ROLE OF AN AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAM ON STUDENTS GRADUATING HIGH

SCHOOL: A FOCUS ON LIVED EXPERIENCES

by
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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 study was to determine the role of an afterschool program on students graduating high school. The study included students that were chosen using purposeful sampling who had recently graduated high school and participated in a school's afterschool program. A qualitative design was used with hermeneutical phenomenology being the focus in order for the researcher to highlight and interpret the lived experiences of the participants. Data was collected through interviews with recent graduates. The researcher's field notes were also used as a data collection procedure. The researcher analyzed the data through interpretive measures by coding the transcribed interviews and specifically identifying common themes regarding the experience of afterschool programs and the role after school programs had on graduating high school students. Three significant themes emerged in the findings: an improved overall self-worth of the students, a tangible connection between high school and career opportunities, and an establishment of connections between adults and the students.

Descriptors: afterschool programs, high school dropouts, hermeneutic phenomenology, graduation rates

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to a couple of special people. My wife, Cassie, has always helped me reach my full potential, and I know that she will always be immensely proud of this accomplishment. My simple words cannot do justice the enormous sense of joy I feel each day we spend together. Proverbs 31 has always been a favorite of Cassie's, and I am lucky to have found a virtuous woman who is much more precious to me than any amount of rubies.

Secondly, my mom has always stood behind me and loved me unconditionally no matter the circumstance. She taught me to always remember the phrase "I think I can. I think I can" when things got tough, and I'm thankful for that imbedded determination she instilled in me.

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I would also like to give a special thanks to my committee members. Dr. Marino helped me back away from the cliff on more than once occasion. Dr. Bigham and Dr. Conley were also both instrumental to the process that is writing a dissertation.

Table of Contents

List of Abbreviations

Century Community Learning Lab (CCLC)

Grade Point Average (GPA)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Lottery for Education: Afterschool Program (LEAP)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

National Governor's Association (NGA)

Young Man's Christian Association (YMCA)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background

The problem of students dropping out of high school is a serious issue in today's educational world. A recent study indicated that only seven out of ten students finish high school and that those who drop out are more likely to be unemployed, incarcerated, and earn less money over the course of their life (Sparks, Johnson, & Akos, 2010). Recent research supports the fact that high school dropouts are simply more likely to be a burden on themselves and the society as a whole (Huang, Kim, Cho, Marshall, & Perez, 2011). This burden extends to a wide range of problems such as lower wages, less tax revenue, higher crime rates, more dependence on welfare and health care programs, and an overall lower level in the quality of life and living (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). This can lead to a revolving door of poverty and crime for high school dropouts that can span across multiple generations since these former students have no educational background to help them overcome these societal problems related to dropping out of high school (Perkins-Gough, 2009).

Afterschool programs can be defined as taking place after normal school hours to provide care or some form of enrichment activity for a student (Miller, 2003). These programs are becoming more prevalent and popular, as state and federal funding has created an increase in their popularity (Zief, Lauver, & Maynard, 2006). In addition to helping bridge the gap between school and home, afterschool programs offer rich opportunities to enhance learning. Afterschool programs also help promote equity among students by providing additional services for low-performing students and creating supportive environments for all students across all demographic and socioeconomic

groups (Gayl, 2004). The problem of students dropping out of high school has been around much longer than afterschool programs have existed, but some educators are beginning to speculate that afterschool programs and high school dropout prevention could be related to each other in terms of potential solutions to the dropout problem and the effectiveness of afterschool programs (Neuman, 2010).

Schools are shifting more focus on dropouts and graduation rates than ever before (Barton, 2006). No Child Left Behind's inclusion of graduation rates as a factor of Adequate Yearly Process is a major reason for this newfound accountability because schools are now graded on the graduation rate at their respective school (United States Department of Education, 2001). Accountability for dropouts is something that schools are dealing with that, in the past, was not measured accurately or consistently due to the lack of emphasis or interest on the topic (Barton, 2006). A report by Education Trust (2003) created a political awareness campaign due to the apparent lack of accuracy in states' high school graduation rate statistics. This report brought to light the vast reporting differences that many states used in defining dropouts and reporting the graduation rates associated with them.

Many lawmakers and educators had inaccurately begun to believe that the dropout problem was being corrected or at least showing adequate signs of progress (Barton, 2006). However, the Education Trust report (2003) proved that the large number of high school dropouts and the resulting low graduation rates were an increasingly serious problem that was simply being misreported by most states in order to comply with NCLB's newfound emphasis on the school's graduation rates (Barton, 2006). In fact, some experts expect the dropout problem to increase substantially through 2020 unless

significant improvements are made regarding educational reform and awareness on dropout prevention strategies (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

As a result, many strategies have recently been implemented across the country in regards to improving graduation rates, with afterschool programs being one of them (Neuman, 2010). One study indicated that participation in afterschool programs can lead to students displaying increased engagement in learning, having more social skills development, decreased acts of juvenile delinquency, and a continued wide-ranging list of other positive outcomes (Gayl, 2004). It is imperative to understand what works in preventing dropouts and how afterschool programs themselves may be effective tools in fighting the dropout battle.

The components of the social constructivism theory and its relationship to afterschool programs should also be better understood since high school dropouts state the lack of a positive school climate and the lack of a positive relationship with an adult at the school as a major reason for dropping out (Bridgeland et al., 2006). In a learning community grounded in social constructivism, learners mediate knowledge within a social context (Hirtle, 1996). Most afterschool programs are incorporating various aspects of the social constructivism theory. Some of these factors include a focus on learning and not solely on performance, a view as learners as active participants in the search for knowledge, and a teacher-pupil relationship built upon the idea of guidance not instruction (Adams, 2006).

Afterschool programs exude characteristics and properties that are intertwined with research related to dropout prevention programs (Huang et al., 2011). A recent prominent study conducted for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation on the perspectives of high school dropouts discussed some of these factors. In the study,

Brideland et al. (2006) concluded high school dropouts were not inspired to work hard due to a lack of connection to the school, did not find any of their classes interesting, and did not have a strong relationship with any teachers in the building. Quality afterschool programs incorporate each of these aspects through their various academic and social facets (Hammond & Reimer, 2006). When these facets are present they seemingly improve the intrinsic motivation of the student to graduate high school (Huang et al., 2011).

This study looked to expand upon recent research related to preventing high school dropouts and the implementation of afterschool programs. In the anticipation to study the relationship of afterschool programs and students staying in school, it is important to look at the big picture and the large scope of research associated with it. However, it is also important to focus on specific and in-depth factors related to student success as told by the students themselves. All of these factors can only be truly understood through the thoughts and lived experiences of students who participated in an afterschool program during high school and successfully graduated, thus warranting a qualitative study.

Situation to Self

This study is important in order to better understand how to help students graduate high school, as well as what effect afterschool programs can have in that happening. Axiology was used as a philosophical assumption since the researcher included axiological assumptions from the research in the study. Social constructivism acted as the paradigm since the researcher looked to rely on the participants' views of the role of afterschool programs on graduating high school.

I brought to this study the bias that I believed the participation in afterschool programs made students more likely to graduate high school. I felt this was especially true for at-risk students who were in danger of not graduating, and I expected most students to state that their experience in an afterschool program was a positive one. I was highly interested in understanding the questions of how and why afterschool programs influence students to stay in school. Many studies focus on students on a general level, but I attempted to gain an understanding on a more personal level in order to garner some basic themes relating to the correlation of afterschool programs and high school graduation.

Problem Statement

The number of students dropping out of high school is trending at an alarming rate. Nearly 6.2 million students in the United States dropped out of high school in 2007. This total represents 16% of the population for that particular age group (Northeastern University-Center for Labor Market Studies and Alternative Schools Network in Chicago, 2009). Amazingly, about 7000 students drop out of school every day (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). It is therefore imperative to understand not only a broad overview of what keeps students in school, but also understand those specific strategies that keep students in school.

Dropouts themselves reported a variety of reasons for leaving school such as a lack of connection to the school, academic challenges and futility, and the weight of real-world events to name a few (Bridgeland et al., 2006). However, these primary reasons do not reveal the many underlying causes that each dropout faces individually. Multiple factors may influence students' attitudes, behaviors, and performance in high school prior to dropping out (Chapman, Laird, Ifill, & KewalRamani, 2011).

Rumberger and Lim (2008) recently conducted a study that spanned 25 years of research on the topic of dropouts. This dropout study cited some major aspects that were predictive of high school dropouts. For example, students' behavior and performance in school obviously influenced their decision to stay in school, but students' activities and behaviors after school hours such as engaging in deviant or criminal behavior also influenced their chances of staying in school. Also, Rumberger and Lim's (2008) study revealed factors within families, schools, and communities that affected students and their likelihood of dropping out of high school. These factors included not only fiscal and material resources, but also social resources in the form of supportive relationships in families, schools, and communities.

The strategy of afterschool programs must be further understood since afterschool programs promote socially desirable behavior, offer academic intervention programs, discourage delinquent behavior, and provide students opportunities to form supportive relationships with adults (Gottfredson, Cross, & Soule, 2007). However, in order to better understand how to further utilize afterschool programs and their importance in keeping students in school and on the path to graduation, researchers need to explore the afterschool programs strategy from the eyes of recent graduates who participated in afterschool programs.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to understand what role a high school afterschool program played in students graduating high school. The focus of the research was to describe the lived experiences of students who participated in an afterschool program and successfully graduated high school. The study attempted to offer a new viewpoint to the existing dropout prevention and afterschool program literature by exploring the in-depth

perspectives and experiences of high school graduates who participated in an afterschool program. This interview data was analyzed in order to better understand an afterschool program's role on the students and the relationship between their participation in the program and their successful completion of high school.

Significance of the Study

The most important contribution this study sought to make was to help all high school students graduate high school. This study could be a tool for educators to help accomplish this goal on a larger scale. Data analysis from the in-depth interview process provides educators and researchers with knowledge regarding specific instances related to afterschool programs and their possible influence on students staying in school and graduating. This data can be used to help educators and lawmakers make better decisions regarding strategies on how to keep students from dropping out of high school. The specificity of the research to afterschool programs provides even more data related to afterschool programs and gives educators specific responses related to staying in school from students' specific interview responses. This provides educators with a direct lens into the thoughts, feelings, and commonalities of high school graduates who participated in an afterschool program.

This study offers insight to schools that incorporate afterschool programs or who are thinking of incorporating an afterschool program. The results identify strategies to keep students from dropping out of high school by focusing on in-depth responses from student interviews. While data from test scores and discipline records can offer strategies and effective dropout prevention tools, actual in-depth responses from students provide a more accurate picture of the specific role that afterschool programs played in that student completing high school.

The results also provided an opportunity for former students to have a voice to express certain aspects of the afterschool program or the school as a whole. Participants had the opportunity to discuss the school and the afterschool program in an extended manner. The study's participants gave responses that might give any school ideas regarding what might need to be refined in order to improve some aspect relating to the school.

This study was also extremely beneficial to the school and district involved in the data collection process. Results provided both with a plethora of information regarding aspects of the school's specific afterschool program and its combination of activities associated with it. This provided the school with more information and resources to better implement the program and help students not only be successful in school, but ultimately graduate high school.

Funding is another important aspect to consider. Any school that incorporates an afterschool program could use this study's information as a guide to determine the amount of funding that should be provided to a school's specific afterschool program. Depending on their perceived significance, schools could decide to increase or decrease their focus and funding to afterschool programs. Results could also influence a school to invest the manpower to find or fund a grant related to afterschool programs or dropout prevention.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this study:

1. What role did afterschool programs play in students who graduated from a high school that incorporated the program?

The overall role and effect that afterschool programs had on participating students needed to be determined. The impact these programs had might have been academic, social, or intrinsic; however, this needed be explored and interpreted in order for educators to understand how influential afterschool programs were to high school graduates. This qualitative data could have a direct effect on current students and potential future high school graduates.

