinsic factors on psychological well-being. BPN relates social and environmental environments to the development of autonomy, competence and relatedness. COT describes how different people position themselves within various environments.

There are three orientations with COT. The first is autonomy orientation, which describes an altruistic interest in events. Deci and Ryan (2000) suggested this orientation has the greatest positive effect on the three factors of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The second

orientation is control orientation, where extrinsic factors such as rewards and social recognition are the focus. In control orientation, competence and relatedness are developed, but autonomy is not. Lastly, amotivated orientation is described by the anxiety that is caused by a sense of potential incompetence, and is developed within a social/environmental context that does not support any of the three factors (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Based upon the framework of self-determination theory, this research considered the environments of the students and the effect these environments and orientations may have upon the decision to continue with post-secondary education.

Related Literature

Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Motivation

Over the years, most research into motivation has largely focused upon motivation and amotivation in general terms, but not specifically in regards to entry into a post-secondary institution (Jung, 2013). Motivational research usually begins with the assumption that on some level, everyone wants to achieve (Bong, Cho, Ahn, & Kim, 2012). In simple terms, a person is either motivated or amotivated toward a particular task. More recently, studies into motivation have divided the topic into its intrinsic and extrinsic forms, with a continuum that ranges over several measurable processes. The question of what creates motivation has become central to many studies on the subject and to self-determination theory. The reasons a person initially pursues a particular goal or persists in its pursuit have been studied as well, with most researchers dividing motivation into two categories: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation involves a person pursuing a task because he or she finds it personally rewarding and satisfying. Extrinsic motivation involves a person pursuing or completing a task due to social pressures or the possibility of a reward (Gagne & Deci, 2005).

Research into self-determination theory has suggested that intrinsic goal pursuits lead to greater personal satisfaction and persistence because they help the individual meet certain basic psychological needs (Edworthy & Cole, 2012; Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Sheldon, & Deci, 2004). This dynamic can be seen as a direct link to certain levels within Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In contrast, extrinsic goal pursuits, such as for fame or fortune, result in poor psychological health and growth (Vansteenkiste, et al., 2004). According to some research, extrinsic motivators are more closely associated with unstable self-esteem and excessive social pressures (Benabou & Tirole, 2003; Edworthy & Cole, 2012; Kerris, Brown, & Brody, 2000), which lead to overall personal dissatisfaction.

Most of the research into the value of intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation has been conducted in the workplace, with only a few studies directly involving students and learning. It would not be practical to categorize all types of motivation under a universal umbrella, as there are not only different degrees of motivation, but different types of motivation as well (Ryan & Deci, 2008). In a school setting, a student may be intrinsically motivated to learn a new topic because he or she has a genuine interest in the subject. Conversely, the student may be only interested in earning a good grade, and is thus motivated by extrinsic factors alone. In both cases, the amount of motivation may be identical, but the type or context of motivation is very different. Research has shown that the lesson that is learned for intrinsic reasons tends to be more satisfying to the student and retained longer (Ryan & Deci, 2008). It is important to note that teachers, parents, and peers can support or undermine a students' sense of autonomy, and thus affect his or her level of intrinsic motivation (Jung, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2008). This can occur not only as negative responses to the individual's competence, but by the addition of extrinsic rewards, the latter causing a shift from intrinsic to extrinsic motivation. A suggested cause of this shift is a move

away from autonomy or self-control for the student to instead being controlled by the reward provider (Ryan & Deci, 2008). It has also been shown that children from homes in which the parents allow for more autonomy learned better than children from homes in which the parents were more controlling (Shih, 2013).

It is important to mention that while intrinsic factors are the preferred route for motivation, most tasks that people do are not intrinsically motivated. More often than not, the task at hand is something that simply must be done. The driving force behind the motivation to accomplish tasks tends to be extrinsic (Ryan & Deci, 2008). It was found that as a child progresses through the grades, the role of intrinsic motivation in task completion grows smaller, while extrinsic motivators become the leading factors. This shift may be caused by the increase in social pressures to achieve and be successful as a child progresses and grows. Learning simply because it is enjoyable diminishes as the requirements to complete tasks increase. Once this shift occurs, there is a loss of self-direction for the individual. Unless the extrinsic motivation is strong, task persistence may suffer or completely end, resulting in amotivation. However, this shift can occur in the opposite direction as well. A person may begin a task simply for the extrinsic reward that is offered. But while they are completing the task, it is possible that they identify with the activity (internalization), which leads to autonomy and task satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2008).

Other studies have examined the intrinsic-extrinsic connection through a variety of lenses. Active versus passive orientation studies were conducted to determine the relative amplitude of intrinsic motivation toward task performance. Some early research revealed that in the active orientation, students learned certain material with the purpose of teaching that material to others. The passively oriented students learned the material only for the sake of passing an examination. It was determined that those who learned the material for the purpose of teaching it were more

highly intrinsically motivated than those who learned the material to pass a test. Tutoring has been shown to have an effect on the tutors, in that those who were teaching increased in their own skills and understanding of the material. The tutors also increased in their own sense of autonomy and competence (Benware & Deci, 1984; Sparks, 2014). The question that arises in the literature is why does tutoring facilitate learning for the teacher? One possible explanation is that the teacher is exposed to the material in such a way that it increases his or her confidence in the subject area. Next, it must be determined whether this increase in learning take place when the tutor is initially exposed to the material, or does it take place when he or she is teaching it? One could argue that learning, followed by teaching, the material, represents a double exposure to it. However, researchers found that the learning increase was evident even before the teaching of the material took place (Benware & Deci, 1984). It appears that there is a difference in the learning itself when one learns the material in order to teach it. The highest level of intrinsic motivation occurs when a person feels autonomous and that he or she can positively affect the environment. Research has shown that family support of an adolescent's decision making leads to a higher degree of autonomy and extrinsic motivation (Jung, 2012). Interestingly, the process of tutoring tends to satisfy both of these requirements, making learning intrinsically valuable for the individual. In other words, the more involved a person is with the material, the more active the learning. When the active learners (tutors) were compared to the passive learners (test takers), it was found that the rote learning between the two groups was the same. But the active learners (those exhibiting more autonomy due to their role as tutor) were better at integrating the information into a preexisting body of knowledge, and at making use of that knowledge (Roscoe & Chi, 2008).

Student Effort

Another area of academic research involves the study of student effort. Research into student effort has been completed through a number of lenses over the years, with some of the early work taking place in the 1970s. Paul Willis (1977) characterized effort by contrasting it with student resistance, or withdrawal from academic persistence. The reason given for this withdrawal was a complete rejection of the school culture. However, today there are many other factors recognized as causing a decrease in effort, such as various levels of motivation and self-determination. It is not necessary that a student completely reject the school culture in order to fail.

An interesting area of focus on effort found in the literature is that of academic tracking and its effect on student effort and motivation. It has been found that students in higher tracked classes tend to show increased effort in those classes. Prior effort and academic successes were found to be accurate indicators of this increased student effort (Patron & Lopez, 2011). One explanation for this effect is that there is an increase in the number of learning opportunities for students in the higher tracked courses. Studies have found that higher tracked courses often have higher quality instruction and materials, as well as more time spent on instruction (Carbonaro, 2005).

According to research, tracking itself is considered to be a social structure. There has been a great amount of research into tracking and other social structures, but very little research into human agency as a factor in determining student academic outcomes (Patron & Lopez, 2011). Human agency is to what degree a student chooses to participate in the learning process. This decision is a first step in self-determination and contrasts with the social structure, which includes the structure of the school, its demographics, and curricular goals and methods for achieving

them. Logic dictates that both the learning environment (social structure) and student effort (human agency) be researched together in order to explain different learning patterns.

More recently, student effort has been divided into three categories: rule oriented, procedural, and intellectual (Carbonaro, 2005). Rule oriented effort occurs when a student follows the basic rules of the educational system, such as attendance policies. Procedural effort involves following procedural rules such as how or when to turn in homework in a particular class. Both rule and procedurally oriented effort can be described as institutionalized effort. Everyone is expected to follow certain norms of the rule oriented effort type. Certain sub-groups are expected to put forth procedural effort when appropriate. Intellectual effort is more personalized, with the individual choosing the amount of initiative he or she will apply to the intellectual challenge at hand (Carbonaro, 2005).

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement can be a positive influence, leading to greater autonomy and motivation, or it can be a negative influence, leading to a decrease in autonomy and an increase in amotivation (Jung, 2012). But why is academic parental involvement important? Jung (2012) suggested that the influence of the family on an adolescent's decision to attain a post-secondary education cannot be underestimated and may be the dominant factor. Georgiou and Tourva (2007) described decades of research into the positive effect of parental involvement and the necessity to increase the awareness of the home-school relationship.   This research has given rise to a number of mandates that call for increased parental involvement in and with the schools in a bid to increase college enrollment (Georgiou & Tourva, 2006). The effect of parental involvement in the academic affairs of their students has been long debated and researched (Skaliotis, 2010). Most of the extant research indicates that parental involvement in student

academic performance has a positive effect on that performance (Atta & Jamil, 2012; Fan & Chen, 2001). In fact, several researchers have suggested that positive parental involvement is requisite for student success (Atta & Jamil, 2012; Fan & Chen, 2001; Georgiou & Tourva, 2006; Kaya & Lundeen, 2010). A direct correlation between increased parental involvement and increased student achievement was demonstrated by Kaya & Lundeen (2010). They determined that the more the parent was involved in the educational system as a whole, the greater the achievement of the child. A limitation to this research was that the degree of parental involvement may be subject specific (e.g., parental preference for science). This study was interesting because it related the parental sense of efficacy to the amount of parental involvement. The more confident the parent was that he or she had the ability to affect a positive change or outcome, the more likely he or she was to be involved and participate both at home and at school.

Parental psychological well-being is known to affect parent-child activities and school involvement (Moon & Lee, 2009). The relationship of parent-child-academics includes environmental factors such as family structure, parental involvement, and parent-child home activities (Moon & Lee, 2009). These activities may mediate both parental psychological well-being and student academic achievement. This may be because of the effect that parental education and income has on these variables.

Georgiou and Tourva (2007) researched the parents' perception of the achievement of their children. Parents who felt they had a reasonable degree of control over the educational process also believed that their participation was a major factor in the success of their child. Parental participation was defined as behaviors performed both at school and at home. In fact, the Kaya & Lundeen (2010) study found that to be effective, parental participation must include activities performed not only at home, but at the school as well. The necessity of parental

participation at the school is supported by Fan and Chen (2001), who said, "Parental home supervision has a very low relationship with student's academic achievement" (p. 17). This suggests that how a parent participates in school activities at school has greater impact on academics than participating in school activities at home.

Skaliotis (2010) researched parental involvement primarily in secondary education. He measured were parent-student discussions, homework help, and participation in school activities. This research sought to separate the effects of parental involvement into maternal and paternal categories in an attempt to determine if one was more predictive of student success than the other. As with the majority of research in this area, he found that it was the mother's involvement and level of education that had the greatest influence on the academic success of her child. Also noted was that there is very little research into any change in the amount of parental involvement over time. In fact, research shows that overall, there has been an increase in parental involvement over time, although this did not always hold true for individuals. In fact, individual parents tended to decrease in their participation over time. In other words, while the overall number of involved parents has increased, the degree of individual parental involvement decreases as the child moved forward over time. This may be related to a decreasing sense of parental efficacy as academic rigor increases during a student's progress forward (Georgiou & Tourva, 2007). Skaliotis (2010) found evidence that parents who were more involved tended to fit a stable-family model. The factors that determined stability were social class, socio-economic background (SES), two-parent household, and degree of maternal education. He found that fathers had a unique impact on the education and well-being of the children, although the more involved parent tended to be the mother. Interestingly, paternal involvement was strongly associated with the father's ethnicity

and the behavior of the child (Skaliotis 2010). Minority fathers, especially of unruly children, were less likely to become involved in the parent-school-child relationship.

The significance of the decrease in parental involvement as the child gets older may be seen in the impact it could have on the high school years, in which formative decisions concerning post-secondary education are usually made. According to Kaya and Lundeen (2010), a strong predictor of college enrollment is the amount of parental involvement that the child has known. The family's SES may also play a role in determining the amount of parental involvement. Students who dislike school, which is often associated with a lack of parental involvement, are more likely not to choose a post-secondary education (Hallinan, 2008).

The question that arises at this point is, what motivates a child to achieve? Chabra and Kumari (2011) defined achievement motivation as a "disposition to strive for success" (p. 73). This motivation is often related to family background and upbringing (Chabra & Kumari, 2011; Skaliotis, 2010). Other factors include parental involvement, parental education, school climate, and teacher expectations. Similar to the Georgiou and Tourva (2007) study, Chabra and Kumari (2011) measured parental involvement by "knowledge of a child's activities in school and frequent contact with the school" (p. 73). The importance of the family in contributing to achievement motivation is suggested when Chabra and Kumari (2011) state that this motivation is "learned through the socialization process" (p. 74), though this implies other social influences exist outside the family, such as peers. Family values are also considered when determining causes for achievement motivation. If education is not held in high esteem by the family, it likely will not be by the student. Chabra and Kumari (2011) tie achievement motivation to parental involvement by suggesting that the more involved the parents are, the higher the child's perception of confidence. Children with higher confidence are more likely to take risks and

achieve more (Aunola, Nurmi, Neimi, Marja, & Rasku, 2002). This is not to say that all children who receive encouragement through parental involvement will be high achievers. Some people are considered to have high intrinsic motivation for achievement, while others do not. Even with encouragement, there are significant differences between the achievement rates of those with high and low motivation (Chabra & Kumari, 2011). Caution is advised by the researchers because overzealous parents can quickly turn encouragement into pressure. This, in turn, can lead to "anxiety and fear of failure" (p. 73), resulting in lower motivation (Chabra & Kumari, 2011) and possibly an increase in task-avoidance behaviors (Aunola et al., 2002).

It has already been established that parental beliefs and expectations are a major influence in the construction of a child's achievement strategies. These beliefs and expectations become emotionally set in the child. Anticipation of future parental response may direct the ways in which the child makes plans or sets goals (Aunola et al., 2002). Therefore, a failure to construct post-secondary plans may, in some cases, actually be a form of passive task-avoidance in response to a particular cognitive schemata. Over time, consistent use of avoidance behaviors may lead to learned helplessness and a sense of defeat without trying. This form of self-handicapping develops in response to negative or indifferent parental influence. The child expects failure and develops an expectation that he will not be able to handle a given situation. This child is often easily recognized because he is already in the habit of constructing excuses to avoid tasks rather than planning to achieve (Aunola et al., 2002).

Most of the research on achievement strategies used self-reporting methods for collecting data. The problem with this is that it only provides the perspective of the subject about how they respond to various activities. In order to obtain actual behavior and strategizing information, Aunola et al. (2002) used classroom observations, reasoning that teacher observations tend to be

in agreement with experimental observations. Aunola et al. (2002) recommended that future research investigate whether parental involvement influences student achievement, student achievement influences parental involvement, or both.

Parental Education

The effect that the level of parental education has upon the academic abilities of students was questioned in much of the literature. It has been suggested that a higher level of parental education influences a child's academic achievement because of the social structure and learning environment within the family (Chabra & Kumari, 2011). This implies that in these families, academic expectations and the value of education itself may more commonly be higher. Other researchers present the case that higher levels of parental education lead to a higher socioeconomic status, and that a child's academic success may be influenced by SES-related environmental factors (Hallinan, 2008). These factors tend to be resource based, such as better schools, ancillary learning tools, etc. Whether parental education was a standalone factor or was inextricably linked to social and economic position remained unresolved. Research has shown that parental education has a significant effect on children's post-secondary education (Erdem-Keklika & Keklik, 2014). This effect may have to do with social position, as research has determined that social background is important in determining an educational career.

Children of more highly educated parents may be more aware of opportunities that can arise from the completion of post-secondary education. This is suggestive of the idea of social capital put forth by Pishghadam and Zabihi (2011). They explained that social capital is made up of the potential and actual resources and relationships that are accessible. The resources of social capital are most readily available in the home or school environment. For example, a professionally successful, highly educated parent may routinely extol the virtues of education

while at the same time providing more and varied educational and extracurricular opportunities for his or her children. This may create a positive perspective in regards to the pursuit of post-secondary education in the mind of the child. Conversely, students who do not perceive greater opportunities after post-secondary education have lower enrollment rates. Also, students of lesser ability fear being filtered out in post-secondary education (Erdem-Keklika & Devrim, 2014), so they simply give up before trying. Another example of social capital suggests that a child's literacy performance in school is related to the literacy skills that he brings from home (Duranovic, Salihovic, Ibrahimagic, Tinjic, & Golubovic, 2011). It was noted that one of the leading indicators of the child's literacy was the parents level of education, suggesting that a child reared in a more "educated" home has greater resources and opportunities for academic success. Simply put, more highly educated parents are better equipped to provide the skills and tools for academic success (Pishghadam & Zabihi, 2011).

The child's perception of his or her own abilities remained an important factor in determining an educational career. According to Kodde and Ritzen (1985), students who choose to pursue a post-secondary career are "assumed to self-select themselves on scholastic abilities" (p. 357). In other words, students who believe in their own abilities are very often the ones who choose to pursue post-secondary education. It would also be reasonable to state the converse: Students who do not believe in their own abilities may be less likely to pursue post-secondary education. This concept has been supported by more recent research regarding motivation and perception of ability (Bong et al., 2012; Jung, 2012).

Socioeconomic Status

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2011), poverty rates among children in the United States are continuing to grow and have reached a historical high. This is significant because a

great deal of research has shown that a child's socioeconomic status (SES) has a profound effect on academic and cognitive growth (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Ram & Hou, 2003; Vail, 2004). It is difficult, if not impossible, to overcome deficits in early education preparedness (Ekber & Havva, 2012). Students who begin school behind their peers in terms of the necessary initial skill set must address these shortcomings while at the same time learning new skills (Stull, 2013). Kindergarten teachers have reported that an astounding 46% of their students have measurable deficits in initial skills upon entering school (Cox, Pianta, & Rimm-kaufman, 2000). Research has traditionally suggested that the reason for low scores among low SES students is that they tend to attend underperforming schools (Ekber & Havva, 2012). Today, more emphasis is being placed upon the skills a child has when he or she initially enters the educational system.

