FINDING THEIR PLACE: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF THE CULTURE OF

STUDENTS ATTENDING A RURAL, SELF-PACED, ALTERNATIVE EVENING

HIGH SCHOOL

by

Teena M. Atkins

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to provide a cultural portrait as well as identify methods of success of nontraditional students attending a self-paced, alternative evening high school in the southeast region of the United States in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. An ethnographic research design was utilized employing data triangulation through observations, interviews, focus group, and journals as methods of data collection. Participants included nontraditional students who were currently attending or recently graduated from an alternative evening high school in the southeast region of the United States. This study sought to better understand what factors contributed to these students' decisions to attend a nontraditional evening high school. Once enrolled in a nontraditional evening high school, the factors that contributed to their success were explored. Data analysis strategies included review and coding data, memoing, and organizing data into themes. Next, data matrices were used to organize and present data.

Keywords: nontraditional, disengagement, self-paced, high school, culture, ethnography

Copyright

Acknowledgments

"Commit thy works unto the LORD, and thy thoughts shall be established." Proverbs 16:3 (KJV)

I commit this work to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and I thank Him for the many blessings He has given me. And, to my husband, David, no words can express my appreciation for the unmeasurable love and support you have given me throughout this journey; you believed in me even when I doubted myself. To my sons, Daniel and Christopher, my daughter in law, Trella, and my sweet grandsons, Tate and Bo, thank you for your love, patience, and support. God certainly blessed me with a precious family, and I love each of you dearly. Dr. Lunde, thank you for sharing your wisdom with me and for being such a spiritual and inspirational support for me when I needed it the most. God's plan was perfect (as always) when you stepped in as my chair. To Dr. Fyock and Dr. Lannom, many thanks to both of you as you stood by me through to the end showing an incredible amount of patience as life sometimes got in the way and slowed my progress. I appreciate both of you more than words can express. To all the students everywhere who persevere and find their place, you are all my heroes. May God richly bless each of you.

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List of Abbreviations

Alternative Education Program (AEP)

Computer-based Instruction (CBI)

Individual Education Plan (IEP)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Research Question (RQ)

Sunset High School (SHS)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

There is no lack of literature concerning the negative effect that dropping out of high school has on the student, the community, and the United States. However, little research exists highlighting the perseverance and tenacity of a determined culture of students who find their place in a nontraditional high school setting and work toward obtaining their diploma. Chapter One of this study includes the background of relevant literature related to this culture of students that motivated or deterred them in their pursuit to graduate. The background is followed by the situation to self, which depicts the motivation for conducting the research. The problem statement identifies the general problem: students attending an alternative evening high school are often misconceived as being bad kids and viewed in a negative light by traditional educators and their community. The last half of Chapter One expounds upon the purpose and the significance of the study, outlines research questions, and defines relevant terms related to the research.

Background

In Emily Dickinson's (1951) poem "Success is Counted Sweetest," the narrator understood the value of success after a difficult struggle when she stated, "Success is counted sweetest | By those who ne'er succeed . . . The distant strains of triumph | Burst agonized and clear!" Likewise, after struggling academically or experiencing academic failure, one would experience "sweet success" to find their place in an academic environment and ultimately to obtain a high school diploma.

In contrast, failure to earn a high school diploma can have serious repercussions on the individual, the community, and the nation. In fact, Americans who do not achieve a high school

diploma lag behind those who do graduate in terms of income and are more likely to project a financial burden on their community and country (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009; "High school dropouts," 2006). In a 2006 press release, the Alliance for Excellent Education claimed near 1.3 million students who did not graduate from United States high schools in 2001 cost the nation more than $325 billion in productivity, lost wages, and taxes over the course of their lifetime. Since high school dropouts generally do not perform as well in the job market, they contribute less to yearly federal and state income taxes; likewise, Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) noted a link between lower academic levels, poorer health, and longevity of life. For individuals, failure to earn a high school diploma can impact their personal lives negatively. Bowers, Sprott, and Taff (2013) claimed dropouts experience higher rates of incarceration and unemployment while earning less income over the course of a lifetime.

In a survey of research on programs designed to reduce high school dropouts, Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) argued that student disengagement from the learning process often led to students leaving school before successfully earning a high school diploma. In a study seeking to measure student engagement, participants listed a lack of authentic learning as a major contributor to disengagement from learning (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009). Students must see relevance in the learning process in order to fully engage.

Damon (2008), a professor of education at Stanford University and Director of the Stanford Center on Adolescence stated, "The most pressing problem in education today is student disengagement" (p. 60). Additionally, Damon (2008) made the claim that compounding the problem was the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) which led to an educational system focused on raising test scores, leaving teachers pressed to overemphasize test-taking strategies and content, and less time making learning relevant. Finn and Ravitch (2007)

commented, "We're at risk of turning United States schools into test-prepping skill factories where nothing matters except exam scores on basic subjects" (p. 13). With an increased accountability placed on student achievement in the United States, educators and researchers scramble to find innovative methods, concepts, and strategies to address the issue of student disengagement from the learning process.

Fredricks, Blumenfield, and Paris (2004) argued that in order for students to be engaged cognitively, behaviorally, and emotionally, they must be provided with flexible avenues to experience academic success. Too often, students find traditional high schools lacking in their ability to combine flexibility and sufficient support with the opportunity to succeed; therefore, they become disengaged from the learning process and are at risk for failure (Turner & Meyer, 2004).

Further compounding the problem, academically disengaged students often possess the mindset that success is reserved for elite students who have always been successful (Altenbaugh, 1998). Even for students who prove successful on standardized tests, disengagement from learning presents a dilemma since academic disengagement can lead to emotional and behavioral disengagement (Fredricks et al., 2004).

In response, educators have attempted to perfect the concept of "alternative education" since the early 1970s by creating innovative and alternative educational programs; unfortunately, many of these programs eventually evolved into a dumping ground for troubled youth (Loflin, 2002). As a result, nontraditional, alternative schools are often viewed unfavorably by members of the community and traditional educators.

Kleiner, Porch, Fams, and Greene (2002) highlighted three basic models of alternative schools: innovative, last-chance, and remedial-focused. Innovative alternative school models

present a non-conventional approach to learning and instruction and include magnet and charter schools while last-chance alternative schools are described as "correctional" and sometimes serve as a last chance for students who have been expelled from traditional school environments (Kleiner et al., 2002). Remedial-focused alternative schools focus attention on the modification and remediation of academic, social and emotional skills as well (Raywid, 1994).

The population of nontraditional evening high schools consists mainly of students who, for various reasons, have either chosen not to attend a traditional day school or have attended yet were unable to find success there. These students make up a unique culture within the United States' educational system while the circumstances contributing to their enrollment in a nontraditional high school setting vary. Factors that often contribute to the failure of these at-risk students include repeated academic failure (Battin-Pearson, Newcomb, Abbot, Hill, & Catalano, 2000), behavior and emotional problems (Garnier et al., 1997; Finn, 1989), and disengagement from learning and school (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). However, there remains a gap in the literature that sheds light on this culture of learners who did not, for various reasons, fit into the traditional educational setting, yet they persisted in their pursuit of a high school diploma.

Hilger (1952, 1966) and Mead (1955) were considered early 20th century anthropologists who identified youth as an authentic cultural category and conducted studies of such employing conventional cultural anthropological methods. Mead (1955) highlighted the need for direct study of youth in their groups. While in the past, psychologists, researchers, and educators studied youth as objects to be managed, counseled, or taught, Burton (1978) called for a sense of balance and the need for "systematic interest in the cultural lives of the young in their own terms" (p. 58).

Students who struggle to succeed in traditional high schools often drop out and thus fail to obtain a high school diploma. Bradley and Renzulli (2011) presented a Push or Pull Out model suggesting students who drop out of school are either pushed or pulled into doing so by various factors or circumstances. The "push-out" concept proposes that students drop out due to causes within the school that inhibit a student from proceeding with their education goals (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011). The "pullout" concept suggests that students fail to continue their education because of elements or conditions outside of the school causing a lack of commitment to the educational process (Bradley and Renzulli, 2011).

The desire to create educational programs that enable all students to excel and reach their fullest potential remains a chief concern for all educators (Kim, Kim, & Karimi, 2012). In recent years, alternative schools have gained the opportunity to "operate under conditions of relaxed state and local education codes" (Neumann, 2008, p. 51) with the expectation that they would create an environment that produces greater student achievement (Neumann, 2008, p. 51). Alternative evening high schools can often serve the educational needs of these at-risk students by offering a multitude of incentives such as flexible schedules, self-paced learning, mentoring, and smaller student-to-teacher ratios.

Equally important to this study is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory, developed in 1954 by Abraham Maslow. Maslow contended that unless a people's survival and physiological needs are met, they are unable to progress on the growth and development continuum. Since student academic failure is a key concern for educators, identifying at-risk factors for students and then seeking to provide programs that address these factors is critical to the academic success of at-risk students (Freita & Leonard, 2011).

In 1993, as the result of a collaborative effort of three rural Appalachian counties located in the southeastern region of the United States, a self-paced, alternative, evening high school opened its doors seeking to provide a supportive environment for disengaged, at-risk students and promoted education as a lifelong experience. The school offered a flexible schedule, mastery learning, low student-to-teacher ratio, and a supportive and respectful learning environment among many other things; faculty and staff also attempted to view each student as an individual and meet the unique needs of this culture of learners.

Situation to Self

Seeking to better understand the culture of students who attend a self-paced, alternative, evening high school is of particular interest to me. For the past twelve years, I have worked at a traditional public high school. During this time, I have watched a number of students, most of whom were generally unsuccessful in the traditional school setting for various reasons, struggle as they attempted to fit into the conventional setting of the local public high school. I also witnessed a number of these students drop out and then later enroll in a nearby alternative evening high school where I work part-time as a writing tutor. Often, the students attending the alternative evening high school are labeled as troublemakers. However, despite striving to overcome cumbersome personal, physical, or mental issues, many of these at-risk students appeared to have found some measure of academic success in the nontraditional setting as I have witnessed them cross the stage to accept their diplomas at graduation, accept earned scholarships, and even don sashes signifying their status as an honor graduate. In I Timothy 4:4, it is written, "For everything created by God is good . . ." (King James Version). Regardless of the choices these students have made or circumstances they have found themselves in, they attend school during the evening hours when many of their friends are enjoying time with their

families or participating in sporting and social events. While some of these students might have made bad choices, they are not necessarily bad kids. Rather, they are children, who for various reasons are facing somewhat insurmountable factors at home, in their personal lives, or with their mental or physical wellbeing, causing them to lose focus on education.

Creswell (2013) suggested that ". . . general assumptions and interpretive frameworks hold qualitative research together" (p. 42) as he compared research to an intricate fabric comprised of an array of colorful threads and textures. It is through the constructivist paradigm that I explored the individuals' participation in this particular culture of students attending a self-paced, alternative, evening high school, for "in this worldview, individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work . . . and the goal of the research was then to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation" (Creswell, 2007, p. 20).

Brofenbrenner and Crouter (1983) presented a paradigm for researching the effect environment might have on development; this social-address model relates culture-sharing characteristics such as social class, socioeconomic status, residence, and education (Pollnac, 1975). Swartz (1982) stated, "Culture is distributed among the statuses that make up a society . . . and [that] the members of these categories share more with one another than with other members of the society" (p. 315). Likewise, Holland and Skinner (1987) conducted a study presenting young adults attending Southern University as a cultural model based on their enrollment in the college and their interpretation, understanding, and evaluation of their experiences. I viewed this research with the philosophical assumption that the students attending this charter school chosen as the site for this study are indeed a culture based on their shared enrollment in an alternative evening school, their geographical location, socioeconomic status, and willingness to persist in pursuing their academic goals.

Creswell (2013) explained that a researcher's ontological assumption questions the nature of reality and views that reality from different perspectives. Since reality is subjective, I approached this research with the ontological assumption that I, as the researcher, as well as the participants in this study, often embrace different realities and have presented multiple forms of evidence organized in themes to portray how the participants viewed their experience differently.

Epistemological assumptions address the "relationship between the researcher and that being researched" (Creswell, 2013, p.21). In order to conduct research and construct knowledge, I approached this study with an interactional stance as I sought to collaborate with participants. This was accomplished through in-depth interviews with participants, focus groups, and observations.

The role of values in qualitative research was addressed and clarified through the axiological assumptions of the researcher (Creswell, 2013). Complete neutrality in the research process is impossible, and I acknowledge that my interpretations of research findings were subject to my personal voice and the reality that my background differs from the backgrounds of participants in this study.

Problem Statement

Creswell (2007) expressed the importance of the researcher providing rationale for a particular study, beginning by stating the problem or rather identifying the need for the study. Alternative schools often contend with negative stigmas as a warehouse or dumping grounds for at-risk students who have behavioral problems (Kim & Taylor, 2008). McGee (2001) identified the antipathetic attitude directed toward alternative education as a large obstacle and claims enlightening stakeholders about the success of alternative schools and at-risk students who attend as the best means to counter.

This negative image cast upon at-risk students attending alternative education programs can result in some students being reluctant to come to school because they fear being mislabeled or defined by the obstacles they face (McGee, 2001). While many of these students have made poor choices, they are not necessarily bad kids. Rather, they are children, who for various reasons, are facing somewhat insurmountable factors at home, in their personal lives, or with their mental or physical wellbeing, causing them to lose focus on education. More research is warranted to provide a better understanding of this culture of students who have overcome obstacles, found their place in an educational environment, and experienced some measure of academic success. The problem is that students attending a rural alternative evening school in the southeast region of the United States are often mislabeled as troublemakers and misunderstood by traditional school educators as well as the community.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to better understand the culture of students attending a rural, alternative evening high school in a rural southern Appalachian community as they persist in overcoming obstacles and pursuing a high school diploma. At this stage in the research, culture was generally defined as "a set of guidelines that individuals inherit as members of a particular society" (O'Sullivan & Burke, 2009, p. 155) and includes why they chose to attend an alternative evening high school, as well as cultural behaviors and knowledge. One theory guiding this research was Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs and how this theory relates to participants' level of satisfaction of needs as they move toward self-actualization. Another theory underpinning this study was Lee's (1966) push or pull theory and the relationship of push or pull factors on participants' motivation to exit a traditional high school and enroll in an alternative evening high school.

Significance of the Study

This ethnographic study was significant in ensuring that an accurate cultural portrait of the participants was presented and that the factors that contributed to or inhibited their academic success were explored. Currently, the literature highlights the challenges at-risk and poverty-stricken students face as they strive for academic success. Ridge (2009) reported the impact of poverty can often be highly detrimental with the effects of poverty being both pervasive and disruptive. Areas of concern identified by research include economic, material, social, and school deprivation. Yet, a "deficit-thinking paradigm blames low-socioeconomic-strata students for their failure in school" (Kim & Taylor, 2008, p. 208).

Additionally, although students are often "pushed" or "pulled" from school because of forces inside or outside the school environment, these students have returned to high school in a nontraditional setting and found academic success (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011). It is important for educators and researchers to understand the circumstances that resulted in these students ultimately having their educational needs met so they are able to obtain academic success. The goal of this study was to illuminate this culture of at-risk students and to add significantly to the body of literature relating to students' perceptions, obstacles, aspirations, and accomplishments in an alternative evening high school setting. The study also sought to identify how at-risk high school students in this nontraditional school setting described how they best learn in an effort to improve the pedagogical practices of teachers in both traditional and nontraditional school settings. It is hopeful this ethnographic study will allow educators and researchers to imagine what the world is like for these participants as they seek to provide optimal learning environments for other students who have become disengaged or do not fit in to a traditional school environment.

The theoretical significance of this study exists in its endowment to those theories whose substance form the study's framework: Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Lee's push or pull theory. Further investigation is needed to fully understand the needs of students as well as what motivates them to drop out of school and then re-enroll in a nontraditional school setting.

Research Questions

Through this ethnographic study of the culture of nontraditional students attending an alternative evening high school, I sought to answer the following questions:

Research Question One: What circumstances or reasons led students attending an evening alternative school to choose a nontraditional high school setting in pursuing their high school diploma?

In an effort to better understand the culture of students attending this alternative evening, self-paced high school, one must first understand the circumstances, which led them to leave the traditional day school and enroll in an alternative high school. The guiding concept in seeking the answer to this question was Bradley and Renzulli's (2011) proposal that students are either "pushed" or "pulled" from traditional school by either intrinsic or extrinsic factors hindering their focus on academics.

Research Question Two: What role do teachers, administrators, parents, and peers play in the educational experience of students attending an evening alternative high school?

Lessard, Fortin, Royer, and Blaya (2004) noted poor student-teacher relationships as one of the most important factors leading to student disengagement from the educational process. Likewise, in studying a population of 790 students extending over a 14-year period, Alexander, Entwisle, and Kabbani (2001) reported that parental, personal, and peer resources affected their likelihood of dropping out of school. In answering this question, I hoped to gain a better

understanding of the interwoven relationships and level of support between the students and these key role players.

Research Question Three: What factors might have inhibited the success of students attending an alternative evening high school?

Attempting to understand the obstacles this culture of students attending an evening, self-paced, alternative high school faced along their educational journeys, I sought to answer this question. Jimmerson, Egeland, Sroufe, and Carlson (2000) conducted a longitudinal study consisting of 143 participants and discovered factors related to their engagement in the educational process may start prior to beginning school.

Research Question Four: What factors have contributed to the educational success of students attending an alternative evening high school?

Creswell (2013) expounded on the claim that researchers use qualitative research to "empower individuals to share their stories" (p. 48). Attempting to answer this question through qualitative research methods, I sought to gain rich data highlighting prominent factors contributing to the success of this culture of students.

Definitions

Terms pertinent to this study are listed and defined below as they relate to the study.

1. *At-risk student* – Within this study, at-risk student was defined as a student or a group of students who possess a higher probability of academic failure or for dropping out of school (Hidden Curriculum, 2014). These students may face circumstances or obstacles that could jeopardize their ability to obtain a high school diploma such as teenage pregnancy, transiency, homelessness, serious health conditions, learning disabilities, or other conditions.

2. *Alternative high school* – Due to the continuous evolvement of alternative programs as well as the rules governing them, [alternative high schools] have become somewhat of a "moving target" and difficult to describe (Lang & Sletten, 2002). Aron (2006) describes alternative education as "a term used to broadly encompass educational activities that fall outside the traditional school setting" (p. 34).

3. *Culture* – For the purpose of this study, culture was generally defined as "a set of guidelines that individuals inherit as members of a particular society" (O'Sullivan & Burke, 2009, p. 155), including why students chose to attend an alternative, evening school, as well as cultural behaviors and knowledge.