2. How do students describe their lived experience of participating in afterschool programs and subsequently graduating high school?

The deeper meaning of what it means to participate in an afterschool program needed to be determined as well. The exploration of this question provided an in-depth opportunity to provide relevant information through the perspective of high school graduates who experienced that phenomenon of afterschool programs.

Research Plan

This qualitative study was based on a hermeneutical phenomenology design. This design was appropriate for this study since it attempted to interpret the lived experiences of students and develop common themes related to the role of afterschool programs on students graduating high school. The hermeneutical phenomenological design was appropriate based on what the researcher was looking to accomplish with the study which was to interpret and identify what common themes emerged from interviews with former participants in afterschool programs and how they related to helping them graduate high school.

Delimitations and Limitations

The study was limited to nine former students who graduated from the same high school within the last six years and had a positive experience in afterschool programs.

This small number of participants was important because if too many participants are included in a hermeneutical phenomenological research design then the data can become oversaturated due to the extra amount of unnecessary data (Cohen, Kahn, & Steves, 2000). This could have made interpreting experiences and extrapolating common themes difficult. The data is highly rich in the interview process and a large amount of participants is not advised (van Manen, 1990). Hermeneutical phenomenological studies seek to achieve depth rather than breadth and this small number of participants allowed the researcher to investigate deeper and produce more vivid descriptions of the phenomenon of afterschool programs and the lived experiences associated with them (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This study attempted to determine what role afterschool programs had on students graduating high school. The academic and social effectiveness of afterschool programs and their subsequent effects on graduation rates were analyzed by looking at current research related to afterschool programs and their history as well as the theory of social constructivism. However, it was also important to understand the reasons that caused a student to drop out of high school as well as all the strategies could be taken to possibly prevent those future dropouts. This understanding was necessary in order for the researcher to have an accurate grasp of the data that presented itself during the research process.

Theoretical Framework

Education and learning are two terms that have a broad spectrum of meaning. There have been numerous theories and thought processes over the years regarding how to best educate students of any age range. Some theories are similar in terms of beliefs, while others have completely different thoughts in terms of what influences learning and how to best achieve it on a regular basis. For this study, Lev Vygotsky's Social Constructivism Theory most closely aligns to the learning principles present in afterschool programs and the high school graduates that are produced from those programs (Miller, 2011).

The origins of social constructivism stem directly from the mind of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. His theory began to develop while working with special needs children and the various struggles he encountered while trying to help them reach their potential (Miller, 2011). Vygotsky's theory builds upon Piaget's Cognitive Stage

Theory by not focusing on cognitive development solely on an individual basis. Social constructivism places much more of an emphasis on social interaction and the benefits associated with this interaction (Hirtle, 1996).

The theme of social constructivism is based on the assumptions that learners construct knowledge through the product of their social interaction, interpretation, and understanding (Miller, 2011). This learning is viewed as an ongoing process of active knowledge construction within these social forms and processes. This creation of knowledge cannot be separated from the social environment from which it was formed, and thus the socially interactive process of learning cannot be excluded as a result (Adams, 2006).

Vygotsky believed that when learners actively constructed knowledge in a social context it provided not only an optimal learning environment, but it also provided the potential of transforming the learner's cultural reality (Hirtle, 1996). For example, according to Adams (2006) social constructivists argue that learning ceases to be judged as acceptance of fact and instead simply becomes personal interpretation, question creation, and the appreciation of validity through socially recognizable forms. Learning is not just simply the process of synthesizing the content; more specifically, it is the process of focusing on the learner and the learner's experience in the learning environment.

The concept of afterschool programs fits well into the thoughts of social constructivism and the principles associated with the theory. Social constructivists challenge the common thought process in education that a fixed measure of thought can be directly transferred to the learner (Hirtle, 1996). The social constructivist theory is

grounded in the notion that social interaction and communication are the overriding keys that drive the learning.

Afterschool programs focus on students building relationships with teachers and other students while also focusing on topics related to learning. This subsequently builds a student's interest in school and gives the student a sense of accomplishment that sometimes cannot be reached in the normal confines of the traditional classroom setting (Fusco, 2008). Afterschool programs allow students to form relationships with teachers that are sometimes simply not possible in the regular classroom due to the large amount of classes that the teachers teach as well as the large size of these teacher's classes (Shernoff & Vandell, 2007). All of these aspects of afterschool programs and afterschool education are closely aligned to social constructivism and the theories associated with it regarding the learner and the learning process. Consequently, afterschool programs can be a setting that provides students with some of the most fundamental motivational forces in human nature such as achieving autonomy, increasing skill development, and improving overall relatedness (Eccles, 1999).

Review of the Literature

Results of Dropping Out. Students who drop out of school are more than likely setting themselves up for a life that will be filled with many difficulties down the road. According to a recent study, one in every ten young male high school dropout was either in jail or in a juvenile detention center (Grant & Morial, 2009). Prison can be a possible destination for dropouts, but there are various other problems that can lead up to prison and continue once a prison term is served. High school dropouts are facing a lifelong prospect of lower lifetime wages and a higher prospect of being unemployed (Sparks et al., 2010).

High school dropouts significantly diminish their chances of securing a good job that paves the way for a promising future. For those dropouts who are actually fortunate enough to be employed, the average annual salary for dropouts seems to be getting lower each year. In 1971, full-time workers without a high school diploma made an average annual salary of $35,087 in 2002 constant dollars compared to $22,903 in the year 2002 (Barton, 2006). A 2010 census revealed that the median income of persons ages 18 through 67 who had not completed high school and were considered high school dropouts was roughly $25,000 in 2009. By comparison, in 2009 the median income of all persons between the ages 18 and 67 with a high school diploma (including a General Educational Development certificate) was $43,000 (United States Department of Commerce, 2010). This number translates into a loss of $630,000 in income over the course of a high school dropout's lifetime as directly compared to the wages of a person with at least a high school diploma (Rouse, 2007). As a result, it is safe to assume that the salaries for high school dropouts will continue to get less and less substantial due to inflation and make this problem greater and even more serious for future generations of high school dropouts.

This also puts a serious drain on the public since high school dropouts are more likely to produce a counterproductive aspect to society than high school graduates. High school dropouts generate fewer tax dollars, are more likely to be on welfare, and participate in fewer elections over time (Menzer & Hampel, 2009). High school dropouts are a contributing factor to the rising costs of healthcare since dropouts age 25 and older report being in worse health than adults who finished high school (Chapman et al., 2011). In fact, the average high school dropout costs the United State's economy approximately $240,000 over his or her lifetime in terms of lower tax contributions, the drain on public

welfare programs, and a higher reliance on Medicaid and Medicare (Levin & Belfield, 2007).

Of course, the flip side of high school dropouts presents an entirely different story. Citizens and workers with higher levels of education generally earn more income and are more productive in their jobs over time. In turn, this contributes more to the nation's overall social stability and generates more tax revenue to the economy (Austin, 2012).

The negative result of dropping out of high school is well-documented and highly predictive of future success based on the research presented. If afterschool programs can help provide a bridge to help students reach their high school graduation, then it is imperative to understand and effectively use these programs to the height of their potential.

Demographics of Dropouts. Research indicates that most high school dropouts are either a minority, come from a low income family, or are a combination of both of these factors (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). Each year, approximately 1.2 million students drop out of high school and more than half of those students were from a minority group. Poverty stricken students are seven times more likely to be high school dropouts than students from the highest quartile of family earnings (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009).

However, schools must be careful to not stereotype students as potential dropouts based on these demographics alone. Although it is well-documented in previous research that certain minority groups are more likely to drop out, individual students do not drop out simply because they are minorities (Sparks et al., 2010). Schools must explore what causes dropouts across certain demographics and recognize those patterns in order to

possibly prevent those students from dropping out of high school, or at least help create a bridge to help reduce the large number of dropouts that exist in certain demographic groups.

Reasons for Dropping Out. There is no universal explanation that applies to all high school dropouts (Bridgeland et al., 2006). This could be an indictment of why schools across the United States are still struggling to prevent them. One high school dropout might not have displayed the same warning signs that another dropout might have displayed. Most high school dropouts were a puzzle of complex issues that related specifically to each individual student. However, recent educational research has pinpointed a few consistent indicators relating to high school dropouts that schools are beginning to recognize in dropouts as well as potential dropouts such as lack of a connection to the school environment, a perception that school is boring, lack of motivation, academic challenges, and the unpredictable nature of real world events (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Some other possible dropout indicators might include a difficult transition to high school, deficient academic basic skills, and a lack of engagement and involvement to the overall school process (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009).

Potential high school dropouts can most likely be identified before the actual occurrence of dropping out of high school. Most dropouts were already considered "at-risk" by schools as early as the middle grades (6-8) by engaging in behavior that already strongly resembled that of a future dropout (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). The ninth grade itself is considered a transitional year and caused many students to become irreversibly behind in terms of academics and academic progress (Sparks et al., 2010). Academic success in the ninth grade is highly predictive of a student's future

success in subsequent grade levels (Sparks et al., 2010). One recent study stated that ninth grade academic success was more predictive of future high school dropouts than the demographic information or prior academic achievement of a student (Allensworth & Easton, 2007).

Educational Focus on Dropouts. The passage of the federal No Child Left Behind law set in to motion a number of federal mandates that have affected schools in a large variety of ways (Wallis, 2008). The intent of the law was to produce substantial gains in student achievement and hold states and schools more accountable for student progress on a year-to-year basis (United States Department of Education, 2001). This accountability extended to graduation rates, and this in turn has caused schools to begin to focus on these rates and the reasons behind the graduation rates themselves. For decades, schools and districts published misleading or wholly inaccurate graduation rates. As a result, the general public knew little about the scope of the nation's high school dropout problem (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). For example, a little over ten years ago the public and lawmaker assumption based on official federal documents was that the national public high school graduation rate was roughly 85% (United States Department of Education, 1998). However, various independent researchers came to the conclusion that the nation's actual graduation rate was somewhere around 70% for all students and the graduation rates for historically disadvantaged minority students was closer to 50% (Swanson, 2004).

NCLB dictated that for the first time under federal law, schools had to prove that they were making yearly progress on not just test scores, but that they were also making progress on high school graduation rates as well (Bridgeland et al., 2006). With this added emphasis to graduation rates being recognized and identified, research exposed

these alarmingly low graduation rates across the United States that were previously hidden behind the veil of inaccurate data and reporting systems (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). This newfound accountability on graduation rates has now brought more attention to high school dropouts and the strategies designed to prevent those dropouts. The evolution of the graduation rate policy has largely mirrored the country's growing awareness of the dropout crisis and the overwhelming desire to address it (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). This has caused schools to incorporate more strategies and programs such as afterschool programs in order to keep students performing successfully in schools and help these students stay on the track to graduate from high school.

In order to further strengthen school's graduation rate reporting accuracies, the National Governor's Association developed the Graduation Rate Compact in 2004 (The Council of Chief State School Officers, 2006). This compact was an agreement that states would calculate a commonly defined graduation rate uniformly across each respective state (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). The rate, known as a four-year adjusted cohort rate, is based on individual student data and measures the percent of entering ninth graders who graduate in four years or less with a regular high school diploma (The Council of Chief State School Officers, 2006). The development of the NGA Compact was an important step, not only in the movement toward a common graduation rate, but also in the movement toward calculations that use actual student outcomes tracked over time rather than estimates based on a snapshot of data (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009).