Methods for measuring SES have gone through a number of changes over the years. Currently, a widely used indicator of SES is a family's access to capital, with capital defined as income, occupation, and parental education (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Another important indicator being employed is family structure dynamics. Family structure dynamics recognizes the fluidity of structure commonly encountered and includes, but is not limited to, two parent, single parent, separations, and step-parent structures. Single parent and step-parent households tend to put children at academic risk (Ram & Hou, 2003). It has been suggested that this is due to a decrease in household income because of divorce, separation, or the death of a parent. This drop in income often coincides with a physical move to a poorer neighborhood and contributes to a lack of available resources (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). A lack of material resources begins a negative cascade effect whereby a single parent may be required to work multiple jobs to support the family. This, in turn, leads to less time spent with the children, inconsistent

discipline, and less supervision, all of which are suggested to contribute to a child's lack of preparedness to begin school (Ekber & Havva, 2012).

The SES of the family has been found to be a powerful variable in predicting student achievement and college entry (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Ekber & Havva, 2012). In attempting to combat SES-related academic deficiencies, school systems have recognized that they cannot change a student's SES, but they can increase expenditures in school programs designed to close the achievement gap between low and high SES students. However, research has shown that increased expenditures in these programs have actually been associated with a decrease in academic achievement (Ram & Hou, 2003; Walberg, 1989). Research found that students from larger school districts (greater than 4,000 students) scored lower than students from smaller school districts (fewer than 2,600 students). While the literature is thin in explaining this phenomenon, Walberg's (1989) earlier research suggested that while larger districts may have greater resources available for these programs, the increased bureaucracy tended to restrict their practical application.

One area that is showing promise in narrowing the achievement gap is the implementation of dual enrollment programs. These programs allow students to take college courses for college credit while still enrolled in high school. Studies have suggested that students from lower SES households benefit more from dual enrollment than students from higher SES households (Karp, Calcagno, Hughes, Jeong, & Baily, 2007). According to Haverman and Wilson (2007), only 26% of traditional college students from the lowest SES quartile will receive a degree, compared with 59% of students from the uppermost quartile. Research shows that dual enrollment students are much more likely to graduate from high school and complete a college degree than traditionally enrolled students (Allen & Dadgar, 2012). These programs benefit the student in several ways,

such as increased preparation for college level work, increased graduation rate, and increased student confidence (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001). Studies show that dual enrollees are less likely to require remediation in basic math and English (Kim & Bragg, 2008). This is significant because approximately 28% of college freshmen require remediation in these areas (Attwell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006). Another important finding is that dual enrollees are more likely than their peers to fully enroll in college within the first year after high school (Adelman, 2004). Overall, it is estimated that dual enrollment increases the odds of graduating college by 61% (Morrison, 2008).

Family involvement is another area affected by SES. A number of factors come into play to define a family's level of involvement, such as encouragement, expectations, and assistance with educational activities (Chabra & Kumari, 2011). These findings throughout the literature suggested that different learning environments are created by families from different SES backgrounds. The higher the SES of the family, the more positive contact there was with the school. Kaya & Lundeen (2010) found that the lower the SES of the parents, the less likely they were to be involved in their children's education at any level. They suggested that these parents may feel that they lack the knowledge necessary to participate in school-related activities or discussions. This theory is supported by earlier research, which saw the same effect of parental level of education, family income, and educational choice (Vail, 2004). Generally speaking, the higher the family income, the more likely the child was to attempt a post-secondary education. Pishghadam and Zabihi (2011) associated the SES of a child with completion of secondary school, with a higher SES generally being associated with a greater likelihood of completing secondary school. The SES of a family determines its social capital (aggregate of resources), which has a significant impact on secondary school completion and college enrollment.

It has been suggested that a major factor in academic success is the child's initial academic ability. This ability may be severely affected by the resources that are available to the family and by the way the family interacts with one another. For example, it was found that in high SES families, adults and children spent greater amounts of time engaged in conversation (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). In lower SES families, the children were more often expected to occupy their time quietly without adult interaction or supervision (Milne & Plourde, 2006). Duranovic et al. (2011) found that at the elementary level, most students who were poor readers came from low SES neighborhoods. They suggested that significant predictors of reading ability include parental education, parental occupation, and family income. The social background of these children was moderated by their parents' levels of education, which created differences in linguistic stimulation and reading abilities. Parents with higher levels of education (usually indicative of a higher SES) developed more interactive strategies when engaging with their children, and those children tended to have higher reading levels. In this study, the children with the lowest academic scores came from homes where the parents had the lowest levels of education (Duranovic et al., 2011). The significance here is that not all students are entered school with the same abilities or achievement needs or goals. The way in which the family responds to these achievement needs and goals affects the student's achievement motivation and abilities. When learning to read, a child's experience is directly related to the literacy skills he brings to school from home. These skills should have been developed during the pre-school period. Generally, the lower the SES, the less educated the parents, and the less academic interaction that occurs both at home and at school (Duranovic et al., 2011).

Students' background characteristics have shown in the literature to be factors that strongly influence academic success. These characteristics are in turn influenced by cultural

differences, racial/ethnic differences, and SES (Marks, 2000). Studies have shown that students from higher SES backgrounds tend to achieve at a higher rate due to an increase in their academic effort. Where SES and social class have been studied, these findings have been consistent (Marks, 2000). Due to increasing demand for early skill mastery, an increase in the achievement gap between low- and high-SES students seems almost inevitable. Again, this disparity is at least partly due to lower skill mastery upon entering school (Stull, 2013).

Most of the literature focused on ways to close the achievement gap between students from low and high SES backgrounds. There has been little research, however, into why some students from low SES backgrounds are actually high academic achievers. This is particularly interesting because the majority of research found in the literature suggested that students from low SES backgrounds actually start their education without many of the basic skills and abilities that are necessary for success. At the start of their school careers, students from low SES households tended to be behind their classmates in areas such as language, computational skills, social skills, and problem-solving skills (Vail, 2004). Nonetheless, many of these students do succeed academically. The question then becomes, what factors contribute to this success?

One of the strongest predictors of intelligence among grade school students was found to be the home environment, even when SES was controlled (Eriksen et al., 2013). However, parental expectations have been found to be an integral function of SES (Stull, 2013). In low SES homes, there is usually less access to educational materials and resources. Also, the parents tend to have less time to spend with their children to prepare them to enter school (Ram & Hou, 2003). Children from higher SES households had better developed social skills, possibly due to greater and more consistent interactions with adults than their lower SES counterparts. However, in low SES households with academically successful children, the parents made time for their children

and talked with them regularly. Conversely, academically challenged children from disadvantaged households were shown to have significantly smaller vocabularies and less developed speaking skills. Parents of high achieving students of all SES backgrounds made securing educational materials a priority, and provided a structured setting where the children had specific times set for the completion of school work. These parents also made a priority of performing educational activities outside of school each week (Milne & Plourde, 2006). Interestingly, parenting skills that were most effective in supporting academic success differed among the various subsets of research participants. These differences fell mainly along racial or ethnic lines. Measured activities included time spent reading to children or on other academically related activities (Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992). Another common theme that appeared in the literature was that regardless of SES, most parents of academically successful students monitored the quality and amount of television watched by their children. Children who were allowed unrestricted access to television with little or no monitoring of content or of time spent watching were significantly lacking in initial skills over students for whom television time and content was closely regulated. The highest achievement was found among those children who were limited to one hour or less of television time per day, regardless of the family's SES (Milne & Plourde, 2006).

Sibling Influences

The effect that siblings may have on one another in terms of behavior and personality characteristics cannot be overlooked as a potential factor the decision-making process of college entry, though this has been scarcely researched. There are many factors that have been considered in sibling research, including birth order, differential parenting, and asymmetrical sibling relationships, among many others. Twin studies have also been popular over the years,

but will not be considered for the purpose of this research due to low transferability. Some of the earliest research into the effect of siblings and birth order goes back to the mid-nineteenth century. However, one of the earliest explanations did not arise until Raymond Sletto (1934) suggested that differential parental treatment due to birth order was indeed a cause of behavior and personality differences.

The existence of behavioral and personality differences among siblings is not contested. However, the causes for these differences and how can they be measured remain in question. Most of the empirical, quantitative research has been inconclusive at best, as there has been little if any evidence to support any significant effect outside the family caused by birth order, differential parenting, or any of the other factors studied (Boomsa et al., 2008). These studies have included regular siblings, half-siblings, step-siblings and adopted siblings. It is interesting to note that what little qualitative research that exists in this area supports the idea of affective birth order. These results have been connected to research that asks the subjects to describe their feelings toward their parents and toward their siblings. A connection between the expressed feelings and perceived behavior and personality was shown to exist (Paulus, Trapnell & Chen, 1999).

Some birth order research has suggested that firstborns are more likely to graduate from high school and go on to college, while those later-born are more likely to be underachievers or drop out altogether (Paulhus, Trapnell & Chen, 1999). Again, the question that has not been answered is why this appears to be so. According to Harris (2000), about one half of the variances in personality characteristics among siblings are due to genetic makeup. The other half is environmental, but is not due to a shared home environment. This would open the door to consideration of non-shared environmental influences such as peer groups and individual life

experiences. As early as 1975, Zajonc and Markus suggested that firstborns have the same initial advantage that only children have: There is no competition for parental attention.

Peer Influences

There are many factors beyond family that influence students' decision making processes. These include peers, teachers, and societal roles, and many more. Different factors affect different populations of students in a variety of ways. A great deal of research has gone into isolating these factors and interpreting how students are affected by them in terms of academic success. The influence of peers and close friendships on academic choices has not enjoyed as much attention as others areas of influence.

While researching a population of gifted female students, Fiebig (2008) discovered that as these young women aged from adolescence through high school, their aspirations to leadership diminished. He determined that this was due to the subjects choosing to give up their academic abilities and post-secondary aspirations for more traditional roles, often due to overwhelming peer influence. Clearly, these choices were driven by social norms found within the subject population. Fiebig's work inspired Wilson and Adelson (2012) to investigate a variety of academically diverse subpopulations (i.e., gifted, average ability, and below average ability) in order to learn what drives their academic decision making processes. It was found that different subpopulations indeed displayed different post-secondary decision making patterns. The reason dissimilar subpopulations make different choices may be differences in potential vocational aspirations, which are aligned with differential levels of ability. Peer groups tend to be made up of students with similar interests and abilities. It is within these groups that students develop ability-specific identity concepts (Wilson & Adelson, 2012). These concepts are employed when

making post-secondary decisions. Therefore, academic self-concepts are largely dependent upon the social context of the student.

Interestingly, other researchers have found that there is actually an inverse relationship between the academic ability of the peer group and the average academic growth of an individual member (Marsh, 1991; Schneeweis & Winter-Ebmer, 2007). In these cases, the peer group can be a small cluster of friends or an entire school. In the case of the latter, Marsh (1991) questioned the benefits of attending higher academic ability schools due to this inverse effect. It was found that some students of high ability developed lower self-concepts while attending higher-ability schools. Also, the self-concept of students of moderate ability increased when they attended schools with a lower average ability. It was concluded that a poor academic self-image was likely to be further damaged by attending a higher ability school. This and similar studies suggest that students compare their academic abilities with their peers and make post-secondary decisions accordingly. A student's self-concept decreases when the peer group is of high ability. The same student's self-concept may increase when the peer group's ability is lower (Wilson & Adelson, 2012).

The effect of peer and other close relationships on the decision making process has been applied to the study of self-determination theory. Here, the relationship between autonomous behavior and controlled behavior was measured as a product of peer influence. When autonomy support is provided by one member of the peer dyad, the other member tends to increase in autonomy, motivation, and positive performance (Deci, La Guardia, Moller, Scheiner, & Ryan, 2006). How well a student feels that he or she fits in with the peer group was shown to have an effect on career decision making. Peer belongingness was found to be a predictor in whether or not students felt comfortable with their career path choice and remained in college (Slaten &

Baskin, 2013). An increase in autonomy has been shown to lead to greater academic success as well as increased psychological well-being (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004). Autonomy support consists of internalizing the other's perspective, providing encouragement, and responding to the other's needs (Deci et al., 2006).

Two types of relationships exist at this level: differential and close personal. In differential peer relationships (authority versus subordinate), it is the satisfaction of the needs of the subordinate that generates positive results (Deci et al., 2006), and there is no expectation of mutuality. Satisfaction of needs always flows from authority to subordinate. In close, personal relationships, however, there is an expectation of mutuality, with both persons receiving and providing autonomy support. Most peer relationships involving students are of the close personal rather than the differential type. While the majority of researchers of peer relationships have shown a positive correlation between support and the autonomous self, some instead see autonomy as meaning individualism (Deci et al., 2006).

Teacher Influences

The influence that teachers can have upon students has been likened to the influence of parents. In fact, a number of studies have held that effective parenting skills are generalizable outside the home and can be extended to teacher-student relationships (Smith, 2010; Wentzel, 1999). There is an established, positive relationship between parents, adolescents, and academic success (Wentzel, 2002). Therefore, by extending the generalization from parents to teachers, the same positive relationship can be said to exist between teachers and their students in terms of academic success. For many years, research has shown that positive academic growth has been connected to the positive characteristics of the teachers (Maulana, Opdenakker & Bosker, 2013; Smith, 2010). Exactly how this teacher-student relationship functions is still unclear. There has

been little research in this area in terms of socialization models between the two sets of participants, as the focus has been more on the results of the relationships than the causes. What research has been conducted has focused primarily on the elementary grades or college, with a small amount centered on the middle grades. However, one study was found that involved the effects of tracking on the academic success of high school students in terms of effort exerted by those students (Oakes, 1985). This particular study found that it was the teachers' higher expectations of students in higher tracked courses that caused those students to put forth more effort.

The interaction between student and teacher is a proximal relationship, in that it includes not only facets of the teacher's personality and abilities, but the student's level of socialization and skill, IQ, and models of relationships (Spilt, Hughes, Wu, & Kwok, 2012). This relationship also depends upon context. Context includes the classroom climate, school culture, community culture and values, SES of the participants, etc. This is not unlike the home, where multiple contextual variables affect the parent-child relationship. Both the home and school environments and relationships affect the child's degree of socialization.

Socialization is the process through which children interpret and internalize the values of their caregivers specifically and of society in general (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). These values include social behavior and academic expectations. Parents are not the only agents of socialization. These also include siblings, peers, teachers, and a new variable, social media. In academics, teachers are positioned at the vanguard of the process. In the modern classroom, learning can be described as a social process in which the teacher assumes a pseudo-parent role. In this way, the values of the teacher (what the student needs to succeed at school both socially and academically) are poised to be internalized by the students (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). This

internalization is not an automatic process, however. A poor student-teacher relationship that causes distress and anxiety will decrease the child's ability to learn both social and academic material (Hamre & Pianta, 2005). Poor student-teacher relationships diminish the sense of belonging, which is central to positive self-determination and motivation (Vallerand et al., 2008). On the other hand, children who experience a warm, positive relationship with their teacher(s) are more likely to accept the academic and social values of that teacher (Wentzel, 1999). Interestingly, both the positive and negative effects of student-teacher relationships seem to have a greater effect on at-risk students (Hughes, Luo, Kwok, & Loyd 2008). Changes in context cause changes in relationships, leading to a decrease in relationship stability. At-risk students are thought to be more vulnerable to these changes and to changes in stability (Hughes et al., 2008). This vulnerability may be due to instability within the lives of these students caused by a variety of variables such as low SES, cultural difficulties, broken homes, etc. These variables appear to have a stronger influence in the early years (Hamre & Pianta, 2005) due to the cascade effect over time.

There appears to be a decline in the student-teacher relationship over time. This is similar to the decline in the parent-child relationship as the child develops through the adolescent years. A number of reasons for this decline have been suggested, including a decrease in dependence and social pressure (Split et al., 2012). Little research on this decline was found in the literature. The effect during the high school years is largely unknown, suggesting an additional gap in the literature. What is known is that younger adolescents report a decrease in student-teacher relationships in middle school. Interestingly, these declines correspond to academic declines commonly found during that same period (Wentzel, 1999). Older adolescents acknowledge that teachers may provide some advice or specific assistance, but as a secondary or tertiary source

after parents and peers. Researchers of self-determination theory have studied the effects of teachers' autonomy support on the motivation and academic success of students. The findings of this research suggest a possible reason for the decline of student-teacher relationships.

Black and Deci (2000) noted that by the secondary and post-secondary years, instruction tends to change to a more structured system of information delivery, generally revolving around a large amount of lecture. Students are typically left on their own to study the material in a sink-or-swim situation. This change was found to lead to an increase in anxiety about the course and lower performance for the student. It was found that by adding weekly, 90-minute group study sessions with the instructor, student self-regulation, competence, and interest in the course increased (Black & Deci, 2000). The small group instruction was student-centered, as opposed to the instructor-centered lecture method. In order to be successful, it was important during the small group sessions that the instructors used methods related to autonomy support. In order to do so, the teachers needed to internalize the perspectives of the students, relate to the students' anxieties and frustrations, and provide them with choices (Deci & Ryan, 2008). In this way, the instructors were providing autonomy support to the students.

Other Motivational Factors

Motivation is the reasoning behind why humans behave as they do. The factors that drive motivation are as varied as the people they affect. Research into motivation includes the work of Abraham Maslow (1943) and his hierarchy of human needs. Simply put, Maslow suggested that a person's basic needs (hunger, safety, etc.) must be met before he or she can progress on to a higher level of needs or growth. The highest level one can achieve in this hierarchy is that of self-actualization. It is at this point that a person is supposedly able to realize their personal potential and self-fulfillment for growth. Also at this level, a person's need for fulfillment moves from the

self to the needs of society and others. Based on Maslow's theory, when a person fails to achieve their full potential, it is because they have lower-level psycho-social needs that are not being met, either partially or completely. There are a plethora of reasons as to why this may be so, and over the years researchers have sought to identify the factors involved.

Today, Maslow's work is over seventy years old, but it is included here because it provides an important foundation for understanding human motivation and, by extension, achievement. However, Maslow's theory, as originally postulated, does not differentiate between intrinsic and extrinsic factors affecting the fulfillment of motivational needs. More recently, there has been a great deal of research into motivation that does try to determine and define the underlying causes that drive this facet of human behavior.

Jenkins (2009) worked to unravel what factors contributed most significantly to student achievement in medical school. From her observations, she concluded that success is its own best driving force, creating a cycle of positive motivation. By this it was meant that one positive outcome encouraged the student to attempt another. Conversely, research conducted by Freitas & Leonard (2011) suggested that factors such as test-taking anxiety, family and social obligations, health issues, etc., contributed negatively to classroom performance. In an attempt to understand why these factors held such an influence on classroom performance, Freitas & Leonard (2011) applied Maslow's hierarchy to their research in order to identify a cause and effect relationship between met and unmet needs in terms of academic performance. What prompted this research was the observation that academically talented students did not always succeed while students who faced adversity often did. Analysis of these two sets of students found that the needs for both fell into one of two categories: physical or psychosocial needs.