4. *Mastery Learning* – Kazu, Kazu, and Ozdemir (2005) defined mastery learning as attainment of a pre-determined level of knowledge or skill; this level of attainment must be reached, mastered, in order for the learner to move forward.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This chapter opens with an introduction to the theoretical framework underpinning this study including motivational theories, Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs and Lee's (1966) push or pull theory. The section elaborates on how these theories apply to various fields of study including education. In addition, the participation – identification model is explored as it relates to at-risk students' early exit from high school (Finn, 1989). Next, the literature review delves into the causes and effects of student disengagement, characteristics of at-risk students, and the role of alternative schools.

Theoretical Framework

Quality ethnographic research is theory driven (Wilson & Chaddha, 2010). Grant and Osanloo (2014) used a metaphor when comparing theoretical frameworks for research to blueprints for construction. While a blueprint guides the construction of a house, a theoretical framework guides the collection and analysis of data and served as a cornerstone for the rationale for the study (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). The theory and models underpinning this study include Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1954), Lee's (1966) push out or pull out theory, and Finn's (1989) participation-identification model.   These theories and model, interwoven into a framework, provide ballast for a review of the literature, methods of research, and analysis of data.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

In the early 1940s, Abraham H. Maslow expressed his concern over the paucity of definitive motivational theory; as a result, Maslow (1943) presented his hierarchy of needs, a model Maslow hoped would underpin future motivational research and provide better understanding on how individual needs are met (Milheim, 2012). As a result, Maslow's

Hierarchy of Needs Theory (1954) guides research on motivation in various fields of study including nursing, criminal justice, and education (Udechukwu, 2009; Valadez & Lund, 1993; Minshull, Ross, & Turner, 1986; Johnson & Taliaferro, 2012; and Demarco & Tilson, 1998).

Maslow (1954) identified five basic needs and placed these needs on a pyramid ranging from the most basic physiological needs such as food, water, sleep, and shelter on the lower level with needs becoming less vital as they reach the upper level of the pyramid from safety, love and belonging, and esteem to self-actualization at the top. However, one must be cautious not to assume that each component is a separate entity that must be fully met before the person can experience the next emerging level or need; in actuality, needs can be partially met with decreasing percentages achieved on each level as one moves up the pyramid toward self-actualization (Valadez & Lund, 1993).

The base and lowest level of Maslow's (1954) pyramid represents the most basic of physiological needs including air, food, water, clothing, sleep, and shelter. A lack of fulfillment at this most basic level leads one to focus on meeting these basic needs, and one's behavior and thoughts are dominated until these needs are satisfied (Gorman, 2010). Without these basic physiological needs, the body is unable to survive, and an absence of these needs over an extended amount of time can lead to psychological and physical stress and eventually death (Taormina & Gao, 2013).

Maslow's (1954) second level on the hierarchy pyramid encompasses the need for safety. In Maslow's (1943) original model, safety is identified as an overall sense of comfort and familiarity, and without this sense of security, a person tends to feel uncertain and apprehensive. Gorman (2010) describes a person at this level as having all of their basic needs met and seeking security through structure and order as they strive to feel safe from harm.

The third level of Maslow's (1954) hierarchy pyramid, love and belongingness, is achieved when a person is involved in a meaningful relationship or is affiliated with a desired group. Gorman (2010) claimed this level of hierarchy is "very much impacted by cultural values and beliefs about what is acceptable to the group" since often a person's actions or motivations are based on "established norms of performance rules of inclusion and exclusion" (p. 27).

The next level on Maslow's (1954) hierarchy is related to self-esteem and a person's need for achievement, recognition, and prestige; not only is this respect desired from others but also from oneself in the form of self-respect. In Gorman's (2010) article outlining Maslow's hierarchy and its relationship to social and emotional wellbeing, he proposes that this level can only be achieved through meeting societal expectations "based on the values and beliefs determined by culture," and the importance of culture becomes increasingly important as one moves higher on the pyramid transcending toward self-actualization (p. 27).

Maslow (1968) described the needs at the higher levels of the pyramid as growth needs claiming that once they are satisfied, a person possesses the ability to realize their full potential and seeks to reach the final level of self-actualization. Gorman (2010) described a person at this level as understanding their ability to set and achieve goals. Additionally, Gormon (2010) claimed that higher levels are closely connected to culture, and disconnecting from culture can hamper one's attainment of goals.

Application of Maslow's theory in the various fields. Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs marked a shift in applied psychology and provided theoretical understandings on "variables that affect humans in the contemporary workplace" (Udechekwu, 2009, p. 74). Maslow has provided a theoretical framework for studies related to a variety of fields such as

corrections, nursing, and education (Udechekwu, 2009; Valadez & Lund, 1993; Minshull, Ross, & Turner, 1986; Johnson & Taliaferro, 2012; DeMarco & Tilson, 1998).

For example, in an attempt to understand high correctional officer turnover rates in the southern United States, Udechekwu (2009) used concepts from Maslow's (1954) theory to explore work attitudes and career satisfaction of correctional officers claiming doing so offered a unique perspective and proposed the idea that needs influencing work attitudes could be satisfied extrinsically or intrinsically. In the 2009 article, Udechekwu suggested that without a means of measuring or recognizing it, the idea of satisfaction was meaningless, and Maslow's theory served as a useful means for measurement.

In the nursing field, Maslow's theory has guided the education and training of nurses and led to the proposal of the Human Needs Model of Nursing; this model provided a foundation for nursing research, education, and practice (Minshull, Ross, & Turner, 1986). This model of nursing viewed the role of nurses as supportive and theorized that when nurses provided direct or indirect support based on the unique needs of the individual, that individual was better able to achieve wellness goals (Minshull, et al, 1986). Although this model of nursing was considered simplistic, this simplicity offered the opportunity for the model to be applied in a variety of nursing situations and enabled nurses to view the patient and nurse scenario as a partnership as they sought to provide a humanistic approach to nursing based upon individual needs (Minshull, et al, 1986).

In 1990, the Department of Veterans Affairs Nursing Service implemented a mentor and leadership training program as they sought to prepare nurses for leadership roles (Valadez & Lund, 1993). The program was based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and began with the notion that by forming a mentor and mentee relationship, many physiological, belonging, and

love needs would be realized; learning took place through the mentor's ability to create a relationship where human needs could coincide with work needs (Valadez & Lund, 1993). These mentoring relationships were described as noncompetitive and functioned to support independence for the mentee while promoting a sense of pride in the mentor; mentor rewards included increased productivity along with the opportunity to learn (Valadez & Lund, 1993). Mentors encouraged honesty, persistence, and self-discipline, and moving forward in the program; participants developed self-esteem through shared accomplishment. Self-actualization occurred when program goals were surpassed, and the participant evolved as a leader (Valadez & Lund, 1993). Knowles (1990) believed that all organizations have both human purposes and work purposes; they are social systems where human needs must be addressed in order for learners to be able to reach higher levels on Maslow's hierarchy of needs and increase work competencies. Likewise, Valadez and Lund (1993) claimed that the training program implemented by the Department of Veterans Affairs Nursing Service resulted in higher levels of accomplishment for both the mentors and the mentees as they formed a mutual respect for each other and worked as partners in reaching their goals.

The corrections and nursing fields are not alone in their employment of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory in measuring the satisfaction of stakeholders and seeking to motivate employees and students. Likewise, in the field of education, it is difficult for students to optimize learning opportunities when those same basic needs go unfulfilled. Understanding what motivates students can aid educators in removing some of the barriers students face in their pursuit of a high school diploma.

DeMarco and Tilson (1998) outlined how Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs can aid educators when applied to various classroom settings. Educators can support students in meeting

those most basic needs by ensuring students have access to adequate amounts of food and water, making sure classroom temperatures remain at a comfortable setting, and allowing breaks during long sessions of instruction (DeMarco and Tilson, 1998). Once the lower-level physiological needs are met, educators must work toward providing an environment where the student feels safe, loved, and accepted; students need to feel a sense of belonging within the classroom and free to learn without the fear of making a mistake. Additionally, students appreciate being heard and need validation when they have done a good job (DeMarco and Tilson, 1998).

Most educators and schools share a common goal of meeting the needs of their students, and Smith, Gregory, and Pugh (1981) reported Maslow's hierarchy of needs was once used to develop a Statements About Schools (SAS) Inventory, an instrument designed to measure seven alternative schools' success in meeting the needs of their students. Within this qualitative study, researchers utilized the SAS to determine the overall satisfaction of teachers and students (Smith et al., 1981). Findings revealed that among those participating schools offering flexible schedules, viewing students as individuals, and providing support in meeting students' basic needs scored higher than conventional schools (Smith et al., 1981).

In considering Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs, it is logical to infer that the basic needs of a student must be met in order for them to effectively navigate their way toward academic success. Likewise, Bradley and Renzulli (2011) suggested students are either pushed out of school because of factors within the school or pulled out of school as the result of external distractions outside the school environment that distract them and cause disengagement from the learning process. Once disengaged, these students can become difficult to teach, alienated, vulnerable, and for many, at the end of the academic line (Cook, 2005). A modernized alternative education program in the form of chartered schools that boast supportive learning

environments and flexible scheduling is one way of responding to the unique needs of the culture of students who have disconnected from mainstream schools (Wilson, Stemp, & McGinty, 2011).

Lee's Push-Pull Theory

Lee (1966) saw motivation as factors, which either pushed an individual away from something or pulled an individual toward something; these factors were viewed as either positively attracting (pull) the individual to a destination or negatively repelling them from a destination (push). Lee (1966) first presented push and pull factors in his article outlining a general model analyzing the ". . . volume of migration, the development of streams and counterstreams, and the characteristics of migrants" (p. 49). Lee (1966) noted that while the contributing factors in the decision to migrate appeared complex, those factors could be organized into two categories: factors attracting people to an area and factors repelling people from an area. Lee (1966) used this simple framework in developing hypotheses regarding the extent of migration under disparate conditions and varying characteristics of migrants.

Later, Lee (1970) threw "empirical considerations to the winds and [moved] far beyond the bounds of established knowledge" (p. 437) as he attempted to present theoretical connections among education and migration. Lee (1970) explored American life, its migration of population, and its attempt to educate large volumes of its population to advanced levels and claimed that by "varying the curriculum and shaping the courses for the students, rather than the reverse, the American system proclaims the eminent usefulness of persons who, judged by narrower criteria, would have been shunted at an early age into the lower and middle ranks of the labor force." (p. 439). In addition, Lee (1970) believed that it is not simply one's inherited ability that leads to their success, but it is also the awakening of interest and desirability to learn a particular skill or

content which leads to their ultimate academic and labor field success; he called for the educational system to adapt to different abilities of students, vary their instruction, and refrain from demanding that all students conform to the same rigidly dictated educational process.

Application of push-pull theory in various fields. In later years, Lee's (1966) push-pull theory guided research on tourism and tourist motivation (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1981; and Kim, Lee, & Klenosky, 2003). Crompton (1979) identified 'push' as the socio-psychological motive or desire to go on vacation and 'pull' as the choice of destination. The in-depth interviews conducted in the Crompton (1979) study proved to be an event of self-discovery and led to many respondents realizing their real motives for pleasurable vacations. Many respondents expressed surprise at the revelations stating their "motives . . . were often radically different from the reasons they were accustomed to giving" (Crompton, 1979). Understanding factors, which pulled or pushed participants in making choices led to better self-understanding among participants and guided decision makers in the tourism industry in catering to their clientele through advertisements and attractions.

More recently, researchers applied a push-pull theory in identifying motivational factors of entrepreneurship (Kirkwood, 2009) and assessing commitment levels among organizational professionals (McAulay, Zetz, & Blau, 2006). In their study, McAulay, Zetz, and Blau (2006) identified two independent processes where "job insecurity push[ed] employees away from organizational commitment" or "professionalization pull[ed] them toward a professional commitment" (p. 588). The findings allowed researchers to identify push and pull factors, which led employees toward a more positive or negative attitude regarding the organization, and researchers called for future research examining the "push" and the "pull" factors in other

aspects of professional and organizational satisfaction and commitment (McAulay, Zetz, & Blau, 2006).

In a similar study, researchers applied a push or push theory to explore the essence of possible gender differences among motivated entrepreneurs (Kirkwood, 2009). This particular study considered various "pull" factors such as independence, money, achievement, opportunity, and lifestyle as well as certain "push" factors, including job dissatisfaction and children, and compared these "pull" and "push" factors among both men and women (Kirkwood, 2009). Through the application of a push or pull theory within this study, Kirkwood (2009) determined that although the types of motivators were similar, the manifestation of the push and pull factors differed among men and women.

Push-pull theory in education. Researchers have found the application of Lee's (1966) push-pull theory useful in other fields for exploring what motivates people to travel, what factors attract them to various destinations, what motivates commitment among employees, and variations in the manifestation of various factors related to entrepreneurship (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1981; Kim, Lee, & Klenosky, 2003, McAulay, Zetz, & Blau, 2006, and Kirkwood, 2009). Therefore, using this theory to explore "push" and "pull" factors related to education eventually occurred, and the findings provided valuable insight into the motivational factors related to both teachers and students.

Knell and Castro (2014) conducted a qualitative study using a push-pull factor analysis to identify motivational factors among 13 teacher candidates for entering the teaching profession. Researchers asserted that using the same push-pull factor analysis originally used to explain human migration patterns (Lee, 1966) allowed them to incorporate both personal and contextual qualities in the candidates' decision to become a teacher (Knell & Castro, 2014).

While students are often organized into two categories, still in school or dropped out, Bradley and Renzulli (2011) claimed complex reasons often lead students to leave high school and offered a model with three possible outcomes: enrolled in school, pulled out, or pushed out. Bradley and Renzulli (2011) reasoned that regardless of whether a student drops out because of outside responsibilities interfering with their commitment to education or due to a problem within the school, the outcome is the same; however, the causes for the student dropping out are important as educators and researchers work toward meeting the unique needs of youth and guiding them toward high school completion.

In a study, Stearns and Glennie (2006) compared dropout rates as well as reasons for dropping out across a variety of ages and grade levels for high school students. As students move through high school, they are confronted with numerous factors related to employment opportunities, disciplinary policies, academic expectations, and family issues which can lead them to being pushed or pulled from school. Stearns and Glennie (2006) asserted that school administrators and teachers should be committed to understanding what motivates students to drop out and then search for methods to meet the unique needs of those students who are at risk of dropping out.

Push out factors. When a student drops out of school because of factors within the school that discourages the student from pursuing their education, Bradley and Renzulli (2011) propose that the student is "pushed out" of school. In other words, factors within the school setting such as suspension, poor student-teacher rapport, and rigid attendance policies can lead to a student becoming disengaged from the academic process and feeling "pushed out" of school (Bradley and Renzulli, 2011).

Exclusion, school transience, and prolonged absences can cause a significant loss of academic seat time and result in a notable disruption in academic progress (Brown, 2007). In fact, in a study conducted by the University of Maryland on the social, emotional, and academic experiences of 37 students excluded from their school environment, Brown (2007) noted that the exclusion left them "academically despairing and extremely wary of the very people and processes on which they are dependent for school success" (p. 434). Understanding the factors affecting these students' disengagement from education is crucial as educators work toward mending broken trust between students and educational personnel and rebuilding students' faith in the educational process (Brown, 2007).

Mills and McGregor (2010) argued that students who live in an unsupportive, unstable, or neglectful environment often find it challenging to conform to the cultural expectations of a traditional school and often become disengaged from the educational process as they struggle to have to their most basic needs met. Likewise, students from a low-socioeconomic status family might face a variety of issues influencing their decision to drop out; these issues can include low academic performance, nonparticipation in extracurricular activities, poor attendance, and a lack of social engagement (Ream and Rumberger, 2008).

Pull out factors. Examples of factors that pull a student away from school and cause them to lose their focus on academic studies might include family hardship, grieving a lost loved one, chaotic household, socioeconomic demands, emotional distress, prolonged physical ailments, teenage parenthood, and alcohol and drug abuse. These at-risk students need strong support to aid them in establishing connections with peers and adults within the school and the school itself as an institution (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

It is important to note that some students identified with both pull-out and push-out factors contributing to their dropping out of school (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011). For example, a student who views school as an oppositional environment might view improving the family finances by entering the work force a more desirable alternative to school. Low socioeconomic status can serve as both a push-out and a pull-out factor since it is sometimes associated with academic failure as the result of a low GPA, and students sometimes find it necessary to leave school to seek employment (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011).

In a 2014 University of Georgia study drawing on a sample of high school dropouts, researchers recognized that while many students who had originally dropped out of school returned later to obtain their diploma, little research exists on these students who "stopout" of high school (Boylan & Renzulli, 2014). Within this study, Boylan and Renzulli (2014) examined how circumstances, which "pushed" or "pulled" students out of school, influenced their route of return to the academic setting. Pushed out students who do reengage in the educational process are more likely to avoid the traditional school setting, and while various factors might serve as reasons these students left the traditional school setting, these factors could also affect students' reengagement differentially depending on their motivation as well as opportunity (Boylan & Renzulli, 2014).

In contrast, students who were pulled from the educational process due to factors outside of the school may find returning to the traditional school setting easier if the pull factors are resolved with little long-lasting effects (Boylan & Renzulli, 2014). For example, a student who left school to help financially support their family might find returning a viable option once their parents' regained employment. However, students who leave school due to teenage pregnancy

might find returning to the traditional school setting more difficult since the responsibilities of parenthood are long lasting.

Participation-Identification Model

Finn (1989) hypothesized the participation-identification model, a groundbreaking concept focused on important variables of student engagement and the process of high school completion and dropout. This model conceptualizes drop out and completion as ongoing processes of *non-participation → poor school performance → emotional withdrawal* (dropout) or *participation → school success → identification* (completion) (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). This model presents academic completion or dropout as an ongoing and long-term process rather than a single event and places focus on students' participation in schooling, with both emotional and behavioral components (Finn, 1989).

Finn (1989) claimed students' participation within the school contributed to their sense of belonging and overall academic success. Participation is identified in four levels with the first level consisting of students' fundamental response to teacher-initiated directions; a second level involves students displaying a measure of enthusiasm and beginning to ask questions, and the third and fourth levels encompass students' participation in extra-curricular activities as well as goal-setting and decision-making activities, which can lead to their viewing the curriculum and educational process as relevant to their needs (Finn, 1989). Students' identification with their school signifies harmonization of self with an external entity in "the form of shared values or sense of belonging" (Finn, 1989, p. 134). This sense of belongingness is a gradual procession. The lack of such identification could lead to further lack of participation from school-related activities and withdrawal from the educational process in general (Finn, 1989).

The participation-identification model highlights the importance of students' connection with school but does not offer an explanation for all instances in which adolescents drop out of school before graduation. However, it does portray the "total withdrawal of some [students] as a process of disengagement over time" rather than as a "phenomenon that occurs in a single day or even a single school year" (Finn, 1989, p. 133).

It is noteworthy to mention that researchers find that participation in and identification with school occurred more often among students from families where there is an emphasis on academic success and school-related goals (Iannarelli, 2014; Cheng, Ickes, & Verhofstadt, 2012), and students lacking this important encouragement from their home environment may be predisposed to some level of nonparticipation and nonidentification (Finn, 1989).