However, even after the recent outcry over the high number of dropouts in society, the general public is still currently almost entirely unaware of the severity of the

problem due to inaccurate data and the overestimation of graduation rates schools, districts, and states (Barton, 2006). Former Deputy Secretary of the U. S. Department of Education Eugene Hickok stated in 2005 that on any given day schools "can't tell us who's in school and who's not, nor in any given year how many students have successfully made it through their four years of schooling to graduate and how many have dropped out" (Bridgeland et al., 2006). The NGA Compact had the intentions of curing the reporting problem, but instead it simply drew attention to the fact that graduation rate accountability was still virtually nonexistent and that states had largely not made accountability improvements of their own accord (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009).

States and governors finally incorporated federal regulations governing graduation rate accountability in 2008 (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Overall and for each student subgroup, high schools either were required to meet a graduation rate goal set by the state, or to meet a modest but meaningful annual growth target that was also set by the respective state. For the first time, all public high schools across the United States were required to use a clear and accurate graduation rate calculation (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2012). However, the educational landscape has been muddled again due to ten states being granted a waiver excluding those particular states from the current NCLB standards (Dries, 2012). Each state will have its own unique standards that were approved by the federal government and the uncertainty regarding graduation rates is likely to come again to the forefront.

This past, present, and future confusion regarding graduation rates and their actual meanings must not be ignored. It is vitally important for schools and districts to not ignore the dropout problem that is prevalent across the nation. No matter what

educational legislation is set forth, schools should be focusing on helping all students graduate from high school and developing programs and initiatives to help make high school graduation a possibility. Afterschool programs are one option that schools can use to increase the large scope of factors that influence high school graduation (Huang et al., 2011).

Introduction to Afterschool Programs

History of Afterschool Programs. Afterschool programs are currently serving around eight million students across the United States (Afterschool Alliance, 2011). Schools are the largest providers of these afterschool programs, followed by YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, religious organizations, and private schools. The inception of afterschool programs into the educational landscape began in the mid 1990's (Neuman, 2010). Their introduction and origin was largely based on the increasing awareness that a large number of children were mainly unsupervised once they arrived home from school. It was determined that 34% of middle school youth and 51% of high school youth were taking care of themselves once the regular school day ended (Hammond & Reimer, 2006). In much broader terms, on any given day there are more than 14 million students across the United States who are on their own after the school day ends without adult supervision (Earle, 2009).

The combination of this realization with the advent of a much more stringent focus on student testing and test scores helped lay the foundation for afterschool programs and its future role in education. The federal government first became involved in 1994 when the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Act (21st CCLC) was introduced to provide a wide range of grants to rural and inner-city public schools for after school projects that benefited the educational, health, social service, cultural, and

recreational needs of a rural or inner city community (21st Century Community Learning

Centers, 2011).

A second factor contributing to the introduction and growth of afterschool

programs was the increased realization that unstructured and unsupervised after school

time presented ample opportunity for a multitude of risky juvenile behavior (Zief et al.,

2006). The aforementioned reality of more parents entering the workforce and leaving

unsupervised children at home alone led to increases in crime and drug use. The increase

in acts of juvenile delinquency was reflected back to schools through students' low

attendance and poor grades (Vandell, Reisner, & Pierce, 2007). Students who are

unsupervised after the regular school hours are more likely to commit a delinquent act,

become a crime victim, get injured in some way, use illegal substances such as drugs and

alcohol, or become a teen parent (National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2005). One

recent study by Soule, Gottfredson, and Bauer (2008) discovered that juvenile

victimization and juvenile delinquency actually peak during regular school hours, while

juvenile substance use peaked during the weekend. However, disaggregating by offense

revealed that the more serious offenses such as armed robbery, acts of serious violence,

and the distribution of illegal substances were elevated after school hours, while simple

assault offenses were most elevated during school hours (Soule, Gottfredson, & Bauer,

2008).

Adult supervised afterschool programs can dramatically cut the likelihood of

youths committing or participating in any of these detrimental and illegal acts (Gayl,

2004). This realization that there was a relationship between unsupervised children and

juvenile delinquency and juvenile victimization had a substantial influence on

policymakers and helped contribute to an increase in public support for afterschool

programs (Soule et al., 2008). Society was not content to sit aside passively after this stark realization that everyday citizens were more likely to have a crime committed against them when the youth of the nation were unsupervised after school hours (Vandell et al., 2007).

The move toward academic accountability and the constant search of how to improve academic achievement across the board resulted in a massive increase in afterschool programs in order to extend the school day and enhance academic performance and enrichment (Hammond & Reimer, 2006). Afterschool programs were originally created to offer help with homework, activities, and even provide snacks and meals. Now they have evolved into programs that foster social development, reinforce talents, and improve academic achievement (Afterschool Alliance, 2011). Each of these elements can have a direct effect on students graduating from high school (Reisner, Vandell, Pechman, Pierce, Brown, & Bolt, 2007).

Types of Afterschool Programs. There are various types of afterschool programs that might focus on things such as a program's intended goals, staff-student ratios, budgets, operating hours, organizational features, etc. Since their original inception, afterschool programs have been viewed and implemented in a variety of different ways. These viewpoints range from providing a safe haven for youth and keeping them out of trouble to improving academic performance, providing enrichment activities, and also providing social/recreational activities (Fashola, 1998). According to Parsad and Lewis (2009), afterschool programs can now be categorized into four different groups: fee-based, stand-alone, 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLCs), and broad-based.

Fee-based afterschool programs refer to a paid day care that incorporates homework help, recreational activities, and other enrichment opportunities. The fee-based programs are two separate entities that are completely separate from the student's respective school. Stand-alone programs are programs that only focus on tutoring or academic instruction in a specific subject area such as math, reading, or science. The 21st CCLCs are programs that are funded through a federal grant and provide academic enrichment as well as regular academic programs designed to improve student achievement. In addition to these core academic programs, CCLCs have an array of components such as art, music, technology education, and counseling (21st Century Community Learning Centers, 2011). The concept behind CCLCs was to open up schools for broader use by students and community members as well in order to help schools take better advantage of the large amount of resources that are available. The grant funds can be used for weekend school programs, expanded library hours, day care services, or literacy education programs (Gayl, 2004). In 2009, federal funding for CCLCs reached an all-time high of $1.13 billion (Earle, 2009). Broad-based programs are blended programs that incorporate various aspects of these previous three groups but do not fit specifically into one of those aforementioned categories (Parsad & Lewis, 2009).

Some states have their own state specific programs that have incorporated many of the same aspects of the federally based programs. California became the most ambitious afterschool program state when it began investing $550 million a year into the programs in 2008 (Earle, 2009). Tennessee's afterschool program is another example of a state funded afterschool program. In 2002, Tennessee adopted the Lottery for Education: Afterschool Programs (LEAPs) act. This act uses unclaimed state lottery

money to fund grants for eligible schools and districts that are awarded the grant. The goal of a LEAPs grant is to provide students with enrichment opportunities after the regular school day that reinforce and complement the regular school day (Tennessee Department of Education, 2011). The LEAPs program can be termed a blended program since it entails many of the same characteristics as a federally named blended program. There were numerous other states besides California and Tennessee that increased and implemented afterschool program funding in 2008: $82 million in New York, $14 million in Georgia, $5.5 million in Massachusetts, $14.5 million in New Jersey, $10 million in Ohio, and $5 million in Minnesota (Earle, 2009). While every program has subtle characteristics that make it unique, the main difference between the state and federal afterschool programs is the origination of the funding source since it is a state specific program.

Characteristics of Quality Afterschool Programs. Research seems to indicate that quality afterschool programs have some common basic principles that help ensure the effectiveness of each respective afterschool program. These quality programs give students opportunities to solve problems and use their deductive reasoning skills, they focus on teamwork, they nurture students' skills and talents, and they offer the student's choices. Programs that focus on these aspects build a culture of learning and encourage students to express ideas openly and apply their abilities to real-world activities (Neuman, 2010).

There are some other factors regarding programming, staffing, and support systems that help shape highly functional and high quality afterschool programs. These factors help shape these programs and form the foundation of their successful implementation and execution (Hammond & Reimer, 2006). Some of these factors are

providing new learning opportunities and learning environments for students, focusing on skill-building and mastery, having intentional relationship building with adults and peers, possessing experienced leadership throughout the afterschool program, and partnering with community members to develop and build strong community relationships (Vandell, Reisner, Brown, Pierce, Dadisman, & Pechman, 2004).

The type of learning and development that takes place in quality afterschool programs reflects a balance of three different types of learning. Extended learning is one of these types of learning. This learning style uses learning activities that are closely aligned to the regular school day such as homework help, credit recovery, and tutoring. The design of these extended learning programs is set-up as an extension to the student's regular school day (Hammond & Reimer, 2006). Another type of learning in quality afterschool programs is project based enriched learning. Project based enriched learning is more hands-on and experimental than regular classroom learning and can be either aligned or disconnected from the curriculum of the school. The final type of learning in quality afterschool programs, intentional learning, includes all nonacademic activities that foster social skills as well as all other nonacademic skills (Hammond & Reimer, 2006).

The researchers Durlak and Weissber (2007) conducted a recent study that focused on the impact of afterschool programs as they relate to the student's personal and social skills. The researchers recommended that all quality afterschool programs should use specific evidence based approaches to guarantee a quality program with quality results. In order to improve students' personal and social skills, afterschool programs must devote a sufficient amount of time to skill enhancement, be explicit in what they actually wish to achieve, use activities that are coordinated and sequenced in order to

achieve their designed purpose, and require active involvement of all the students. This design not only lets the students benefit in multiple ways, but a successful afterschool program is also unlikely to exist if these components are nonexistent (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007).

Challenges of Afterschool Programs. Due to the vagueness of the term "afterschool programs" and the activities associated with them, there is some uncertainty among the general public regarding the entire afterschool program movement and the funding that is associated with it (Hammond & Reimer, 2006). Hollister (2003) argued there are two basic approaches to afterschool programs: time on task and home alone. Time on task uses afterschool programs to extend the school day and focus on academic enrichment. The other approach according to Hollister, home alone, focuses on increasing supervision of youth after school and increasing their sense of belonging in the world and the school. This approach also helps youth foster a positive relationship with adults.

Some groups argue that the two conflicting strategies should be merged. Research shows evidence of a link between a student's social development and academic success (Hammond & Reimer, 2006). Therefore, afterschool programs should all have the same basic strategy in order to reduce confusion and help increase funding opportunities for all programs (Hall, Yohalem, Tolman & Wilson, 2003). In the current afterschool program structure that is used, most parents and educators do not have a solid grasp of afterschool programs and their functions due to the wide variety of programs associated with the term (Hollister, 2003).

Another challenge facing afterschool programs involves the collection of research and the studies associated with that research. There is increasing pressure to prove that

afterschool programs are proven to be effective through scientific research (Hammond &

Reimer, 2006). However, some uncontrollable factors are making this research difficult.

One factor involves the relative youth of the afterschool program movement and the only

recent focus on accountability for these afterschool programs. The growth of these

programs has been so fast that there has been little time to build high quality programs

that are based on solid and sustained research evaluation (Beckett, Hawken, &

Jacknowitz, 2001). Due to the various types of afterschool programs, it is often difficult

to identify the model on which most afterschool programs were based and find the links

between theory and program characteristics (Hollister, 2003).

Secondly, many afterschool program evaluations and related studies fail to

account for selection bias (Gottfredson et al., 2007). Selection bias is a term used to

describe a systematic difference in characteristics between those who are selected for

study and those who are not selected (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). This selection bias can

sometimes occurs in afterschool program studies since students who involved themselves

in optional afterschool programs were those who were theoretically on the track for

progress and development related to student success and graduation (Gottfredson et al.,

2007).