In most cases, a number of community resources designed to address the physical needs of students are already in place, such as financial assistance, food banks, crises centers, etc. But a person's psychosocial needs often have deeper roots than just the physical. These additional needs include feelings of belonging, acceptance, and self-worth. Interestingly, it was found that female students were most at risk due to having higher psychosocial needs than their male counterparts (Freitas & Leonard, 2011). The most effective response to the psychosocial needs of college students was found to be involvement in peer social groups such as study groups and other learning communities.

Summary

An analysis of the literature associated with this review revealed that research aimed specifically at academic motivation of high school students and their potential matriculation to college is severely lacking. However, there appears to be a large body of general research into the factors governing autonomy, competence, and personal satisfaction. The majority of these works are focused in the area of motivation research, or what drives us to do what we do (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gagne & Deci, 2005; McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989; Vallerand et al., 2008; Vansteenkiste et al., 2004). According to the literature, factors moderating motivational levels of students include both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (e.g., Benware & Deci, 1984; Gagne & Deci, 2005; Grolnick, Deci, & Ryan, 1997; Kernis et al., 2000; McClelland et al., 1989; Vansteenkiste et al., 2004), parental influences (e.g., Chabra & Kumari, 2011; Fan & Chen, 2001; Georgiou & Tourva, 2007; Kaya & Lundeen, 2010; Kodde & Ritzen, 1985; Moon & Lee, 2009; Pishghadam & Zabihi, 2011; Skaliotis, 2010), socio-economic status (e.g., Duranovic et al., 2011; Kaya & Lundeen, 2010; Kodde & Ritzen, 1985; Marks, 2000; Pishghadam & Zabihi, 2011), sibling and peer influences (e.g., Deci et al., 2006; Fiebig, 2008;

Harris, 2000; Jordan, 1997; Marsh, 1991; Paulhus et al., 1999; Reiss, 2000; Sletto, 1934; Zajonc & Markus, 1975), and teacher influences (e.g., Black & Deci, 2000; Grusec & Goodnow, 1994; Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Oakes, 1985; Split et al., 2012; Vallerand et al., 2008; Wentzel, 1999).

The factors that affect self-determination, motivation, and achievement are varied. This variance has led some researchers to suggest that no one area of human behavior is responsible for motivation, but that there is an intricate interplay within the multiple psycho-social models that develops over time and is unique to the individual (Freitas & Leonard, 2011). All of the variables found in the categories of this literature review may play some role in influencing a student's choice about pursuing post-secondary education. There is, however, an absence of information on the direct effect that these factors have on influencing high school students to self-limit their educational experience to the secondary level or how these factors are interrelated. The purpose of this study was to fill this gap within the current body of research.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an explanation of the research design and methods used in this study. Sampling and data collection are described, followed by an explanation of the data analysis in relation to the research questions. The methods of analysis and a description of the phenomenon are presented. The chapter will conclude with a summary of the methodology.

This study was conducted in order to better understand the phenomenon that influences self-limitation among high school seniors in northeast Georgia. This study is important in furthering the understanding of student choice as to when and why students end their academic careers. It is hoped that with a clearer understanding this phenomenon, it will become easier to design and implement programs that will successfully encourage students to continue with post-secondary education. Post-secondary education is essential for developing the skills needed for the students to become successful in today's job market. Numerous reasons exist for students to choose to discontinue their academic careers after high school, including lack of interest (amotivation), financial inability, family obligations, time, and other considerations. Therefore, it is vitally important to understand these influences and develop programs or protocols that encourage and enable students to continue their education after high school.

Design

For the purposes of this research, a transcendental phenomenological research design was chosen. Phenomenology is, according to Moustakas (1994), "the science of describing what one perceives, senses and knows in one's immediate awareness and experience" (p. 26). Since it is the lived experiences of the participants that were described, phenomenology is the best design

choice. Within phenomenology there are two major schools of thought: transcendental and hermeneutical. Transcendental phenomenology seeks to describe the phenomenon without judgment or pre-conceived values, made possible through eidetic reduction. Hermeneutical phenomenology is interpretive rather that descriptive and may be influenced by the experiences and views of the researcher (Gadamer & Weinsheimer, 2004). Transcendental phenomenology was chosen over hermeneutical phenomenology for this study because the research sought to describe the experiences of the participants using their voices and not the voice of the researcher in order to form a fresh perspective. The views and experiences of the participants in regards to the phenomenon of academic self-limitation are what this research was determined to explain. For this type of research, Creswell (2013) suggested addressing the commonalities of the participants in regard to the shared phenomenon. Thus, themes emerged that addressed the commonalities of the participants in regard to self-limitation from post-secondary education. This design was appropriate because the researcher experienced the phenomenon vicariously through the participants while limiting his own experiences and perceptions as much as possible through the processes of reduction.

Research Questions

1) What value does post-secondary education have for the participants?

   a) What meaning is there to the participants regarding education?

   b) What meaning is there to the participants regarding parental expectations of education?

   c) How does the home environment contribute to self-limiting behavior in terms of the pursuit of post-secondary education?

2) What are some ways in which life experiences outside the home might hinder students from aspiring to post-secondary education?

3) How would additional resources, both at home and within the community, enhance the

participants' lived experiences so that they might aspire to post-secondary education?

Participants

The sample was selected purposively by survey (see Appendix A) and consisted of

volunteers. Purposeful sampling was required because it was essential that the participants had all

experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Only those students who indicated that they had

no immediate plans for post-secondary education were selected. The purpose of the survey was

largely selective, and also to assist in data triangulation. The reason for selectivity is that the

phenomenon of academic self-limitation must be shared by all of the participants. The

participants were both male and female high school students between the ages of 16 and 19 with a

random mix of academic abilities. The participants were from the same general community and

attended the same school within the same school system. There were 12 participants, all with

pseudonyms assigned to protect their identities.

Site

Randall High School (pseudonym) in northeast Georgia was selected to serve as the

research site because its student body contained suitable participants (those who self-limit). This

school is located in the State of Georgia and is considered a rural setting. The county in which

the school is found is geographically located in the center of a regional area of industrial decline

that took place in the 1980s. The participants are the descendants of the people who once worked

in various industries when those industries existed. The school system is comprised of one high

school, one middle school, and four elementary schools. The high school is a Title I, low income

institution. The graduation rate at Randall High School has risen dramatically from 2006 to 2013

from 66% to a current 92% (Georgia Department of Education, 2013). This rise is due in large part to the tremendous efforts of the faculty who made it a priority to increase this rate.

There is a great deal of poverty in the county, as evidenced by the high unemployment numbers. Little to no work is available, so students are advised to receive as much education as possible in order to enable them to become a mobile commodity so that they are able to travel to where the jobs are and become employed (Cremer, De Donder, & Pestieau, 2010).

Procedures

The first procedure conducted was to submit the necessary forms to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for their approval. Once this was secured, the process of selecting and securing participants was initiated. The first step in this procedure will be to obtain parental consent and/or student assent (see Appendices B and C). Full disclosure of the study, its purpose, and its procedures were discussed on the permission forms. Those for whom permission was granted were given a survey to determine if they met the selective criterion for this study. Those who met the necessary criterion were interviewed individually, then collaboratively as a focus group. The individual interviews were semi-structured to allow for cross-comparisons of the data. I selected a non-threatening setting in which to conduct the interviews. The sessions were recorded electronically and on paper and later transcribed for analysis. The focus group was conducted with a more open-ended approach so that group dynamics could be observed. The focus groups were recorded electronically and later transcribed onto paper for analysis.

Data analysis began with the information from the interviews going through the process of member checking, and then being selectively coded through the process of horizonalization (Moustakas, 1994) in a search for clusters of meaning (Creswell, 2013). Themes were developed to produce a textural description. Recurring themes/descriptions were sought and from these, the

essence of the phenomenon was developed. At that point, the research questions were answered as the story of the participants is told.

The Researcher's Role

My role as researcher was to gather information on the phenomenon of academic self-limitation of high school students in northeast Georgia, and to describe a common theme or set of themes that give meaning to this shared experience. I am a veteran teacher with 17 years of classroom experience. I have taught both in an affluent area of Florida and an area of medium to high poverty in Georgia. I currently teach at Randall High School and have a professional relationship with that site. Although it was possible that some of the participants could have become or may have been students of mine, this would not be intentional.

I have always believed that education provides the best avenue of financial security for most people. Therefore, I am distressed when students of reasonable academic ability choose to end their educational experience with high school graduation. I understand that for some students, any number of variables may preclude them from pursuing post-secondary education. These can include financial hardship or family obligations. But for others, it is simply a choice, a self-limitation. It was this particular phenomenon that was researched.

Data Collection

The data for this study came from multiple sampling strategies. Surveys, interviews, and focus groups were coded to develop clusters of meaning in order to produce connecting themes that describe the phenomenon of academic self-limitation (Creswell, 2013; Saldana, 2013). Initially, a survey was conducted to gather data about the participant experience concerning the phenomenon. The participants' responses to the survey were compared to the participants' responses from the other data collection methods. The questions used in each of the three data

collection methods were similar in order to verify the validity of each participant's responses, as they were expected to be similar in their description of the phenomenon from one collection method to another. A detailed description and justification of the questions can be found in the Interviews section.

The survey gave the participants the opportunity to describe the phenomenon in private, without the immediate influence or distraction of having other people present. One-on-one interviews followed the surveys. The purpose of the interview was not only to cross-check the validity of the survey responses, but to provide a more in-depth line of questioning. This allowed the researcher to personalize the interview questions based upon participant responses, honing in on various nuances provided by the interviewees. Lastly, a focus group was conducted involving as many of the participants as possible at one time. Again, the general line of questioning was congruent with the surveys and one-on-one interviews, but the dynamic was different. In the focus group, participants were aware of not only the interviewer, but of other participants. Ultimately, this did not affect participant responses. It is possible that some participants became reluctant to be as open as they were on the survey or in the one-on-one interview. On the other hand, the group dynamic may have provided a synergistic effect, drawing out richer descriptions of the phenomenon as the participants reacted in discussion with one another. Coding, though usually reserved for the analysis section, took place both during and after the research. Coding is as much a heuristic technique as it is a tool for analysis, helping to connect data with ideas from the very beginning of the research (Saldana, 2013).

Survey

The participants were asked to complete an open-ended survey (Appendix A) in order to gather descriptions of their experiences concerning the phenomenon. This was a paper-and-pencil

survey instead of an online survey to better accommodate participants who do not have internet access. The surveys were given to the participants and returned within 10 days. The purpose of the survey was to obtain the participants' initial descriptions of the phenomenon, as well as associated background information. The design of the questions allowed the participants to describe their experiences of the phenomenon in their own words. The survey questions were also designed to address all of the research questions in terms of the value and meaning of education, benefits or limitations of resources, and negative life experiences. The survey questions, like those of the interviews and focus group, were based upon Moustakas' (1994) five characteristics of human science research question characteristics, and were similar in scope. This format kept the questions from all three data sources focused, so that validity could be checked through triangulation. Another use of the survey was to initially determine who had, or was currently, experiencing the phenomenon being researched. This will serve to eliminate from participation those who have not experienced the phenomenon.

The over-arching question to guide the research was, "What are the social and academic impediments that cause many high school students from rural northeast Georgia to choose not to pursue post-secondary education?" The subsequent research questions were designed to address the guiding question in terms of value of education, motivation and self-determination, availability of resources, and other contributing influences. The responses of the participants to the survey (and the interviews and focus group) offered descriptions of their personal experiences of the phenomenon and helped to form a description of the phenomenon within the scope of the research questions.

Interviews

Interviews (Appendix D) were conducted within two weeks of the return of the surveys. The purposes of the interview were to add to the body of knowledge through the life experiences of the interviewees (Crabtree & DiCicco-Bloom, 2006) and to assist in answering the research questions. Also, the interviews gave voice to the participants and allowed them to relate the phenomenon in their own words. A pilot session was conducted with teachers standing in for the students. Validity of interview questions and procedures was scrutinized and corrections made as needed. Interviews were electronically recorded and conducted at the school of the participants.

Van Manen (1990) pointed out that not all methods of interviewing are appropriate for all disciplines. He and other researchers have discussed the differences between interviews that are structured, semi-structured, and unstructured (Crabtree & DiCicco-Bloom, 2006; Van Manen, 1990). According to Moustakas (1990), data collection should be individualized, and the interview provides one of the best structures for this purpose. In this manner, the interviewer can adjust the line of questioning based upon the responses of the interviewee. It should be noted that almost no interview can be completely unstructured, as a pre-determined time and location for the interview are forms of structure. A truly structured interview tends to produce quantized data better fitting quantitative research (Crabtree & DiCicco-Bloom, 2006). Thus, the interviews for this research were semi-structured in nature to allow for richer participant responses, more accurate data collection, and coding. Semi-structured interviewing permits a greater understanding of meaning and perceptions by allowing a more free flow of thought and response (Crabtree & DiCicco-Bloom, 2006). This freedom is important considering the scope of the research questions, which asked about the values and meaning surrounding education as perceived by the participants. The research questions also involved the availability of resources

and other personal experiences that may influence the participants. These factors could only be described by the participants as they related their responses to the survey, interview, and focus group questions.

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

Self-determination, motivation, and the value of education for the participants

1. Explain why you decided against continuing your education at this time.

2. What does it mean to you when we say that someone is "educated"?

3. Describe the importance of education to you.

4. Describe some of your concerns, your thoughts, when you made this decision.

5. Describe how comfortable you would be/are in making major decisions on your own.

6. Academically, what are some of your strong points?

Self-determination, motivation, and the value of education to the parents and family of the participants

7. Describe the importance of education to your family.

8. Describe the input from your family in making this decision.

9. What effect, if any did (family, friends, school, other factors) have on your decision to not pursue (college, technical school, other) at this time?

10. Describe what the conversations at home were like when your education and future were discussed.

The effect of external life-experiences

11. What were some of the external (non-family) factors that influenced you to (go in this direction)?

12. Describe some of the high points of your educational career. Low points?

13. What could have happened differently in your life experience that might have set you on a
    different course?

Resources as a factor in decision making

14. If there was a lack of available resources during your educational career, describe what
    they were/might have been.

15. Describe how additional resources, both at home and at school, could have influenced
    your educational decision if they had been available (funding, technology, etc.).

The purpose of the questions relating to self-determination, motivation, and value of
education for the participants and their families was to gather information about the participant's
experiences in the development of self-motivation, and how highly they value education. These
questions were divided into two subgroups. Questions 1 through 6 sought descriptions from the
participant's point of view, while questions 7 through 10 were aimed at the parents and families
of the participants. By engaging the two different perspectives, a better understanding of the
development of motivation and values pertaining to education was achieved (Eitam et al., 2013).
Question 1 specifically asked the participants to provide a descriptive motive of why they had
chosen to end their formal education at the high school level. This question provided a general
description of the reasoning behind the participant's decision to self-limit his or her education.
Questions 2 and 3 sought to establish a description of the participant's value of education. The
development of this value may have been intrinsic, extrinsic, or a blend of the two (Edworthy &
Cole, 2012; Gagne & Deci, 2005). Along with questions 7 through 10, I gained insight into the
formative process of the participant's development of not only their value of education, but also
of the development of self-determination and motivation. It is important to have the participant's
perspective into their own ability to make decisions as well as how those decisions are influenced

by their families (Jung, 2012). Questions 4 and 5 sought describe the degree to which family

input factored into the decision making and value constructing processes (Deci & Ryan, 2008;

Shih, 2013). Question 6 flowed from the desire to gain insight into the participants' personal

academic abilities. This information is important because the literature strongly suggests that

intrinsic factors have the greatest effect, either positive or negative, on the development of

motivation and self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2008).

Influences outside of the home were considered in the development of questions 11

through 15. Question 11 was designed to draw out descriptions of the influence from multiple

sources such as peers, teachers, or others by whom the participants may have been influenced.

Some of the literature suggests that it is within peer groups that most people develop positive

ability-specific identities (Wilson & Adelson, 2012). However, other researchers have suggested

that there actually exists an inverse relationship within the peer group whereby a negative

academic growth occurs (Marsh, 1991; Schneeweis & Winter-Ebmer, 2007). This self-concept of

ability ties back into question 6, in which the participants were asked about their academic

strengths and weaknesses. A student who has a low self-perception of ability may be far less

motivated academically than a student with a high sense of ability. Question 12 asked the

participants to describe their school lives thus far. A more positive experience overall may be

indicative of a stronger concept of self and ability, while a more negative experience may be

indicative of a weaker concept of self and ability. The development of these concepts may be due

to a combination of internal and external factors, likely influenced by family, peers, and others.

Question 13 asked the participant to reflect upon their lives and educational careers, and suggest

how different experiences may have changed their chosen direction. This question was designed

to gain a deeper, reflective perspective from the participants by challenging them to synthesize

different scenarios. By understanding what they would change in a given situation, a better

understanding of their perspectives was obtained.

Questions 14 and 15 sought to understand how resources outside the realm of family,

peers, and teachers did or could influence the participants' decisions to self-limit their academic

careers. The most prominent factor in this category is the socioeconomic status of the participant.

This is important because the literature shows that a child's SES has a profound effect on social,

academic, and cognitive growth, which, in turn, affects motivation and self-determination

(Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Ram & Hou, 2003; Vail, 2004). Other factors considered here were

community resources (state, county, and city), availability of local colleges or trade schools,

mentor programs, etc.

Focus Groups

In a focus group, a relatively small number of people gather in a non-threatening

environment to discuss a common topic (Ho, 2006). Focus groups arose during the 1940s as a

tool for marketing research (Crabtree & DiCicco-Bloom, 2006), but have been increasingly used

as an information gathering tool in the social sciences (Ho, 2006). A semi-structured focus group

(Appendix E) was conducted toward the end of the data gathering period. This group interview

was conducted at the school of the participants and consisted of those who participated in the

survey and one-on-one interview and myself. The pilot procedures for the focus group consisted

of a team of teachers participating in a mock focus group interview. Again, the purpose of

piloting was to test the validity of the questions and procedures. The focus group session served

several functions, including as a check for validation of the individual interview and survey data.

While individualized interviews can generate a greater depth of information, focus groups are able

to gather data with a wider range of perspectives (Crabtree & DiCicco-Bloom, 2006) and may be

influenced by group dynamics. Together with the surveys and one-on-one interviews, the focus group data helped answer the research questions concerning educational values, resources, and life experiences.