Wehlage (1986) called for educational reform for at-risk students failing to form a connection and identify with the traditional educational process stating, "the school must find curricular experiences that can both retain student interest and engagement on the other hand, and result in worthwhile learning and development on the other;" likewise, traditional organizational structure and curriculum may not be most appropriate for these students lacking in participation and identification (p.25).

According to Finn's (1989) participation-identification model, successful completion of school is a series of processes that occur over a period of time involving many factors that can either promote or impede a student's progress. Fine (1986) suggests ethnographic studies as a means of gaining a better understanding of these processes of disengagement, which could lead to a student's final act of leaving school. Consequently, when a student's most basic needs are not met, they are unable to move upward on Maslow's (1954) hierarchy pyramid toward self-

actualization creating a "pull" factor, as noted by Finn (1989), that causes the student to lose focus on learning and academics.

Related Literature

Student Disengagement

In order for a student to achieve academic success, they must engage in the educational process; defining "student engagement" can be problematic and is in a broad sense, defined in terms of a student's level of involvement in learning as well as how connected they are to their peers, teachers, classes, and institution (Axelson & Flick, 2011). In a recent study investigating the link between a quality learning environment and the quality of students' academic experiences while in high school, researchers divided student engagement into three subtypes: cognitive, behavioral, and emotional (Shernoff, Kelly, Tonks, Anderson, Cavanagh, Sinha, & Abdi, 2016).

While cognitive engagement involves a student's active participation in learning and the employment of self-regulated strategies aimed toward depth of processing and metacognitive development, behavioral engagement alludes to sustained effort, active participation, and consistent attendance (Shernoff et. al, 2016). A student's emotional engagement involves the ability to exercise emotional control and limit distractions and anxieties that might detract from the learning experience (Shernoff, et. al, 2016). In order to optimize learning through student engagement, educators must strive to create a learning environment that engages students not just cognitively, but behaviorally and emotionally as well. Many factors contribute to successful student engagement; however, ". . . shaping and creating supportive and challenging classroom environments may be a chief way teachers can foster engagement in learning" (Shernoff et. al, 2016, p. 59).

Even though student engagement is recognized as a crucial element in academic success, many high school students admit they are disengaged (Hafen et al., 2012) pointing toward an alarming finding in educational research depicting a significant decline in student engagement at the high school level (Steingberg et al., 1996). Harris (2008) claims educators consider engaging disengaged students as one of their greatest challenges.

Causes of disengagement. Regrettably, current research proposes disengagement as the norm due to a focus on a standards-based curriculum and more restrained classrooms (Deci, 2009). These same educational reforms have, in many cases, resulted in classroom and curriculum being structured to restrict autonomy rather than promote it, leading to even further disengagement at the secondary level (Deci, 2009). With an increased focus on standardized testing and greater accountability for adequate progress and student growth, it is easy for educators to find themselves in a position of simply teaching the test. This leaves no room for student input and paves the way for increased disconnectedness among both students and teachers.

In a recent study, findings depicted that support for student autonomy was an important contributing factor in curtailing student disengagement within the classroom through meaningful discussion and the freedom to share their input, which leads to greater student autonomy and increased engagement (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012).

Equally important, another study (Cristini et al., 2012) classified students into three subgroups: (a) academically challenged, (b) socially isolated, and (c) well adjusted. Characteristics of academically disengaged students include, but are not limited to, negative student-teacher relationships, low self-esteem, and minimal to no school involvement and commitment (Cristini et al., 2012). Similarly, socially isolated students were characterized by

low school commitment, low self-esteem, and negative relationships with peers and were found to be less likely to harbor supportive relationships with classmates or to feel as academically competent as their peers (Cristini et al., 2012).

School factors identified as contributing to student disengagement included, but were not limited to, disputes within the school, bullying, being "picked on" by teachers, poor academic performance, self-exclusion, and boredom (Cook, 2005). The reasons causing disengagement from school are often numerous and complex – many struggled to cope with and survive multiple difficulties that can limit their ability to focus on education and the classroom and lead to complete disengagement (Cook, 2005).

Effects of student disengagement. Student disengagement, whether it is behavioral, cognitive, or emotional, can have a negative impact on the educational process and greatly inhibit academic progress. Student disengagement has been named as a major contributor of poor attendance, low academic achievement, and deviant behavior (Lamb, Walstab, Tess, Vickers, & Rumberger, 2004). Ultimately, disengagement can lead to drop out, which leaves students at an alarming disadvantage in the labor market, impedes self-sufficiency, and makes it difficult to provide for their family in later years (Wilson, et al., 2011). Deficient levels of student engagement can result in academic struggles such as low grades, dwindling scores on standardized tests, and an increase in dropout rates (Croninger & Lee, 2001). Disengagement in one area usually causes a ripple effect in other aspects of the student's life.

Earlier research outlined the importance of interaction with peers and the influence these relationships can have on a student's motivation and engagement in the classroom (Van Ryzin, Gravely, & Roseth, 2009). Likewise, a supportive learning environment where students feel comfortable expressing their creativity thus allowing them to become more involved within the

classroom will fare much better than those in a setting where stimulation is lacking or the student feels threatened (Hafen et al., 2012).

At Risk Students

Historically, educators have sought to meet the unique needs of learners as they attempt to obtain a high school diploma. Focus is most often placed on what goes on in the classroom and within the confines of the school campus. Today's youth face a multitude of obstacles and stressors that educators and researchers could not have imagined just decades ago.

According to the United States Census Bureau, in 2012 only 57.8 percent of children live in a home where both biological parents are present. Likewise, a decline in the percentage of homes where the father is the breadwinner and the mother is a full-time homemaker has shown a steady decline from 60 percent of all families in the United States in 1972 to a mere 29 percent in 2007. Modern changes in family dynamics have caused a decrease in homes where there are two supportive parents present, a mom who is afforded the option of being able to stay at home and care for the family and children after school, and even the simplest things such as a quiet time after dinner where children are encouraged to do their homework. The world in which students live and learn has become highly technical and fast-paced, and with the added pressure of a struggling economy, the foundations of the family unit, as it was once known has begun to crack.

Understanding the factors that keep students focused and on track as they face obstacles and stressful events is critical in empowering them to visualize their success, meet their educational goals, and reach their full academic potential. Snyder (1995) defined academic hope as the "process of thinking about one's goals, along with the motivation to move toward (agency) and the ways to achieve (pathways) those goals" and suggested creating an environment where students interact in a supportive manner and feel they have the "agency" and "pathways" to

achieve their goals increases their probability of academic success (p. 355). In a recent longitudinal study seeking to determine the extent to which hope predicts the attainment of goals, Feldman, Rand, and Kahle-Wrobleski (2009) claimed hope was not a reality but a perception and noted that theoretically, high hope could exist without the attainment of goals. However, it was their belief that hope did provide a cognitive basis for academic achievement. Additionally, Snyder (1995) claimed the ignition of the academic hope process can occur by changing only one component, which can act as an incitement for changes in other components.

Recent educational trends focused on accountability have resulted in renewed attention drawn to students at risk of dropping out or failing school; these at-risk students include students from ethnic minorities, students with mental or physical disabilities, English language learning students, low socio-economic students, and students struggling with special circumstances such as homelessness, teenage pregnancy, or a generally disruptive home environment (Lagana-Riordan, Aguilar, Franklin, Streeter, Kim, Tripodi, & Hopson, 2011). Generally, at-risk students score lower on standardized tests and tend to struggle academically; therefore, they are more likely to encounter academic difficulty strong enough to result in their dropping out of school (Pruett, Davidson, McMahon, Ward, & Griffith, 2000).

Low socio-economic students. While students from families with a low SES are not destined to do poorly when it comes to academics, research shows they are at a disadvantage, and educators striving to close the gap must find creative and effective means to support these at-risk students. In 2007, the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty released sobering statistics claiming 1.35 million children in the United States experienced homelessness. This national crisis of homelessness has been linked to a large number of students being labeled as homeless in school districts across the United States (Miller, 2011).

In a mixed methods study, Miller (2015) examined how families' homelessness correlated with students' aspirations and outcomes; these participants described challenges they faced during these unstable and often turbulent times in their lives. These challenges manifested in many of the students' struggles within the academic setting including a lack of engagement or ability to focus on studies as they attempted to meet their basic needs (Miller, 2015). As a result, Miller (2015) concluded that communities and schools must make considerations beyond one-size-fits-all schools and seek to educate educators on the diverseness of their students if they intend to meet the wide-ranging needs of their student population.

In a coordinated analysis of six longitudinal data sets related to skill sets of students entering school, researchers concluded that early literacy skills are a strong predictor for later reading ability and academic success (Duncan, et al., 2007). Other studies have indicated that children from low socio-economic families have limited access to books in the home (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). The development of early literacy skills in all children is important since a lack of those crucial skills are associated with negative long-term academic outcomes including failure to obtain a high school diploma (Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000).

Economic difficulties within a family unit can negatively impact a student's ability to do well in school. Mills and McGregor (2010) claimed in their report mapping the re-engagement services available to disengaged students that low socio-economic status along with family relationships and cultural barriers exist as key factors in student disengagement and suggest a change in school policies and pedagogical practices in an effort to prevent these at-risk students from becoming disengaged from school to the point of early leaving.

Similarly, Bradley and Renzulli (2011) noted in the results of their qualitative study seeking to understand the complexity of early dropouts among high school students that those students from low-socioeconomic status families are associated with a variety of influences including minimal social networks and lack of participation in sports, clubs, and other extracurricular activities, which places them at a much higher risk for noncompletion. Additionally, Bradley and Renzulli (2011) discovered that cultural factors, which often interfered with a student's commitment to the educational process, were often linked directly to the family's low socio-economic status causing a high probability that the student will 'pullout' of school early.

In a study commissioned by the Queensland Department of Education to predict current trends in retention rates and factors contributing to students dropping out of school early, researchers noted that students coming from families affected by welfare issues often suffered from low academic self-esteem, found school irrelevant, felt excluded, and experienced an overall negative attitude toward the academic process (Lamb, Walstab, et. al, 2004). In understanding the struggles these students face, Mills and McGregor (2010) highlighted the importance of empathy and support from the school in order for these students to experience academic success as well as social wellbeing.

In a more recent study, Marchetti, Wilson, and Dunham (2016) found a strong correlation between academic achievement (as measured by a student's ACT and SAT scores) and the economic status of a student's family income. These findings led to the assumption that those students from low-socioeconomic status families are at an academic disadvantage when compared to their peers from wealthier families. Researchers suggest that Maslow's hierarchy of needs may shed light on this phenomenon since Maslow (1943) theorized that a person is

motivated to first meet basic physiological needs such as food and shelter (Marchetti et. al, 2016).

Additionally, students from low SES families typically show less participation in extracurricular activities; this can be the result of the student needing to hold a part-time job, a lack of funds to purchase needed equipment, or the unavailability of transportation to events and practices held after school hours. A lack of participation in extracurricular activities can negatively impact academic achievement since many activities require academic eligibility in order for students to participate (Massoni, 2011).

Teenage pregnancy. Adolescence is a transitional phase in young people's lives where they face various conflicts and confusion as they transform from child to adult (Santrock, 1998). During this transitional phase, teenagers, at times, lack emotional and behavioral stability (Dizon-Luna, 2013). As a result, they often engage in risky behaviors including premarital sex; these behaviors can negatively impact their wellbeing and place them at risk for dropping out of school (Dizon-Luna, 2013).

In a descriptive analysis report presented by the National Center for Education Statistics, Dalton, Glennie, and Ingels (2009) presented dropouts with a series of questions about their reasons for noncompletion of high school; twenty-eight percent of female participants claimed they dropped out of school early due to pregnancy. Unfortunately, teenage mothers who choose to drop out of school experience overwhelming responsibilities as a new parent and often lack the skills and maturity necessary to guide their own children early on in life (Dizon-Luna, 2013). In addition, without a high school diploma, a teenage mother who has dropped out of school most likely will struggle in the job market and find it necessary to accept a menial job with low pay (Dizon-Luna, 2013).

In a case study involving ten female high school dropouts between the ages of 16 and 19 years of age, most eventually realized the importance of education, expressed regret at having dropped out of school, and admitted they would return to school if given the opportunity (Dizon-Luna, 2013). Overall, Dizon-Luna (2013) concluded noncompletion of school is a societal issue and not only a problem for the educational system.

Students with disabilities. Schools are held accountable for the graduation of each student; this includes students with disabilities. Students with disabilities have a high dropout rate even though provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) attempt to provide some measure of safeguard against such realities (Zablocki & Krezmien, 2012). Reschly and Christenson (2006) described students with disabilities as "one of the most vulnerable populations for school dropout" (p. 276). More specifically, of the population of students with disabilities, students with emotional or behavioral disorders (EBD) or students with learning disabilities (LD) were found to have an even higher incidence of dropout (Reschly & Christenson, 2006). According to Scientific Research International (2005 & 2006), students diagnosed with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) often face more challenges within the academic setting including peer / teacher relationships, lower grades, higher suspension rates, and a general dissatisfaction with school. Researchers identified many of these challenges as predictors for an increased risk of leaving school early (Dynarski, Clarke, Cobb, Finn, Rumberger, & Smink, 2008).

Since students with disabilities often do not fare well in terms of employment beyond high school (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996), the outlook is even bleaker for those students with disabilities who have dropped out of school (Edgar, 1987). In a competitive job market, a high

school diploma most often stands as the minimum requirement for economic opportunity and stability.

The Council for Exceptional Children (2010) outlined unique characteristics of students with disabilities; these students differ in ability, learning style, and personality from most general education students. Students with disabilities often demonstrate unique learning needs, which require accommodations, encouragement, and flexibility.

The Role of Alternative Schools

In a 2014 study focused on the internal student characteristics and external institutional factors that contributed to the attainment of goals and academic success, researchers suggested students who persisted despite obstacles discovered alternative pathways and support which instilled the resilience to overcome and continue with their pursuit of goals (Hansen, Trujillo, Boland, & MacKinnon, 2014). Participants professed that "the institution [provided] a positive context that enabled [them] to set goals, generate pathways, and sustain motivation" as they worked toward attainment of academic success (Hansen, et al., 2014, p. 60).

In recent years, alternative high schools have sought to creatively meet the educational needs of students who struggle in a traditional high school by providing them with alternative methods of schooling encompassing a more flexible schedule, additional support, methods of mastery learning, and computer-based instruction within a nontraditional school setting.

Academic failure and high school dropout rates have been a source of contention for educators. Understanding that high school completion is considered a long-term process, it is evident that no single intervention or strategy will ensure success. Rather, prolonged and repeated successful strategies are crucial. Alternative schools are rising to the challenge as they strive to meet the needs of this unique culture of students.

In a recent article, Johnson and Taliaferro (2012) conducted a review of the literature outlining current knowledge on the mental health of a group of students attending an alternative high school. Since the students were described as "vulnerable . . . [and] marginalized youth facing significant social environmental challenges," the alternative high school setting offered a data-rich venue for research along with the opportunity to employ nursing interventions with "high-risk, yet resilient, youth" (p. 79) who were at risk of academic failure while facing monumental barriers to their normal development.

When conducting research in an alternative high school, Johnson and Taliaferro (2012) cautioned researchers to be mindful of the framing of issues concerning this vulnerable culture of youth so as not to cast further negative stigmatizations or stereotypes. Instead, Johnson and Taliaferro (2012) encouraged professionals and researchers working with these young people to seek to empower them while encouraging them to "see themselves as agents of change within their environments rather than helpless victims of circumstance" (p. 93).

In their review of literature, Johnson and Taliaferro (2012) identified key issues faced by youth attending alternative high schools including unequal access to health care and education, discrimination, and poverty; additionally, these students often sought to exist in "abnormally chaotic and unstable environments" while lacking some elements outlined in the lowest level on Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs as they strived to accomplish developmental and academic goals (p. 93). As a result, these issues often manifested through students' disruptive behaviors, course failures, truancy, and substance abuse (Atkins, 2008).

Johnson and Taliaferro (2012) concluded that neglecting the unique needs of these at-risk students could result in further negative stigmatizations. Lehr, Moreau, Lange, and Lanners (2004) made the claim that alternative schools offer a more personalized and supportive

approach to education with flexible scheduling and smaller teacher-to-student ratios; therefore, alternative schools might be better equipped in enabling this culture of students to meet their most basic needs as they struggle to obtain emotional and physical wellbeing and future academic success. Johnson and Taliaferro (2012) called for future research addressing the resilience of this culture of students and their academic, social, and health outcomes.

Mills and McGregor (2010) argued that alternative schools are not striving to be traditional mainstream schools, and they are not "dumping grounds" for troublemakers. In fact, they claim the strategies they employ to reconnect students to the learning environment should be "supported as models of effective teaching" and serve as a guide to "inform practices within mainstream schools" (Mills & McGregor, 2010, p. 10).

Successful strategies often employed by alternative school programs in an effort to reengage previously disengaged students include individualized flexible programs, small class size with low student-to-teacher ratio, an emphasis on care and concern, mentor programs where students bond with a caring adult inside the school, opportunities for success (most often in the form of mastery learning), an atmosphere of respect, counselors who understand the culture of students attending the alternative school, and most importantly, a sustained effort in making learning relevant to the student (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

Flexibility. Flexibility is crucial for struggling and at-risk students and can potentially be a powerful force in education and student engagement (Parnell & Procter, 2011). Flexible hours that accommodate this culture of students requires that school hours occur during a time that does not interfere with students' work schedules and/or parenting. "Flexibility is about individuals and groups being able to take an active role in forming and reforming the form and function of their environment" (Parnell & Procter, 2011, p. 87). There are students who attend

alternative education programs because of events in their lives and need a different setting, but it is important that the system is flexible enough that they are able to return to the mainstream should they so desire (Cook, 2005).

Gold and Mann (1984) discovered that the population of students in alternative schools portrayed fewer disruptive behaviors; students professed that flexibility was a positive difference between the alternative school and traditional school setting. In a similar state-level study, participants named choice and flexibility as the determining factors for their decision to attend and persist in the alternative program (Lehr & Lange, 2000).

Smaller classes. In a review of the literature, small class size was repeatedly noted as an effective practice in the alternative setting (Flower, McDaniel, and Jolivette, 2011). Likewise, using a multi-method approach, researchers documented increased learning outcomes in classes with a population of 15 students or less, allowing students the opportunity of more one-on-one instructional time with the teacher, which resulted in students being more actively engaged in the learning process (Blatchford, Russell, Bassett, Brown, & Martin, 2007).