A third factor making research for afterschool programs difficult is the evaluation

of these programs in general due to the wide array of different program types (Hammond

& Reimer, 2006). This wide variety of programs leads to highly varied goals and

practices among each afterschool program. This variety makes generalizations and

conclusions regarding each program's effectiveness difficult and stifles evidence

regarding the overall impact of afterschool programs (The Forum for Youth Investment,

2003).

Afterschool Programs Effects and Literature Gap

Due to the upswing in the popularity of afterschool programs, there has been a large amount of recent research related to their overall effectiveness (Lauer, Akiba, Wilkerson, Apthorp, Snow, & Martin-Glenn, 2006). Research is beginning to support the common assumption that structured afterschool programs can provide positive environments where students can develop and strengthen certain skills no matter if these skills are academic or social in nature (Gayl, 2004).

Academic Effects. Jenner and Jenner (2007) provided evidence that students who participated in afterschool programs had statistical improvements in standardized test scores. One meta-analysis of 35 studies reported that the standardized test scores of low-income and at-risk youth students that participated in afterschool programs improved significantly in both reading and math (Lauer et al., 2006). Other critics argue that it is not realistic for afterschool programs to target standardized test scores due to the full year of classroom instruction needed and the relatively small gains indicated in the previous afterschool studies. Even though afterschool programs might have some impact on standardized test scores, their actual contribution to the scores is small and difficult to statistically prove (The Forum for Youth Investment, 2003). Unless the time spent in an afterschool program is extraordinarily more beneficial than the student's regular classroom time with the teacher, dramatic standardized test gains for those students who participate in an afterschool program are unlikely. This result would more likely be an indicator of poor classroom instruction by the teacher rather than an acceleration of student knowledge that was based solely on the student's participation in an afterschool program (Gayl, 2004).

However, instead of focusing on standardized test gains, afterschool programs can successfully target more immediate academic outcomes such as better grades and improved study habits by the students (The Forum for Youth Investment, 2003). Since afterschool programs have demonstrated effects on the actual conditions that contribute to student achievement, participation in afterschool programs can support vast improvements in student success even if the programs themselves have limited academic impacts in terms of specific standardized test gains (Gayl, 2004). Students that attend afterschool programs spend more time in academic and enrichment activities than their peers who do not attend afterschool programs (Posner & Vandell, 1994). In fact, students who attend afterschool programs report a higher overall sense of intrinsic motivation and better concentration in the regular school setting (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Most afterschool programs incorporate aspects that enhance academic skills with tutoring, focus on reading enrichment programs, and link the afterschool curriculum through the regular school program with various activities. This type of learning helps enhance a student's intrinsic motivation and further facilitates learning success with the student (Huang et al., 2011).

Neuman (2010) reported that student attendance during normal school hours vastly improved for students who were currently involved in afterschool programs. Kane (2004) determined that if a student participated in an afterschool program then his parents were more likely to be involved at the school in some capacity, the student was more likely to complete assigned homework, and the student's GPA was more likely to be higher. All of these factors correlate into students benefitting academically and not becoming academically at-risk and in danger of not graduating from high school. Of

course, a student who becomes at-risk, no matter the reason, is more likely to drop out of high school (Sparks et al., 2010).

Social Effects. While most of the focus might be academic in nature, the potential personal and social benefits of afterschool programs cannot be overlooked. There is evidence from recent studies that afterschool programs have a wide-ranging social effect on those participating students. Research findings from a number of studies concluded that afterschool programs improved student's interpersonal skills, behavior at school, relationships with peers, and overall attitude towards school (Hammond & Reimer, 2006).

Afterschool programs can boost a student's confidence through social interaction with peers. These programs offer a less threatening environment for students who might feel isolated in school. As a result, they are able to make friends and get to know other students on a more personal level (Gayl, 2004). Quality afterschool programs establish and maintain caring and supportive relationships between the staff and students (Vandell et al., 2004. These relationships serve as the foundation of a respectful climate that makes students feel welcomed and relaxed not only during afterschool hours, but also during normal school hours as well (Beckett et al., 2001). These positive adult relationships provide students with much needed personal attention. This also gives these students opportunities to develop positive and stable relationships with adults that sometimes cannot be achieved in a traditional classroom setting (Hall et al., 2003). Students that attend afterschool programs are more likely to emulate responsible adults who model and reinforce what is known as socially acceptable behavior (Reisner et al., 2007).

There is evidence that students who establish strong ties with school and community resources through afterschool programs are less likely to take harmful risks related to safety and delinquent acts (Reisner et al., 2007). Students involved in an afterschool program are overall less likely to have behavior problems at school or commit a crime after school (Reisner et al., 2007). In fact, three previous studies regarding a California afterschool program all concluded that afterschool programs had a positive impact on improving feelings of safety for students while at school and during the afterschool hours (Jenner & Jenner, 2007). These facts point to evidence that afterschool programs are essentially providing students with a safer environment. This ultimately improves students' overall success in school and increases the likelihood of these students graduating from high school (Huang et al., 2011).

Afterschool programs have been shown to improve students' self-esteem and self-confidence (Gayl, 2004). One particular study concluded that students involved in afterschool programs displayed not only improved self-esteem and self-confidence, but that students who participated in afterschool programs improved significantly in three major areas: feelings and attitudes, indicators of behavioral adjustment, and school performance. In other words, the results showed evidence that afterschool programs significantly increased participants' positive feelings and attitudes about themselves and their school, as well as their social behaviors (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007). Furthermore, afterschool programs have been shown to increase a student's overall sense of belonging at the school (Gayl, 2004). Once again, all of these factors directly correlate into students developing skills that make them more likely to graduate (Rouse, Bamaca-Gomex, & Newman, 2001).

Socioeconomic Effects of Afterschool Programs. Another important aspect to consider regarding afterschool programs involves the socioeconomic status of the student. The result of several studies showed evidence that the impact of afterschool programs was often greater for low-income students when compared to middle and high income students (Hammond & Reimer, 2006). One specific study stated that participation in the specific afterschool program studied had a significant effect in reducing the potential of dropping out of high school for all participating students. However, this particular study showed evidence that low socioeconomic status was the subgroup most dramatically affected by afterschool program participation (Huang et al., 2011).

This is important for potential high school dropouts because the dropout rate of students living in low-income families was about five times greater than the rate of students from high income families in 2009 (Chapman et al., 2011). It is imperative for schools to recognize these socioeconomic statistics and the differences associated with them because these students may be the most in need of attending afterschool programs, as well as the most likely to actually benefit from attending these afterschool program (Gayl, 2004).

Afterschool programs not only support healthy and positive development for students; they also provide a crucial safety net for students who are juggling an unstable mix of family, school, and social pressures in a disadvantaged setting (Neuman, 2010). Participation in afterschool programs for disadvantaged students is linked to reductions in various behavior problems (Vandell et al., 2007). Vandell et al. (2007) conclude that a lack of supervision after the regular school day ends is associated with seriously negative outcomes for students coming from low socioeconomic homes. Miller (2003) surmised

that afterschool programs can be used as an effective tool to increase educational equity across socioeconomic lines in order to accurately provide educational opportunities for all sets of students across all subgroups. By reducing the likelihood that low-income students will drop out of high school, afterschool programs can essentially break the cycle of poverty for current and future poverty stricken generations across the nation.

Overall Effects of Afterschool Programs. Afterschool programs can have positive effects on overall student achievement and student success (Lauer, Akiba, Wilkerson, Apthorp, Snow, & Martin-Glenn, 2004). They can also help students develop a sense of resilience to better help them succeed not only in school, but also in the many facets of life. There has been a growing research field related to resiliency, especially as it pertains to students who are considered at-risk of not succeeding in school and have a high probability of not graduating high school. Resilience has been found to consist of different protective factors that are necessary in order for a student to be able to respond to stress and adversity in a competent manner. Furthermore, educational resilience could be better described as the heightened likelihood of success in school and in other aspects of life despite environmental adversities due to early traits, conditions, or unexpected life experiences (Rouse et al., 2001).

Afterschool programs have been found to improve attributes related to resiliency in three crucial ways (Huang et al., 2011). First, they provide students with supervision after school during a time when they are more likely to participate in deviant or anti-social behaviors (U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Justice, 2000). Secondly, afterschool programs provide experiences that help develop students' social skills and work habits (Vandell et al., 2007). Finally, afterschool programs help improve a student's academic achievement through after school tutoring and other academic

enrichment activities (Fashola, 2002). Huang et al. (2011) argued that these three major factors of afterschool programs were highly important to the contribution and sustainability of resiliency for students who were at an increased risk of dropping out of high school.

The scope of afterschool programs and their overall effectiveness can also expand to experiences after high school for the student. Many high school afterschool program activities are aligned with some type of academic or school-based club. Students who were involved in an academic club and afterschool programs have had higher academic performance in college, a greater overall likelihood of enrolling in college, and more years of college completion than their uninvolved peers (Shernoff & Vandell, 2007). While in high school, students who were currently involved in afterschool programs have reported increased aspirations to attend college (Tannenbaum & Brown-Welty, 2006). Obviously, this can have an effect on a school's dropout rate due to these higher aspirations of college that make high school graduation for the student a foregone conclusion.

However, there seems to be no true straightforward answer on how to develop the optimal afterschool program to achieve the desired results of student success as well as that ultimate success related to graduating from high school. The answer seems to lie in the question as to why the afterschool program was originally set up in the first place, the extent as to which the program addressed the specific needs of the students, and the extent the program exhibited positive outcomes for the students when evaluated (Fashola, 2002).

Afterschool Programs' Effects on Graduation Rates. As mentioned earlier, schools have a wide number of intervention strategies that are designed to curb the

obstacles faced by students and reduce their likelihood of dropping out of high school. Research is beginning to show evidence that afterschool programs can be a possible solution for supporting at-risk students to stay in school. This is due to the fact that afterschool programs incorporate many of the already proven intervention strategies related to keeping students from dropping out of high school (Afterschool Alliance, 2009). Some of these most frequently mentioned strategies related to at-risk students staying in school are early identification and intervention for at-risk students, the opportunity for a safe school environment in order to have an actual safe learning environment, and on-going school and community collaboration through relationship building (Smink & Reimer, 2005). These core strategies are already incorporated by most high quality afterschool programs (Afterschool Alliance, 2009). Also, the afterschool environment can help support the development of new skills critical to students being successful and feeling capable of success, particularly for high school students (Fusco, 2008).

According to previous research, any former student who stayed in school and graduated had more than likely experienced some obstacle that might have hindered the student's academic or social development (Huang et al., 2011). These obstacles could have been school factors, community factors, or home life factors and each of them could have contributed to poor academic and social development for the student (Ungar, 2004). Furthermore, students already in danger of dropping out of high school probably faced additional obstacles at home such as poverty, trauma, and a lack of positive peer and adult interaction (Masten & Obradovic, 2006).

Students who could overcome these obstacles developed resiliency that was based on such factors as high self-esteem, positive life attitudes, and high future aspirations

(Siebert, 2005). Students were more likely to achieve resiliency if they were exposed to opportunities to develop affirming and personal relationships, learned about the importance of school, and gained a sense of well-being and other positive attributes (Scott-Little, Hamann, & Jurs, 2002). Quality afterschool programs can build this broad sense of educational resiliency in students and provide them a better chance of surviving the pitfalls that are associated with students dropping out of high school. Afterschool programs can have potential long-term effects on students and increase students' likelihood of not dropping out of high school (Huang et al., 2011).