Data Analysis

The purpose of this research was to provide as complete an interpretation as possible of the phenomenon and each participant's relationship to it. A great deal of information was generated, collected, and organized. Meaning was developed and the information disseminated as accurately as possible as a description of the phenomenon and its relationship to the participants.

Creswell (2013) suggested that the researcher start with what he calls phenomenological reduction, whereby the researcher returns to the essence of the experience to glean a deeper, inner meaning. This is accomplished through a system of epoche, or bracketing, whereby the researcher seeks out and, as well as he can, eliminates much of his own experience in order to better comprehend the experiences of the participants. Horizonalization was utilized next as a tool to identify information that carries relevance to the phenomenon or experiences of the participants. This step was also important because it prepared the data to be later organized in a more formal, categorical manner. During horizonalization, all statements of significance collected during the survey, interview, and focus group were listed and initially given equal weight (Moustakas, 1994). Once this collection and organization was completed, the data were organized into clusters of meaning so coding of the data could take place (Moustakas, 1994). During coding, related statements from all data collection methods were categorized into units of significance by assigning a word or phrase that captures the essence of that portion of the data (Saldana, 2013). Each of these units had its own inherent meaning, or classification. The

identified themes were developed, allowing me to write a detailed description of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Trustworthiness

Several methods were employed for the purpose of validating the research. Authenticity was addressed using direct quotes. No paraphrasing of the participants' responses were used, but a strict adherence to the actual interview and focus group transcripts was maintained. Credibility and confirmability were addressed using member checks and triangulation. Member checks consisted of the participants having the opportunity to verify the transcripts against their own recollection in order to verify the information (Creswell, 2013). Triangulation of the different data sources verified that the information was correct and that no contradicting anomalies existed by comparing the data from one source to the data from two other sources (Creswell. 2013). Transferability was ensured by the comparison of the specifics from one data set to another.

Ethical Considerations

Participation in this research was entirely voluntary. All data collection began with informed consent and assent. Pseudonyms were used and personally identifiable information was not collected. Nonetheless, all data were stored in a locked filing cabinet, including written transcripts and electronic recordings. Computer data were stored in files with password protection, the password being known only to the researcher.

Summary

For this study, a transcendental phenomenological research design was chosen. This is because of the importance of describing the phenomenon as the lived experiences of the participants and forming a new perspective (Moustakas 1994). The participants were high school students that were purposively selected in order to assure that each had experienced the

phenomenon in question. The high school selected as the research site is representative of other high schools in the region in terms of demographics and academic opportunities and outcomes. The researcher gathered data through a variety of procedures (interviews, focus groups, and member checking) and analyzed it in order to describe the phenomenon and find meaning in it. Analysis began with phenomenological reduction, whereby the researcher bracketed out his own presumptions as much as possible in order to have a fresh perspective of the data. This was followed by horizonalization to prepare the data to be more formally organized during the coding process. From this, themes were realized and described, allowing for a description of the phenomenon. Finally, trustworthiness and ethical considerations were discussed.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This chapter attends to the descriptions of the participants and to the findings of the research of this transcendental phenomenological study. A portrait of each of the 12 research participants has been developed to provide a more profound narrative for the interpretation of the results. The participants' identities have been protected by the use of pseudonyms.

In review, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of students at one northeast Georgia high school regarding the factors that influenced their self-imposed limitations, or desire, to access postsecondary education. Data collection included the use of an open-ended questionnaire, individual interviews, and a focus group interview. The initial surveys helped to determine which of the potential participants qualified to participate in the research. Only those students who had no plans to attend post-secondary education were chosen to participate in an individual interview. Also, the questionnaire items largely mirrored the individual interview questions. This assisted the researcher in determining the validity of the participants' survey responses as they were cross-checked against the interview responses. The focus group provided a third means of validation by placing the participants within a group of their peers and determining if their responses varied from those in the survey or individual interviews. The recorded responses remained true throughout the procedure, regardless of the data gathering method, providing triangulation for validity purposes. Emergent themes provided the organization for the findings of this study, which was guided by the following questions:

- What value does postsecondary education have for the participants?

- How would access to additional resources, both at home and within the community, enhance the participants' lived experiences so that they might aspire to post-secondary education?

- What are some ways in which life experiences might hinder students from aspiring to postsecondary education?

The researcher was intrigued by the continuity in responses between the three data collection methods, especially between the individual and focus group interviews. Initial expectations were that social pressures among peers found within the focus group would cause a variation in responses from those given in the individual interviews. This was not the case. The responses generated by the initial questionnaire were supported and supplemented by the interviews. The similarity of responses remained unchanged between the three data collection sources. Interestingly, the focus group was dominated by several participants, the most notable being Marty. This established a social hierarchy that continued throughout the focus group session. However, everyone was courteous and did not speak over one another.

Participants

Kathy

With long blond hair and a constant smile, Kathy is a 17-year-old high school senior. She is of Caucasian descent, and is the middle child between two sisters. Her parents divorced when she was nine years old. Her mother was awarded custody of all three of the girls. During the individual interviews, Kathy confided, "Dad's the one that left us, so we just stayed with mom." Her mother barely made ends meet running a small plant nursery from several greenhouses in her large backyard. Every day after school and on weekends, Kathy and her sisters helped with the business by either potting plants or by attending plant shows and sales at a variety of venues.

At the time of this research, Kathy was engaged and planned on getting married "as soon as I graduate" from high school and finds a job. She always did well in school, but, in her own words, "never really liked it." She commented during the individual interviews that her family had very little money, so they never talked about continuing on with post-secondary education. "When we were little, we were allowed to have two cookies after we ate supper. If it was like an Oreo, that counted as two cookies because it has two sides." Neither of her parents had attended college, and Kathy suggested that if her family had shown more interest in the prospect of her attendance, then she may have looked into funding resources and considered continuing her education. In her case, there was also a definite lack of resources, including no computers or Internet access. None of her peers had any plans for continuing their education after high school, so it was not a common topic of discussion. During the focus group session, Kathy said, "Additional education is only important if you need it for your plans." Marty agreed and stated, "If you're not gonna use it, why waste your time and money?"

Nancy

Nancy presented herself with a serious and confident face. She is shorter than average for her age and a bit stout, with medium length dark brown hair. She is of Caucasian descent and the eldest of two children. At 16 years old and a high school junior at the time of the interview, she already appeared to be set in her future plans, having everything planned out and organized. Nancy is originally from Tennessee and moved to Georgia during her freshman year.

Education is important to Nancy, and she always tried to achieve the highest scores that she can. In her own words, "I'm no Albert Einstein, but I try." However, on the questionnaire, Nancy stated that she did not have any plans for additional education after high school. She elaborated in the individual interview that she felt "I don't need it," having taken advantage of the

high school cosmetology program. Successful completion of this program can lead to licensure, which was her ultimate goal.

Education was important to her family and was commonly discussed. At home, she had always been expected to achieve to her fullest potential. During the focus group, Nancy commented, "Well, my momma wants straight As, but she knows I do my best, so she'll accept Bs." Her peers have had little influence on her academic decisions. However, adults in her life had a positive impact, providing her with feedback and acting as role models. Resources were generally not a problem for Nancy, but she did mention that the availability of courses in her high school program was sometimes an issue. "Some semesters they don't offer what you need," she said.

Faith

Faith is a tall but lightly built young lady with very long blond hair. She is very fair-skinned and shy. She was also 17 years old and a high school senior during the interview. Faith was born in Hawaii, but moved to Georgia with her mother during her middle school years. Faith is an only child. She mentioned that her father was not present in her life after he left the family during her eighth grade year.

Faith's immediate plans after graduation were to find a job and go to work, then "I'm just gonna try to figure out what I wanna do." Faith was open and candid in the individual interviews, but was relatively quiet in the focus group, answering questions only when directed to her. She considered education to be important, but "not the most important thing." She was concerned about not earning enough money to have a "good life," but remains unsure as to what direction her life will take. Faith described herself as not being very comfortable in making major decisions on her own, stating, "I'd rather have mommy do it, but I'm growing up."

Academically, Faith has been successful and enjoyed her academic subjects until her eighth grade year. At that point, her grades began to slip and her disinterest in school began. Her mother was ambivalent about education, but others in her extended family believed it to be very important. She had not yet told anyone about her plans to not attend post-secondary school, and was a bit nervous about telling her family. Faith pointed out that she had family members who received college degrees and do not use them, yet were in debt because of them. She maintained, "I don't want to end up owing more than I make." Her peers had no influence on her decision making, and she even laughed at the notion. Faith said that she and her mother have "had to move a bunch of times" and that this has made it difficult for her to learn or to make and maintain friendships.

Marty

Marty is a jovial young man with a stocky build and short dark hair. He is of mixed Caucasian and Latino descent and tends to be quite verbose when engaged in discussion. Marty dominated the focus group session because he almost always made the first comment on each question. He was 16 years old and a high school junior during the interview. He had no plans to attend post-secondary education, but instead proposed to keep his current job and over time "see where life takes me." He took welding courses at his high school and was interested in possibly making welding his career. He lamented, however, that there were no locally available welding jobs.

Marty did not consider formal education with high regard. To him, an educated person is simply someone with "…common sense, not book smart." In fact, he said, "I don't like book smart." He did appreciate the basics of education (reading, writing, and basic math), but said, "This other crap that you have to learn really isn't a big thing to me. I think it's most like bogus."

However, Marty struggled to pass his classes and was in danger of not graduating on time, if at all. He described middle and high school as "like being in jail" and has had truancy issues in the past. He felt confident that left to his own decisions, he would "work things out." According to Marty, the only advice offered to him from his parents for life after high school was:

> Make sure that you have a job, or make sure you have a place to stay and a way to get
>
> from place to place, you know, home to work, blah, blah, blah. They really didn't give a
>
> crap about me going to more school or anything, just that I had a job and could keep it.
>
> Marty mentioned that neither of his parents went to any form of post-secondary school,

and that his father never finished high school. Marty's peers told him that "education is power," but he chose to ignore them. Marty insisted that the resources someone has shouldn't really matter. He said, "There is always a better seat to sit in, or a better pencil to have, but what you've got is what you've got, so make the best of it." He described his access to resources as average, and did not believe that he experienced any lack of necessary or helpful benefits in this area.

Celeste

Celeste is a quiet young lady with long dark ringlets of hair. At first she appeared a bit shy, but opened up as she began to feel more comfortable. Her voice was very soft, being at times almost inaudible. When she speaks, she uses a definite local pattern of speech and slang. She is the eldest of two children in a single parent home, and was a 17-year-old senior at the time of the interview. Celeste described her inability to decide on a career path as her main reason for choosing to not attend post-secondary education when she graduates. "I don't want to go to school and end up with something I'm not gonna use. I might end up doing something totally different," she said. She mentioned that perhaps she would rather find something that does not require additional education, as she felt post-secondary education is only moderately important.

She commented, "College is only important if it's gonna help you in your job." Then she continued, "I have friends that have good jobs and they didn't even go to college." Celeste spoke often about how her mother made most of the decisions for their household, including personal decisions for Celeste and her sister. "I know mom still thinks of me as a kid. But she is getting better about letting me decide." Other than reading, Celeste did not enjoy her academic courses and earns low to average grades. "I like to read. I get in trouble because I'll be in class reading a book instead of doing math or whatever. Probably doesn't help my grades."

While her mother insisted that Celeste complete high school, post-secondary education was not commonly discussed. Celeste mentioned that if she attended college, she would be the first in her family to do so. While some of Celeste's friends were planning on attending college or technical school, her best friend was not. Their plan was to find jobs and rent an apartment together. Although Celeste stated that there was no shortage of resources growing up, she pondered aloud how things might have been different if her parents had not divorced and her father was still present: "We weren't poor or anything. We had everything we needed. But I think things would have been better if he had stayed. Who knows?"

Robert

Robert is a tall, lanky Caucasian boy who resembles a young Abraham Lincoln, sans the beard. He was 17 years old and a senior at the time of the interview. Robert was a bit reserved and had to be coaxed into anything more verbose than simple "yes" or "no" responses. He described his family as being "poor" financially, and he is the second of four children. Robert was a bit of a loner, and preferred not to be in large or loud groups. Robert's immediate plan for himself after high school was to join the armed forces and "see if there's a job in the military for me." Robert took the vocational welding courses at the high school and insisted that he really

enjoyed them. He said, "If there's a job in the military with welding, I'd choose that." When asked why he was not considering other options after high school such as college, he replied, "We don't have the money right now".

Additionally, Robert did not feel that there was a need to continue his education. He stated that an educated person is "just someone who knows a few more things and is wiser." In fact, he stated that if it were not mandatory, he would not be in school now. "Momma makes me go to school every day. Even on short days when nobody does nothing. She said that she ain't getting the law on her because of me".

According to Robert, his family shared his views concerning education. "My dad says all you really need is to read and write, and the rest is a waste of time unless you're gonna be a doctor." His father never completed high school, while his mother did. He said that his parents feel that it is more important to have practical knowledge and a trade, than to be "book smart." Robert said that a lack of resources was always a problem in his home, and at times "the electric got cut off."

Missy

Missy was a 17-year-old senior during the interview. She is a very petite young lady with long brown hair and a wide smile. She is Caucasian and the middle child of three. She had a two-year-old son and was legally emancipated. She lived on social and government financial assistance and worked when she can.

Despite the obvious difficulties, Missy was striving to earn her high school diploma. She had no plans to continue with any form of post-secondary education upon graduation from high school. Her goal was to find the best job that she could and go to work. When asked about her

thought process in making this decision, her reply was simply "Johnny" (her son). She admitted that her entire focus is on him and his future. "He is why I keep going," she said.

Missy held education in high esteem, but believed that her life choices have severely limited her options, and thus she had given up on continuing her own education after high school. "I know it's [education] important, but I made my choices and now I gotta live with them." She believed that an educated person is someone with a formal, post-secondary education, and that this is what is necessary to be successful. "An educated person went to college for something professional. In middle school I was planning on being a lawyer. That sure would have been different. I was gonna go to college and everything," she said.

Being an emancipated minor with a child of her own, Missy was very comfortable in making her own major decisions. Her mother rarely entered into her life, and her father was incarcerated. Resources were very limited for Missy, as she struggled to cope every day. She described the early years of her life as "normal," and she began experimenting with drugs and sex around 8th grade. "That's when I discovered boys – the wrong boys - and drugs and drinking," she said. This was also the time when her father became incarcerated. She claimed that a better home environment would have likely made a difference in her outcome, as she was "always surrounded by negative influences."

John

John is a 16-year-old junior who appeared full of energy during the interview. He is African-American and is the oldest of three children. John's goal for after high school is to find a job and, along with his friends, rent a home and "start life." According to John, being educated means simply that a person knows how to "read, write, and do everyday stuff." At home, John's mother talked to him about the importance of continuing his education, but his father was trying

to get John a position at the pump factory where the father works. "Mom says to go to school, do better. Dad says it's time to start earning my way," John said.

Neither of John's parents attended any form of post-secondary education, although they both did graduate from high school. He described his parents as being "okay" with whichever decision he made, but that he decided that additional education was not in his future. He commented, "Mom hopes if I go to work, I'll get tired of it and decide to go to school. Dad says do whatever, but I'll have to pay for it myself." John enjoyed his vocational classes at high school, but not his academic courses. John admitted that if he had applied himself more in school over the years, he could be on a different path. Resources were never an issue for John, as he described always having whatever was needed for school. He said, "You mean paper, and books, and computers? Yeah, we always had that stuff."

Mary

Mary is a Caucasian student with short-cropped red hair, pale skin, and several homemade tattoos on her forearm. She was 17 years old and a high school junior at the time of the interview, and had a definite sadness to her personality. Mary lived alone with her father, but offered no information about her mother or if she has any siblings. In conversation, Mary was articulate beyond her age, and she earned excellent grades in her academic classes. Nonetheless, Mary had no desire to pursue any form of post-secondary education. According to Mary, an educated person is simply "someone who went to [any] school." Her father "just wants [her] to be happy," and did not discuss additional post-secondary school options. Mary agreed that education can be important for some people, but not for her. "I've learned everything I need to know about history and science and everything. What am I gonna do with it? Nothing. If I was gonna use it, okay, but I'm not." She felt that she was "smart enough" to make it in the world with her current level

of education. "I'm smarter than most people I know. I will figure things out as I need to." While

a lack of resources did not appear to be a hindrance to Mary, she did describe growing up as a

solitary experience, keeping to herself. "I had friends in elementary school," she said, "but then

the kids got mean, so I just went my own way." When asked if different life experiences could

have altered her future academic outlook, Mary stared vacantly and said simply, "probably."

Bobby

Bobby is a sandy-haired boy with freckles and braces. He was a 17-year-old Caucasian and

is the younger of two boys. Even though he was interviewed during his senior year in high

school, Bobby did not yet know what he wants to do with his life. According to Bobby, his

mother suggested that he at least start college when he completes high school, and figure out what

direction to take as he goes along. "Mom wants me to start college next fall and see what I like,"

he said. Bobby countered that he "doesn't want to waste time" if it turns out that post-secondary

education is not for him. Bobby's mother holds a university degree in business and was not happy

with his decision to forgo additional education. Bobby did not consider formal education as

particularly important, and he shared the following:

> My mom went to college. Now she stays at home and babysits and dad works and makes
>
> more than she used to. She isn't using hers [degree], and is still paying for it. I don't
>
> wanna get stuck financially like that.

Bobby said that his father had the opportunity to go to college but chose not to. "Grandpa really

wanted dad to go on to school, but dad said 'no way.'" He stated that his father regrets that

decision, but Bobby remained unswayed. Bobby's financial description of his family was that of

typical lower-middle income. While they did not have a lot left over each month, he did not

remember doing without most necessities. However, he did mention that there was "no computer

at home," and that he had "to use the computers at school." He described his parents telling him that if he chose to continue on to college, they would "find a way to make it happen." Bobby's older brother was currently in college and, according to Bobby, "is always ragging on me to go."

Carl

Carl presented a commanding presence when he entered the room. He is very tall and has the robust frame of a man, but retains a boyish face. He is of Caucasian descent and is an only child. During the interview, Carl was 17 years old and a high school senior. His mother died during his freshman year in high school. Carl's parents had both been an integral part of his life until his mother's passing.

Carl expressed that to him, an educated person holds at least a bachelor's degree, and that education is very important. He stated that getting a good post-secondary education is "one of the most fundamental things that I'm gonna teach my kids one day."

Carl was strong in his academic coursework, especially in science and history. However, Carl had no immediate plans to attend any form of post-secondary school. He said that his father never attended college, and that his mother started college, but dropped out and never resumed. "They want me to be the first college graduate in the family. Mom almost was, but didn't finish".