In a recent study focused on student engagement, the main implication of the findings highlighted the benefits of smaller class sizes specifically for lower attaining students (Blatchford, Bassett, & Brown, 2011). Findings showed in a larger class, students were more prone to be off task requiring the teacher to redirect, which took away from valuable instructional time. As expected, low attaining students were most affected by this off-task behavior and frequent redirection (Blatchford, et al., 2011). This study suggests that while smaller class sizes are beneficial at all grade levels, they are of particular benefit to low achieving and at-risk students.

Mentors. Keller and Pryce (2010) defined student mentoring as a supportive and individualized relationship between a non-parental adult and a student and where the adult encourages positive development in the student. Mentors and students typically participate in the mentoring relationship on a voluntary basis with mentors combining the characteristics of being a friend as well as a parent without actually being either (Keller & Pryce, 2010).

The population of students attending alternative high schools is sometimes there as the result of disciplinary action or to avoid the consequences of poor choices made in a traditional school setting. Others have had negative experiences in the traditional school setting such as poor teacher relationships. A positive relationship with an adult role model within the school provides students with much needed support and aids in their connectivity with their academic setting (Flower, et al., 2011). An added benefit of school-based adult mentors is the opportunity for mentors to serve as a liaison between the school and parents, bridging a gap that will hopefully encourage increased parental involvement.

Demographic and cultural changes within the United States population has led schools to seek plans and policies that effectively meet the changing demands of a diverse student body (McGee & Lin, 2017). Family dynamics play an important role in the academic success of these students. Many come from broken homes or chaotic households, and some are even struggling with parenthood themselves. Additionally, low-achieving students have often not had ample opportunity to experience success. Mentors must consider the goals and perspectives of students and guide them through problem solving to aid in developing good decision-making skills and to remain focused on their educational goals (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Most importantly, mentors should encourage students to believe that they have the "capability to change their trajectory when standards for performance are paired with persistent support" (Reschly &

Christenson, 2012, p. 458). In essence, the mentor serves as an advocate for the child while monitoring their academic progress and behavior, providing counsel in array of areas, and celebrating academic and life achievements; these mentoring relationships provide a safety net for at-risk students as they move through challenging life events (McGee & Lin, 2017).

While many youth mentoring programs are comprised largely of volunteers, findings in a study conducted by Lakind, Eddy, and Zell (2014) suggest proper selection of mentors is a key component to any successful mentoring program especially when the mentors are working with at-risk students since the mentoring relationship is more rewarding for both the mentor and the student when the mentors are better equipped to assist them in their goal achievement. Additionally, DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, and Cooper (2002) stressed the importance of providing mentors with clear expectations, ongoing training, and compensation for their time; mentors within this study expressed they were better able to advocate for the youth when they had the professional knowledge and ability to support across multiple settings such as through service providers and in educational practices. Experienced mentors claim that mentoring can be "a key determinant in altering the life course of youth at risk for negative life outcomes" (Lakind et al., 2014, p. 706).

Opportunities for success. Kochhar-Bryant, Lacey, and McGee (2005) identified an important component in alternative schools is to increase a student's successful experiences while decreasing their unsuccessful experiences. Likewise, Schussler (2009) proposes that teachers within the alternative school setting can create a learning environment more conducive to academic engagement by ensuring there are sufficient opportunities for their students to succeed.

D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009) present the idea that schools can no longer operate in the mode of "one size fits all" where students either understand the concepts and content or do not; they claim that "the face of today's youth" has changed thus requiring a different approach to education (p. 211). Students who do not experience success in the classroom will disengage and often become disruptive. Because the majority of students attending alternative schools have experienced less than optimal academic success and a wide variety of ability levels within the classroom, a different approach to classroom instruction might be implemented. D' Angelo and Zemanick (2009) believed that moving away from a "lecture and note-taking scenario" was the answer for rural alternative high schools (p. 215). Software programs utilizing mastery learning have been successful in differentiating for the unique needs of students while allowing them greater opportunity for success. The results were underachieving students developed confidence in their ability to succeed and identified with the educational process (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009).

Authentic learning. Deci and Ryan (1991) suggest that students will be naturally aroused and intrinsically motivated when they perceive the subject matter to be authentic and relevant to their own experiences and concerns. The challenge for teachers is to create a challenging environment while simultaneously providing the support each student needs to successfully complete each task.

In a 2008 study involving seven Virginia high schools, Certo, Cauley, Moxley, and Chafin sought to determine students' perspectives on standards-based reform. An important finding in this study revealed that when students perceived their work as authentic, they showed increased engagement in the learning process and were positively influenced by the instruction (Certo, et al., 2008). Students associated authentic learning with teachers caring about them and

thus connected to their school environment. In contrast, the same students viewed worksheets

and note taking as a barrier created by the teacher to block the opportunity for meaningful

discussion and dialogue and often resulted in some measure of disconnectedness (Certo, et al.,

2008).

Summary

Today's youth are more diverse regarding learning styles, motivations, backgrounds, and

interests (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). In spite of overwhelming obstacles, many young adults

who are at risk for dropping out of school have resisted the urge to quit and chosen instead to

pursue their goals in an educational environment that understands their unique perspective,

believes in them, and stands ready to challenge and support them through each step toward their

future successes. These students gain more than just a diploma; they often graduate with a

renewed sense of accomplishment and confidence in their ability to succeed. Lange and Lehr

(1997) reported that overall, alternative school students claim their educational experience

through an alternative program as overwhelmingly positive and a higher level of satisfaction as a

result of their accomplishments.

At-risk students are often labeled by society according to the obstacles they are struggling

to overcome. Likewise, alternative schools, the last chance for many of them, shoulders a stigma

as well, likely the result of critics who view the alternative setting as "an easy way for bad kids

to get pushed through the system" (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). Some studies framed the

culture of students attending alternative high schools as "disenfranchised" youth who had been

erroneously labeled as "bad" or "troublemakers" (Becker, 2010; Brown, 2007; Kim & Taylor,

2008). Researchers are concerned about the antipathetic labels placed on this culture because

they highlight the root of their problem behaviors as "originating within an individual rather than

reflecting the social environment context of students' lives" (Johnson & Taliaferro, 2011). In spite of their audacious mission, alternative schools are understudied (Glassett, 2012); however, "alternative schools for at-risk youth are an important piece of the finely woven fabric of public education in the United States" (Free, 2017, p. 503).

Understanding what motivates at-risk students to engage in the learning process and persevere toward their academic goals, offering them the necessary encouragement and support, and creating a learning environment where their successes are celebrated is the goal of most alternative education programs. Alternative education programs often embody the philosophical reasoning of Maslow (1943) as they strive to meet the diverse and unique needs of at-risk students (Kennedy, 2011). While a positive educational experience may not immediately result in a sustained change, students reportedly were moved in a positive direction toward actualization when surrounded by teachers and mentors whom they trusted and admired (Kennedy, 2011).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

Chapter Three presents an explanation for the chosen research design along with a listing

of questions this study will seek to answer. Next, the setting and participants are described

followed by an explanation of procedures for conducting the research. Finally, the researcher's

role is defined, and measures are outlined for collecting and analyzing data as well as ensuring

trustworthiness. The chapter closes with a discussion on ethical considerations.

Design

A stigma is often placed on students who attend an alternative high school; they are often

thought of as being troublemakers and difficult (Arnove & Strout, 1980; Wilson, et al., 2011).

Creswell (2013) stated that qualitative research is conducted "because there is a problem or issue

that needs to be explored . . . [and a need to] identify variables that cannot be easily measured"

(p. 48). Likewise, this need for "complex, detailed understanding of the issue . . . can only be

established by talking directly with people . . . and allowing them to tell the stories

unencumbered by what we expect to find" (p. 48). Many students who attend Sunset High

School have found a strong measure of academic success as they complete high school and

obtain their diplomas. This study was qualitative in nature and sought to create a cultural portrait

of students attending Sunset High School by providing a deeper understanding of how the

interactions and engagements among educators, students, parents, and community contributed to

the students' overall academic success as well as factors that may have hindered progress.

While narrative research embodies many forms, this study was qualitative with an

ethnographic design. Creswell (2007) asserted ethnographic studies offer an openly ideological

view of a culture where the researcher elaborates and analyzes the "learned patterns of values,

behaviors, beliefs, and language of a *culture-sharing group*" (p. 68). A *culture-sharing group* can be a single classroom or an entire school, but the focus is on using the group to extract a deep and clear understanding of various cultural themes that emerge during the study (Miller & Salkind, 2002). More specifically, Blum (2008) claimed that ethnographic research "allows for a fuller exploration of the ways in which [the educational environment] is negotiated and practiced . . . in a rural community" (p. 34) and highlighted the connection between educational environment, social contexts, and geographical location.

The reason for choosing an ethnographic form of study is often rooted in a chance experience within a classroom setting or perhaps a comment made by a student or parent; this moment sparks a concern or question to be answered and is often referred to as the paradigmatic moment, which eventually evolves into more questions followed by a search for answers and understanding (Conteh, Gregory, Kearney, & Mor-Sommerfeld, 2005). The paradigmatic moment inspiring this study occurred when negative comments were made by a group of traditional educators regarding the academic ability of students attending Sunset High School. It was the hope that an ethnographic study would serve as an effective method of research in providing an accurate portrayal of this culture of students attending Sunset High School as well as an understanding of what motivates them to succeed.

There are many forms of ethnographies; I chose the *realist ethnography* approach characterized by Van Maanen (1988). This approach takes an objective position where the researcher acts like a reporter to examine a culture's status system, work life, family life, social networks, and communication networks (Creswell, 2007). The realist ethnographer reports from the background to tell the story of the participants from a third-person-omniscient point of view (Van Maanen, 1988). Therefore, the ethnographer's role is to depict a detailed and accurate

picture of the social experiences of a group of people by capturing "snapshots" of cultural practices (Naidu, 2012).

Research Questions

Through this ethnographic study of the culture of non-traditional students attending an evening high school, I sought to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What factors led high school students to enroll in an alternative evening high school?

RQ2: What role do teachers, administrators, parents, and peers play in the educational experience of students attending an alternative evening high school?

RQ3: What factors have contributed to the persistence of these students in continuing their education?

RQ4: What factors might have inhibited the success of students attending an alternative evening high school?

Setting

The setting for this study was Sunset High School, an evening alternative high school located in a small rural community at the base of the Appalachian Mountains. Bhattacharya (2012) described the research setting as a "physical, social, and cultural site in which the researcher conducts the study, [and where] the researcher studies the participants in their natural setting" (p. 4). This setting was appropriate for the study because it allowed for the "embeddedness and reflexivity of the researcher in the cultural setting of the participants" while allowing the opportunity to observe the influence of the cultural behaviors on participants (Bhattacharya, 2012, p. 4).

Approximately 190 students are currently enrolled at Sunset High School, with the student population being predominately white and economically disadvantaged. The school

operates under a governing board of 11 members comprised of school superintendents from the counties it serves, one state representative, and community leaders. The site employs two part-time site administrators, a graduation coach, and approximately 40 part-time teachers, counselors, para-professionals, and technology assistants. Additionally, the school boasts a strong mentoring program where faculty and staff members serve as mentors to students on a voluntary basis.

According to the United States Census Bureau (2016), the small, rural farming community where this school site is located has a population of approximately 21,725 citizens and is 97% Caucasian. Nearly 20 percent of the population is categorized as being below poverty level with the median family income at $41,686.

The school chosen for this study opened its door in 1993 as the result of a collaborative effort of three counties seeking to provide a supportive learning environment for disengaged and at-risk students and to promote education as a lifelong experience. The school is a year-round, self-paced, individualized, evening alternative high school offering the state's required curriculum courses to students. The school utilizes CBI (computer-based instruction) strategies using Gradpoint by Nova Net and promotes mastery learning. Students are allowed to choose which subject they wish to work on each night and work at their own pace. The courses are divided into modules; a pre-assessment is administered for each module, and students are then assigned lessons for that module based on their demonstration of content knowledge on the pre-assessment. After completing the lessons for the module, students must then demonstrate mastery of the content for that module on a post-assessment before they are able to move on to the next module.

Participants

Creswell (2007) stated that the qualitative researcher chooses individuals for study for their ability to purposefully inform and provide further understanding of the research problem. Without a doubt, sample selection in qualitative research can have a tremendous effect on the overall quality of the research. Hammersly and Atkinson (1995) suggested selecting participants based on their perspective of the social life of the group, demographics, and context that leads to various forms of behavior. Morse (1991) recommended when researchers employ purposeful sampling, they are selecting participants in accordance with the needs of the study.

The population of participants for this study was selected using purposeful sampling and consisted of students who have been voluntarily enrolled full time for a minimum of one full semester or recently graduated from an alternative evening high school in a rural community at the base of the Appalachian Mountains. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), sample sizes in qualitative studies are not pre-specified, instead they develop as the study progresses. The goal of this study was to include a minimum of 10 and a maximum of 15 students who are enrolled in the alternative evening high school selected for this study.

Students who are voluntarily enrolled in Sunset High School were asked to participate. A list of students' names and email addresses were obtained from the school's site administrator based on their voluntary enrollment in Sunset High School. I sent an email to potential participants inviting them to voluntarily participate in the study. The email invitation included the purpose of the study, directions for participation, and researcher contact information should they have further questions or concerns (see Appendix E). Of those willing to participate, students were selected on their willingness to participate, their length of voluntary enrollment at the school, and their ability to provide rich data for this study. Since I work part time tutoring

students at this site, no students under my direct instruction were allowed to participate in this study.

Originally, 30 students were invited to participate in this study; of those invited, 11 (six females and five males) willingly moved forward and participated in the interview, focus group, and observation process. Of those who moved forward, nine identified as Caucasian, and two identified as Hispanics. Table One provides an illustration of the demographics of participants.

Table 1

Final Sample Profiles

Participants (Pseudonyms)	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Current Grade Level
Kristy	18	Female	Caucasian	12
Gabriella	15	Female	Caucasian	10
Joseph	17	Male	Caucasian	12
Rebecca	18	Female	Caucasian	Graduate
Chuck	18	Male	Caucasian	12
Abby	19	Female	Caucasian	Graduate
Andrew	16	Male	Hispanic	10
Austin	18	Male	Caucasian	Graduate
Mary	17	Female	Caucasian	12
Cole	18	Male	Caucasian	12
Lydia	19	female	Hispanic	Graduate

Procedures

Before beginning this study, IRB approval was procured. Additionally, written approvals from the school system's superintendent as well as the school's site administrators were obtained (see Appendix G). Once my proposal was approved and IRB approval obtained, fieldwork began. Since the school is self-paced and regular attendance is encouraged but not required, only those students who have been voluntarily enrolled for a minimum of one full semester were allowed to participate. Counselors and site administrators offered suggestions on the selection of participants based on the condition of students' enrollment, attendance, and ability to offer rich data for this study. Upon receiving recommendations from site administrators, I sent an email to students' email addresses (see Appendix E) explaining the purpose of the study, instructions for voluntary participation, and contact information for the researcher. Once a final sampling was obtained, I notified participants via their school email address and began scheduling semi-structured interviews and focus group interview. Observations were scheduled based on the daily schedule for the school chosen as the site for this study and in consideration of availability of participants.

The Researcher's Role

For this study, I, the researcher, served as the human instrument. Creswell (2007) outlines one of the characteristics of qualitative research is that the researcher collects the data through examination, observation, and interviewing participants with the researcher being the instrument for collecting this data. Currently, I am employed at a rural traditional high school where I teach freshman English, Advanced Placement Literature, and journalism. In addition, I serve as English department chair, faculty writing coach, and project-based-learning coordinator. Over the years, I have made my way through the ranks beginning as a substitute teacher. Later, I

served as an administrative assistant to the principal and finally obtained certification and began my teaching career. Currently, I have been teaching for twelve years. In addition, I also work part-time at Sunset High School, the evening alternative high school which served as the setting for this study. At Sunset High School, I serve as a writing tutor for students ranging in age from 14 to 21 years of age. It is important to note that no student under my direct instruction was invited or allowed to participate in this study.

While it is possible that I am acquainted with some of the students participating in the study, I do not feel this casual acquaintance caused bias or affected the reliability of the study. No student under my direct instruction was allowed to participate in this study. As both a professional and a Christian, I approached this study with an open mind, without inclination to judge, and with complete and total honesty.

Data Collection

Creswell (2007) illustrated data collection within a qualitative study as a "series of interrelated activities" that is embodied by certain "activities aimed at gathering good information" (p. 118). Data collection methods used in this study included interviews, observations, and field notes. Using at least three types of data collection methods, triangulation, aided in avoiding dependence on a single source of data. For this study, data collection occurred in three stages and in the following order: (a) individual, semi-structured interviews, (b) a focus group interview, and (c) observations. As an ethnographic researcher, I immersed myself in the natural setting of the culture of participants and moved through each stage of data collection looking for patterns and predictability.

Stage 1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Creswell and Brown (1992) claimed interviews play a crucial role in qualitative data collection. The interviews for this study were semi-structured, one-on-one, and consisted of approximately ten open-ended questions. Semi-structured interviews amalgamate the flexibility of an unstructured interview with the inclination of a survey instrument in an effort to generate pivotal qualitative data (Gchensul, Gchensul, & Lecompte, 1999). These semi-structured interviews took place in a partitioned area of a professional development room located on the premises of Sunset High School. Participants were asked open-ended questions seeking variations in their responses allowing me to further explore those varieties in responses. After permission was granted from the participant, each interview was audio recorded electronically using an Apple iPad. Additionally, as suggested by Creswell (2007), the open-ended interview questions were listed on a form with ample space available for the researcher to note participant reactions and responses (see Appendix B). Afterwards, audio recordings were stored in a locked cabinet until they were transcribed and analyzed by myself. Once audio recordings were carefully transcribed, a copy of each transcription was shared with the participant to ensure accuracy of the audio recording and transcription.