Afterschool Programs' Literature Gap. The research studied on afterschool programs seemed to leave a gap regarding students' personal thoughts related to the actual role that afterschool programs played in their success while in high school. Furthermore, the research left a gap on students' personal thoughts regarding the afterschool program's influence on their eventual graduation from high school. A large number of quantitative studies related to afterschool programs have recently been conducted related to specific achiever benchmarks such as math and reading, interpersonal aspects, and crime prevention (Zief et al., 2006: Lauer et al., 2006: Jenner & Jenner, 2007), but there has not been a study with an emphasis on the deeper question related to how afterschool programs can be a major factor in students graduating high school. This study sought to address this gap by giving students the opportunity to voice their own thoughts in a research setting.

Additionally, this study looked to give former high school students the opportunity to relate their actual thoughts and experiences on how and why afterschool programs influenced their path to graduation. The study also allowed the students the opportunity to give a humanistic aspect to the data that statistics associated with

quantitative studies are not always able to provide. This qualitative data from this study will give educators earlier and more accurate predictors of possible future dropouts as well as identify specific strategies that were effective in how afterschool programs are preventing students from dropping out of school.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The premise of this study was to uncover what role afterschool programs had on students graduating high school. Social constructivism was the theoretical framework that was used to guide the study since the study relied on the participants' description of their experiences (Creswell, 2007). The design, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures will be introduced in this chapter.

Research Design

The hermeneutical phenomenological approach is based on the concept that individuals describe a lived experience (Creswell, 2007). Van Manen (1990) stated that phenomenology is the science of a phenomenon while hermeneutics is the theory and practice of interpretation. Hermeneutic phenomenology combines these concepts with the idea of interpreting a description of a lived experience. This type of research seeks to understand and describe someone else's experience and capture the essence of that experience through in-depth thematic analysis (Heidegger, 1962). The interpretation of these thematic analyses should not be seen as right or wrong, but as a personal interpretation based on the process of hermeneutical research (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005).

This hermeneutical phenomenological approach was used in this study because the research focused on the interpretation of students' descriptions of their lived experiences in afterschool programs. The study sought to understand and describe students' experiences and capture the essence of those experiences. The research questions used in the study were exploratory questions and were consistent with the

approach of hermeneutical phenomenology since they could not be solved, but only more deeply understood (van Manen, 1990).

Research Questions

1. **Research Question 1:** What role did afterschool programs play in students who graduated from a high school that incorporated the program?

2. **Research Question 2:** How do students describe their lived experience of participating in afterschool programs and subsequently graduating high school?

Participants

The participants consisted of students who recently graduated from Cougar High School (pseudonym) which incorporated an afterschool program. The afterschool program had been operating at the site school for four years so participants might come from any of the varying cohorts of graduating classes. In regards to the number of participants, Creswell (2007) stated that the intent of qualitative research is not only to study a few individuals, but to collect extensive detail about each person studied. The intent of qualitative research is not to generalize the information, but to clarify, explain, and expound on the particular and the specific. Therefore, the number of participants was chosen that best reflected the scope of research needed.

Qualitative research allows the researcher to use purposeful sampling in order to select individuals and sites for study that already have an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon of the study (Creswell, 2007). The purposeful sampling design was used for the selection purposes of this study since students who were likely to be rich with information with respect to the phenomenon of participating in an afterschool program and graduating high school were chosen. Purposeful sampling

was appropriate since the intent was to achieve a more in-depth and thorough understanding of the selected participants (Gall et al., 2007).

The specific type of purposeful sampling employed was intensity sampling. This type of sampling is normally used for information rich cases that describe the phenomenon intensely but not extremely (Creswell, 2007). For example, participants in this study described the role that afterschool programs had in their successful completion of high school. Participants were chosen that display this characteristic on a high level, but not to an extreme extent in order to help reduce any possible researcher bias. This makes the findings more likely to represent a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being interpreted (Gall et al., 2007).

These students were purposefully chosen for the study using a questionnaire (see Appendix A) examining their thoughts on afterschool programs and the program's role in their graduation from high school. The program director of the afterschool program at the selected site narrowed the field of possible participants by sending the questionnaire to those former students who graduated and participated in afterschool programs. This use of criterion sampling ensured that all the participants in the study had experienced the required phenomenon of a positive experience in afterschool programs (Creswell, 2007). It is essential in hermeneutical phenomenological research that the participant has not only experienced the phenomenon, but also has an interest in understanding its meaning (Moustakas, 1994). The questionnaire was mailed to the homes of the former students and returned to the researcher via a self-addressed envelope.

The students involved in the study were selected from returned questionnaires that fulfilled the requirements of the study listed below. However, the specific number of participants included in the study might have been adjusted based on the number of

questionnaires that were returned. Participants had to be former students who had graduated, participated in the afterschool program, completed the survey, and expressed an interest to further discuss the lived experience of afterschool programs and their relationship to high school graduation. Each participant read and signed a consent form based on a phenomenological design, which included such information as the purpose of the study, the procedures for the study, the data collection process, confidentiality information, and information about their right to withdraw at any time from the study (van Manen, 1990). At the conclusion of the study, participants were given a $25 gift card as an expression of appreciation for the time they committed to the study and the research process as a whole.

One common basis of hermeneutic phenomenological research is to see participants not in terms of groups, but of individual characteristics and individual people that do not need to be studied as broad demographic variables (van Manen, 1990). The demographic information of the students involved in this study was random in nature since demographic specifics could not be controlled with this sample group. Participants should be viewed as people who offer a picture of what it is like to be themselves as they make sense of a phenomenon (Cohen et al., 2000). The research model of hermeneutic phenomenology encourages this small sample size due to the importance of the researcher's need to maintain a strong connection to the subjects and interpret the meaning of their lived experiences (Creswell, 2007).

Setting

The research was conducted at a location of the participants' choosing. The school and district had agreed to allow the researcher to use their facilities and the researcher made participants aware of this option of using this as a location to conduct

the interviews. The school itself is located in southeast Tennessee in a rural community that has a high rate of poverty. According to 2012-2013 school year data, there are 338 students at Cougar High School with the demographic breakdown as follows: 97.7% white, 1.2% black, and 1.2% Hispanic. The school's free and reduced lunch rate is 82.4% and its 2010 graduation rate was 82.5%.

The site was chosen due to a variety of reasons. The school is in the same geographic region as the researcher so accessibility to information was more prevalent. This allowed the research to take place at a school which gave the researcher greater accessibility in the research process. Also, the school had a similar type of afterschool program as the researcher's school, so familiarity with the strategies and management aspects of the program were helpful in the study. One final aspect in terms of rationale for the site was that, like the researcher's, the chosen school was in Tennessee which kept educational terminology more closely aligned.

Researcher's Role

I am the current principal at a high school and have been involved in education for 12 years. I began my educational career as an English teacher for seven years, served as an assistant principal for one year, and I am currently working in my fourth year as principal. The research was conducted with data from a school where an afterschool program had been implemented for the last four years. My current school had incorporated an afterschool program for the last five years.

I had a twofold reason for conducting this study: first, in my job, I saw the daily struggles that some students had to graduate high school, and secondly I had witnessed the implementation of what I deemed a highly functioning afterschool program. It was my belief that afterschool programs could be a viable link to graduation, and I wanted to

talk to students in a research setting in order to study that belief. I am highly passionate about students graduating high school because I had witnessed the success of a highly at-risk student, and I had witnessed the failure of a student who gave no indications he was contemplating dropping out of high school. This study helped me better understand high school age students and their needs for afterschool programs as they relate to staying in school and graduating.

Data Collection Procedures

The first step was to receive permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) in order to begin the research process. Once the approval was given by the IRB, a participant consent form was distributed to the participants in the study. This had to be returned to the researcher before any actual data collection could begin. Also, even though the participants were no longer current students, district and school approval was gained before the research process begins as a measure of courtesy to both the school and district.

Data was collected through an active interview process with the participants and interviewer. Hermeneutic phenomenological research must be conducted with an interview process in order for the researcher to become immersed in the data (van Manen, 1990). An active interview process involves the exchanging of information between the participant and the interviewer. Creswell (2007) states that in phenomenological research the primary method for data collection is interviews that are conversational in nature. This format is relatively unstructured and the emphasis of the interviewer is on listening and interacting rather than controlling the conversation (Cohen et al., 2000). As a result, the interview procedures for this study were based on the interviewing process consistent with hermeneutic phenomenological research as stated by van Manen (1990):

- Interviews should be an instrument for exploring and gathering narrative material and should serve as a resource for developing a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

- Interviews should be used as a means to garner a conversational relationship with the participant in order to develop a deeper meaning about the experience.

- Interviews should stay close to the phenomenon as lived by allowing the participant to speak freely about the experience as a whole without confining the participant to a specific set of questions. (p. 66)

The researcher took notes during the interview in order to possibly facilitate the interview process. Also, notes were taken that reflected certain aspects of the participant that could not be discerned strictly from the actual text of the interview such as body language, tone of voice, environmental distractions, and demeanor (Cohen et al., 2000). As an added safeguard, interviews were also video recorded with a separate device in order to record anything the researcher might document in his notes that might not have been present in the audio recording.

Field notes were also written by the researcher directly after the conclusion of each interview and once the participant had departed the interview room. This provided an opportunity for reflection and self-evaluation by the researcher. These field notes were used to record any ideas, insights, or observations the researcher had about the participant's interview. These field notes added another layer of data collection to the research process.

Clarifying questions were asked as needed after the researcher had reviewed the original interview transcripts via email or phone call. According to Cohen et al. (2000), not only do clarifying questions help reduce researcher bias, but it can also serve as a

conversation in which the participant can offer a more detailed description of the phenomenon being studied. The participants reflected on the phenomenon in more detail which led to more enriched data.

Interviews

The function of the interview process was based on hermeneutical phenomenological research designs. Van Manen (1990) stated that hermeneutical phenomenological interview questions should be used as a means to gather narrative material that may help develop a deeper understanding of a human phenomenon. Also, the interview can be used as a vehicle to develop an in-depth conversational relationship about the actual meaning of an experience related to the phenomenon. This differs greatly from interviews that are tightly structured such as interviews with guides that specify questions that must be asked, an order of asking, and a specific wording for each question (Cohen et al., 2000).

The interview questions (Appendix C) served as the interview guide and were not intended to be used as a strictly adhered script by the interviewer. Each question was only a tool to help stimulate conversation in case the participant needed a talking point at some point in the interview process. The first two questions were designed to help generate comfort for the interviewer and interviewee. The intrinsic motivation to graduate for the interviewee could be addressed with question three. Questions four through eight were designed to gather more information about the student's specific role in afterschool programs and the specific effect on the student while in school. These questions also looked to explore the social constructivism aspect of afterschool programs and their possible benefits. Questions 10 through 12 focused on the specific role of afterschool programs and their role in the student graduating high school. Question 13

was a closure question that was designed to let the student offer any additional insight or thoughts to the interview.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data was analyzed following the structured methods developed for hermeneutical phenomenological analysis which can be broken into three basic elements: reduction, description, and a search for essences or understanding (Giorgi, 1997). This process of analysis can be characterized as a movement between two metaphors: that of a field text which was constructed through the data collection process and that of a narrative text that was meant to convey the researcher's present understanding and interpretation of the data which stands alone as the findings of a hermeneutic phenomenological study (Cohen et al., 2000). This analysis of the data was the most accurate way to interpret the data from this study based on the research design and research questions (Van Manen, 1990). The goal of the analysis was the generation of a thick description that captured the experience from the perspective of the participant in its fullest and richest features (Cohen et al., 2000). The researcher must be able to rely on intuition and judgment in order to accurately portray the phenomenon related to the intertwined role of afterschool programs and graduating high school (Gall et al., 2007). This involved moving from the raw text created by data collection to a narrative text that is meant to stand alone (Ricoeur, 1981).