Although he said that his parents had always expressed to him the importance of continuing his education, Carl felt that to do so would put too large a strain on his family's finances. Carl said, "For now, I want to work and help dad get caught up." According to Carl, his friends, though supportive, had no idea what they were going to do after high school. "Nobody I know has any plans after graduation," Carl said. Thus, they were not a source of motivation for him. Resources were never an issue for Carl, as his father "always made sure we had what we needed."

Dustin

Dustin is a Caucasian male with shaggy, unkempt hair that constantly fell in front of his face. Dustin was 17 years old and a junior in high school at the time of the interview. He was held back and had to repeat much of his 9th grade year. His clothing was worn and appeared two sizes too large for his thin frame. He is the third child out of four, and while his parents are divorced, they both remained in his life. He currently lived with his father, while his sibling lived with their mother. Two older siblings were adults and lived on their own.

Though on the initial survey Dustin stated that he did not intend to continue his education after high school, during the interview, Dustin stated that he had not made a definite decision yet as to whether or not he will attend some form of post-secondary education. He said, "Someday I might go to technical school or something, but not right now."

Dustin expressed that he is both tired of school and afraid that education beyond the high school level may simply be too difficult for him. "I don't know if I can do it," he said. Dustin described an educated person as someone "with college education or a skill that they are really good at." He believed that it is important to be able to read, write, and perform basic math, but that additional education is "meaningless unless you're gonna use it."

Dustin described his parents as allowing him to make all of the decisions concerning his future. He stated, "My parents told me that since I was the one doing it, it was my decision." Education was important to Dustin's family, but he wanted to put off that decision for the time being. His parents told him that he was "either going to go to school, or start paying rent." According to Dustin, "If I'm paying rent, it sure isn't going to be at home." He went on to say, "After high school, my plans are to get a good job and a place of my own." Dustin stated that perhaps "if I'd learned better, it might be different" in regards to his education. Dustin related a

lack of resources neither to in relation to his current academic difficulties nor to his decision to not pursue a post-secondary education.

Results

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the social and academic impediments that may have contributed to causing many high school students from rural northeast Georgia to choose not to pursue a post-secondary education. While comparing and reviewing the data sets from this research (survey answers, transcripts from individual interviews, and transcripts from the focus group), certain commonalities arose from among the individual experiences of the participants in relation to education.

Extensive horizonalization was employed and used to refine the participant statements into initial codes (Saldaña, 2013). From these codes (Table 1), eight major themes emerged: plans after high school, individual perspectives on education, family perspectives on education, perspectives on educated people, lack of resources, family factors related to school success, school factors related to success, and social factors related to success. Also, the frequency of occurrences of each subtheme provided an indication toward strength of influence in terms of item commonality among the participants. Some factors occupy multiple places on the table because of the way in which the participants related them. For example, some participants had a strong dislike of school because of their perceived personal ability, while others disliked school because their families considered it a waste of time. Only a few of the participants appeared comfortable enough to provide more effusive responses during the interviews, with most giving more curt, simple answers. The findings of this research are organized according to the developed themes and subthemes.

Research Question 1

   The first research question focused on the participants' value of post-secondary education. Four emergent themes related to this question arose from the data: Theme 1 was plans after high school, Theme 2 was individual perspectives on education, Theme 3 was family perspectives on education, and Theme 4 was perspectives on educated people.

   Theme 1: Plans after high school. While some of the participants suggested that they might one day like to attend some form of post-secondary education, most did not. For example, John stated:

   I don't know what I wanna do yet. Mom said to start college and figure it out there, but I

   don't wanna waste my time until I figure out what I wanna do. I might go to North Georgia

   or something eventually, just not right away.

Robert suggested that he was still considering his options and asserted, "If there's a job in the military with welding, I'd choose that." Similarly, Celeste said:

   I don't know, really. I just don't have any idea exactly what I want to do yet. I think of

   something I like, then I end up thinking of something better. So why start something

   you'll change your mind about?

In contrast, Kathy was firm in her post-high school plans and said, "I plan to get married soon after graduation, so I'll just keep working to save money for that." Bobby was also certain that additional school was not in his plans when he stated, "Oh, I'm not ready to go to more school after twelve years of school, here. I just want to get out and see if I can make it on my own for a while."

Theme 2: Individual perspectives on education. The second theme was focused upon each participant's view of education. Again, there was a variance among the participants as to how each viewed education. Marty was the most cynical in his opinion:

> I think basics are the, uh, what you really need, but like this other crap that you have to learn isn't really a big deal to me. I think it's most like, bogus. They just want you to try to, I think they're trying to just live your life to make you just mature and then let you go and tell you that we didn't just like put you in a factory like they used to.

In contrast, Carl said, "Education is of the highest priority of my life. I believe that in order to move anywhere in life, you have to have knowledge to be able to get there."

Theme 3: Family perspectives on education. This theme focused primarily on the value placed upon education by the participants' families, particularly the parents. There was a sharp dichotomy among the participants' families in terms of the opinions expressed. Robert's statement suggested a mixed opinion from his family:

> Well, my dad never finished high school. My mom went to, I think, Tallulah Falls, or some college for secretary, and she's not even that. She did the pharmacy tech, so I don't think anyone in my family's been to college. It's just not that important.

Faith said that her mother believed that education is important, but that it is "not the most important thing." She elaborated:

> My mom thinks the same way I do. It's important, but not the most important thing. The rest of her family thinks it's very important. Mom went to college, but still has bills from it. She got it in business, but she works at Caterpillar making parts. So what good is that?

In contrast, Carl's family told him, "If you want to get anywhere nowadays, you have to become educated and learn."

Theme 4: Perspectives on educated people. The fourth theme that emerged as a possible influence on the participants' decisions concerning post-secondary education was what it meant to be educated and how this related to their own sense of personal academic skills. Missy described an educated person by saying, "They're smart, and they're probably going to be successful." Missy also described herself as being very strong academically throughout elementary and early middle school by saying, "I had perfect scores for years in a row, and I was always a straight-A student in elementary school." Carl was the most specific in describing an educated person:

> I believe that it's someone who at least has a minimum of a bachelor's degree or higher, and is either in a specific field, maybe a broad field or like a specified field, but as long as they have at least a bachelor's degree education.

Carl was confident in his assertion that, "My strongest suits, uh, tend to be science and history, respectively. But I don't believe I'm weak in math or English as well." Kathy also suggested that an educated person has formal, post-secondary education when she answered the question by stating, "I think it means they've gone to college." She suggested that she was comfortable academically when she said, "I do pretty well in all subjects, but I think English is my best subject." In contrast, when Marty was asked what it meant to say someone is educated, he replied, "Common sense. They know what's right, what's wrong." In describing his own academic skills, Marty said, "I hate math. It's like, I'm behind a year in math right now, because I don't like it." He elaborated:

> Just everybody just talked – everybody - everybody's always said that education's like power. Like the more you know, the more power you have, the more money you'll make. Blah, blah, blah. But to me, I mean, I think the same way but like, I can try my hardest in

class, and wouldn't be like, it - sometimes it's not useful. Like I'd, I don't know, it's just

like it's very - I think it's kind of important to like go to school, get a GED, and if you're

wanting to actually have a life and take care of your kids and your grandkids, I think it's a

good thing to go to college, and then improve in what you want to do and then keep going,

but if you just go - if you're just trying to get through life, like the easiest way possible,

you shouldn't go to college 'cause you're - that's just gonna like extend your life then it's

gonna blow you out of the water.

Bobby said that being educated means "They know how to read and write and do math, everyday

stuff." Supporting this, Bobby's account of his personal scholastic abilities did not mention any

academic courses, only vocational classes: "I like to do things with my hands. Mr. Jones's class is

my favorite because we get to make things using the plasma table."

Research Question 2

The second research question centered upon how access to additional resources, both at

home and within the community, would have enhanced the participants' lived experiences so that

they might aspire to post-secondary education. A single theme presented itself in association with

this question and involved a potential lack of resources due to familial situations or a general lack

of access to technology.

Theme 5: Lack of resources. The responses that led to the development of this theme

again indicated a dichotomy in the lived experiences of the participants. For example, Bobby

stated, "I have my own room. We have a computer in the family room. I guess I had everything I

needed." John said, "We never had like, computers and stuff at home. I had to use the computers

at school and the library stuff to do projects and papers." In contrast, Faith described a life of

doing without:

> We moved a lot, and we would lose stuff. Mom couldn't afford to replace it, so we just did without it. We lived in Hawaii all my life until dad left. It's really expensive there, so mom and me moved to the mainland and lived with my aunt for a while. Then we started moving a lot.

She continued:

> Moving around, it's been hard 'cause you don't always know where the stuff is at the school, and you don't always know, like you don't always have stuff, 'cause you can't move everything, and you don't know like where there's a library or whatever, to get resources.

Research Question 3

This question asked in what ways life experiences might hinder students from aspiring to post-secondary education. Three themes arose: family factors that influenced school success, school factors related to success, and social factors related to success.

Theme 6: Family factors related to school success. All of the participants indicated some degree of familial influence in regard to their school success, which, in turn, influenced their decisions to pursue post-secondary education. Carl indicated a positive influence from his family:

> My father didn't really have the opportunity to go to college, and my mother didn't. She almost got through, but dropped out at the last minute. But they've made sure to stress to me all my life, that if you want to get anywhere nowadays, you have to become educated and learn, and - and I think it's really important to learn as much as you can.

Celeste said, "Mama said, 'You will finish high school.' She said it would be good for me to think about college or something else, but that it was up to me."

In contrast, Missy painted a more negative experience with her family. When asked what they thought about her education, she simply replied, "They don't care," and "do what you want." As she continued to describe her home life, she said, "I was always surrounded by a lot of negative influences." Bobby's experience was more neutral in his description of his family's attitude toward his educational future. He said, "My folks would just say, 'You have to do something,' like either go to work or to school. That's pretty much it." Marty described a similar sentiment:

> My dad is just - my dad - my dad - like I told my dad, I was like, "Dad, what would you do if like just got up and moved out?" He was like, "Well, you better have a good job 'cause I ain't helping you pay bills." I was like, "All right." But he was like, you know, I support you in everything you do, 'cause I'm your dad, but I - he's like, these are the things your gonna do if you're gonna live with me: You're gonna go to school, and then he said when I'm a senior, I have to get a job. But I already got a job, so, but, that's like the major things he pushes towards.

Theme 7: School factors related to success. A number of the participants indicated that school influences were a factor in their academic success. Missy related, "I had a lot of teachers that I talked to, and um, kids in, like, my honors classes and stuff that helped me a lot. I had good friends that were actually a good influence." Faith said, "When I was in Hawaii, I had a lot of good classes." She continued, "Over there, um, up until 8th grade, I was doing really good." Nancy also related a positive school experience:

> Well, I am in band, and when I was in the 5th grade, the director came down and did a pitch test, and I was one out of four in my entire county that made a 100 on it. So that really influenced my going into band and sticking with that all through high school.

Not everyone described positive experiences in school. Carl noted that he had:

a few teachers that cared more about getting us through the class than they did about the material, and actually teaching us. So there are a few times where I had to go back and like, re-teach things to myself, or otherwise, I'd be missing them later. Like especially during the math courses, there are some teachers that just are not good at teaching others, which is a little sad.

Marty described school as "like being in jail," and went on to say,

Uh, good teachers? I mean, I'm not being mean, but like there's some teachers you can tell that care, and there's some people that, there's some teachers that are just like here to get onto you and be like, "You're not doing that right." Like some teachers are just like, okay, let's say you don't do your homework. They're just gonna hate on you and then give you bad grades because you don't do your homework. But, and there's some teachers that if you don't do your homework, they try to help you out. They'll be like, "Okay, you can stay after for detention," and most people think that's a bad thing. Like, let's say, like, I didn't do my homework for math for Mrs. Smith. She'll be like, "Okay, um, you're gonna have to stay after detention 'cause you didn't do your homework," and most, most kids or teenagers are like. "I'm in trouble." But she's really just trying to help out and better yourself.

Theme 8: Social factors related to success. Some of the participants described factors that were more social in nature, but which fell outside of both family and school. For example, Kathy, whose immediate plans involved marriage, said, "I just want to start on life, not do more school. You know?" John said, "I, like, know some people who went to college, and they aren't making a lot of money. Wasted their time, like four years, in my opinion." Bobby described his

uncertainty as being influenced by his peers when he said, "Well, most of my friends aren't going anywhere after high school. I dunno what they're gonna do right away, so if that counts, I guess that's why I'm not." Marty described the influence of social factors on his decisions:

> If like I was going to go to North G - I mean Athens Tech, it was mainly because, like, most of my friends are going. But I mean, it's just like, I - they really don't care. I kinda don't care what people think, like it goes through my head and comes out the other ear, but like you acknowledge some stuff, and like to me, it's just you have to - you have to learn when to acknowledge something. Like a common sense type of thing. But it's just like - like Abraham, he's like my best friend, we've been friends since like the 6th grade and he was like, "Dude, I'm gonna go to college, man, blah, blah, blah." I was like, I don't know if I'm gonna go to college yet.

Table 1

Frequency of Factors as Mentioned by Participants

Factor	Frequency
Value of Education	
Positive Parental Educational Influence	2
Negative Parental Educational Influence	10
Low Participant Value of Education	10
No Parental Post-Secondary Education	8
Positive Sibling Influence	1
Negative Sibling Influence	0
Positive Cohort Influence	0
Negative Cohort Influence	4
Strong Dislike of School	4
Additional Resources	
Single-Parent Home	8
Limited Access to Technology	7
Low SES	10
Perceived Ability	
Poor Academic Performance	6
Strong Dislike of School	4
Compulsory Attendance Only	4

Evidence of the value of education grew from the development of seven subthemes. These subthemes arose during the horizonalization and initial coding processes. These factors ranged from environmental to intrinsic and were a strong element in most of the participants' lived experiences.

Perceived Value of Education

As stated in previous chapters, there are an almost infinite number of factors that can influence the way a person values almost anything. While everyone has their own ideas concerning the worth of education to themselves, what is important to this research is how the participants perceive the value of education within their individual lived experiences. Data from the surveys, individual interviews, and focus groups remained consistent throughout the research. In all, seven factors emerged from the research data to become subthemes supporting the development of perceived value of education.

Positive parental educational influence. When one considers the relatively short time the participants have had to develop life experiences, the question becomes, "What has so strongly influenced the participant's value of education?" What is meant by positive parental educational influence is that some of the parents have impressed upon their children a need for, or the value of, education. This was manifested mostly in the conversations related by the participants in which their parents took a keen interest in the participants' educational futures.

Only two of the participants related that they were positively influenced by their parents in terms of educational values, one strongly and the other only moderately. For example, Nancy recalled how her parents emphasized to her the importance of continuing her education in a post-secondary setting. She said, "They told me 'No school, no frills,' and I knew what they meant. They wouldn't pay a dime and I'd be on my own." Nancy admitted that she was positively

influenced and that she has always tried to achieve the highest scores that she could. As she was quoted earlier, "Well, my momma wants straight As, but she knows I do my best, so she'll accept Bs." Nonetheless, Nancy decided that she had enough education for now and had no plans to continue after high school. "I already have the [cosmetology] training. All I need is to pass the state exam."

Dustin was also told by his mother that he would benefit from post-secondary education, but that the decision was left entirely up to him with "no strings attached." Given that choice, Dustin decided that additional education was not in his immediate plans. "Twelve years is enough for now." he lamented.

Negative parental educational influence. Without exception, all of the participants who held relatively low values for education also had a parent or parents who either disparaged or did not promote the value of education. Of those parents, 8 out of 10 had no postsecondary education themselves. Additionally, 7 out of 10 of these parents made statements to their child indicating that education was not very important to them. The remaining three participants did not recall ever having conversations with their parents concerning post-secondary education. Kathy said that she knew "it wasn't gonna happen," so there was "no point talking about it," while Mary said her father "never brings it up" and just "wants me to be happy."

Missy gave the most negative account of parental involvement and value of education. Her father was in prison and, according to Missy, her mother "could not care less about what I do." Missy was an emancipated minor and was raising her child on her own. Her strained relationship with her mother was often contentious, so Missy did not expect support from her in any manner. She said, "We don't really talk. Never have. When we do, it just ends up in a big fight."

For Marty, the extent of parental conversations concerning his post-secondary future had amounted to little more than his being told to get a job. "Dad's always telling me to 'Worry about keeping a roof over your head,' and stuff like that. He says I should just get my GED and find a good job." Marty added, "They consider a real education as just having common sense and using it."

Kathy said that there never were any discussions about additional education in her home. She opined that if her mother had shown interest in Kathy attending college, it might have changed her decision. During the focus group, Kathy said, "If I thought they really wanted me to [go to college], I might have seriously considered it." In fact, Kathy stated that there was never any emphasis on achieving high grades throughout her academic career. "It just wasn't something we talked about," she said. Although her parents were divorced, she said that her father was still involved and that she and her sisters spent alternating weekends with him. She said "Dad never brought it up, either. I think he was afraid he would have to pay for it".

Robert stated that his mother did not consider post-secondary education important, and told him to "just be happy" with his life, whatever he chose. Celeste was pushed for high school completion only, as was Faith. John related that he was given the choice of either "Go to work or go to school," but that continued education was not emphasized. Bobby's parents were split on the issue, with his mother suggesting college "if I wanted it," while his father pushed for him to go to work.

Low participant valuation of education. The research found that the majority of the participants admitted to holding a low value of education in general and for post-secondary education in particular (see Table 1). Some insight into this phenomenon was gleaned from the participants' responses to the surveys and interviews. These opinions ranged from Faith's

statement that education is "not the most important thing," to Marty's assertion that education is "totally bogus." However, most agreed that a person does need at least the basics (reading, writing, and basic math) in order to make it through life with some degree of success. Robert said that education means that "a person has wisdom, not book smarts." Kathy shared that education has value "only if you need it for your plans," while both Nancy and Mary claimed that they already had adequate education for their life choices. Bobby held that education is not necessary for "a good life," while Carl added,

> Dad dropped out of high school and mom dropped out of college. They both did pretty well, though. Mom died two years ago, but she was making good money, so it can't be that important. I mean, you can make it without it.

Robert also had a parent begin, but never complete, college. "She still has the bills from it," he said. Many of the participants from single-parent homes related that there simply was never enough time to have conversations about educational futures. This was most often due to parents working multiple jobs in order to make ends meet and, according to the participants, rarely being home. For example, Kathy said:

> Mom was always busy. We didn't talk much about anything. Even if I wanted to go to college, we didn't have the money. I think if she had shown some interest in me going to college, it might have changed my decision.