Table 2

Participant Interview Questions

Question	Rationale
1. Whose decision was it for you to enroll in Sunset High School? Were you in agreement with the enrollment into this school?	The purpose of question one was to aid in the determination of why the participant chose to enroll in the non-traditional school setting. Bradley and Renzulli (2011) called for future studies examining the various reasons for students dropping out claiming the research could prove valuable theoretically and empirically since students leaving a traditional school are either pushed out by factors within the school or pulled out by factors outside of the school environment. A

	better understanding of the decision-making process that led to their enrollment at Sunset High School could be helpful in identifying those push and pull factors.
2. Describe your educational experiences before attending this school.	The purpose of question two was to aid in determining what factors either "pushed" or "pulled" the participant from the traditional educational setting. In a study analyzing the complexity of noncompletion of school, Bradley and Renzulli (2011) reported that some students claimed problems within the school setting led to their dropping out before completion. Data obtained from this question could identify factors within the school setting that might have pushed the participant to exit the traditional school setting.
3. Describe your family.	The purpose of question three was to assist in determining the participant's living condition and familial connectedness. In a study examining 30 years of dropout prediction literature, researchers identified family dynamics as playing an important role in the level of students' engagement in school (Bowers, Sprott, & Taff, 2013). Data obtained from this question could prove beneficial in better understanding the role that family plays in the participant's leaving the traditional school setting and later enrolling in Sunset High School.
4. Describe your mother and father's views on education.	The purpose of question four was to determine the type of educational support the participant receives in the home and the value placed on education. Researchers have discovered that participation and identification happen more commonly among students from families who communicate well and who place an emphasis on the importance of education and school-related activities (Finn, 1989). Students whose parents have lower academic expectations often arrived at school more inclined to nonparticipation and nonidentification (Finn, 1989). By asking this

	question, I hoped to gain a better understanding of the value placed on education within the home as well as the level of educational expectations the participant receives from parents.
5. Describe yourself as a student before attending this school.	The purpose of question five was to assess student engagement in the learning process prior to attending the school. Finn's (1989) participation – identification model claims a student's engagement and level of connectedness to their school can have a positive impact on their educational experience, and a lack of connectedness and engagement can become factor leading to early dropout. Research has shown that students who fail to identify or connect with school often feel 'pushed' out (Griffin, 2002; Lan & Lanthier, 2003) resulting in their failure to move further up on Maslow's pyramid. In asking this question, the researcher sought to identify the participants' level of engagement before their enrollment at Sunset High School.
6. Has your opinion of yourself as a student changed since your enrollment at Sunset High School? If so, how?	The purpose of question six was to assess any change in student connectedness to the school environment after enrollment at the site. Cristini et al. (2012) claimed, "students' perception of school may contribute to how they feel about themselves," (p. 22) and students who find themselves engaged in a positive educational experience tend to have a more positive perception of self. This positive perception of self allows them to move further up on Maslow's pyramid toward self-actualization. Data obtained from this question provided a better understanding of the impact Sunset High School's cultural environment has on the participant's perception of self.
7. Describe some positive experiences you have experienced while attending Sunset High School.	The purpose of question seven was to determine what factors inside the school have a positive effect on the participant's learning. In his migration studies, Lee (1966)

	discovered that migrants who primarily responded to the plus factors at their destination generally experienced a positive outcome, and those positive outcomes increased with the challenge of intervening obstacles. Responses to this question led to rich data providing a better understanding on what attracted the participant to the destination (Sunset High School), and once enrolled, what experiences they have perceived as positive.
8. Describe some negative experiences you have experienced as a result of your enrollment at Sunset High School.	The purpose of question eight was to determine what factors inside the school might have a negative effect on the participant's learning and life. As director of one alternative high school, McGee (2001) claimed that students attending his school faced a concerning issue where some members of the general public and many educators had a negative perception of students attending the alternative school; his concern was deepened when students of his school confessed that despite having good grades and no discipline issues, they hesitated to list the school on job applications because they felt they were viewed as trouble makers simply because they attended an alternative school. While alternative schools can serve as a solution for a wide variety of students, many alternative schools face the pressure of reshaping the reputation of the alternative school concept (Becker, 2010). Data collected from this question helped to shed light on any negative stigmas participants face as a result of their enrollment at Sunset High School.
9. What role do the faculty and staff play in your educational experience at Sunset High School?	The purpose of question nine was to determine what role faculty and staff play in the educational experience of participants. Students who experience a positive relationship with teachers were found to be 16% less likely to drop out of school (Rumberger, 1995). In contrast, researchers reported a negative student-teacher

	relationship as the second most important factor leading to an increased risk of dropping out of school early (Lessard et al., 2004). Sunset High School boasts a strong mentoring program for their students. The data collected from this question aided in determining the impact faculty and staff have on the culture of students attending Sunset High School.
10. How do your peers affect your educational experience?	The purpose of question ten was to determine the effect peers have on the educational experience of the participant. Maslow's (1954) research questioned how a particular experience is affected by motivation; this research was not conducted in an education setting, but the principles can be applied to learning and the learning experience, especially in the area of student motivation and a student's satisfaction with their overall educational experience. In a study using Maslow's model as a framework, researchers sought to better understand the factors leading to student satisfaction in the learning environment (Milheim, 2012). Researchers claim that students who form a positive strong bond with one another felt accepted, developed a greater self-esteem, and built a mutual respect thus affording them the opportunity to move higher on Maslow's (1954) pyramid (Curtis & Lawson, 2001; Milheim, 2012). The data obtained from responses to this question led to a better understanding of how the relationship among peers influence the educational experience of participants within this study.

Field notes. During the interview process, I made field notes detailing my thoughts and perceptions as the interview was conducted (see Appendix B). All field notes will be stored in a locked cabinet for which I had the only key. Later, these notations were analyzed in search of emerging themes related to but not limited to any factor or occurrence that might have contributed to a student becoming detached from a traditional day high school, any factor or

occurrence outside of the educational setting that might have caused the student to lose focus on their academic goals, and any factor or occurrence that has motivated or discouraged their academic success while attending the non-traditional evening high school setting.

Stage 2 Focus Group

Krueger (1988) defined a focus group as "a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment" (p. 18). A focus group interview differs from an individual interview in that focus group participants are afforded the opportunity to interact with each other in addition to the interviewer; this group interaction can often produce data that would be less attainable (Morgan, 1988). Agar and MacDonald (1995) highlighted the importance of group interaction in obtaining rich qualitative data and cautioned that too much moderator control within the focus group interview can potentially hamper group interaction and too little moderator control can result in important topics never being discussed. The focus group session was conducted as a method of data collection in order to gather rich data through thoughtful discussion. Edmunds (2000) explained how focus group sessions should be comprised of a small group of participants and conducted in an interview style; the session may be guided by a moderator. Krueger and Casey (2000) recommended including 10-12 participants, and although the amount of time will vary, one and a half to two hours is the suggested amount of time allowed for the session. Each of the participants in this study were invited to take part in the focus group. I served as the moderator for this focus group interview utilizing the guided interview approach where a broad, open-ended question (Appendix F) was companioned with probes under each question as advised by Krueger and Casey (2000) and Morgan (1988). This focus group interview was conducted in a petitioned area of the school chosen as the site for this study. To begin, I introduced myself and allowed

participants the opportunity to do the same. Following introductions, I read a scripted preamble reminding students of the purpose of the study, their voluntary enrollment, reassurance of confidentiality, right to withdraw from the study, and instructions for participation (Appendix F). Next, I moved forward and began asking open-ended questions and companioned probes as necessary to move discussion forward (see Table 3).

Table 3

Focus Group Interview Questions

Question	Rationale
1. Describe your educational experience before enrolling in a self-paced, evening, alternative high school.	The purpose of question one was to provide a better understanding of the type of educational experience each participant had before enrolling in Sunset High School. Students leave traditional high schools for a variety of reasons. Bradley and Renzulli (2011) claim these reasons are important and offer a model with three outcomes where students are either in school, pushed out, or pulled out. Data obtained from this question helped to shed light on which outcome best describes participants.
2. Describe any positive impact(s) attending an evening alternative school has had on your educational experience and life.	In a study exploring how students perceive high school and their engagement in the educational process, Certo, Cauley, Moxley, and Chafin (2008) discovered that students who felt learning as authentic and teachers as supportive demonstrated an increase in school engagement and an overall greater academic performance. Since many alternative schools are committed to students who are at-risk and employ strategies believed to advance their academic and socioemotional development (Brown, 2007), data collected from questions two and three highlighted both positive and negative factors of Sunset High School.
3. Describe any negative impact(s) attending an evening alternative high school has had on your educational experience and life.	
	In addition, McGee (2001) called attention to the negative stigma often cast upon students

	attending alternative schools which sometimes leads to students being mislabeled by their obstacles. Data obtained from question three helped to determine if any participants have experienced or perceived any such negative stigmas as a result of their enrollment at Sunset High School.
4. Who or what has been your greatest support or encouragement in obtaining a high school diploma?	Valadez and Lund (1993) conducted research exploring the effect mentor relationships between educators and students and found these mentor / mentee relationships to be a "crucial element of education" (p. 260) and claimed the participants within the study felt their mentorship sat on the survival stage of Maslow's (1954) pyramid. In other research, McGee (2001) spoke to the importance of close peer relationships in the educational setting and Sunset High School boasts of a strong mentoring program for their students; finally, Finn (1989) asserted that the support of parents as well as the parents' support of the educational process served as a strong positive influence of students' academic success. Responses to this question four helped to shed light on the benefits of these and other relationships in promoting connectedness and effectually academic success.
5. What did you find most challenging when it comes to obtaining your high school diploma before attending an evening alternative high school?	Finn (1989) claimed that dropping out of school, failing academically, or being rejected by the school culture may serve as a starting point in a cycle where the student fails to participate with and form an identification connected to the educational process. Responses to questions five and six combined provided a unique and comparative glimpse of challenges the participant faced before enrolling in Sunset High School and then how those challenges changed, lessened, or increased after their enrollment in Sunset High School.
6. In regards to obtaining your high school diploma, what do you find most challenging after your enrollment at an evening alternative high school?	

7. What impact do you feel your peers have on your efforts to obtain your high school diploma?	Maslowski (1997) contended that school culture exists as the norms and values shared by school members, which influences or shapes their functioning at school. In addition, research has shown that positive relationships with peers can lead to further engagement and strengthen students' sense of connectedness and belonging (Axelson & Flick, 2011) allowing them to move up on Maslow's (1954) pyramid. Responses to question seven helped to provide a better understanding of peer relationships within the culture of students attending Sunset High School and what effect these relationships have on the academic success of participants.
8. As a student or recent graduate of an evening alternative high school, do you feel you are academically stronger or weaker as a result of your enrollment at an evening alternative high school?	Alternative schools are sometimes referred to as a dumping grounds for undesirable students (Gregg, 1998; Kim & Taylor, 2008; & Loflin, 2002) offering substandard curriculum and low expectations (Wheelock, 1998). As a student enrolled or recently graduated from an alternative evening high school, participants in this study offered valuable insight into how this culture of students views and assesses its academic gains as a result of enrollment in Sunset High School.
9. What are your plans upon obtaining your high school diploma, or your current education/employment status if you have recently graduated?	Sunset High School strives to establish a sense of belonging and community among students and faculty. Maslow's (1954) motivational theory places individuals on a pyramid according to their hierarchy of needs. Completion of high school, achievement of a high school diploma, enrollment in college or tech school, and even obtaining gainful employment are all events that enable an individual to move up the levels of Maslow's (1954) pyramid toward the ultimate goal of self-actualization. Responses to question nine helped to shed light on where participants of this focus group and study currently exist in relation to Maslow's (1954) pyramid.

Data collected through the focus group included group interaction, conversation, body language, tone of voice, and silence (Grudens-Schuck, Allen, & Larson, 2004). The session was audio recorded and carefully transcribed by myself; participants were informed of the use of the audio recorder and reassured of confidentiality before the session begins. Once audio recordings were carefully transcribed, a copy of each participant's transcription was shared with the participant to ensure accuracy of the audio recording and transcription. Selected quotes and transcriptions were analyzed for repeated themes.

Stage 3 Observations

An equally important method of data collection in this study were observations made by the researcher. Creswell (2007) claimed observing within the setting of a chosen site requires skill and outlined observation data collection in steps beginning with selecting the site to be observed, obtaining permission, and then identifying who and what will be observed and for how long. Additionally, Creswell (2007) encouraged the researcher to record both reflective and descriptive notes about what is observed including notations regarding experiences and learning. Observational data will be collected through observing participants during times when no direct questions are asked. The researcher observed students' work samples as well as their interactions with peers and educators (Appendix D).

Observations were both scheduled and unscheduled and varied in duration depending on the event observed. Unscheduled observations included but will not be limited to interaction with peers at evening breaks and meal times, interaction between students and parents at student drop off area, and interaction between students, their peers, and teachers in the classroom. Scheduled observations included accompanying school personnel on home visits, accompanying

students and school personnel on a field trip as they tour nearby college and vocational school campuses, and student appreciation events where students, parents, siblings, and faculty and staff were in attendance. Creswell (2013) expressed the importance of determining the role of the observer ranging "from that of a complete participant (going native) to that of a complete observer" (p. 167). In all observations, I served simply as an observer recording both descriptive and reflective notes (Appendix D) detailing my personal thoughts and reflections as well as a description of the physical setting in which the observation took place. Since I work part time at Sunset High School, I am a familiar sight to students and faculty, so introduction will not be necessary when observing. Creswell (2013) recommends the observer remain passive and friendly while conducting observations and prepare full notes immediately after each observation in an effort to ensure a rich narrative description of events and participants under observation.

Data Analysis

Hansen (2006) reported that a researcher must examine and identify relevant issues while making sense of data. As the researcher, I carefully transcribed all interviews and focus group session; afterwards, all transcriptions were compared to the original recording to ensure accuracy. Creswell (2007) encouraged qualitative researchers to organize and prepare data for analysis and then proceed with pruning the data into relevant themes and categories through coding and then reducing the codes until finally the data is ready for presentation in the form of figures or tables. Likewise, memoing aided in identifying concepts and half-formed ideas as I attempted to make more cohesive sense of the data. Memoing is the process of recording ideas the researcher forms of the evolving theory as they progress through the process of coding (Creswell, 2007). Finally, sorting allowed me to look for relationships among categories.

Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) suggested the goal of coding and memoing in processing data is to turn written notes into a document a broader audience can understand.

      Reading Field Notes. To begin, I read field notes line by line approaching the notes with fresh eyes as if a stranger wrote them; this allowed me, the ethnographer, the opportunity to reflect on all that has been observed and recorded in a concentrated time frame (Emerson, et al., 1995). While reading, it was important to make an effort to identify patterns and themes within the data and gain fresh insight.

      Open Coding. While sifting through field notes, I recorded words or phrases that might identify specific categories; the words and comments were written in the "comment" field in a word processing program holding all analytic possibilities in an effort to capture as many themes as possible. Emerson et al. (1995) suggested the ethnographer initially strive to precipitate as many codes as possible without concern of whether or not they fit in with the initial focus of the study.

      Memoing. Strauss and Corbin (1990) point out that through the process of rereading field notes and open coding, the researcher begins to develop and elaborate on ideas relating to various themes. Additionally, the use of memoing aids in identifying and writing about "processes that characterize talk and interaction in a particular setting" (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 143). Through reengaging in the events and observations while rereading field notes and reorganizing and categorizing the data, ideas reflecting concerns and highlights began to emerge and form themes. In summation, reading the field notes, open coding, and memoing required my stepping back from my work in the field and begin forming ideas and connections (Emerson et al., 1995).

Focused coding. After open coding and memoing and having sorted my field notes accordingly, I began the task of focused coding by conducting a tedious, line-by-line analysis of selected notes and attempted to connect data that might not have appeared to be related earlier in the process. It is also important to define subthemes that highlight differences within the broader topic at this point of the analysis process (Emerson et al., 1995). Focused coding allowed me to discover new themes and relationships within the data.

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Trustworthiness

</div>

In qualitative inquiry, trustworthiness in the findings is crucial. Lincoln and Guba (1985) outlined four principles for qualitative analysis: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility is an examination of the research finding in comparison to the data collected to determine if the representation is a credible interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative researchers can ensure trustworthiness within their study by employing triangulation, rather using a minimum of three forms of data collection (Creswell, 2007). To ensure triangulation within this study, data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, focus group interview, and observations. Additionally, Yin (1994) recognized the importance of adopting well-established research methods, using member checks, and peer reviews to ensure credibility. To further demonstrate trustworthiness, this study included member checking where, after each interview was transcribed, I provided written transcriptions to participants giving them the opportunity to ensure no mistakes were made in interpretation or transcription.

Transferability

Transferability is the capacity or extent to which the research findings can be transferred beyond the limits of this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Cole and Gardner (1975) called attention to the importance of researchers clearly and concisely conveying the boundaries of their study so another could easily employ them. This study is transferable through the generation of data and rich descriptions enabling other researchers to make judgement regarding the findings' transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, I maintained a comprehensive collection of the analysis of data including transcriptions, coding, and theme generation, which will be available upon request.

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research resembles reliability in quantitative research (Creswell, 2007), and can be defined as an evaluation of the caliber of the processes of collecting and analyzing the data; therefore, to ensure dependability, I provided in-depth description on methods employed in this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure dependability in this study, I provided a detailed account of all data collection and document stages of analysis.

Confirmability

Confirmability is related to objectivity and is an evaluation of how well the findings are substantiated by the collected data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Miles and Huberman (1994) claimed the most important criterion is the extent to which the investigator discloses his or her own predispositions. In order to establish confirmability, I employed peer review in order to effectively review the study's method, procedure, and results (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorenson, 2010) as well as to ascertain the possibility for bias (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000).

Ethical Considerations

In considering ethical issues within this study, I assured anonymity by assigning pseudonyms to all participants and the site. The list of pseudonyms as well as all other data were kept under lock and key with myself having the only key. All electronic data was password protected. Although I am employed part-time at the site where this study took place, no students under my direct instruction were allowed to participate in this study. As both a professional and a Christian, I pledge to be forthright and honest in all aspects of this study.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

Holloway and Biley (2011) claimed that "qualitative researchers do not only write a story, they are also story analysts . . . reflect[ing] the complexity of what went on in the field" (p. 970). Likewise, Atkinson (1992) called on ethnographers to report findings "based on thorough research, ethically and conscientiously conducted, with a systematic review of sources and evidence, and conveyed. . . through coherent written texts" (p. 4).   In writing rich descriptions of cultural scenes and settings and documenting accounts of social actions and events, this researcher has attempted to construct an accurate ethnographic monograph and shed light on this culture of students as they have persevered toward achieving their academic goals while enrolled at a self-paced, evening alternative high school. Through semi-structured interviews, a focus group interview, and observations, I explored the lives of 11 students (currently enrolled in or recently graduated from) an evening alternative high school located at the base of the Appalachian Mountains.

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to yield a cultural portrait of nontraditional students attending a self-paced, alternative evening high school. In addition, the researcher sought to identify factors and methods contributing to or hindering the success of these nontraditional students as they worked toward obtaining their high school diploma. Central questions guiding this study included: (1) What factors led high school students to enroll in an alternative evening high school?, (2) What role do teachers, administrators, parents, and peers play in the educational experience of students attending an alternative evening high school?, (3) What factors have contributed to the persistence of these students in continuing their education?, and (4) What factors might have inhibited the success of students attending an alternative evening high school?

This chapter contains an overview of the 11 participants taking part in this study along with a brief introduction of each. Next, a results section follows containing an explanation of the 15 codes identified from transcription of data and open coding, and finally, a discussion of the four emerging themes and 14 subthemes.

Participants

The average age for participants was 17.54 years old. All participants (ranging in ages from 15-19 years) met the eligibility requirements for this study in that they were currently and voluntarily enrolled for a minimum of one full semester or recently graduated within the past two years. The group of 11 participants (six females and five males) were comprised of: two sophomores, five seniors, and four recent graduates; nine of the participants were Caucasian, and two identified as Hispanic. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants as well as the site chosen for this study in an effort to preserve anonymity.