The analysis of the data actually began during the interviews. This happened naturally and inevitably since the researcher was actively listening and thinking about the meaning of what each participant was saying during the interview (Cohen et al., 2000). Since the interviews were conservational in nature, the researcher was an active

participant in each interview, thus increasing the likelihood of actual interpretation of the data to begin to occur (Creswell, 2007).

Once the interview process ended, each interview was transcribed verbatim from the recording by a transcriber hired by the researcher in order to more quickly facilitate the research process. The transcribed interviews were read as a whole several times by the researcher in order to not only become familiar with the data, but to also begin to form some initial interpretations of the data. This reading was done as a whole because interpretation is done at a global level within the data and a partial reading would have defeated this purpose (Giorgi, 1997). This step is usually referred to as immersing oneself in the data (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). In this beginning phase, the essential characteristics in the data from each interview began to be recognized by the researcher (Cohen et al., 2000). This immersion phase consisted of multiple re-readings of the transcripts, along with contemplation and reflection by the researcher (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005).

The next step involved the data reduction process. Heidegger (1962) stated that this process of clearing space must be evident in order for the phenomenon to reveal itself accurately. Van Manen (1990) also stressed the need for data reduction in order to let the phenomenon be represented accurately. In this phase the researcher decided what phrases and words were relevant to the study. The researcher reorganized the interviews to place together discussions of the same topic, eliminate aspects of the interview that were off-topic, and simplify the spoken language of the participants by removing certain verbal ticks (Cohen et al., 2000). This allowed the research data to be more concise without affecting the overall meaning of the data (Van Manen, 1990). Also, this data

reduction step allowed the upcoming data coding process to be more authentic (Cohen et al., 2000).

Once an understanding of the overall text was obtained, phrases in the text began to be highlighted for coding purposes. Coding is generally used in hermeneutical research to break up and segment the data into more simple categories while at the same time expand the data to help formulate new levels of interpretation (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Once again, this involved the re-reading of the transcripts by the researcher in order for the researcher to become completely immersed in the data (van Manen, 1990). The researcher identified various words, statements, or ideas that were deemed as important and significant (van Manen, 1990). Various highlighter colors were used in this identification process to better distinguish each type of statement. A different color of highlighter was used for each type of theme that began to emerge. Also, underlined words or phrases within each highlighted statement emerged with subgroups of themes in the data. The coding of the data via highlighted statements was a necessary process that identified meaningful data and set the stage for the interpretation of this data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

The underlined data was examined line by line and all of the important phrases were labeled with tentative theme names. This phase required the researcher to label themes and extract passages that had similar themes across each respective interview (Cohen et al., 2000). These highlighted statements were read several times in order to help develop common themes related to the experience of afterschool programs. Tentative theme names were written in the margin of the text based on what was underlined (Cohen et al., 2000). These themes could be understood as the structures of the experience. According to van Manen (1990), it was important during this phase to

maintain a mental picture of the mass of data as a whole because the entire interpretation process was circular from the first step of the data analysis process until the last. The researcher was determining what the themes from the data were and the structures that made up the experience (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). Meaning units describing the essence of afterschool programs and their role in graduating high school were formed based on the direct interpretation of these themes. These units were statements of meaning and explanation that were directly formed from the transcribed data of the interviews and themes that directly related to the research question (Creswell, 2007). These themes helped formulate meaning related to the experience of afterschool programs.

The last step in the hermeneutical process to analyze data involved the writing and rewriting of data (Cohen et al., 2000). This aspect had to be completed solely by the researcher since a hermeneutical phenomenological description is always one singular interpretation (van Manen, 1990). This was the most crucial step to the interpretive phenomenology process since language is the only way researchers can bring the experience of the phenomenon into a symbolic form that is expressed through narrative writing (van Manen, 1990). The progress from identification and comparison of the themes to achieving an accurate picture of the phenomenon occurred through the reflective process of multiple writing and rewriting (Cohen et al., 2000). This composite description of the phenomenon described the essence of the experience and represented the culminating aspect of the study through thematic analysis (Creswell, 2007). The researcher's field notes and interview narratives were both used to clarify the themes during this writing and rewriting process.

Trustworthiness

As with any study, there were possible threats in terms of trustworthiness with the research. According to Gall et al. (2007), trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to the extent to which the researcher used methods that ensure a high range of research quality and accuracy. In this study, one threat could possibly come from the interpretation of the questions by the researcher. For example, the researcher's personal bias that participation in an afterschool program made a student more likely to graduate high school could have influenced how themes and meaning units were formed from the interview responses. It was important for the researcher to clearly state this personal bias to the reader in order to achieve full disclosure before interpretations of the experiences begin.

This personal bias was controlled by using interviews, but the researcher's personal beliefs can never truly be separated from the actual hermeneutical interpretations (Gall et al., 2007). The researcher used bracketing to set aside, as far as humanly possible, all preconceived experiences about afterschool programs role on students graduating high school during the early stages of the research process. This helped the researcher best understand the experiences of all the participants in order to help combat bias and ensure the trustworthiness of the study (Creswell, 2007). However, the Heideggerian phenomenological method used in this study allowed the researcher to bring pre-understandings to the research that were never actually transcended and these pre-understandings enable rather than constrain the researcher (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005).

Another possible limitation dealing with dependability could have been related to the researcher asking guided questions in order to elicit responses to further validate the

research questions. This was offset by the researcher having a specific list of questions before the interview process began in order to give the researcher a guide to follow during the interview process. However, the questions and interviews were open-ended in nature in order to allow the participants to talk freely about their experiences and without guidance from the researcher.

Peer review was conducted by a research committee throughout the data analysis and publication process. This involved having the committee check the interview analysis, results, and recommendations for consistency. However, this factor differed slightly in regards to other types of qualitative research since hermeneutical research involves interpretation (van Manen, 1990).

Member checking was also used by the researcher in the data analysis process. This involved having participants review their statements in the results section in order to check them for accuracy (Gall et al., 2007). Any factual errors were corrected by the researcher and rewritten to accurately reflect the statements of the participants. The researcher's field notes were also used to check results for possible inconsistencies and inaccuracies.

The researcher took measures to protect the data accumulated in the research process. All data was locked in a filing cabinet that only the researcher could access. This data will be destroyed no later than one week after the publishing of this research study.

Ethical Issues

The school the researcher is using in the study is the researcher's alma mater. However, the researcher had not lived in the area for 15 years and did not expect to have any preexisting relationship with any of the students involved in the study. If a

relationship had been discovered, that former student would have been excluded from the study.

The researcher strongly believed in conducting a research project that was consistent with his own personal belief system. The basic principles of honesty and integrity were utilized throughout the research process. These traits closely aligned with the researcher's personal worldview and he allowed the data to develop with an underlying theme of truth.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine the role that afterschool programs played on select students graduating high school. A hermeneutical phenomenological design was used in order to allow the researcher to interpret the lived experiences of former graduates from a high school that incorporated an afterschool program. Purposeful sampling was used in order to have participants who had already agreed that afterschool programs had a positive effect, and this allowed the researcher to gather a more in-depth and accurate portrayal of the phenomenon of afterschool programs and their role in graduation. The data was collected from interviews and the researcher's field notes during the interview process. The interviews were audio recorded and lasted approximately 30 minutes to one hour in length. The interviews were conversational in nature, and the researcher's list of questions were only used when there was a lull in the conversation or if a transition question was needed.

The following research questions were explored:

1. **Research Question 1:** What role did afterschool programs play in students who graduated from a high school that incorporated the program?

2. **Research Question 2:** How do students describe their lived experience of participating in afterschool programs and subsequently graduating high school?

Participant Analysis

This section covers the overall impression of the participants: John, Robert, Heather, Mary, Albert, Summer, Cole, Anna, Clint (pseudonyms). The impression and representation of the group and the individual analysis that follows are based on the interviews conducted. The interpretation was filtered through the researcher's lens of experience as consistent with hermeneutical phenomenology. It is not a sharing of their

own self-actualization by the participants, but, rather, it is the researcher's own interpretations of these experiences.

Individual Analysis

John

John is an only child who now lives in Florida while attending college. He was a 2010 high school graduate and was involved in an art and photography afterschool club. John felt that afterschool programs not only led him to a college based on his interests but also gave him a vision for the future. He felt like afterschool programs were extremely beneficial for him and changed his life in a positive way.

Robert

Robert still lives in the area where he grew up and graduated from in 2012. He participated in an afterschool computer club and recently completed an online course related to computer repair. He enjoyed "every minute" of his afterschool computer club and felt like afterschool programs made him appreciate the school on a more consistent basis. His afterschool computer club was something he looked forward to every week, and he was nostalgic about the positive experiences he had while attending the club.

Heather

Heather is a 2009 graduate who now lives in a neighboring county. While in high school, she was involved in a healthy living afterschool club. She plans on starting college courses next year and had previously completed an income tax course. Her afterschool program and the teacher in charge of the program were a major influence on her graduating from high school. She felt like the afterschool program was the best thing offered to her during her time in high school.

Mary

Mary graduated in 2012 after moving to the area when she was in the fourth grade. She was an active participant in the afterschool art club. She is attending a local community college and majoring in History. The afterschool art program helped her get back on track to graduate after rejoining the club her junior year after not attending her sophomore year. Her grades, attendance, and overall school involvement were remarkably lower her sophomore year, which Mary based solely on her lack of attendance to the afterschool art club. She thought afterschool programs were a great idea because they had the potential to help students academically, socially, and could help them make a connection with teachers or staff members.

Albert

Albert is a 2011 graduate who began college classes at his current school while still in high school. He attended the multimedia afterschool club and also worked at a local television station as an addition to the club. He is attending a university in Tennessee and majoring in video game design. The afterschool multimedia club started as a hobby for him but quickly turned into something he was passionate about. He had never been an excellent student who was overly motivated to excel in an academic sense, but the afterschool programs helped him turn that corner academically. The flexibility and freedom associated with afterschool programs appealed to Albert, since he was not fond of the rigid design of some of his classes during the regular school day. He thought there must continue to be a budget for afterschool programs because he had seen them be extremely helpful to all types of students.

Summer

Summer is an only child who grew up and still lives in her hometown. She is a 2010 graduate who is saving money to hopefully attend college in the future. She was involved in the multimedia afterschool club all four years of high school and also worked at a local television station while in high school. The fact that she was able to choose what she wanted to learn about was her biggest point of emphasis with the afterschool programs. Once she became interested in the filming and videoing aspect associated with the multimedia club, she began to look forward to not only attending the afterschool club but also attending school in general. She had never been an attendance problem, but said she felt like she was more "in-tune" with school once she began regularly attending the afterschool program. The afterschool programs were a positive learning experience in her eyes and could be a great way for all students to experiment with various interests in a more relaxed environment.

Cole

Cole graduated in 2006 and is the participant who has been out of high school the longest amount of time. After high school, Cole graduated from a Tennessee university with a bachelor's degree in business, and he just finished his master's degree from another university in northeast Tennessee. He currently works for that university in the technology department. In high school, he was involved in the afterschool technology club, which included a wide range of activities such as building, repairing, and exploring computers. He thought that afterschool programs could be a great way to draw out students that needed an extra push that they might not be getting at home or maybe just help them fit in to a new clique that might not have previously existed. The afterschool

programs played a giant role in his graduation from high school because they helped shape his path from high school to his current destination.