> In contrast, two of the participants had parents who did not provide negative comments about continuing with some form of post-secondary education, but made it clear that the decision belonged wholly to the participants. Both Dustin and Nancy related that their parents were open to the idea of college, but neither promoted it. Nancy said that her mother often told her to "go to college, but also have a plan B." She continued with a laugh, "I chose plan B." Similarly, Dustin

said, "Mom wants me to go to college, but she doesn't push it. It's my decision." Dustin was the only participant for whom a sibling was influential. His older brother was currently at university, but Dustin insisted that post-secondary education was "not for me." Celeste stated that a post-secondary education is important "only if you want to make a lot of money." She did not believe the investment of additional class time was worth it. "I can't see me sitting around for another four years just to learn stuff I don't really need."

The influence of friends was mentioned by only Kathy, John, and Bobby. For all three of these participants, no one in the immediate cohort group had plans to continue with their education after high school. Kathy related that "none of my friends are going to college, and I am getting married next summer." John mentioned that he and several of his closest friends were planning on getting jobs and moving in together. He said, "We're gonna split the rent so we can afford it, just getting started." Bobby also mentioned moving in with friends because "If I stay at home, I'll have to pay rent. If I'm gonna pay rent, it's gonna be my own place."

No parental postsecondary education. Of the 12 participants, only Faith, Robert, and Carl had a parent who attended college. Of those three, Faith's mother was the only one to have completed it and earned a degree. Both Robert's and Carl's mothers dropped out of college prior to completion. Of the remaining nine, there was no history of any of the parents completing any form of post-secondary education.

According to Faith, her mother completed college and earned her degree in business. However, Faith lamented that her mother did not use her degree and still had to pay back the loans she acquired in order to attend school. "Mom can't always make the payments. She says groceries and rent come first, but she keeps on paying them when she can," she recalled. "A lot of good it's doing," she added. When asked if she thought that perhaps that was why her mother did

not insist upon her pursuing a post-secondary education, Faith looked down and paused for a moment. "I don't know. I never thought about it like that," she finally replied.

According to Carl, his father dropped out of high school and his mother dropped out of college. He gave no explanation for why his father left high school, but said of his mother, "She kinda quit school to have me. She was gonna go back, but never made it." Knowing that his mother died several years previously, I did not press the question further.

Robert's mother also started technical school, but soon withdrew. "She didn't have the money to keep going," Robert said. He also said that his mother insisted that she would return to school "someday." "She doesn't even use what she learned when she was there," he continued. When asked if his mother's experience had an impact on his views about continuing education, Robert said, "I don't think so, not really. Today, everything you need to know you can look up online for free."

Positive sibling influence. The positive influence of a sibling occurred only once throughout the gathering of data. At the time of the research, Dustin's brother was enrolled in a four-year university. According to Dustin, his brother was a positive influence as he cajoled Dustin toward a decision to attempt post-secondary education in some form. According to Dustin, "He [his brother] says I'm gonna end up nowhere, selling meth if I don't get out of here and go to college." However, while Dustin admitted that there may be value in furthering his education, until he knew what he wanted to pursue, he believed it would be a "waste of time." None of the other participants reported having a sibling attending any form of post-secondary education.

Negative cohort influence. There were three incidences of individual cohort groups having a negative influence on the decision concerning post-secondary education. In Bobby's

case, his social cohort group was made up of several likeminded boys whose immediate plans were to find regular jobs and throw in their lots together. None of them had any plans to continue their education after high school and, according to Bobby, they had been making plans for this combined effort for "over a year." "We know it's gonna be tough, and that's why we are gonna split rent and groceries and stuff," he said. "We'll be splittin' everything four ways, so it won't take a major job to afford it."

Both John and Kathy mentioned that they did not have friends with plans to attend any form of post-secondary education. However, unlike Bobby, there were no mutual plans for life after high school. Kathy's immediate post-secondary plans included marriage and work, while John had not solidified a plan for his future. John has suggested that because he has no close friends planning on continuing their education, it has made his decision to do the same easier. "If everybody else was going, I might, but not now," he said.

Strong dislike of school. While many teenage students describe a dislike for school, only two of the participants displayed a strong dislike. This was evidenced in the participant responses in both the individual interviews and the focus group. Most of the participating students mentioned some degree of discontent with their daily school lives. This usually manifested itself in comments such as Kathy's, who said, "I am so ready to get out of here." John also commented, "School is boring. I want to do something else." However, both Marty and Robert expressed much stronger feelings of discontent with education than the others.

Marty took several opportunities throughout the interview processes to paint a very negative picture of the entire educational process. His most often used word to describe all formal education was "bogus." While he made it clear that he meant no personal offense, he said that he "does not like book-smart people." According to Marty, "common sense" is all that a

person needs. In fact, Marty also said that he would "settle for a GED" if he thought he "could

pass the test." Robert, on the other hand, did not express a disdain for education itself, but made it

clear that formal education was not for him. "I wouldn't come to school if it wasn't mandatory"

was his remark. According to Robert, an educated person is "someone who has wisdom, not book

smarts." When asked to explain further, he said:

> The things I like to do I can learn by watching someone or actually doing them. Like
>
> fixing cars or welding and stuff. I like the things you can learn on-the-job while you're
>
> actually doing them hands-on. But if I have to read a bunch of books and stuff first, eh,
>
> no thanks.

As can be seen by the data thus far displayed, each participant's lived experience has provided a

variety of vehicles to arrive at individual personal valuations of education. Equally important is

each participant's personal idea of what being educated means to him.

Limited Resources

Research question 2 was, "How would access to additional resources, both at home and

within the community, enhance the participants' lived experiences so that they might aspire to

post-secondary education?" Educational resources refers to having access to anything that assists

or makes possible academic endeavors or progress. These resources range from consumables

such as pencils and paper to financial resources to pay for tutoring or even post-secondary

education. Basic daily necessities such as shelter, food, clothing, and electricity can also be

included.

Single-parent home. Some would consider having both parents at home as a valuable

educational resource (Atta & Jamil, 2012; Kaya & Lundeen, 2010; Skaliotis, 2010). The majority

of participants who described themselves as coming from single-parent homes mentioned some

degree of limited access to various resources. Most of the participants attributed this to the lack of multiple incomes normally found in a two-parent home. For example, Kathy made it very clear that her standard of living dropped considerably after her father left, describing financial hardships that she endured "after dad left." Faith noted that after her father left, "We moved a lot, and we would lose stuff when we moved. Mom couldn't afford to replace it, so we just did without."

In Kathy's case, after the divorce, her mother owned and operated a struggling business on her own. She had only Kathy and her sisters to help with the actual work of potting plants in the greenhouses and working the various sales they attended. Kathy said that she and her sisters had to work in the family business just to help make ends meet. She recalled, "We helped in the greenhouses, but we never got paid. Mom couldn't afford help, so we got the job. I always had cactus hairs stuck in my fingers." She also noted that their home lacked computers or Internet access. "Everybody has cell phones. That ain't happening," she said. "If we needed the Internet to do a project or something, we had to use the school library."

Faith described the time that her father left and her parents divorced as traumatic both emotionally and financially. During the individual interview, she shared the following:

> We lived in Hawaii all my life, until dad left. It's really expensive there, so mom and me moved to the mainland and lived with my aunt for a while. Then we started moving a lot. Mom would get a better job and away we would go. We never really stayed anyplace for long. It was like we were living out of suitcases and boxes most of the time. It's hard to make friends like that, and I really missed daddy.

Another issue was the lack of input from two parental sources. The only parental educational influence tended to be from the one who had custodial rights. Kathy said that her

mother was "too busy" to sit down and have serious discussions about Kathy's education, and that her father simply avoided the subject. Missy's situation was the most difficult in this regard because she lived on her own. Her parents were still married, but her father was in prison and she had no contact with him. She described her mother as completely uncaring and unsympathetic. She said that "since everything happened" her mother "could not care less" what Missy did.

Celeste's parents were also divorced, and she had little contact with her father. "I see him in the summer and some holidays. That's pretty much it," she said. Celeste's mother pushed for high school completion only and left the decision for anything more completely up to Celeste, who commented, "I know mom still thinks of me as a kid. But she is getting better about letting me decide".

Nancy, Marty, and Mary also had divorced parents and lived in single-parent homes. Each mentioned only receiving educational advice from one parent. According to Marty, he and his father both held the same low opinion of education, and his father had been a strong influence in his life. He said that his father told him to "get through life the easiest way," and that that simply means to "use common sense." Mary lived with her mother, and her father lived in another state. "He's not allowed to call or visit," she said. Her mother told her, "Education is only important for some people, not everyone."

Nancy's mother, her only parental influence, suggested that Nancy go to college. She stated,, "Mom is really supportive of whatever I want to do, and she really wants me to go to college, but I don't want to." Carl's situation was different from the others in that his single-parent home was not the result of divorce. Instead, Carl's father was a widower, Carl's mother having passed away while Carl was in middle school. He did not discuss post-secondary

education with his father because he believed it would be an additional burden. Carl said, "Dad has enough to think about right now."

Limited access to technology. The availability of technology as an educational resource was questioned within the scope of this research. Surveys, interviews, and focus group questions were included to assess the availability of technology to the participants. Just over half of the participants said that there was a lack of technological resources during their educational careers. Except for Faith, none of the participants provided any comments or remarks about this lack, as it had always simply been a matter of fact for them. Six of the participants said that they never had computers or the use of the Internet in their homes. Faith noted that she had these things before her parents divorced, but not after. She attributed this lack of technology to her frequent moves. "It would've been nice, but it didn't make sense for us," she said. These six participants stated that they had reasonable access to technology at school and were able to use it as needed. The remainder of the participants all answered that they had computers and access to the Internet at home.

Low SES. Socioeconomic status, as used here, does not denote a specific, numerical level of income. Instead, it represents the participants self-described, subjective level of economic status. This definition is important to the research because of the potential effects it can have on the development of motivation (Eitam et al., 2013).

Robert openly described his family as "poor" and said that the cost of a postsecondary education would be too great a burden for them. He said that a lack of resources was always a problem for them, and that often the utility company would shut off the electricity due to unpaid bills. He noted that:

A couple months ago, they cut off the power and mamma couldn't even cook supper.

We had to wait till she could borrow some money and go down there and pay it.

Sometimes they do it at night. You wake up and the lights don't work.

Marty was more pragmatic about his family's financial situation. He said, "There is always a better seat to sit in, or a better pencil to have, but what you've got is what you've got, so make the best of it." He said that, overall, he did not sense that he lacked the resources necessary for education. But during the individual and focus group interviews, he talked about his family having a hard time paying bills and rent. He commented, "Last week dad said we can eat or have lights."

Missy's was the most desperate case of all in terms of resources. She lived entirely on her own, went to school to earn her high school diploma, and was raising her two-year-old son. Her resources were limited to what little money could can earn, monthly public assistance, and church charities. Each month she also struggled to pay for her probationary sentence for drug-related charges. "Sometimes I have to choose between daycare and paying for probation," she said, "That's why I am absent a lot." She understood that the foreseeable future did not allow for the pursuit of post-secondary education. "It's my mess. I made it and I have to live with it," she said.

Bobby stated that there was never a lack of school supplies in his home, but that they never had computers, cell phones, or television. Bobby had an older brother in college on a scholarship, but saw the financial strain that put on his family. "Dad took on a second job so he could stay in school," Bobby said. He also mentioned that if he decided to continue his education, his parents would "find a way to make it happen," but he remained concerned. Carl's statements reflected similar feelings. He did not believe that his family could afford to send him to school at that time. So, his plans were to "work and help dad out with the bills." Kathy's home

life was filled with helping to keep the family's small business afloat. Working at shows and flea markets sometimes required her absence from school. She admitted that her family had "no money" for post-secondary education. Knowing this, she said there was "no point" in making plans.

Perceived Ability

The theme of perceived ability best addresses the research question, "What are some ways in which life experiences might hinder students from aspiring to post-secondary education?" Perceived ability is the participants' self-evaluation of his or her academic ability, or preparedness, to continue with their education. Throughout the surveys, interviews, and focus groups, a significant number of the participants related a dislike or disinterest in attending school or in making a serious attempt at achieving personal academic success. When asked to elaborate, most of these participants conveyed that at an earlier point in their academic careers, some phenomenon occurred which had a negative impact on their perceived academic ability. For example, Missy stated, "That's when I discovered boys, the wrong boys, and drugs and drinking."

Poor academic performance. The exact phenomenon cited differed among those affected, but the change in motivation was constant. These participants felt that they could no longer compete academically with their classmates and to attempt to continue on toward higher education would be a futile endeavor. They felt that somewhere along their academic journey, they became inadequately prepared for what lay ahead. According to Dustin, poor math teachers in the 6th and 7th grades did not provide adequate explanations for him to fully comprehend the concepts being taught. He believed that these experiences caused him to begin falling behind, and he was never able to catch up. He stated that:

In middle school I lost it in math. I was doing great until 6th grade when I had Mrs. Tuck.

She went too fast and I never understood what we were doing. It was worse in 7th grade

because I was already behind, and Mr. Williams expected you to be ready to go and I

wasn't. I didn't get any of it. I still don't do very good in math.

Marty also opined that many of his early teachers were, at best, indifferent to his needs and the

needs of the other students. He said, "They did as little as they could," and "It's only their job,

they really didn't care."

For others, it was a traumatic experience in their home lives that they believed led to their

academic downfall. Faith related that it was her parent's divorce during her 8th grade year that

led to significant academic difficulties, as she lost interest in school and social life in general.

Also, due to the new financial difficulties of being a single parent, her mother was forced to move

quite often from job to job, which meant that Faith had to move from one school to the next. "We

were always moving," she said. The resulting academic hardships and lack of long-term

friendships caused Faith to develop a dislike for school. She pondered what it would have been

like "if my father had never left and we could have stayed in one place." Missy admitted that it

was a combination of family issues and poor decisions by the 8th grade that led to not only her

academic downfall, but to her personal difficulties. "That's the year everything happened," she

said. "My dad went to prison, I started having sex and doing drugs. Now I have a child and a

parole officer."

Once they fell behind, the participants felt that they were never going to be able to catch

up and perform at the same academic level of their classmates. Over time, they developed a cycle

of academic self-deprecation as each of the affected participants stated that they did not believe

that they would be successful in pursuing post-secondary education. Bobby stated, "I'm not that kind of smart. I have common sense, but not so much of the other stuff."

Mary and Nancy both stated that a high school education provided everything they would need, but that they feared not being successful if they went further. Mary said, "I can read; I can write and do basic math. When would I ever actually use calculus or stuff like that? I have smart friends who are failing calculus." Nancy's comment was, "I'm pretty good at most school stuff, but high school is really hard. I don't think I would do very good in college."

John found school "difficult and boring." He did not pinpoint any particular time or event that may have caused his difficulty, but stated, "I never did really good. Even in elementary school, I would play sick and stay home." While the reasons given were varied, many of the participants expressed that there were indeed specific life experiences that likely hindered them from aspiring to post-secondary education. Some felt that they were not properly prepared for the rigors of academia. Others experienced life-altering familial turmoil and instability. But in each case, the situation became, to them, insurmountable.

Strong dislike of school. As noted earlier, two of the participants held particularly strong negative opinions of education. Both Marty and Robert felt that they already had enough education for their particular needs. Marty lamented the "bogus" nature of formal education, while Robert opined, "Everything you need you can look up online." Both of these participants believed that any further education would be a waste of time and resources.

Summary

Chapter Four provided a description of the participants and of their individual and collective experiences in order to extricate meaning to support the findings of the research. The purpose of this research was to answer the research questions which drove this study.

- What value does post-secondary education have for the participants?

- How would access to additional resources, both at home and within the community, enhance the participants lived experiences so that they might aspire to post-secondary education?

- What are some ways in which life experiences might hinder students from aspiring to post-secondary education?

Participant descriptions were developed to provide an intimate portrait of the people involved and to better understand them as individuals to see the phenomenon through their lived experiences. No two participants' experiences were exactly alike, and each provided a unique perspective on the shared phenomenon of forgoing post-secondary education. Each participant related the common phenomenon to their own lived experience in the form of survey answers, individual interviews, and a focus group interview. While unique, these individual perspectives produced certain commonalities, which were noted in the chapter narratives. Data from these sources were analyzed and coded, and themes developed. Twelve subthemes became apparent, which led to the development of eight salient, over-arching themes: plans after high school, individual perspectives on education, family perspectives on education, perspectives on educated people, lack of resources, family factors related to school success, school factors related to success, and social factors related to success. These themes were then presented following the transcendental phenomenological approach in order to explicate the quintessence of the phenomenon while limiting the bias of the researcher.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

This chapter provides of summary of the research findings and a discussion of how the current literature may be impacted. This chapter is divided into sections based upon the three initial research questions. Possible implications to the stakeholders are presented, as well as a discussion of the limitations of the research. Recommendations for future research are addressed, followed by a summary of the chapter.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lives of several high school students in rural northeast Georgia in regard to their lived experiences relating to post-secondary education. In so doing, this research sought to provide a voice for the participants in order that they might themselves describe their lived experiences and provide the researcher with a window into their world.

A myriad of emotions were invoked throughout the research process as the participants described their journeys over the several years leading to the interview. Some described seasons of happiness and joy, only to be marred later by life-altering tragedy. Others were stoic from the beginning, prematurely jaded by what they have already lived. A few remained optimistic about the future, still clinging to a degree of hope. But the one thing they shared in common was that they all believed that they had reached the end of their academic journey. In seeking a collective description of these experiences, an assiduous analysis was conducted using the methods outlined in Chapter Three. Eight major themes emerged regarding the factors that might have influenced the participants' decisions not to pursue post-secondary education (Saldaña, 2013). These were: plans after high school, individual perspectives on education, family perspectives on education,

perspectives on educated people, lack of resources, family factors related to school success, school factors related to success, and social factors related to success. The experiences of the each participant were unique, yet certain commonalities arose, some with relatively high rates of occurrence, some with significantly less. These experiences fell into early coding categories of: academic motivation, single-parent homes, low value of education for the participants, low value of education for the parent(s), low SES, absence of parental post-secondary education, and perceived limited academic ability. Taken as a whole, these factors helped provide descriptions from which answers to the research questions were derived.