Kristy

Kristy is an 18-year-old Caucasian female currently enrolled in Sunset High School and on track to graduate in the fall of 2018. Kristy is the youngest of three children and resides at home with both parents. During the semi-structured interview, Kristy appeared reserved and responded to some questions with only a shrug of her shoulders and a shy smile. Before enrolling in Sunset High School, Kristy attended a regular day school. Kristy shared the fact that she has always been shy and reserved and that her reason for leaving a traditional day school was that it had "huge classrooms stuffed with kids."

Since enrolling in Sunset High School, Kristy has successfully completed two grade levels and increased her overall grade point average. She noted the most positive aspect of attending Sunset High School is that she is able to work on her academics with minimal social

interaction with other others. In addition, she found it easier to seek help from the teacher in a smaller group or on a one-on-one basis rather than in front of a large classroom full of students.

During classroom observations, the researcher noted that Kristy most often works in the back corner of the classroom, has little to no interactions with other students, but she was always fully engaged in the learning process. In addition, the only times she was observed seeking assistance from the teacher was when she needed a password to take a test. Kristy stated, "I always work in one particular classroom because there are fewer students in here, and it is quiet; it's easier for me to work in here." After graduation, Kristy plans to attend technical school and become a cosmetologist.

Gabriella

Gabriella is a 15-year-old Caucasian female. She is a bubbly 10th grader with a warm smile; she has recently completed her first full semester at Sunset High School. Gabriella stated that while neither of her parents graduated from high school, they are "supportive" of her and are "very proud that she is getting a good education." Before enrolling in Sunset High School, Gabriella attended a traditional day school where she admits she "did not try very hard and was involved in a lot of drama." In addition, she stated she was bullied by other students who made fun of her when she made bad grades.

Although Gabriella has only been enrolled at Sunset High School for one full semester, she reports that her grades are already much better. Gabriella stated, "I love it here; I am happier, and I am focused on getting my work done." Gabriella attributed much of her success at Sunset High School to her mentor who has been "very helpful and supportive." In addition, Gabriella credits a self-paced curriculum as a factor in her academic success and emotional well-being when she commented, "It helps that I can work at my own pace, and I know right away

how I did on a test; I don't have to wait a few days for the teacher to grade it. I don't feel rushed, and no one makes fun of me that I didn't get something the first time. . . I'm really starting to feel proud of myself." After earning her high school diploma, Gabriella plans to attend college and become a teacher.

In class, Gabriella sometimes seeks confirmation that her selected answers are correct before submitting them and in turn, often apologizes to the teacher for asking for help. The researcher noted the teacher offering frequent encouragement and praise to Gabriella on several occasions in various forms such as a pat on the back as she passed by Gabriella, offering praise when Gabriella did well on a quiz, and presenting Gabriella with a snack when she passed a test.

Joseph

Joseph is a 17-year-old Caucasian male who has recently enlisted in the armed forces; he plans to graduate in the fall of 2018 and will report for active duty once he has obtained his diploma. Joseph is the youngest of three children and lives with his supportive mother. It was Joseph's decision to withdraw from a traditional day school and enroll in Sunset High School. He stated that he was unmotivated in day school and was attracted to the four-day school week and evening hours at Sunset High School; this allowed him the flexibility to work a full-time job during the day.

While Joseph found the supportive environment and flexible schedule of Sunset High School a plus, he highlighted what he referred to as a "pitfall" he hoped other students would not make. He warned, "Make sure you come [to school] every day. . . it's not like day school; you have to actually work hard while you're here to make progress. It's no longer just about showing up and earning a credit." Joseph said that he came to Sunset High School thinking he would graduate ahead of his classmates and get an early start on adult life, but "…then I got lazy and

didn't come every day, and sometimes my friends at day school wanted me do stuff with them in the evenings. As it turned out, they will graduate in the spring, and I will have to spend the summer finishing up my last two classes."

In spite of his setback, Joseph felt his enrollment at Sunset High School has been a positive experience. He noted that his grades had improved, and he had formed a bond with some of his teachers who have been caring and supportive. He felt the experience had helped him mature and become more independent. He added, "I like that they treat us like adults here instead of like little kids. I mean, … they try to help you think through making good decisions instead of just telling you what to do."

Rebecca

Rebecca is an 18-year-old Caucasian female and recent graduate (spring of 2018) of Sunset High School. Rebecca comes from a large close-knit and supportive family of 15; she is the middle child. She was raised by both parents, one of which is a doctor and the other is a nurse. Rebecca made the decision to enroll in Sunset High School after falling behind in her studies at a traditional day school. Rebecca shared, "…before attending this school, I was not the best student; I didn't study and was not prepared at all. You know, I was never sure of what I was doing." In addition, Rebecca struggled adhering to the strict attendance policies of a traditional school. Rebecca expressed her frustration when she said, "I was sick a lot, and when I was out, I would just be overwhelmed when I returned to school; it was so stressful." She added, "The stress would be compounded when teachers tried to get me caught up by giving me a ton of work to do at home; I was drowning in all of this work, and I had no idea how to do it or where to start."

After enrolling in Sunset High School, Rebecca claimed she found comfort in the supportive environment where she was able to work at her own pace. She recalled, "When I didn't have confidence in myself, my teachers made sure that I understood I could do it; I would never have graduated without the support they have given me." Rebecca went on to explain how in day school, she often felt lost in the crowd, but at Sunset High School, she felt like "the teachers really [saw] me and cared about me and not just my grade." Rebecca noted that one thing she found encouraging was watching other students succeed, "Just about every night, someone finished a course or earned their diploma; it's a big deal." At Sunset School's spring graduation ceremony, Rebecca proudly accepted well-earned scholarships for her post-secondary school plans. She will begin college in the fall where she plans to follow in her parents' footsteps and work in the medical field.

Chuck

Chuck is an outgoing 18-year-old Caucasian male and currently a senior at Sunset High School. Chuck stated that it was his parents' decision for him to enroll at the self-paced, alternative, evening high school, but he was in agreement with the choice. The move was made due to his lack of academic success and poor rapport with faculty and staff at his traditional day school. Chuck described his experience at day school as "not too pleasant" and explained how he "did not get along with some of the staff." Chuck admitted, "I really didn't try as hard as I should have because I knew they didn't like me; one teacher actually told me, 'Right there's the door! You can leave if you want to.'"

Since enrolling at Sunset High School, Chuck claims that has all changed, "I just feel better about myself. My grades are good, and I am actually motivated to do my school work now. The teachers here really care and push me to do my best." When asked about any negative

experiences he has had as a result of his enrollment, Chuck expressed regret over some's lack of understanding, "I just wish people would be more positive with the whole night school outlook…people have negative views and think it's just a halfway school, it's not; it's a good school." Upon earning his diploma, Chuck plans to head straight into the workforce where he will drive a truck for his family's business.

Abby

19-year-old Abby is a 2017 salutatorian graduate of Sunset High School. After struggling in both traditional day school and home school, Abby's mother saw a pamphlet for Sunset High School and thought it might be a good fit for her daughter. She is the oldest child in her family with three younger brothers and one younger sister. "Both parents earned high school diplomas and value education, but they want me to have a better life. My dad is 40 years old and still trying to work his way up the ladder."

When asked what she found most beneficial about Sunset High School, Abby was quick to say, "It's the teachers; they were so supportive and helpful. They still ask me how I'm doing. I am thankful I had the opportunity to experience that." Abby stated that the only negative aspect of attending Sunset High School was "people often confused us with kids who get in trouble; they don't understand that it's not that kind of school. We don't have bad attitudes, and we are not troublemakers." Since Abby graduated as salutatorian of her class, she earned thousands of dollars in scholarships to offset the cost of her post-secondary education. Currently, she is enrolled at a community college where she is concentrating on completing her core classes; she is still undecided on a major.

Andrew

Andrew, a 16-year-old Hispanic male, left a traditional day school and enrolled in Sunset High School. Andrew explained, "I was getting bullied in day school by other Mexicans, and I just felt like I was slower than everyone else. I could never keep up with the teacher." Andrew continued by expressing his frustration with large class sizes, feeling like he didn't fit in, and poor grades. As a result, Andrew experienced a lack of engagement in school and considered dropping out.

Since his enrollment at Sunset High School, Andrew reports that his grades are good, and he is earning credits at a steady pace. When observed in the classroom, he appeared focused and works diligently often skipping dinner to continue his work. He explained that he never imagined he would "feel a part of any school," but he will always be "thankful that [he] was able to attend SHS because it has changed [his] life."

When asked about his family, a noticeable sense of pride was detected in Andrew's voice as he described his large family consisting of four brothers and three sisters. Andrew's parents grew up in Mexico; his father left school after the eighth grade, and his mother dropped out of school after ninth grade. Andrew explained the close bond he shared with his family and how proud his parents were of his recent success in school. After graduation, Andrew plans to attend a local community college but has not yet decided on a major.

Austin

Austin is an 18-year-old Caucasian male and recent graduate of Sunset High School. Austin pleaded with his parents to allow him to attend Sunset High School, "I had bombed like three classes, so finally they caved and let me enroll. I worked hard, and in a short amount of time I had recouped two of those courses and never looked back." When asked about his educational experience before enrolling in Sunset High School, Austin replied, "Torture. I

would sit in class for eight hours a day, and I couldn't even tell you what the teacher talked about. I would always just zone out and think about something else; I was failing."

As Austin reflected back on his time as a student at Sunset High School, he outlined factors that had led to his academic success, "One of the most positive things about this school is how flexible they are, not just in the hours they have school, but in how they help you; the teachers really go above and beyond." Austin explained how he had planned to wait until next semester to graduate, but the teachers encouraged him, and he was able to finish in time to walk at graduation. In observing Austin and his family at the Sunset High School graduation commencement program, both Austin and his family displayed immense pride at his academic success.

Mary

Mary is a 17-year-old Caucasian female and senior at Sunset High School. She is the youngest of four children with two older brothers and an older sister. Mary is on track to graduate in the fall 2018, and she expressed immense excitement over the prospect of being the fourth in her family to graduate from Sunset High School. In fact, in the spring of 2016, all three of her older siblings graduated in the same commencement ceremony; Mary stated, "They received an All in the Family Award at graduation; my parents were so proud." Mary plans to enroll in college and major in business.

When asked about her educational experience before her enrollment at Sunset High School, Mary stated she attended a traditional day school through sixth grade and then was homeschooled until she enrolled at Sunset High School. Mary stated:

I have always been that kid that worried about their grades, and I tried so hard, but I was still making bad grades. Also, I'm not a social butterfly, and it was hard to ask questions

in a big classroom. Here [SHS], there are teachers everywhere wanting to help me, and

when I work hard, I see immediate progress. That made me want to work even harder.

Like some other participants, Mary expressed much frustration regarding the negative stigma

sometimes placed upon students who attend an evening alternative school. She explained, "This

is a good school, but sometimes people associate it with troublemakers, and I am not sure why.

People have even asked me why I go here because I'm a good kid." Mary revealed that even her

parents had negative views on the school until they learned it was actually a good school.

Cole

Cole is an 18-year-old Caucasian male and current senior. Cole "couldn't seem to catch

up on assignments" due to his lack of regular attendance." Before withdrawing from day school,

he spent much of his school day sleeping in an effort to pass the time. Cole has been estranged

from his father since he was ten years old and currently lives with his mother. He works two

part-time jobs and spends much of his earnings "helping [his] mom out with the bills." Cole

possesses a deep gratitude and appreciation for his mother and expressed a strong desire to help

relieve some of the stress she bears as a single mother, "She works very hard, but things do not

come easy for her; we are always behind on the rent no matter how hard we work; I wish I made

a lot of money, so I could give it to her."

After becoming totally disengaged from the educational process and failing all four of his

courses during his second semester of sophomore year, Cole dropped out of his traditional day

school with no clear direction for his future. Without a high school diploma, Cole also gave up

on his dream of joining the military. During this time of his life, Cole revealed that he felt

"hopeless" and wondered if life would always be this "hard and mundane."

One afternoon, one of Cole's former teachers from day school came into his place of employment for dinner. The teacher encouraged him to enroll in Sunset High School; Cole claimed his decision to do so "changed [his] life." Once enrolled in the evening, alternative high school, he was introduced to his mentor who Cole claimed, "…was the first person at a school that acted like they understood me and really cared. If I missed a day, she called to check on me, and when she noticed I was slowing down in math, she got me some help."

The flexibility of evening school afforded Cole the opportunity to switch to a full-time position during the day with better pay and more dependable hours. Cole expressed excitement about his future as he described his recent swearing in ceremony with the Marines, "My mom got to be there, and it felt good for her to be proud of me; I can't wait for her to see me graduate next month."

Lydia

Lydia, a 19-year-old Hispanic female, graduated from Sunset High School two years ago. Lydia explained that she left her traditional day school where she was "a model student with good grades" because she became pregnant during her junior year. She stated, "At first, I just dropped out because people were saying [bad things] about me and posted all kinds of [unflattering] stuff about me on social media; I was an emotional mess." Lydia stated that she lived in a blended family at the time, and things were "chaotic because [her] parents were upset about her pregnancy." Lydia dropped out of school and moved in with her boyfriend hoping things would "settle down" after the baby was born, and she would return to school." However, after the birth of her little girl, Lydia was unable to afford child care while she attended school during the day. She had heard of Sunset High School and decided to enroll.

Lydia claimed, "I felt like going to Sunset High School gave me my dignity back; it was like it righted some of the wrong I had done." When describing positive experiences while enrolled at an evening alternative high school, Lydia felt the greatest advantage was that it gave her the freedom to stay home with her little girl during the day while her boyfriend (now husband) worked to support them. In addition, the self-paced curriculum allowed her to move quickly through familiar content. Lydia formed a strong bond with the faculty and staff at Sunset High School; she claimed they "helped her with life things too." She described instances where they gave her a bag of diapers or clothes for her baby and even collected money and bought her a dress for her graduation ceremony. "I still keep in touch with some of them," Lydia stated, "they truly treated me like family and never judged me; they saw my potential and not just my mistakes."

During an observation of Lydia with her little girl, a busy toddler with shiny brown eyes full of love for her mama, it appeared Lydia had gained a sense of accomplishment as well as contentment in her life. She has enrolled in an online college but has not decided on a major. She concluded, "I want to be working toward a college degree, but I am taking my time; I don't want to miss a moment of my little girl growing up; my goal is to have my degree in something by the time she starts school."

Results

During open coding of collected and transcribed data, I strived to identify as many specific categories as possible in order to capture possible themes. As a result, fifteen codes materialized. These codes included: bullying, flexibility, mentor, teacher, peers, frustration, safety, judgement, support, focus, shyness, fitting in, failure, proud, and bad impression. These

codes emerged through thoroughly sifting through transcripts of semi-structured interviews, focus group interview, observations, and field notes (see Table 4).

Table 4

Codes Portrayed in Transcription of Data

Code	Instances	Description
bullying	17	Bullying refers to any unwanted aggressive or humiliating behavior experienced by the participant from either a teacher or peer.
flexibility	24	Flexibility refers to SHS's relaxed stance on hours of attendance, students' choice on which content area they will work on each night, and self-paced curriculum.
mentor	14	Each SHS student is assigned a faculty/staff mentor upon enrollment. The mentor's purpose is to serve as a support for the student and to bridge the relationship between the school, the student, and guardians.
teacher	67	Teachers are referred to mainly in terms of student/teacher ratio and relationships.
peers	13	Participants discussed peer relationships and influence.
frustration	28	Participants discussed feelings of frustration related to lack of academic progress, conformity to traditional day school rules, and negative stigma related to SHS.
safety	9	Within this study, participants discussed their perception of safety within the classroom and school environment.
judgement	10	Judgement is based on how participants felt others (teachers, parents, and peers) perceived them because of their status or decisions.

support	23	Support relates to participants perception of level of support they have received from parents, peers, and school personnel.
focus	16	Many participants spoke of their ability to or lack of ability to focus on the educational process.
shyness	10	Shyness and/or stress due to a participant's anxiety was mentioned and observed in various interviews and during some observations.
fitting in	16	"Fitting in" refers to a participant's sense of belonging in the educational setting.
failure	28	Failure is discussed in relation to participants' feelings of failure in achieving their educational goals and living up to expectations of others.
proud	27	Participants discussed feelings of pride when accomplishing goals and/or meeting expectations of others.
bad impression	9	Participants discussed how others perceive them as a result of their enrollment at a self-paced, evening, alternative high school.

After identifying categories through open coding, I reread all field notes and open coding and conducted a line-by-line analysis; doing so enabled me to reconnect with events and observations. As I reflected, four underlying themes and 14 subthemes began to emerge (see Table 5).

Table 5

Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Description	Subtheme
Push Factors	Factors pushing participants away from traditional school	➢ Student/Teacher Rapport ➢ Bullying ➢ High student/teacher ratio
Pull Factors	Factors pulling participants toward a self-paced, evening alternative school	➢ Flexible hours ➢ Flexible attendance policy
Success Factors	Factors contributing to the academic success of participants once enrolled at SHS	➢ Low student/teacher ratio ➢ Safety ➢ Relationships ➢ Self-paced ➢ Celebratory climate
Impediment Factors	Factors impeding the academic success of participants once enrolled at SHS	➢ Flexible attendance policy ➢ Peers ➢ Lack of transportation ➢ Negative Stigma

Theme: Push Factors

While some participants enrolled at SHS from a homeschool environment or as a recent dropout, all participants had attended a traditional day school at some point, and factors pushing them from their respective traditional day school emerged as an underlying theme within this study. This theme also addresses one of the overarching questions of this study seeking to understand what led students to enroll in an evening alternative high school. Lee (1966) identified factors negatively repelling a person from a destination or thing as a push factor. This study highlighted three main push factors repelling participants from a traditional day school: (1) poor student/teacher rapport, (2) bullying, and (3) high student/teacher ratio.

Poor student/teacher rapport. Six out of 11 participants expressed some level of negativity between themselves and one or more of their day school teachers. Andrew highlighted one incident in particular where he felt "degraded and embarrassed" when his teacher became frustrated with him because he was falling behind while taking notes in class and called him out in front of his peers. Andrew continued to grow more discouraged as he struggled academically while trying to avoid conflict with his teacher. In an interview with Chuck, he stated:

> My experience in day school was not pleasant … some of the staff I didn't get along with too well. At first, it made me mad, so I decided I would retaliate by not doing my work; once I started failing, I just gave up.

Chuck expressed regret that he did not attempt resolution by further explaining his difficulty in understanding some of the content and admitted that toward the end, he was simply defiant and unwilling to try anymore. In observing Chuck during this portion of the interview, it was apparent in his body language and change in tone of voice that the incident still caused some measure of frustration for him.