Anna

Anna is a 2011 graduate who did not move to the high school until her senior year. She now lives in a neighboring county and is expecting her first child. She participated in an afterschool writing club as well as an afterschool music club. Her future aspirations include working towards a career in music. The afterschool programs allowed her the freedom to explore her interests and express herself in ways that had not been possible in the regular school day. She made a wide range of new friends and still has a wide range of positive memories regarding her afterschool programs. The afterschool programs made school fun for her again and made her care more about her schoolwork in an overall sense.

Clint

Clint graduated in 2008 and still lives in his hometown. He is attending a local community college and hopes to be a music teacher in the future. He was an active participant in the afterschool heritage club as well as the afterschool music club. Afterschool programs helped him with a wide range of factors related to social issues. He had been bullied for a number of years at school but felt like afterschool programs curbed the bullying drastically. Graduating from high school was always a good possibility before he began participating in the afterschool clubs, but that possibility became a certainty once he became a more regular attendee to the clubs.

Themes

Three distinct themes presented themselves in the research process. These themes were discovered by the researcher through multiple readings of the interview text during

the immersion process and the appropriate identification and analysis. Each of the following themes directly relates to the research questions and qualitative hermeneutical design of the study:

1. Improved overall self-worth of students

2. Tangible connection between high school and career opportunities

3. Establishment of connections between adults and students

Improved Overall Self-Worth of Students

In order for someone to have a positive self-worth, a person must have respect for himself and a favorable opinion of himself (Miller, 2011). This study exhibited a variety of issues related to this theme such as increased confidence, a wider social net, friends with common interests, and an overall sense of belonging for students who participated in afterschool programs. In some capacity, all the participants involved in the study described a relationship between an increased self-worth and their participation in afterschool programs. This analysis identified the improved overall self-worth for students as the most prevalent theme in the study.

John

John did not move to the school until his junior year and at times felt like an outcast until he started participating in afterschool programs. Bullying was a common occurrence and made him begin to hate the idea of coming to school. He said, "I didn't know anyone, and I just didn't feel like I fit in really. I started getting involved in the afterschool programs, and then it was like my social status went up." This caused an increase in his social confidence which similarly addressed his overall well-being and self-worth. John stated:

The afterschool programs just made me feel better about myself in so many ways. That combined with friends I made because of them was something I just didn't think was possible. They boosted my social confidence, my artistic confidence, and my confidence in my ability to teach."

The afterschool programs were "what I needed in my life, especially to graduate," according to John.

Robert

Robert was able to connect with a large amount of students that he did not normally socialize with through his afterschool computer club. "There was a wide variety because some were in the band, some played sports…just different types of people." These new friends shared some of his interests and this made him more confident and made him more comfortable at the school as a whole. Robert stated:

Making these new friends just made me feel better about myself because I guess I was just a happier person. I met people that I never would have been in contact with on a regular basis and that just helped me know more people who liked the same things that I did.

Robert believed that "afterschool programs made me a better person, and I think they help anyone who participates become a better person."

Heather

Heather termed herself as an at-risk student due to her quitting school for a brief amount of time. When she returned to school her senior year, she was behind on her credits and felt like an outsider due to her time of absence. According to Heather, "Going back after that first month, I seriously wanted to quit because I was 19 and doing school and I shouldn't even be here." She became involved in an afterschool cooking club,

which helped her make new friends, gain confidence, and get back on track to graduate. "I just really got the confidence that I can do this. I didn't need my ex-boyfriend and I didn't have to be in this life that I was headed. I believed this and my new friends were telling me this as well." In the afterschool programs, Heather realized that she was "more than capable and smart enough to succeed," so she continued to push herself to be better. She eventually convinced another student who was in her afterschool club not to quit school and used the lessons she had learned as examples. This would not have been possible before afterschool programs because according to Heather they "brought out qualities I didn't know existed" according to Heather.

Mary

Mary attended an afterschool art program her freshman, junior, and senior years but was unable to attend during her sophomore year of school. She was able to pinpoint specific differences from when she was able to attend such as better grades, being more involved in school, and her overall self-worth. According to Mary:

> The year that I didn't do the afterschool clubs I wasn't really involved with any school stuff and looking back my grades really dropped that year. Also, I just didn't really socialize that much with anybody because I just went through my day at school and then went home every day.

Although Mary did not term herself as an at-risk student, she can easily be placed in that category due to some warning indicators during her sophomore year such as poor attendance, low grades, and lack of social involvement in the school (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). This changed when she returned to the afterschool art club her junior year. According to Mary, "I was able to become more comfortable around people that I might not have known, and this helped me from a social standpoint and even a self-

confidence standpoint." More specifically, her art from the afterschool club was displayed in the library, which caused teachers and students to take note and offer praise. "It was neat to be recognized for things I had done through the afterschool programs and this definitely made me feel better about myself." These compliments from the art further reinforced her self-esteem and self-confidence and continued to shape her identify until she graduated.

Albert

Albert's afterschool multimedia club gave him something to look forward to rather than just "being there." The club also vastly enhanced his social circle because he did not have many friends before he began attending the afterschool club. This was something Albert realized during the interview and stated:

> Truthfully I just never had that many friends growing up and I just never thought how many friends I gained. The multimedia club just brought all these people together, and it just worked. It was nice to hang out with people who shared the same interests as me and it helped me realize that maybe I'm not such a dork.

Another aspect that Albert talked at length about was his current college classes and his confidence level based on his experiences in his afterschool club. "I just feel like I am light years ahead of everybody in my class right now and it's a good feeling to have this confidence that I know what I'm doing." This confidence carried over from high school due to his level of comfort that he has already achieved working with computers, camera angles, graphics engines, etc. in the afterschool club.

Summer

Afterschool clubs improved Summer's self-worth in a variety of ways. She was able to make more friends with common interests, learn more about something that

interested her, and become more involved in the school. She had always had "fair" grades but the multimedia club sparked her interest by providing a hobby that had never previously been presented as an option. The afterschool club also helped Summer's confidence in herself through social interaction. Summer stated:

> Before the club I was quiet and in this little shell and wouldn't talk to anybody or do anything. By actually being in a club, I was sitting there talking to other people with the same interest so it helped me break out of that shell.

The combination of these factors led Summer to have more of "a purpose" while in school instead of just "going through the motions." This purpose caused her to get more out of her time in high school and also gave her more of a sense of direction for the future.

Cole

Cole was able to find his niche in school through the afterschool computer program. He had always had a vast interest in computers but was able to enhance that through the afterschool computer club by experimenting with them around his peers. "It was amazing to watch other people work because I knew things that others didn't, and I was able to explain certain things to them, and it was amazing to watch that understanding happen." The afterschool program also improved his interest in the true academic nature of school because he had not put a maximum amount of effort into his schoolwork until he began the afterschool program. According to Cole, "Being a part of the computer club encouraged me to do better because you were expected to do better in the leadership role I was involved in." This gave Cole a sense of ownership he had not previously felt in the school as a whole, and this carried over into his post high school years. Cole summarized his interview by stating "afterschool programs were a way for

me to grow, and I've definitely grown mentally because of my afterschool program participation." One other facet evident with Cole was recognizing that students like him, who weren't involved in sports or any other activities, were able to take ownership and be proud of something.

Anna

Anna changed schools numerous times growing up due to her family's travels. The afterschool music program helped her in a variety of ways such as making new friends, gaining confidence, and overall having more fun at school. She was given an opportunity to be a leader in the club, and this helped her gain confidence in herself that was lacking. According to Anna, "It really gave me a big confidence boost because I was able to get to where I didn't care so much what people thought." This also led to Anna letting another student in the afterschool music club tutor her in math, and this "would not have been an option" before gaining confidence through the club. Throughout the interview, Anna seemed to realize the role that afterschool programs played in her increased enjoyment in school and increased enjoyment in her life in general. She stated numerous times that she "sometimes thought of all the fun she had with her friends and it makes me smile." This is a wide contrast to where she began at this school because she did not have any friends or connection to the school until she moved there her senior year. She concluded that "Without the afterschool music club, I wouldn't have developed any true friendships and would not have even wanted to come to school anymore," since it was much more difficult to develop these friendships in the structured confines of a normal school day.

Clint

Although Clint had been a lifelong resident of the community, he did not feel completely comfortable with himself until he began to participate in the afterschool music club at the school. He was not comfortable playing music in front of others or talking in a group until his confidence was raised because of his participation in afterschool programs. Clint stated:

I didn't like to play the piano in public because I got made fun of from elementary school on up. But then the music club came along and it was cool all of a sudden and it just really helped my confidence.

He was able to make new friends who were "all interested in the same things," and it made him look forward to coming to school since he did not feel like an outcast anymore. Clint went on to state that: "Afterschool programs brought me out of my shell because I only had a few select people that I talked to at school, but when I started the afterschool program those select few people turned into almost the whole school." This had a ripple effect on him and made him more involved in school and helped him become more focused on his schoolwork.

Summary

The participation in afterschool programs helped all participants feel better about themselves in a variety of ways. Self-worth stood out as a major factor and had a direct relationship with their actions related to school on a wide scale. They became more involved in school, took more interest in their schoolwork, felt more socially relevant, made more friends with common interests, felt more confident, and were generally happier at school. All of these factors related directly to the student's possible success as a whole in school and the likelihood of that student graduating high school.

Tangible Connection between High School and Career Opportunities

One factor regarding high school dropouts presented in Chapter Two cited research that tied high school dropouts to feeling a lack of connection between schoolwork and their future adult life. This present study showed evidence of student success related to students finding a tangible and realistic connection to work in afterschool programs and future career opportunities. The six included participants were found to have a link between afterschool programs and their future path in life. These links were sometimes through self-discovery and other times through valuable hands-on work related to their new interests.

John

John's ultimate goal is to be a teacher, and the afterschool programs allowed him to teach classes based on his artistic and photography interests. He stated:

> I had to go back home and I would come up with my own lessons and I would set the lesson criteria. Then I would actually teach what I came up with, so it was a very, very good experience on the beginnings of teaching.

The afterschool art classes finalized his thoughts related to teaching as a future career because they offered him an outlet to test those planning and leadership skills necessary for the profession. "The experience of getting my feet wet by teaching was an unbelievable bonus." He further benefited from the afterschool environment that allowed him to foster these skills in the more relaxed setting that was more prevalent in the afterschool timeframe.

Robert

Robert had no future aspirations to go to college but now wants to be a computer technician and has taken a certification test related to that goal. He is working to get his

needed certification level, and he would be a first generation college graduate for his entire extended family. Robert said, "I really had no goals whatsoever until I started attending the afterschool computer club. I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life and I honestly didn't really care to find any goals." He stated numerous times how he had no interest whatsoever in computers before he began his afterschool program but once he started working on computers it just "grew on" him, and he came to love it. "It was cool because I basically became an assistant to other students, and I was showing them how to take apart computers and fix things." He could see himself working on computers for "the rest of my life" and knew this would not have been possible without his participation in the afterschool computer club because he had no idea what jobs existed in the computer field. "There is absolutely no way whatsoever that I would have found my love for computers without the afterschool program. I would have never known the jobs and possibilities available if I hadn't participated in the club."

Albert

Albert took a computer class his freshman year in high school and that class initially generated his interest in computers. Now he is in college to be a video game designer. However, afterschool programs related to multimedia helped him make the shift from gaming being a casual hobby into a future career. Albert stated:

The fact is it helped me figure out what kind of career I wanted for the future. I probably wouldn't be in college because I was really just shooting to graduate because a lot of people in my family haven't graduated high school. That was something I was just aiming for. I hadn't ever thought about going.

He started becoming more involved in the afterschool multimedia club and was surprised at how multimedia incorporated so many facets of technology. He said:

I learned how to run a camera, how to set up microphones, how to adjust lighting, how to run the audio board. There were so many things that went into filming something that I had never thought of, and it was pretty cool to bring all that together and actually film something.