Research Question 1

What value does post-secondary education have for the participants? The research found that participant value of education varied widely. Some considered education essential, while to others, it was a waste of time and resources. But why was this so? What factor or factors were so integral in the lived experiences that they were able to shape the perceived value of education for the participants? It has been suggested that the value a person holds for something arises in part from the personal development of motivation, and whether that motivation is intrinsic or extrinsic (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Research has suggested (Edworthy & Cole, 2012) that greatest personal satisfaction comes through the development of intrinsic motivation, where certain basic psychological needs are being met. Conversely, extrinsic motivation has been related to unstable self-esteem and poor motivational development (Benabou & Tirole, 2003).

The influence of siblings was minimal, with only one participant describing any sibling involvement at all. In that particular case, sibling influence did not positively alter the outcome of the non-pursuit of post-secondary education. Interestingly, this particular participant's situation may support the idea that birth order can have an effect on the pursuit of education, where

firstborns are more likely to pursue post-secondary education, while later-borns are more likely to become underachievers (Paulhus et al., 1999). It also appeared that cohort influence, though only present to a small degree, largely presented itself long after the participants had already developed their value of education. However, cohort influence may have played a role in solidifying the decision against pursuing post-secondary education later in life.

What quickly became apparent was the role that parental influence played in shaping each participant's value of education. As the participants told their stories, the most commonly encountered factor that influenced the value of education was the impact of the parents. Only two of the participants specifically noted positive parental influences concerning post-secondary education, or education in general. The remaining participants' descriptions of parental influence ranged from outright contempt (Marty's and Missy's parents) to perceived indifference. It is important to mention here that in the case of Missy, due to her unique situation, the hostility shown may have been directed at Missy herself rather than at education in general. Indifference was generally manifested by a lack of interest shown by the parent or parents. The indifference took several forms, such as an absence of post-secondary (or secondary) discussions, or by allowing the participant to make his or her own decisions with little to no parental input.

Most of the participants noted that their parents held no post-secondary degrees or certificates. A lack of parental post-secondary education could have served as a de facto denial of the importance of education in the minds of the participants. Just as important could also be the situation in which the parent has a degree, but does not work in a field that utilizes it. In that case, the participant may see the additional education as both useless and an unnecessary expense. Parents dropping out of high school or college may have had the same effect. According to Chabra and Kumari (2011), the educational level of the parents may influence the social and

learning structure within the family. The implication is that the academic expectations and value of education within a family may be largely influenced by the level of parental education.

Research Question 2

How would access to additional resources, both at home and within the community, enhance the participant's lived experiences so that they might aspire to post-secondary education? Over half of the participants mentioned that at some point in their academic lives, they experienced having resources limited to some degree. Three subthemes emerged which helped to explain this condition: single-parent home, limited access to technology, and low SES. Again, the most important motivational factor was parental, though often indirectly.

Part of the lived experience for many of the participants was that they were a part of a single-parent home. First, it is important to understand that this research is in no way attempting to show causality between all single-parent homes and academic difficulty. However, the issues that can arise within single-parent homes may be a significant factor in this particular study. Eight out of twelve of the participants reported that they lived in a single-parent home, and most described that this was a cause of concern academically. For example, Kathy attributed her home situation as making it necessary to sometimes miss school to work with her mother. Others noted that their parents were very busy trying to make ends meet and this made it difficult to find opportunities for communication. In these cases, the participants were likely to be left to make academic decisions on their own. Due to their situation, Faith and her mother found it necessary to often move from home to home, limiting a number of resources for Faith, including close peers.

Just over half of the participants described some limitation in their ability to access technology at home. Generally, this lack of access was limited to computers, Internet, and cell

phones, and to the context of being able to complete homework assignments and projects. However, none of the participants mentioned their lack of resources as having a negative impact on them academically. Other technological resources, such as those supplied by the school, were available to them. However, research conducted by Bradley and Corwyn (2002) suggested that the socioeconomic status of the student has a profound effect on both academic and cognitive growth. While the reasons for this effect are varied, it seems that once these students fall behind their peers, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to overcome the deficit (Vail, 2004).

Ten out of twelve of the participants perceived themselves as being from low-SES households, with several using the word "poor." The academic impact of the financial situation on each participant varied widely. Most suggested that they were still able to afford the required necessities, while others had to, at times, do without basics, such as electricity or food. Several of the participants described the emotional toll their socioeconomic status took on themselves and their families. For example, Carl was concerned for his father, who was having difficulties making it financially after Carl's mother died. Four of the participants, Carl, Kathy, Missy, and Robert, stated that there simply were no financial means for them to attend post-secondary education at that time, with Missy's situation being the most desperate. The other eight participants did not describe finances as an absolute roadblock to the pursuit of post-secondary education.

Research Question 3

What are some ways in which life experiences might hinder students from aspiring to post-secondary education? A partial answer to this question came to light in the theme of perceived ability (subjective), which arose mainly from the subtheme of poor academic performance (objective). The other subtheme, strong dislike of school, was a factor for only two

of the participants, but may also be at least partly connected to poor academic performance. This was important because half of the research participants reported that academically, they either did not perform well, or they did not perform as well as they would like.

The self-described level of difficulty for the participants ranged from being relatively weak academically such as Bobby's "I don't do great, but I'm passing," to John's uncertainty he would even be able to graduate. The exact reason for the poor academic performance of certain participants is beyond the scope of this research. However, by using the rich descriptions of their lived experiences, a picture can be painted using all of the hues and brush strokes provided by the personal narratives of these participants. For example, Marty provided an image of school and his teachers as cold and impersonal. He described not getting the nurturing that he felt was necessary for his future academic success. Dustin claimed that it was a chain of poor educators during a formative time that led to his inability to comprehend advanced math. John did not find fault in others for his difficulties in school, but through his narrative, it can be seen that he is perhaps laboring under an undiagnosed learning disability. Whether or not these are the actual causes for these particular students' lack of success does not matter. What is relevant is their perception of the underlying causes of their academic frustrations. The result would still be the same even if the perceived causes were different: diminished motivation. Many of these participants simply did not believe that they were capable of success in a postsecondary setting.

Discussion

By now, it becomes much easier to see the possible interconnectedness of the themes and subthemes found within the lives of the participants in regard to post-secondary education. It becomes difficult to speak of any one theme in isolation from the others, as the possibilities of cause and effect are beginning to be revealed. These notions had to be bracketed throughout the

research, and have only now been allowed to coalesce into something with form and function: a seminal understanding of the phenomenon being researched.

Self-determination theory provided the theoretical framework which guided this study by providing the construct of amotivation for post-secondary education. For this research, self-determination was framed as a process of shared and learned experiences which impact the development of psychological well-being and the decision-making process. The goal of self-determination is to achieve autonomy for oneself in order to be able make informed major life decisions (Deci & Ryan, 2008). But the growth of that autonomy must be nurtured and guided; thus, it is largely dependent upon the formative environment (Vallerand et al., 2008). The results of this study suggest that many of the participants may have lacked the nurturing necessary to develop a strong sense of self-motivation and self-determination. It appeared that not only negative parental interactions were at work. A few of the participants related that there was a positive parental influence concerning their academic performance, but most stated that there was often simply no interaction at all. For example, Kathy said, "I guess maybe if my family was more interested in college, I would have thought that way, too." There was no parental scorn, but neither was there any praise.

Some of the literature suggested that parental influences and involvement may be the dominant factors in students' choice whether or not to pursue a post-secondary education (Georgiou & Tourva, 2006). This research found that the majority of the participants had been left to make major life decisions on their own with little or no parental guidance. The lack of intrinsically motivated goal pursuits, as suggested by Edworthy and Cole (2012), implies that certain basic psychological needs of the participants were not being met. The participants appeared to value parental involvement in the decision-making process concerning their

respective futures. However, that involvement was either largely non-existent, or the authority to make these decisions had been relinquished to the participant. This, in turn, may have led to the development of amotivation, as opposed to self-motivation. This idea is supported by Vallerand et al., (2008), who suggested that the way others behave toward a person affects his self-satisfaction, and, thus, his level of motivation. It is possible that the participants were seeking parental approval of achievement or potential achievement (Bong et al., 2012). If this is so, it strengthens the proposition that development of the decision-making process in adolescents is connected to self-determination theory, supporting research that focused on the pursuit of post-secondary education (Jung, 2012). Vallerand et al. (2008) supported the idea that the development of amotivation does not occur solely because of one life event, but that it develops over time as a formative process.

Many of the participants of this study related that their parents were either minimally or very passively involved in the post-secondary decision-making process. Some also said that their parents were not particularly interested in higher education and did not consider it to be something significant. As stated earlier, this lack of involvement in the decision-making process could be taken as tacit approval for non-pursuit of post-secondary education. Also, participants such as Marty, who held education in the lowest regard, had parents who did the same. This dynamic helped confirm Jung's (2012) findings that the most important factor in developing motivation to pursue post-secondary education was the value of education held by the family. This study corroborated Jung's findings that the parental value of education, both objective and subjective, appeared to impact the experiences of the participants more often than any other factor. For example, cohort and sibling effects tended to be recent phenomena and, as such, were

not part of the formative life experience. SES did make the decision more difficult for some, but on the whole, it did not appear itself to be the deciding factor.

The level of parental involvement is not exclusively indicative of parental value of education. For example, time and employment constraints may hinder how active a parent can be in his or her child's academic life. However, the result still remains: Parental involvement in student academics has a positive effect (Atta & Jamil, 2012; Fan & Chen, 2001; Georgiou & Tourva, 2007; Kaya & Lundeed, 2010). Based upon this result, the minimal support shown by the majority of the participants' parents in this research may play a role in why so many of the participants exhibited poor academic performance.

Implications

This section will address the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of the research. This transcendental study sought a description of the experiences of the participants. Conclusions, while the implications can be suggested, they can neither be explicitly stated nor absolutely confirmed. Therefore, a discussion of implications is most appropriate in advance of future research.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

The underlying theoretical framework of self-determination in regard to amotivation needs to be revisited in order to better understand the experiential dynamics of the participants. Much of the literature concerning self-determination alternates equally between intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Deci and Ryan (2008) suggested that a person develops motivation by meeting a series of challenges in order to develop a sense of competency. However, a developing sense of self can be greatly diminished by negative social interactions. These interactions can be parent-child, sibling-sibling, peer-peer, etc. Added to this is the meaning (to the individual) of the context in

which these interactions are occurring, such as a particular family structure, home life, SES, and so forth (Vallerand et al., 2008). Simply put, positive interactions in a positive environment tend to produce positive motivational growth. The converse can also be implied. It is important to remember that the depth and breadth of this particular research allowed a glimpse into the extrinsic factors only.

Deci and Ryan (2008) did not set a specific age range for the development of self-determination, but suggested that it continues to develop over a lifetime. However, they implied that the most significant period for its development is the formative years of childhood through early adulthood. The participants in this study ranged in age from 16 to 17 years and were either high school juniors or seniors. The topic of whether or not to pursue post-secondary education is a major life decision for most people and occurs during this significant, formative period. This research supports self-determination theory by suggesting a possible link between the extrinsic factors involved in the processes of decision making and perceived competence, both of which arise through self-determination.

The extrinsic factor that was observed to be the most strongly related to the decision to not attend post-secondary education was the perceived value of education held by the parents. Also, the half of the participants who did not feel academically competent to continue with their education after high school also had parents who did not appear to place high value upon education. Although they almost certainly had some effect, other contextual factors such as SES, single-parent home, etc., did not appear to have the same universal frequency of occurrence among the participants. It is possible, however, that these factors play a significant role in how the parents developed their value of education, which then affects the participants. However, this is beyond the scope of the current research.

Practical Implications

The practical implications suggested by the results of this study involve multiple stakeholders at multiple temporal junctions. Since positive parental involvement in the lives of children leads to greater autonomy and motivation (Jung, 2012), it would seem logical to address how best to increase this interaction. The research herein presented has demonstrated that a negative parental value of education may be linked to why some students lack the motivation to pursue post-secondary education. It would appear as prudent for policy makers to consider developing dialog with, and possibly program for, both parent and student stakeholders. The purpose of these programs and conversations would be to better educate those involved about the benefits of continued education. Also, there appears to be a need to better inform the stakeholders of resources that may be available to them to make post-secondary education a reality. Individual schools, school systems, private education foundations, or appropriate governmental agencies could implement these initiatives. This research has shown that the timeframe for introducing these types of programs should begin early in a child's academic career, as the middle school/high school period may be too late.

Increasing parental value of education may also be affected by making available greater resources for the parents to develop their own desire to learn. Many rural areas, such as northeast Georgia, lack the educational or training opportunities for parents that can be found in more urban locations. The local technical schools offer limited courses, and universities are far away and impractical.

<div align="center">

Limitations

</div>

A number of limitations are found in this research and include, but are not limited to: sample size, sample characteristics, scope of information collected and interpretation of meanings.

The sample of participants was only 12 members in number. A larger group size would have added variation to the lived experiences of the participants as a whole. Also, adding participants from multiple school districts throughout the region would have increased the available data considerably. Sample characteristics may have played a role in limiting the study as well. The participants were all 16 to 17 years old, and the adolescent/young adult interpretation of events and associated meanings may be skewed. Although an attempt was made to alleviate this, survey and interview questions may have inadvertently narrowed the scope of responses. A few participants either declined to respond or said that they did not know a response on some questions. Ultimately, the very nature of a transcendental phenomenological study requires constant attention by the researcher to maintain distance while gathering data, and to bracket out his or her own prejudices and understandings while interpreting, as well as during theme development.

Recommendations for Future Research

There arose from this research several areas that would benefit from further study. The first potential idea for further research would be to perform a comparative study using participants who do plan on attending some form of post-secondary education. From this sample, one might examine the same factors for influences to see where they are alike and where they differ. For example, does the sample of students planning on attending post-secondary education have a higher percentage of parents with a post-secondary education themselves? And, does the number of single parent homes vary? It may be enlightening to see if the implied effect of positive parental influence and value of education remains the same.

A more in-depth look at the effect of peers on the post-secondary decision-making process may be warranted. Although this effect appeared minimal in this particular study, a larger sample

size may reveal a greater influence. A possible outgrowth may be that career counseling by peer group, or by grouping that involves like interests rather than by individual students, could produce a synergistic effect, propelling the students forward to continue their education beyond high school.

Research into prevailing community values of education, especially in underperforming districts, may provide keys to improving public perception of education. This research suggests that perhaps the family views of education are generational, being passed from parent to child. Finding ways to improve the value of education among parents is therefore critical. Discovering creative methods to increase the community value of education may help to create a type of social peer pressure that would permeate into individual homes. Also, a study involving a records review of the participants may reveal learning disabilities or other emotional or social issues not reported in this research. This information could have a profound effect upon the interpretation of a participant's perceived academic ability.

Summary

Some may be dismayed that a study ends with more questions than it answered. But that is often the nature of a qualitative study, and so it should be. Other studies can begin where this one has concluded, and researchers may find it necessary to delve into this phenomenon with a quantitative approach in order to find a particular definitive answer that they seek. But I am satisfied with the results, for they have added another qualifying layer of security to the relatively new and little researched area of self-determination theory. The results of this research have supported, and have been supported by, the constructs of self-determination theory, as proposed by Ryan and Deci (2008), and further supported by the work of Eitam, Kennedy, and Tory-

Higgins (2013). These constructs include the development of motivation vs. amotivation, the development of values, and the nurture of autonomy.

During the course of the literature review for this study, no other research was found that attempted to describe the factors that might be involved in causing students to not pursue post-secondary education. Jung's (2012) research, while somewhat similar, focused mainly upon the development of autonomy with students, or lack thereof, in making decisions. The participants in this study mostly made the decision to not pursue post-secondary education on their own, so autonomy was already in place. Instead, the question was "why did these students make this decision?" As was suggested earlier, parental involvement, or lack thereof, seemed to have the largest degree of influence.

This research has avoided the sterility of a quantitative study and instead allowed the participants to paint upon the canvas using their own words from their own lives. From these self-portraits came a picture detailing the effect of parental influence, both directly and indirectly, and how it will forever affect the lives and values of their children, both positively and negatively.

REFERENCES

Adelman, C. (2004). *Principle indicators of student academic histories in postsecondary education, 1972-2000*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education.

Allen, D., & Dadgar, M. (2012). Does dual enrollment increase students' success in college? Evidence from a quasi-experimental analysis of dual enrollment in New York City. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 11-19. doi:10.1002/he.20010

Alliance for Excellent Education (2011). The high cost of high school dropouts: What the nation pays for inadequate high Schools (2011) *Alliance for Excellent Education* Retrieved from: http://www.all4ed.org/files/HighCost.pdf

Aunola, K., Nurmi, J., Neimi, P., Marja, L., & Rasku, H. (2002). Developmental dynamics of achievement strategies, reading performance and parental beliefs. *Reading Research Quarterly, 37*(3), 310-327.

Atta, M. A., & Jamil, A. (2012). Effects of motivational and parental influence on the educational attainments of students at secondary level. *Academic Research International, 2*(3), 427-431.

Attwell, P., Lavin, D., Domina, T., and Levey, T. (2006). New evidence on college remediation. *Journal of Higher Education. 77*(5). 886-924. Doi:10.1353/jhe.2006.0037

Balduf, M. (2009). Underachievement among college students. *Journal of Advanced Academics, 20*(2), 274-294.

Bandura, A. (1997). *The exercise of control*. New York, NY: Worth Publishers.

Benabou, R., & Tirole, J. (2003). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. *The Review of Economic Studies, 70*(3), 489-520.

Benware, C., & Deci, E. (1984). Quality of learning with an active versus passive

      motivational set. *American Educational Research Journal, 21*(4), 755-765.

Black, A., & Deci, E. (2000). The effects of instructors' autonomy support and students'

      autonomous motivation on learned organic chemistry: A self-determination

      theory perspective. *Science Education, 84*(6), 740-756.

Bong, M., Cho, C., Ahn, H., & Kim, H. (2012). Comparison of self-beliefs for predicting

      student motivation and achievement. *Journal of Educational Research, 105*(5),

      336-352.

Bradley, R., & Corwyn, R. (2002). Socioeconomic status and child development. *Annual*

      Review of Psychology, 53(1), 371-399.

Briska, I. (2008). Development of student's values in pedagogical process. *Signum*

      Temporis, 1(1), 78.

Brown, C. G. (2014). All students need common foundational skills. *Education Next,*

      14(3). Retrieved from http://search.proquest.com/docview/1528894083?accountid=12085

Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2014, April 22). *College Enrollment and Work Activity of 2013 High*

      School Graduates. Retrieved December 2, 2014, from

      http://www.bls.gov/news.release/hsgec.nr0.htm

Callison, D. (2001). Constructivism. *School Library Monthly, 18*(4), 35-51.