During a focus group interview, Chuck shared that when he was in a traditional day school, he missed a lot of days, and as a result, he got behind in his studies. He explained that both him and his teacher grew frustrated at the mountain of make-up work he had accumulated. Chuck stated, "About half way through the semester, I started just sleeping through class. I guess the teacher decided that as long as I didn't bother anyone, she would pass me, so she wouldn't have to deal with me again." Afterwards, Chuck slept through most of his classes in an attempt to avoid "getting on his teacher's nerves."

Bullying. Bullying referred to any unwanted aggressive or humiliating behavior experienced by the participant from either a teacher or peer, and it was referenced 17 times by four different participants within this study. In one interview, Gabriella described her day school experience as being "full of drama" and claimed she was bullied by a peer whom she once considered a friend. She continued, "Finally, I got so miserable that I begged my parents to let me just quit school." Andrew expressed similar frustration when he shared, "I felt like I was slower than everyone else . . . and I was getting bullied by the other [Hispanics]. . . I no longer felt like doing my work and just sort of shut down mentally."

After becoming pregnant during her junior year, Lydia said, "There was a lot of drama. Girls that I thought were my friends were saying things about me and posted [negative things] about me on social media; I just couldn't take it anymore, so I quit."

High student/teacher ratio. Several participants cited large class sizes as a determining factor for their departure from a traditional school setting. Kristy, a quiet and reserved 18-year-old, claimed the "bad part was that they had huge classrooms where they just stuffed 30 or more kids into them." Kristy becomes extremely anxious in crowds and claimed the packed classroom made it impossible for her to learn. During a focus group interview, Abby noted, "When there are a bunch of students and only one teacher, it's harder to get help when you don't understand something. Also, the teachers spend more time controlling the kids that actually teaching."

Theme: Pull Factors

Lee (1966) described factors positively attracting an individual to a place or thing as pull factors. As a result of this study, two factors were consistently identified by participants as positively attracting them to a self-paced, evening alternative high school: (1) a flexible schedule and (2) a flexible attendance policy.

Flexible schedule. Sunset High School operates on a year-round schedule and is open

for students on Monday through Thursday from 4:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. During school hours,

students may choose which course content area in which they wish to work and may work on

one particular course the entire evening or switch to another content classroom whenever they

choose. There is no bell that rings to signal a class change. The hallways are never flooded with

students, and classrooms have an open-door policy where students are free to quietly enter and

exit as they move from one class to another. In an effort to keep hallway traffic to a minimum,

once a student leaves a content classroom, they are not allowed to return to that classroom on

that particular evening.

The flexibility of SHS was positively cited 24 times by participants during various

interviews throughout this study with some participants expressing their desire to complete one

course before moving to the next. Mary stated, "I would just come in and focus on that one class

for hours, and I would see myself making a lot of progress very fast. That's very encouraging.

That's one reason why I came here."

For other participants, the flexibility of attending school in the evening allows them to

work or take care of small children during the day. Rebecca claimed, "The hours of this school

being open definitely made things easier for me; I can work in the morning and come to school at

night. That alone is a great reason to come here." Likewise, Lydia was drawn to the evening

hours since she had an infant and could not afford child care during the day.

Flexible attendance policy. Sunset High School's flexible attendance policy also served

as an attractive factor for some participants. While all students under the age of 16 are required

to attend 20 hours per week, those students who are 16+ years old are afforded more flexibility.

For instance, Cole works full-time outdoors during the day. Since his employment is contingent

upon the weather, the school is flexible in allowing him to come in later on evenings that he has to work late. Cole stated, "We were trying to finish a job because the forecast was calling for rain; I wasn't able to come to school that night."

Theme: Success Factors

The next theme highlighted factors contributing to the academic success of participants once they had enrolled at Sunset High School.   The theme of success factors and its subthemes were defined by the specific codes: teachers, mentor, peers, safety, support, focus, fitting in, and proud. In addition, five associated subthemes were identified: (1) low student/teacher ratio, (2) safety, (3) relationships, (4) self-paced, and (5) a celebratory climate. While participants offered a wide range of personal reasons for their academic success at SHS, the identified themes and subthemes were consistently prevalent.

Low student/teacher ratio. Three participants within this study noted smaller student/teacher ratio as a significant factor in their academic success. Mary stated, "I never have to wait for someone to help me. Some classes have four teachers and only about 15 or 20 kids." In a similar statement, Abby shared during the focus group interview, "Having . . . three or four teachers in the math room makes a huge difference because you can always get help. I like it that a teacher will pull up a chair and just focus on helping me."

During various observations, I noted rarely seeing a teacher sitting at a teacher desk. Most often, teachers were moving about the room checking on students' progress or sitting in close proximity with a student teaching a mini lesson or offering encouragement.

Safety. On the second level of Maslow's (1954) hierarchy pyramid, the need for safety is identified as an overall sense of comfort and familiarity, and Maslow theorized that this need for safety must be met in order for an individual to be motivated to move upward on the pyramid.

During an interview, Andrew stated, "I like how they always have a police officer here ensuring our safety. I really like that. You always see him in the hall and walking around; he knows all of the kids." Mary claimed that "There are always teachers everywhere, so there aren't ever any fights or anything; they keep everything pretty calm. Everyone just focuses on getting their work done."

Relationships. When a student enrolls at Sunset High School, they are assigned a faculty mentor. This mentor meets with the student weekly to discuss academic progress and attendance; in addition, mentors sometimes make referrals to the school counselor, social worker, or graduation coach for further assistance. Mentors make contact with the student's guardian on a monthly basis, and overall, they serve as an advocate for the student while bridging communication between student, school, and parents. Cole claimed, "My mentor is the first person at any school that acted like they understood me and cared . . . she calls if I miss a day to see if something's wrong." Gabriella stated, "My mentor has been very helpful and supportive . . . it's been a good and positive experience."

The theme of relationships proved significant with every participant in this study. While some noted a strong and supportive relationship with a parent or guardian, many reported a supportive relationship with teachers contributed to their success. Joseph highlighted supportive relationships with both teachers and his mother as contributing factors in his success. Lydia commented, "The teachers here care about me as a person and not just as a student . . . they did more than just help me with my school work; they helped me with life things, too."

Self-paced. Sunset High School is a self-paced school where students possess the freedom to work at their own pace. Students are enrolled in three courses at a time; once they have mastered the content in each module, they move forward. Participants found this success

factor beneficial. As stated before, Mary was able to move through history quickly; she claimed, "I would see myself making a lot of progress very fast. That's very encouraging." In contrast, Gabriella shared, "I don't have to worry about keeping up with the class if it takes me a bit longer to learn something; also, I don't have to wait on them [other students] if I understand it. It's just so much better."

Celebratory climate. While observing at this site, it was quickly apparent that accomplishments both great and small are celebrated at Sunset High School. Each evening the site administrator roams the hallways and drifts in and out of classrooms congratulating students on completing a module or course; evening announcements over the intercom blare out congratulations to the latest course completer or recent graduate. Students earning distinguished status on end-of-course exams earn a free gas card. Parents receive random phone calls highlighting accomplishments. Chuck commented, "I like it when you finish even just a post test, and they give you some kind of reward, a little snack or something; they just show you some little appreciation. It feels better."

Theme: Impediment Factors

The final theme of impediment factors emerged from the following codes: judgement, flexibility, frustration, and bad impression. Within this theme, four subthemes were identified: (1) flexible attendance, (2) peers, (3) lack of transportation, and (4) negative stigma. This theme relates to one of the overarching questions of the study addressing what factors might have inhibited the success of students attending a self-paced, alternative evening high school.

Flexible attendance policy. While a flexible attendance policy was noted as a success factor for some participants, it served as a hinderance to others. Joseph warned:

I only have one regret about coming here that I would like to tell others about, and that is to make sure that you come [regularly] once you are enrolled. I came thinking I would graduate ahead of all of my friends in day school, but then I got lazy and didn't come every day. Ended up, they will graduate in the spring, and I will have to spend the summer finishing up these last two classes. . . It's not like day school; you don't get credit just for showing up. You have to actually work hard while you're here to make progress.

Rebecca admitted, "Yes, I did that too, at first. Thankfully, my mentor stayed on me and pushed me to start coming more regularly."

Peers. Once enrolled in Sunset High School, three of the 11 participants identified their peers as a contributing factor to their missing school and at times, failing to make academic progress. While the participants attend school during evening hours, many peer relationships were formed during their enrollment at a traditional day school; therefore, many of their friends attend school during the day. Joseph stated, ". . . friends [call] as soon as they get out of [day] school, so I go with them instead of coming to school." Chuck shared a similar statement:

Sometimes, it's hard when my friends are done with school for the day and just having fun; they will stay on me wanting me to come hang out with them. It's easy to just blow off school for the evening.

Lack of transportation. Sunset High School does not offer bus transportation for their students. Since a large portion of their student population is socio-economically disadvantaged, transportation to and from school presented a challenge for some participants in this study. For example, Cole stated, "It had been raining a lot, and I couldn't work much . . . I couldn't afford to buy gas that week, and I couldn't come to school." Gabriella shared that since she does not

have her own car, she is late or will sometimes miss school for the evening when her mother has to work late.

Negative stigma. This sub theme addressed the problem statement and motivation for conducting this study. Students attending an evening alternative high school are perceived as being bad kids and viewed in a negative light by their peers, community, and traditional educators. This negativity was addressed nine times by five participants during the interview phase of this study. Chuck shared:

> I just wish people would be more positive with the whole night school outlook. So many
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> times, my buddies, they question why I decided to leave day school and come to SHS. . .
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> they think it is a GED school or something. You see, people have a negative view and
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> think it's just a halfway school, and it's not. It's a good school that has just figured out
>
> how to best help their kids.

During Mary's interview, she expressed a similar frustration when she stated, "They think that because it's not a regular day school, and kids only go at night that it must be bad, and they don't see past that; it's really not fair. Kids are good here; they work hard."

Research Question Responses

RQ1. What factors led high school students to enroll in an alternative evening high school?

Two themes (push factors and pull factors) and five subthemes (poor student/teacher rapport, bullying, high student/teacher ratio, flexible hours, and flexible attendance policy) emerged shedding light on why participants within this study left their traditional day school and eventually enrolled in Sunset High School. For example, Chuck described poor student/teacher rapport as one reason for becoming disengaged from learning at his traditional day school when

he stated, "[I] did not get along with some of the staff . . .I really didn't try as hard as I should have because I knew they didn't like me." Recent graduate, Lydia, claimed that bullying pushed her out of day school when she noted, "There was a lot of drama . . . friends were saying things about me and posted [negative things] about me on social media; I just couldn't take it anymore." After Lydia gave birth to her daughter, she enrolled at Sunset High School and claimed she was attracted (pulled) to an evening alternative high school because of the flexible hours which allowed her to stay home with her baby during the day. Kristy was repelled from her traditional day school because the high student/teacher ratio and was drawn (pulled) toward Sunset High School because "there are fewer students . . . it is quiet . . . and it's easier for me to work." Several participants noted the flexible hours and flexible attendance policy at SHS as an attraction (pull factor) in their enrolling.

RQ2. What role do teachers, administrators, parents, and peers play in the educational experience of students attending an alternative evening high school?

Teachers. As previously mentioned, three participants noted poor student/teacher rapport as a push factor in their leaving their traditional day school. In contrast most participants highlighted the positive relationships they had formed with the faculty at SHS. During an interview, Lydia made a powerful statement about her teachers at SHS, ". . . they saw my potential and not just my mistakes." Cole felt similarly about his mentor at SHS when he shared, "[She] was the first person at a school that acted like they understood me and really cared."

Parents. All participants expressed a strong desire to please their parents and for them to "be proud" of their accomplishments. One participant expressed his emotions when his mother attended his military swearing-in ceremony, "My mom got to be there, and it felt good for her to be proud of me; I can't wait for her to see me graduate next month." All parents of participants

inherently wanted their children to be successful and encouraged them to get a good education. Neither of Andrew's parents graduated from high school, but they were strong supporters of him and were proud of his academic accomplishments.

Peers. Peers appeared to have had a negative impact on participants' both in the day school setting and after their enrollment at Sunset High School and served as an impediment factor in their obtaining their high school diploma. At day school, some participants noted they were involved in "drama" with peers which led to their being pushed from day school. Once enrolled at SHS, peers encouraged two of the participants to "skip school" and "hang out." Because of the flexible attendance policy, Joseph was able to miss a significant amount of school causing him to fall behind in his academic progress and resulted in him spending his last summer at SHS catching up on coursework.

RQ3. What factors have contributed to the persistence of these students in continuing their education?

Throughout interviews and observations, it was apparent that the participants within this study had become determined in their pursuit of a high school diploma. Success factors related to their academic success emerged as five subthemes including: low student/teacher ratio, safety, relationships, self-paced curriculum, and celebratory climate.

Low student/teacher ratio. This success factor was highlighted by three participants as contributing to their academic success. Mary was encouraged by "some classes hav[ing] four teachers and only about 15 or 20 kids," and as a result, she "never had to wait for someone to help [her]." Likewise, Kristy, a shy 18-year-old participant, stated, "I always work in one particular classroom because there are fewer students in here, and it is quiet; it's easier for me to work in here."

Safety.   During observations, I noted several safety measures taken by the faculty and staff at Sunset High School to ensure students felt safe in their learning environment. For example, back packs were not allowed in the classrooms. Any student who brought a back pack to school was instructed to leave it in the front office until the end of the evening. Teachers were observed frequently moving about the room and "checking in" on students' academic progress and offering encouragement. The site administrator was most often observed in the hallway and in classrooms. An armed school resource officer was highly visible in the drop-off area where students arrived, passing through the classrooms, and in the hallways during breaks. He was familiar with students often calling them by name, engaging in conversation, and offering encouragement. Andrew commented, "I like how they always have a police officer here ensuring our safety. I really like that." Mary claimed that due to the fact that "there are always teachers everywhere . . .there aren't ever any fights or anything."

Relationships.   A strong and supportive relationship was a success factor for all participants. Whether that relationship existed in the form of a parent, a teacher, or a mentor, all participants highlighted the support and encouragement of another as a contributing factor in their academic success. This was evident in participant statements; for example, Mary stated, "They (parents) want me to be successful; they are proud of me." Likewise, Cole shared, "More than anything, I want my mom to be proud of me." Other participants noted the strong support they received from mentors and teachers as a success factor.

Self-paced curriculum.   Sunset High School offers a self-paced curriculum. Courses are divided into modules. At the beginning of each module, the student takes a diagnostic pre-test on the module's content. Depending on their level of mastery on the content, the student is assigned lessons within the module to teach any concepts or content. At the end of the module,

they must take a post assessment scoring a minimum of 80% before they are allowed to move to the next module. Some participants reported moving through familiar content quickly. Mary claimed, "I can move as fast as I want. When I work[ed] hard, I [saw] immediate progress. That [made] me want to work even harder."

Celebratory climate. Sunset High School celebrates successes great and small. Several examples of this celebratory atmosphere were noted during observations. For example, bulletin boards in the hallway highlighted student accomplishments, and evening announcements included the names of course completers and recent graduates. Drawings for those demonstrating good attendance were held for gas cards, computer tablets, gift baskets, etc. A large wall coated in chalkboard paint was covered in colorful signatures and encouraging notes from previous graduates. Within the classroom, small tokens of celebrations were noted in the form of encouraging words from the teacher, high fives for a good grade on a quiz, etc.

RQ4. What factors might have inhibited the success of students attending an alternative evening high school?

Factors inhibiting participant success in obtaining their high school diploma materialized as an overarching theme, impediment factors; this theme was comprised of four subthemes including: flexible attendance policy, peers, lack of transportation, and negative stigma.

Flexible attendance policy. When enrolling at Sunset High School, students are informed of the school's attendance policy and advised that regular attendance and sustained work while they are present is crucial for them to be successful. In addition, mentors are charged with tracking attendance for their mentees and notifying the mentee and/or a guardian when a student shows a decrease in attendance. However, students over the age of sixteen are not required to attend a certain number of hours per week, and as a result, these students can fall

behind in their academic progress. This was the case with two participants within this study.

During an interview, Joseph issued a warning he hoped future students would adhere to when he

stated, ""'Make sure you come [to school] every day. . . It's no longer just about showing up and

earning a credit."

   Peers. As mentioned earlier, every time a participant spoke of peers, it was to highlight

the negative impact they had on their academic progress. It is noteworthy to mention that each

negative instance was related to day school and either existed as a push factor (i.e. bullying)

repelling the participant from day school, or as a pull factor attracting the participant away from

Sunset High School causing them to fall behind in their progress.

   Lack of transportation. The lack of available transportation served as a subtheme for

impediment factors. SHS does not provide bus transportation. In an effort to support students in

coming to school, they do offer gas cards as incentives for course completions, scoring

distinguished on end-of-course assessments, and in attendance drawings. However, lack of

transportation still exists as a hinderance for some. This was evident when one participant was

unable to come to school because her mother had to work late and could not bring her.

   Negative stigma. Several participants noted their frustration regarding the negative

stigma sometimes placed on them because of their enrollment at an evening, alternative high

school. This was evident in both Chuck and Mary's interviews. Mary admitted that "even my

parents thought [it was a bad school] at first." Chuck found himself in a position where he found

himself defending the school and explaining that it was an accredited school where he would

earn a regular diploma.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the results of the research conducted through this ethnographic study of culture of students attending a self-paced, alternative evening high school. From the analysis of data, four themes and 14 subthemes emerged defining factors that led participants to enroll at Sunset High School and once there, what factors contributed to or hindered their success as they worked toward obtaining their high school diploma.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

While educators and lawmakers race to find new and innovative methods to meet the academic needs of an ever-changing culture of youth, Sunset High School has chosen to provide students with a unique educational landscape in which they can pursue their high school diploma. This unique approach offers a traditional brick and mortar building as the back drop for an idiosyncratic educational experience where students are supported by an abundance of caring faculty members, flexible hours of operation, and a self-paced, mastery learning curriculum. The purpose of this ethnographic study was to provide a cultural portrait of the students attending this self-paced, evening alternative high school while attempting to identify methods of success as well as hinderances this culture of students faced as they persevered toward achieving their high school diploma. Chapter Five will consist of a summary of the findings, a discussion of those findings in light of the relevant literature and theory, methodological, empirical, and practical implications, delimitations and limitations of the study, and finally, recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

This study broadens the foundation of literature related to at-risk high school students who persevered in their efforts to achieve their academic goals and also highlighted the unique and sustained efforts and methods of a unique school striving to meet the needs of this culture of students. Joseph and Linley (2006) concluded that people often experience "growth and personal development following stressful events" and further claimed that struggling "with adversity is one way through which [one] may discover new strength within, revitalize relationships, and enhance life's meaning" (p. 1050). Each of the participants in this study found their place at

Sunset High School following a single negative event or a series of events in which they were either pushed or pulled from a traditional day school setting. The data collected throughout this study highlighted the success this culture of students achieved through their own perseverance and tenacity supported by a caring environment and flexible educational setting.

Research Question One

What factors led high school students to enroll in an alternative evening high school? The results of this study indicated that this culture of students enrolled in a self-paced alternative high school as a result of factors that either pushed them out of a traditional day school or pulled them toward life events outside of the traditional day school, which ultimately resulted in their enrolling in Sunset High School. The most prevalent of factors participants noted as their reason for being repelled or pushed from their traditional day school setting included: bullying, negative student/teacher rapport, and high student/teacher ratio. In contrast, the strongest factors attracting participants toward an evening, alternative high school included flexible hours and a flexible attendance policy.

Research Question Two

What role do teachers, administrators, parents, and peers play in the educational experience of students attending an alternative evening high school?

Each participant highlighted at least one person who had played an exceptionally important and supportive role in their journey toward academic success. Participants described mentors and teachers at Sunset High School often playing somewhat of a surrogate parental role. Ten of the eleven participants had strong support from at least one parent. When the role of peers in the educational process was discussed, only three participants voiced an opinion, and

each time peers were referred to as a distraction and hindered the participant's educational process to some degree.

Research Question Three

What factors have contributed to the persistence of these students in continuing their education?

Overall, the participants most often referred to advantages of a safe, positive and supportive academic environment that provided them with the flexibility they needed to earn their diploma while allowing them to care for their small infant, work a full-time job to help support their family, and work at their own pace.

Research Question Four

What factors might have inhibited the success of students attending an alternative evening high school?

While some participants noted that the flexible attendance policy was a positive factor in their educational experience, some highlighted it as a distraction. Some explained that it took falling further behind to realize that they not only had to be at school to make progress, they also had to work hard while there. Additionally, a lack of transportation (Sunset High School does not provide bus transportation) deterred some participants from attending more regularly than they would have liked. Finally, participants noted that the negative stigma placed on them and the school by some of their peers, traditional educators, and members of the community who lacked understanding that SHS is an accredited school where students earn a regular high school diploma. Also, some participants expressed a desire for others to be open minded when it came to an evening alternative high school and understand that they are not bad kids simply because of their enrollment there.

Discussion

The findings of this study corroborate previous theoretical research related to Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs, Lee's (1966) push – pull theory, and Finn's (1989) participation – identification model. The participants within this study earned academic success once finding their place in an educational environment where their most basic needs were met, making it possible for them to move up on Maslow's pyramid toward self-actualization. Additionally, participants identified push factors repelling them away from a traditional day school and pull factors drawing them toward an evening, alternative high school. Finally, through interviews and observations, the data revealed that it was not a single event that caused a student to become a drop out of high school; instead it was a series of events beginning with disengagement followed by poor performance and ending with emotional withdrawal.

While the findings of this study further validated the negative impact a lack of engagement can have on a student's academic standing, it also highlighted the importance of determining the cause of any disengagement as well as the value of strong, supportive relationship(s) for at-risk students in the quest for academic success.

Implications
Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study have important theoretical implications and builds on earlier research with solid foundation. Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs was presented as a motivational theory and has guided research across several fields of study to include criminal justice, nursing, and education (Udechukwu, 2009; Valadez & Lund, 1993; Minshull, Ross, & Turner, 1986; Johnson & Taliaferro, 2012; and Demarco & Tilson, 1998). Maslow (1954) identified human needs and placed them in order of importance as an individual moves up the

pyramid toward self-actualization. Maslow's (1954) motivational theory is connected to this research because students must have their basic needs met, feel safe, and have a sense of belonging in their educational setting before they are motivated to learn and move forward toward their academic goals. This theory emerged through participant statements such as the one Andrew made during an interview, "I like how they always have a police officer here ensuring our safety. I really like that." Equally important to student academic success is a sense of belonging. It was evident that participants felt they had found their place at Sunset High School in statements made similar to one that Cole made during an interview where he stated, ". . . I fit in here; they [the teachers] understand me." In creating a safe and positive environment where students felt valued and a sense of belonging, Sunset High School is an example of Maslow's (1954) motivational theory in practice, and it has contributed to the academic success of the participants within this study.

Lee's (1966) push-pull theory originated in guiding research on tourism and the motivation of tourists (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1981; and Kim, Lee, & Klenosky, 2003). Later, researchers applied Lee's (1966) theory to other areas of research seeking to identifying motivational factors in teacher candidates (Knell & Castro, 2014). Research key to this study was conducted by Bradley and Renzulli (2011) where researchers applied Lee's (1966) push-pull theory to analyze the motivational behaviors of high school dropouts. Lee's (1966) push-pull theory is connected to this research as it helped to answer overarching questions this study sought to answer about what motivated participants to leave a traditional day school setting and enroll in an evening, alternative high school. Findings revealed participants were either pushed from their traditional day school because of bullying, bad teacher/student rapport, and/or large student/teacher ratios. Additionally, findings confirmed that participants were pulled from a

traditional day school because life obligations such as teenage pregnancy or the need to aid in financially supporting the family. Equally important were pull factors which attracted participants to Sunset High School such as a flexible schedule and flexible attendance policy.

Finn's (1989) participation-identification model was important to this study because it related to the important variables connected to student engagement and the process of students either completing high school or dropping out. Basically, the model conceptualizes dropout as a process: *non-participation* → *poor school performance* → *emotional withdrawal* (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Findings in this study added validity to this model when Cole stated, "I mostly slept through class . . . eventually I was failing everything . . . I just didn't care anymore." In contrast Finn's (1989) model conceptualizes completion as a process as well: *participation* → *school success* → *identification* (Reschley & Christenson, 2012). Again, findings in this study added validity to this portion of the model as well as participants described engaging in the learning process which led to academic success and finally to earning their diploma.

Empirical Implications

Prior to conducting this study, an extensive review of the literature was conducted. In Chapter Two, I outlined the causes and effects of student disengagement from the learning process and the role of alternative schools in meeting the educational needs of at-risk students. In addition, the negative stigma placed upon alternative schools and the students who attend them was explored. All participants within this study became disengaged from their traditional day school at some point for a variety of reasons, and this disengagement eventually led to failing grades and them inevitably leaving their traditional day school in search of a place where their unique needs could be met in a more creative manner. This study provides additional

support for the harmful outcomes of disengagement and provides insight from the perspective of the culture of students on what factors contributed to their failures and successes.

Practical Implications

The practical implications for this study can be better highlighted if organized by stakeholders: school districts and educators.

School districts. While school districts are held increasingly accountable for the academic success of school-aged children residing within their district, these young people will soon exit the doors of the school and step into vital roles within the community. Schools in the United States have been charged with providing quality education that will lead to the development of quality citizens. Research has been conducted outlining the devastating effects dropping out of high school can have on the individual, the community, and the nation as whole (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009; "High school dropouts," 2006). At-risk students present unique challenges for school districts, and meeting the educational needs of these at-risk students requires creative thinking and flexibility in planning (Pruett, Davidson, McMahon, Ward, & Griffith, 2000). School districts must consider how they can best support at-risk students in overcoming obstacles they face as they to reach their academic goals.

Educators. In considering practical applications for educators, perhaps the most vital key in promoting student engagement is the cultivation of positive and supportive student/teacher relationships. By providing these supportive relationships, educators are promoting a sense of belonging within their classroom and among their students which can ultimately lead to greater success when it comes to academic outcomes. Many of the participants highlighted poor student/teacher rapport as a factor leading to their leaving school; however, in contrast several

participants highlighted a supportive relationship in the form of a parent, mentor, or teacher as a factor greatly contributing to their academic success.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations of this study included the decision to limit or define the perimeter of this study to include only participants between the ages of 14-21 who were voluntarily enrolled for a minimum of one semester at or recently graduated within the past two years from Sunset High School, a self-paced, alternative evening high school located in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. The reason the decision was made to limit the focus of this study to these defined participants was to eliminate students who attend SHS on a temporary basis in order to recover credits from their traditional day school. In addition, since I am employed part-time at Sunset High School, no students under my direct instruction were allowed to participate in this study.

Potential limitations to this study included the fact that only students from one school were invited to participate. Additionally, since the school is predominately Caucasian in population, results were limited in relation to ethnical diversity.

Recommendations for Future Research

The fact that participants within this study were at-risk of dropping out of school and never earning their high school diploma does make them unique. However, the resilience and perseverance of these participants in overcoming obstacles and continuing on their path toward academic success was intriguing to say the least as was the uniqueness of Sunset High School and its faculty and staff who attempted to see each student as an individual and then creatively strived to meet their unique needs. Recommendations for further research are as follows:

- Study a more ethnically diverse self-paced, evening charter school to investigate how these factors positively and/or negatively affect those students.

- Conduct the study in a different geographical location. (The student population of the site chosen for this study was predominately socio-economically disadvantaged.)

Summary

This study fills a gap in the literature shedding light on the culture of learners who did not fit in to a traditional day school, yet they found their place in a self-paced evening alternative school where the findings of this study indicated they found some measure of academic success. These students make up a unique culture in light of their perseverance and tenacity in achieving their academic goals in spite of obstacles they faced along their academic journey. As a result of the process of collecting data for this study, I was in awe of the resilience these participants portrayed as they pursued their diploma.

Additionally, the school climate for Sunset High School proved to be one based on care, concern, and safety where faculty and students have formed somewhat of a familial relationship. I found it refreshing to witness students rising to the expectations of staff members as those same staff members creatively supported them in finding their own independence in taking their first steps toward adulthood. It is my hope that this study sheds light on the efforts of this culture of students erasing the negative stigma that has sometimes stained the image of alternative schools and the students who are struggling to find their place within those schools.

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Appendix A

OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Event Observed:	
Site:	
Role of Observer:	
Date and Time:	
Length of Observation	

	Descriptive Notes	Researcher's Reflective Notes
Description of physical environment:		
Description of social environment:		
Description of participants:		

Appendix B

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW FIELD NOTES

Question	Observation Notes
1. Whose decision was it for you to enroll in Sunset High School? Were you in agreement with the enrollment into this school?	
2. Describe your educational experiences before attending this school.	
3. Describe your family.	

4. Describe your mother and father's views on education.	
5. Describe yourself as a student before attending this school.	
6. Has your opinion of yourself as a student changed since your enrollment at Sunset High School? If so, how?	

7. Describe some positive experiences you have experienced while attending Sunset High School.	
8. Describe some negative experiences you have experienced as a result of your enrollment at Sunset High School.	
9. What role do the faculty and staff play in your educational experience at Sunset High School?	

10. How do your peers affect your educational experience?	

Appendix C

CONSENT FORM
Finding Their Place: An Ethnographic Study of the Culture of Students Attending a Rural,
Self-paced, Alternative Evening
High School
Teena M. Atkins
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study exploring the culture of students attending a rural, self-paced, alternative evening high school. You were selected as a possible participant because of your full time, voluntary enrollment of at least one full semester or a recent graduate at a rural, self-paced, alternative evening school. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Teena M. Atkins, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to better understand what factors led you to enroll in an alternative evening high school, what role teachers, administrators, parents, and peers play in your educational experience, and what factors have contributed to your persistence in continuing your education.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

Attend and participate in a face-to-face interview with the researcher. This individual interview will last approximately 45 minutes. As a participant, you will be asked to use pseudonyms when discussing your experience. The interview will be digitally voice recorded in an effort to ensure accuracy.

Attend and participate in a focus group interview. This focus group interview will be held at the school serving as the site of the study and will last approximately 90 minutes. During this focus group interview, participants will be asked to use pseudonyms when discussing their experiences as well as to keep all discussion within the focus group interview confidential. This focus group interview will be
digitally voice recorded in an attempt to ensure accuracy.

Allow the researcher to observe you within the school setting including the classroom and interactions with peers, faculty, administration, and parents. These observations will last approximately one hour and will not be recorded; however, the researcher will take field notes during the observations.

Risks: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life. The researcher conducting this study is a mandatory

reporter and required, by law, to report child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others.

Benefits:

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

This study has been designed to provide a better understanding of the factors related to students' voluntary enrollment in an alternative evening school as well as shed light on the positive and negative influences inciting their perseverance in obtaining a high school diploma. It is hopeful that the research obtained from this study will guide future educators and researchers in meeting the individual needs of at-risk students in a flexible environment leading to academic excellence and a better quality of life beyond high school.

Compensation: Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study. However, since the school chosen as the setting for this study does not provide bus service or transportation, a gas gift card in the amount of $30.00 will be presented to each participant after all data has been collected based on their voluntary participation in all three listed procedures; the gas card will help to offset the cost of transportation for participants in this study. In addition, pizza will be served at the focus group interview since it will take place during the school's dinner hour.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of a report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

In addition:

- Participants as well as the school chosen as the site for this study will be assigned a pseudonym. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversations.
- Data will be stored on a password locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or your school district. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study:

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Teena M. Atkins. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at tatkins3@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. Rebecca Lunde, at

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 1887, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

(NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS IRB APPROVAL INFORMATION WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN ADDED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Signature of Participant   Date

_____
Signature of Investigator   Date

Appendix D

BLANK FIELD NOTE FORM

Date: Time: Participants: Location:	
Notes to Self:	Observation:

Appendix E

INTRODUCTORY LETTER / EMAIL

I am a doctoral student in the Department of Education at Liberty University. Currently, I am conducting a research study entitled *Finding Their Place: An Ethnographic Study of the Culture of Students Attending a Rural, Self-paced, Alternative Evening High School.* The purpose of this ethnographic study is to (1) provide a cultural portrait, and (2) identify methods of success of students enrolled or recently graduated from a rural, self-paced, alternative evening high school.

Your voluntary participation in this study is being sought due to your current voluntary enrollment of at least one full semester or your recent graduation from a self-paced, alternative evening high school. Your participation will involve a 45-60 minute face-to-face, audio-recorded interview with the researcher. During this interview, you will be asked questions regarding your educational experience. The interview will be carefully transcribed, and each participant will be sent a copy of his or her interview transcription for review of accuracy. Additionally, you would participate in a digitally voice-recorded focus group interview with other participants lasting approximately 90 minutes. During the focus group interview, you will be asked questions regarding your educational experience. Finally, your voluntary participation in this study would include classroom observations and interactions with peers, faculty, administration, and parents. While these observations will not be recorded, I will take field notes while observing.

Confidentiality and Anonymity will be maintained throughout the study. All research participants as well as the school will be assigned a pseudonym. Any other identifiable information including age and grade level will be used with diligence and thought in an effort to protect all participants' identity and demographic information. All data collected will be saved on a computer protected by a password known only to myself. All data will be destroyed three years after the completion of this study.

If you agree to participate in this study, you may withdraw from the study at any time.

If you agree to participate in this study, please sign and date the Informed Consent and return to me in the provided self-addressed stamped envelope.

I am happy to answer any questions or address any concerns at any time before, during, or after the study. Please feel free to contact me using the contact information below.

Sincerely,

Teena M. Atkins
Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University

Appendix F

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS WITH COMPANIONED PROBES

Preamble:

The purpose of this study is to better understand the factors leading to your enrollment in an alternative evening high school, what role teachers, administrators, parents, and peers play in your educational process, what factors have contributed to your persistence in continuing your education, and finally, what your perception is of yourself as a student.

Your participation is this study is voluntary, and you may withdraw from this interview at any point going forward. No identifying information including your name and the name of the school will be used; all participants' name as well as the school's name will be assigned a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. All collected data will be secured for confidentiality with paper copies kept in a locked cabinet and digital copies stored on a password-protected computer. You possess the right to retract any statement(s) from this study at any time.

Reaffirmation of Consent:

Before we begin, have you read and signed the consent form necessary to proceed with this focus group session?

Instructions for Participation:

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this focus group. Throughout this focus group interview, I will ask a series of questions related to your educational experiences and enrollment at an alternative evening high school. When responding to questions or discussion, please refrain from mentioning any specific names; instead, use a pseudonym when referring to specific people or schools. Additionally, please keep statements and comments of other participants within this focus group confidential upon leaving the interview.

Open-Ended Items with Companioned Probes

Any companioned probes are in italics under the corresponding open-ended item.

1. Describe your educational experience before enrolling in a self-paced, evening, alternative high school.
   Traditional day school
   Alternative day school
   Home school
   Virtual School
   Other

2. Describe any positive impact(s) attending an evening alternative school has had on your educational experience and life.

3. Describe any negative impact(s) attending an evening alternative high school has had on your educational experience and life.

4. Who or what has been your greatest support or encouragement in obtaining a high school diploma?
      How has your enrollment in an evening alternative school affected this support?
      How would your educational experience have been different without this support?

5. What did you find most challenging when it comes to obtaining your high school diploma before attending an evening alternative high school?
      Is that particular challenge greater or smaller since your enrollment in an evening alternative high school?

6. In regards to obtaining your high school diploma, what do you find most challenging after your enrollment at an evening alternative high school?
      Is that particular challenge greater or smaller since your enrollment in an evening alternative high school?

7. What impact do you feel your peers have on your efforts to obtain your high school diploma?
      Can you describe this impact or give an example?

8. As a student or recent graduate of an evening alternative high school, do you feel you are academically stronger or weaker as a result of your enrollment at an evening alternative high school?
      What factors do you feel contribute to this strength or weakness?

9. What are your plans upon obtaining your high school diploma, or your current education/employment status if you have recently graduated?
      Technical school
      College
      Work force
      Other

APPENDIX G

Teena M. Atkins

Email: tatkins3@liberty.edu Cell:

RE: Permission to Conduct Study

Dear Dr.

I am a Liberty University Doctoral student and am writing to request permission to conduct research at _____. The title of my research project is *Finding Their Place: An Ethnographic Study of the Culture of Students Attending a Rural, Self-Paced Evening High School,* and the purpose of the research is to provide a cultural portrait of nontraditional students who are currently attending or have recently graduated from a self-paced, evening high school in a rural community. This study will seek to identify factors that either aid or hinder their success as they work toward successfully completing high school and obtaining a diploma. Ideally, educators and researchers can learn from these experiences of these participants as they seek to develop new curricula and create optimal learning environments for disengaged students. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

If approval is granted, the school and all participants will be assigned a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. No costs will be incurred by either your school system or the individual participants. I will be glad to answer any questions you may have concerning this study. My email address is indicated above.

If you agree, kindly sign below and return the signed form in the enclosed self-addressed envelope. Alternatively, kindly submit a signed letter of permission on your institution's letterhead acknowledging your consent and permission for me to conduct this study at your institution.

Sincerely,
Teena M. Atkins
Liberty University

Approved by:

_____   _____   14 FEB 18
Print your name and title here   Signature   Date
SUPERINTENDENT

APPENDIX H

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

April 23, 2018

Teena M. Atkins
IRB Approval 3224.042318: Finding Their Place: An Ethnographic Study of the Culture of
Students Attending a Rural, Self-Paced, Alternative Evening High School

Dear Teena M. Atkins,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB.
This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol
number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as
it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms
for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

The Graduate School

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