Carbonaro, W. (2005). Tracking, students' effort, and academic achievement. *Sociology of*

      Education, 78(1). 27-49.

Chabra, S., & Kumari, L. (2011). Effect of parental encouragement on achievement motivation of

      adolescents. *International Journal of Education and Applied Sciences, 3*(2), 73-78.

Chemers, M., Hu, L., & Garcia, B. (2001). Academic self-efficacy and first-year college student performance and adjustment. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 93*(1), 55-64.

Choi, A. S., Papandrea, F., & Bennett, J. (2007). Assessing cultural values: Developing an attitudinal scale. *Journal of Cultural Economics, 31*(4), 311.

Cobert, R. A. (2005). 21st century jobs. *Economic Development Journal, 4*(4), 34-39.

Cox, M., Pianta, R., & Rimm-Kaufman, S. (2000). Teachers' judgments of problems in the transition to kindergarten. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 15*(2), 147-166.

Cremer, H., De Donder, P., & Pestieau, P. (2010). Education and social mobility. *International Tax Public Finance, 17,* 357-377.

Creswell, J. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Deci, E., La Guardia, J., Mollar, A., Scheiner, M., & Ryan, R. (2006). On the benefits of giving as well as receiving autonomy support: Mutuality in close friendships. *Society for Personality and Social Psychology, 32*(3), 313-327.

Deci, E., & Ryan, R. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior.* New York, NY: Plenum.

Deci, E., & Ryan, R. (2000). The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry, 11*(1), 227-268.

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

Diament, M. (2005). High-school students are poorly prepared for college, survey finds. *The Chronicle of Higher Education, 51*(24), 0-A39.

Duranovic, M., Salihovic, N., Ibrahimagic, A., Tinjic, E., & Golubovic, S. (2011). The role played by the education level of parents and the geographic situations of the preschool institution in the development of specific skills related to reading. *Specialusis Ugdymas, 1*(24), 186-195.

Edworthy, A., & Cole, B. (2012). Cycles of self-esteem. *Social Care and Neurostability, 3*(1), 27-36.

Eitam, B., Kennedy, P., & Tory-Higgins, E. (2013). Motivation from control. *Experimental Brain Research, 229*(3), 475-484.

Ekber, T., & Havva, S. (2012). Socioeconomic determinants of academic achievement. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability, 24*(3). 175-187.

Erdem-Keklika, D., & Keklik, I. (2014). High school students' achievement goals: Assessing gender, grade level and parental education. *Çukurova University Faculty of Education Journal, 43*(1), 63-73.

Eriksen, H. F., Kesmodel, U. S., Underbjerg, M., Kilburn, T. R., Bertrand, J., & Mortensen, E. L. (2013). Predictors of intelligence at the age of 5: Family, pregnancy and birth characteristics, postnatal influences, and postnatal growth. *PLoS One, 8*(11).

Fan, X., Chan, M. (2001). Parental involvement and students' academic achievement: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review, 13*(1), 1-22.

Farris, J., Burke, J., Borkowski, J., & Whitman, T. (2013). Two are better than one: The joint influence of maternal preparedness for parenting and children's self-esteem on academic achievement and adjustment. *Early Education & Development*, *24*(3), 346-365.

Filippin, A., & Paccagnella, M. (2012). Family background, self-confidence and economic outcomes. *Economics of Education Review, 31*(5), 824-834.

Freitas, F., & Leonard, L. (2011). Maslow's hierarchy of needs and student academic success. *Teaching and Learning in Nursing, 6*, 9-13.

Gadamer, H., & Weinsheimer, J. (2004). *Truth and method* (2nd ed.). London: Continuum.

Gagne, M., & Deci, E. (2005). Self-determination theory and work motivation. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 26*(4), 331-362.

Galvinic, V., Krpan, D., & Stankov, S. (2012). Group modeling in social learning environments. *International Journal of Distance Education Technology, 10*(2), 39.

Georgia Department of Education (2013). *Graduation rates*. Retrieved from http://archives.gadoe.org/DMGetDocument.aspx/2011%20Graduation%20Rate %20Comparison%20By%20School%2010.31.11.pdf?p=6CC6799F8C1371F62 02EDEAB1FD36ED4C8ED9BCF0523449A1B9B7F5F246AF958&Type=D

Georgiou, S., & Tourva, A. (2007). Parental attributions and parental involvement. *Social and Psychological Education, 10*(4), 473-482.

Grolnick, Wendy S.; Deci, Edward L.; Ryan, Richard M. Grusec, Joan E. (Ed); Kuczynski, Leon (Ed), (1997). Parenting and children's internalization of values: A handbook of contemporary theory. , (pp. 135-161). Hoboken, NJ, US: John Wiley & Sons Inc, xxiv, 439 pp.

Gropper, D. M., Lawson, R. A., & Thorne Jr., J. T. (2011). Economic freedom and happiness. *The Cato Journal, 31*(2), 237.

Grusec, J., & Goodnow, J. (1994). Impact of parental discipline methods on the child's internalization of values: A reconceptualization of current points of view. *Developmental Psychology, 30*(1), 4-19.

Hallinan, M. T. (2008). Teacher influences on students' attachment to school. *Sociology of Education, 81*(3), 271-283.

Hamre, B., & Pianta, R. (2005). Can instructional and emotional support in the first grade classroom make a difference for children at risk of school failure? *Child Development, 76*(5), 949-967.

Harris, J. (2000). Personality and birth order: Explaining the differences between siblings. *Politics and the Life Science, 19*(2), 160-163.

Haverman, R., & Wilson, K. (2007). *Access, matriculation, and graduation: Economic Inequality and Higher Education*. La Follette School Working Paper No. 2005-032.

Hetherington, M., & Stanley-Hagan, M. (1999). The adjustment of children with divorced parents: A risk and resiliency perspective. *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines, 40*(1), 129-140.

Hughes, J., Luo, W., Kwok, O., & Loyd, L. (2008). Teacher-student support, effortful engagement, and achievement: A 3-year longitudinal study. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 100*(1), 1-14.

Jordan, J., (1997). *Women's Growth in Diversity: More writings from the stone center*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Jung, J. (2013). The cognitive processes associated with occupational/career indecision: A model for gifted adolescents. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted,* 36(4), 433-460.

Karp, M., Calcagno, J., Hughes, K., Jeong, D., & Baily, T. (2007). *The postsecondary achievements of participants in dual enrollment: An analysis of student outcomes in two states*. St. Paul, MN: University of Minnesota.

Kaya, S., & Lundeen, C. (2010). Capturing parents individual and institutional interest toward involvement in science education. *Springer Science and Business Media, 21*(7), 825-841.

Kernis, M., Brown, A., & Brody, G. (2000). Fragile self-esteem in children and its associations with perceived patterns of parent-child communication. *Journal of Personality, 68*(2), 225-252

Kodde, D., & Ritzen, J. (1985). Direct and indirect effect of parental education level on the demand for higher education. *Journal of Human Resources, 23*(3), 356-371.

Malatras, J., & Israel, A. (2012). The influence of family stability on self-control and adjustment. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 69*(7), 661-670.

Marks, H. (2000). Student engagement in instructional activity: Patterns in the elementary, middle, and high school years. *American Educational Research Journal, 37*(1), 153-184.

Marsh, H. (1991). Failure of high-ability high schools to deliver academic benefits commensurate with their students' ability levels. *American Educational Research Journal, 28*(2), 445-480.

Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological review,50*(4), 370.

Maulana, R., Opdenakker, M., & Bosker, R. (2013). Teacher-student interpersonal relationships do change and affect academic motivation. *British Journal of Educational Psychology, 84*(3), 459-482.

McClelland, D., Koestner, R., Weinberger, J. (1989). How do self-attributed and implicit motives differ? *Psychological Review, 96*(4), 690-702.

Milne, A., & Plourde, L. (2006). Factors of a low SES household: What aids academic achievement? *Journal of Instructional Psychology, 33*(3). 183-193.

Moon, S., & Lee, J. (2009). Multiple predictors of Asian American children's school achievement. *Early Education and Development, 20*(1), 129-147.

Moustakas, C. (1990). *Heuristic research: Design, methodology and application.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Oakes, J. (1985). *Keeping track: How schools structure inequality*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press

Patron, H., & Lopez, S. (2011). Student effort, consistency and online performance. *Journal of Educators Online, 8*(2), 1-11.

Paulhus, D., Trapnell, P., & Chen, D. (1999). Birth order effects on personality and achievement within families. *Psychological Science, 10*(6), 482-488.

Pishghadam, R., & Zabihi, R. (2011). Parental education and social and cultural capital in academic achievement. *International Journal of English Linguistics, 1*(2), 50-57.

Ram, B., & Hou, F. (2003). Changes is family structure and child outcome: Roles of economics and familial resources. *Policy Studies Journal, 31*(3), 309-330.

Reiss, D. (2000). *The relationship code: Deciphering genetic and social influences on adolescent development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Roscoe, R., & Chi, M. (2008). Tutor learning: The role of explaining and responding to questions. *Instructional Science, 36*(4), 321-350.

Ryan, R., & Deci, E. (2000). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and new directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 25*(1), 54-67.

Saldana, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Shih, S. (2013). The effects of autonomy support versus psychological control and work

    engagement versus academic burn-out on adolescents use of avoidance strategies.

    Developmental and Educational Psychology, 34(3), 330-347.

Skaliotis, E. (2010). Changes in parental involvement in secondary education: An exploration

    study using the longitudinal study of young people in England. *British Educational*

    Research Journal, 36(6), 975-994.

Slaten, C., & Baskin, T. (2013). Examining the impact of peer and family belongingness on the

    career decision-making difficulties of young adults: A path analytic approach. *Journal of*

    Career Assessment, 22(1), 59-74.

Smith, R. (2010). Total parenting. *Educational Theory, 60*(3), 357-369.

Sparks, S. D. (2014). Peer tutors. *Education Week, 33*(36), 5.

Spilt, J., Hughes, J., Wu, J., & Kwok, O. (2012). Dynamics of teacher-student relationships:

    Stability and change across elementary school and the influence on children's academic

    success. *Child Development, 83*(4), 1180-1195.

Steinberg, L., Dornbusch, S., & Brown, B. (1992). Ethnic differences in adolescent achievement:

    An ecological perspective. *American Psychologist. 47*(6), 723-729.

Stephens County Chamber of Commerce. (2016, May 1). *Toccoa meets Hollywood!* Retrieved

    from http://toccoagachamber.blogspot.com/2012_02_01_archive.html

Stephens County Development Authority. (2016). *Economic development.* Retrieved from

    http://www.stephenscountyga.com/development.cfm?lid=198

Stull, J. (2013). Family socioeconomic status, parent expectations, and a child's achievement.

    Research in Education, 90(4), 53-67.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2011). *American community survey briefs on poverty: 2010 and 2011*. Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/prod/2012pubs/acsbr11-01.pdf

Vallerand, R., Pelletier, L., & Koestner, R. (2008). Reflections on self-determination theory. *Canadian Psychology, 49*(3), 257-262.

Vail, K. (2004). Grasping what kids need to raise performance. *The Education Digest, 69*(6), 12-18.

Van der Slik, F. W. P., De Graaf, N., & Gerris, J. R. M. (2002). Conformity to parental rules: Asymmetric influences of father. *European Sociological Review, 18*(4), 489-502.

Vansteenkiste, M., Simons, J., Lens, W., Sheldon, K., & Deci, E. (2004). Motivating learning performance, and persistence: The synergistic effects of intrinsic goal contents and autonomy-supportive contexts. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 87*(2), 246-260.

Walberg, H. (1989). District size and student learning. *Education and Urban Society, 21*(2), 154-163.

Wentzel, K. (1999). Social-motivational processes and interpersonal relationships: Implications for understanding students' academic success. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 91*(1), 76-97.

Wentzel, K. (2002). Are effective teachers like good parents? Teaching styles and student adjustment in early adolescence. *Child Development, 73*(1), 287-301.

Wilson, H. E., & Adelson, J. L. (2012). College choices of academically talented secondary students. *Journal of Advanced Academics, 23*(1), 32-52.

Zajonc, R., & Markus, G. (1975). Birth order and intellectual development. *Psychological Review, 82*(1), 74-88.

APPENDIX A

Survey

If more room is needed to answer the questions, please continue writing on the back.

1. I am currently a (choose one):   a) senior

                                            b) junior

                                            c) sophomore

                                            d) freshman

2. What are your current plans for life immediately after high school?

    _____

    _____

    _____

3. If your answer to question number 2 does not involve additional education (college, trade-school, etc.) immediately after high school, please explain why not.

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

4. What are the major factors that influenced your decision to question number 2?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

5. Were other people involved in your decision to attend/not attend post-secondary

education? In what ways might they have influenced you in making this decision?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

6. Describe the importance of education to you.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

7. Describe the importance of education to your family.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

8. Are there any other factors that may have influenced your decisions about post-secondary education? What are they and how might they have influenced you?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

9. What do you see yourself doing in the next five years?

_____

_____

_____

APPENDIX B

Explanation/Consent Letter

Dear Parent or Guardian,

Your son/daughter is invited to participate in a research study of the student academic decision making process. The purpose of this study is to try and understand why students make the decisions that they do concerning their academic careers.

Your child's participation will consist of completing a short survey, and if chosen, participating in an individual interview and a group interview (question and answer sessions). These sessions will take place during this semester at school. The research will be conducted by me, Mr. Lambert.

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to seek an understanding of how a variety of factors may affect the academic decision making process of high school students in regards to whether or not a student chooses to continue his or her education after high school. A better understanding of this process may help the school system successfully encourage more students to pursue education beyond high school.

I can assure you that no personally identifiable information will be collected during this process and that your student may choose to stop participating at any time. Participation is absolutely voluntary.

Procedures
If you agree to participate in this study, your child would be asked to do the following:
- Sign a consent form and submit it.
- Complete a survey and submit it.
- Participate in a recorded, one-on-one interview.
- Participate in a group interview.

Risk and Benefits of Being in This Study

This study represents no more risk than what is normally associated with participating in everyday activities.

There are no direct benefits to the participant other than the satisfaction of having participated in a study that may benefit future students.

Confidentiality

No personally identifiable information will be collected. Pseudonyms will be used in place of real names.

Compensation

Students will receive no payment or other consideration for participation in this study.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision to or to not participate will not affect your child's relationship with ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ in any way. If you do decide to allow participation, you are free to withdraw permission at any time. If you do withdraw, all record of your child's participation, including surveys or interviews will be destroyed or deleted.

Contact and Questions

You may contact Mr. Lambert with any questions you may have regarding this research at jeff.lambert@▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮.org

If you have questions and would like to speak to someone else, you are encouraged to contact The Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA. 24515, or email at irb@liberty.edu .

I have read the above information and I consent to allow my child to participate in the study.

My Child, _____, has my permission to participate in this study.
            (Student name)

_____   _____
Signature of parent/guardian   date

IRB Code Numbers:

IRB Expiration Date

APPENDIX C

Assent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study of the student academic decision making process. The purpose of this study is to try and understand why students make the decisions that they do concerning their academic careers.

Your participation will consist of completing a short survey, and if chosen, participating in an individual interview and a group interview (question and answer sessions). These sessions will take place during this semester. The research will be conducted by me, Mr. Lambert.

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to seek an understanding of how a variety of factors may affect the academic decision making process of high school students in regards to whether or not a student chooses to continue his or her education after high school. A better understanding of this process may help the school system successfully encourage more students to pursue education beyond high school.

Procedures

If you agree to participate in this study, you would be asked to do the following:
- Sign this consent form and submit it.
- Complete a survey and submit it.
- Participate in a recorded, one-on-one interview.
- Participate in a group interview.

Risk and Benefits of Being in This Study

This study represents no more risk than what is normally associated with participating in everyday activities.

There are no direct benefits to the participant other than the satisfaction of having participated in a study that may benefit future students.

Confidentiality

No personally identifiable information will be collected. Pseudonyms will be used in place of real names.

Compensation

You will receive no payment or consideration for participation in this study.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Your participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision to or to not participate will not affect your relationship with ▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬ in any way. If you do decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time. If you do withdraw, all record of your participation, including surveys or interviews will be destroyed or deleted.

Contact and Questions

You may contact Mr. Lambert with any questions you may have regarding this research at jeff.lambert@███████████.org

If you have questions and would like to speak to someone else, you are encouraged to contact The Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA. 24515, or email at irb@liberty.edu .

☐ I am over the age of 18

☐ I am not over the age of 18

I have read the above information and I consent to participate in the study.

I would like to participate in this study. _____
                                            (Students printed name)

_____   _____
       Student's signature   Date

Witnessed by: _____   _____
                  Signature   Date

IRB Code Numbers:

IRB Expiration Date

APPENDIX D

Interview Question Guide

This represents a guide only, as the nature and direction of the interview and the responses of the interviewee may necessitate the addition or insertion of questions. In essence, this short list of questions are examples of "conversation starters" that will inevitably lead to other, more in depth questions and responses about the participants lived experiences.

1. Explain why you decided against continuing your education at this time?

2. What does it mean to you when we say that someone is "educated"?

3. Describe the importance of education to you.

4. Describe some of your concerns, your thoughts, when you made this decision.

5. Describe how comfortable you would be/are in making major decisions on your own?

6. Academically, what are some of your strong points? Why do you think this is so?

7. Describe the importance of education to your family.

8. Describe the input from your family in making this decision.

9. What effect, if any did (family, friends, school, other factors) have on your decision to not pursue (college, technical school, other) at this time?

10. Describe what the conversations at home were like when your education and future were discussed.

11. What were some of the external (non-family) factors that influenced you to (go in this direction)?

12. Describe some of the high points of your educational career? Low points?

13. What could have happened differently in your life experience that might have set you on a different course?

14. If there was a lack of available resources during your educational career, describe what they were/might have been.

15. Describe how additional resources, both at home and at school, could have influenced your educational decision if they had been available (funding, technology, etc.).

APPENDIX E

Focus Group Questions

1. What this group has in common is that no-one here has any immediate plans to attend additional schooling after graduation from high school. I would like to hear your thoughts about why you came to this decision.

2. What experiences have you had over the years that may have influenced you in this regard?

3. How supportive are your families in your decisions to not pursue additional education?

4. How influential were your families when you made this decision?

5. What type of influence do you think others had on this decision (peers, teachers, other)?

6. Describe how your social experiences in school over the years affected your thoughts toward continuing with school beyond high school graduation.

7. Are there any other influences that I have not mentioned that you feel are important to this discussion? If so, what are they?

8. If some time in the future you were to decide to go back to school, what do you think would have to change in your life first?