Now he is working towards a college degree because of his participation in the multimedia afterschool club. "I would never be in college working on a real career without the club because I probably would have just barely graduated high school and then just tried to scrape by." He went on to say:

The afterschool program helped me a lot because I saw that there was some point in coming to school and learning something that was going to help me later. I gained that interest that I needed because I really didn't care about math or English or anything like that.

Summer

Summer was able to discover that she wanted to work with visual media through her work in afterschool programs. She stated that she now knows "what path I'm taking" due to her experiences in the various multimedia clubs she worked with in her afterschool programs. Being a teacher or a nurse "like everybody else around here" was not something Summer was interested in doing. She said, "I've seen so many people in this town who don't fulfill their potential and settle for the same boring job as everybody else. I told myself I wasn't going to do that." Afterschool programs helped her explore a newfound career and discover an interest that she was not aware she possessed. Her work in the afterschool program led her to a job at a local television station while she was still in high school and further strengthened her desire to work with visual media. "I was a kid in high school and I was working at a television station. I thought it was the coolest

thing and it really started a passion for filming and media in general." She stated that afterschool programs opened her eyes to her career because "I didn't even know about it. I mean, I knew movies were made with cameras, but I never knew the structure of it."

Cole

Cole's afterschool program work in computer building and computer repair offered him the opportunity to teach an afterschool class to fellow students. "I started participating in the program and started showing people how to fix computers, build websites, and do graphic design projects." Teaching computer basics was something he had done casually and informally, but afterschool programs "provided me a vision to make a change in my life." His afterschool computer teachings led him to an internship opportunity and opened new doors in his life by seeing what future goals were attainable. Cole said:

> I think I probably would have ended up getting a technical degree or something to that extent and probably just working at basically a basic IT job. I think I kind of got our and I decided I wanted to get a further degree and I wanted to move on with my life.

Cole now works in a college's technology department as an educator and said he could see a definite connection between afterschool programs, his graduation from high school, and the path to his current career. "I think there is no doubt that I wouldn't have the position I have today without my time in afterschool programs. Once I started, I couldn't stop and it pretty much validated my love for computers."

Clint

Clint's connection to career opportunities through afterschool programs was through a self-discovery he had regarding his afterschool music club. He participated

regularly in a club where students played music and performed, which involved teaching and learning with other students regarding various music topics. "I was in a leadership position in the club and we would make decisions about what we wanted taught and performed." This leadership position helped guide him to a life changing decision regarding his future path in life. Clint said:

It just clicked one day in my afterschool club that I should be a music teacher because I love to teach and I love music. I could see myself doing it because I had basically been doing it already on a small scale.

After that epiphany, he took on even more of a leadership role in the afterschool music club which afforded him more opportunities to practice his future career. Clint said the afterschool club leaders would "get together and discuss what we were going to teach and what we could do to help things come together for our club." He is now in college and majoring in music education. "I really just found my place teaching music in the afterschool program because I finally felt like I finally knew what I wanted to do with my life." His post-high school path would be different if not for his work in the afterschool program, and according to Clint "there is no telling where I would be right now if not for the afterschool programs…probably working a dead end job somewhere."

Summary

Afterschool programs provided these six students with a connection between what was taught and what was actually necessary in the learning process. The students were able to identify a real-world application since these afterschool programs opened doors for them in regards to life after high school. This helped the afterschool participants see the relevance in not only each program, but also school and high school graduation in

general. The afterschool programs made learning more specific to their own learning needs and gave them a sense of ownership in their current and future life path.

It should be noted that three of the participants (Heather, Mary, and Anna) were not included in the career opportunity and connection discussion since they did not show evidence of the respective theme from the interview data. Heather is currently a stay-at-home mom of a one year child and hopes to possibly begin college at a technical school next fall. However, she did not elaborate on this plan and made no follow-up reference related to it. Mary is in college and majoring in history, but since her afterschool experiences consisted of time spent in the afterschool art club, there was no career connection evident. Anna just graduated from high school and is currently pregnant with her first child. Her work with the afterschool music club did inspire her to pursue a career in music. However, she has taken no steps to fulfill that career and therefore a link between the afterschool clubs and her future career could not be established.

Establishment of Connections between Adults and Students

A lack of connection to an adult at the school has been cited in numerous studies (Rumberger & Lim, 2008: Allensworth & Easton, 2007: Bridgeland et al., 2006) on high school dropouts as a contributing factor to a student dropping out of high school. The data of this study through former students' interviews allowed a closer look at how this connection was established through afterschool programs and what role this connection had on the students. Seven of the participants spoke of an adult involved in their particular afterschool program in a highly positive sense, and these participants provided details on how these relationships with adults through afterschool programs affected them in terms of graduating high school.

Heather

Heather felt like she would not have graduated without the afterschool programs and the adults from the programs pushing her to succeed. She stated, "Every time I got down on myself, one of the afterschool teachers was there to lift me up and keep pushing me." She told the story of her afterschool teacher listening to her problems and allowing her to cry on her shoulder and stated that "was the best experience I had with a teacher because of the fact that the teacher was actually trying to bond with a student and trying to help." Since Heather was behind on her credits, the afterschool program teacher was "able to keep an eye on me and watch my progress." This helped her stay motivated to keep working to catch up on her credits and not "slip through the cracks like I would have without my afterschool teacher backing me up." She was thankful that her afterschool teacher was willing to take the time and energy to push her to graduate. "I was so thankful when I walked across that stage and it wouldn't have been possible without adult role models to help me. I needed that guidance because I wasn't getting it from my so-called friends or my family." However, her experience in the afterschool programs allowed her to "experience a new family" that had her best interests at heart.

Mary

Mary still has a strong relationship with her former afterschool teacher. She still sometimes comes to visit her during afterschool hours at the school and help her and her afterschool students in the various art projects with the club. "I still come back sometimes and just sit in her room and just let her know how I'm doing." While in high school, Mary did not have a great support system at home and was able to get that support from her teacher during the afterschool hours. She stated, "I had someone to confide in, and I felt like I could tell her things about me being bullied or feeling bad

about myself." This made her feel more comfortable around all adults in general and helped her feel like she could trust adults to look out for her best interests in school and in life. "I started to realize that I could trust adults and that they could help you and weren't always out to get you." She "felt better around adults" since she was able to make that connection to her afterschool teacher that differed so greatly from her previous experiences with teachers in a formal classroom setting. "My teachers just always seemed like they only cared about themselves and their class. I think I just misunderstood the situation since I was able to see the difference in the afterschool clubs."

Albert

Albert was in his afterschool teacher's class during the regular school day each year, but he was able to form a bond with that teacher in the afterschool hours. "I had Mr. Benson (pseudonym) as a teacher but didn't really get to know him that well until I began attending his afterschool club." By spending numerous hours working in the multimedia club, Albert began to recognize this bond and the factors associated with it. Albert stated:

> I had never had a teacher put in so many extra hours for me and my interests. He taught me things that I wanted to learn about cameras and angles and even found me a job at the TV station.

Albert took school more seriously from that point and realized that the teacher "saw potential in me to succeed and make a career out of this." This gave Albert a long-term goal that had been missing and offered him an incentive to take his schoolwork more seriously from that point forward. "I had never had an adult take interest in me for no reason other than he wanted to. That wasn't what I was used to being around." He

"didn't want to disappoint" the teacher who had invested so much time and effort into Albert's life and as a result continued to work hard to be successful in his class and his club. "It ultimately came down to me wanting to work hard for him because he worked hard for me when he didn't have to. I have so much respect for what he did and what he's still doing."

Summer

Summer came from a single family home where her father had never been a part of her life. "I basically never had a dad or anyone who acted like my dad in my life." She felt like her afterschool program gave her a chance to connect with her teacher as "almost a fatherly figure." She was able to ask him advice on certain topics and confide to him when she had a problem. Summer stated:

> Mr. Winder (pseudonym) listened to my problems and tried to help me work
>
> through things. The time we were able to spend working afterschool was
>
> something that I will never forget because he wanted me to learn and I knew he
>
> cared about me at the same time.

Her grades improved because she felt like she could talk to her afterschool program teacher if she needed help in a certain subject or with a certain problem from her schoolwork. "He kept me on the right track in school I became a better student in all my classes." This relationship was strengthened further when the afterschool teacher found her a job. She stated, "He actually found me a job which told me that he's trying to help all of us be better. He helped us all, and I wanted to succeed because of that." The newfound work-ethic helped transform her into a better overall student and improved her odds of graduating tremendously according to her. "I think there is no doubt that our relationship increased my odds of graduating."

Cole

Cole felt like the adult involved in his afterschool program inspired and encouraged him to not settle for the easy path that might be available for his life. He was chosen to participate in an internship related to his afterschool program activities in the computer club but was unsure if he wanted to accept the invitation. "Looking back it should have been an easy choice, but there was that fear of the unknown. I decided to turn to Mr. Swanson (pseudonym) since he had helped me so much before." He asked his afterschool teacher for advice and was told that he "needed to do this and shouldn't turn down such a great opportunity. So definitely he's the one that pushed me in a certain direction by encouraging me." Cole felt like he would not have been comfortable asking another teacher for advice other than his afterschool teacher based on the connection they had formed while in the afterschool program. Cole stated:

He was somebody that I had built trust with and I respected his opinion as much as anyone. We had worked together and had formed a bond. It's almost embarrassing to talk about but I look up to him so much because of what he led me to do.

Without the advice of his afterschool teacher, he probably would not have taken the internship which led him down the path to his current success. Cole believed the afterschool program teacher "changed my life because I respected his opinion and what he told me," and that helped him to make the best decision for his future endeavors.

Anna

Anna credited the bonds she formed with her afterschool music teacher with changing her outlook on life and her opinion of herself. "I finally had a teacher on my side it seemed like and it was a good feeling." Her self-esteem had always been low due

to a combination of constantly changing schools and a physical disability. "I moved a lot growing up and at each school I had to start over with new friends. Since I was also a little different, it was hard." Anna felt this began to change once she became involved in the afterschool music club and witnessed adult and student interaction in a different light. "Once I started going to the afterschool club I started to like school again and that was something I hadn't been able to say since I first started elementary school." Anna said her afterschool teacher "tried to help everyone. Not just me in particular, but he helped us all, and this was something I wasn't used to from an adult." This gave her the sense that someone cared for her and her success in general. She stated, "The bond I made with Mr. Terry (pseudonym) was phenomenal because he was always there to help when I needed him, whether it was a problem with music, with school, or with life in general." The afterschool teacher helped her make a CD of her music and continues to be a source of help even after Anna has graduated from high school. "I can't imagine how my senior year would have turned out if not for my afterschool music club and the connection I made with Mr. Terry."

Clint

As mentioned earlier, Clint had some issues in high school regarding self-esteem and playing music in front of others. He was able to get past those issues, but did not feel that would have been possible without the guidance from his afterschool music teacher. "There is no way I would be in college right now to be a music teacher if it wasn't for her." Clint said that his afterschool teacher told him that "a lot of guys played the piano and I shouldn't be afraid to do what I love. She said to just go out there and play and have fun and that's what I started to do." The courage to play in front of others was the springboard to solving his self-worth issues, and Clint recognized the effect that his

teacher had on his life. "She's a motherly type of person who I just knew had my back, and I listened to her because of that." This connection became stronger over his time in the afterschool music club and continues to this day, with Clint stopping by the afterschool club occasionally to play the piano. "It's funny because she couldn't get me to play before, but now she can't get me to stop. I really just enjoy seeing her and letting her see me being successful and happy."

Summary

The seven participants mentioned in this section were able to form a lasting connection with their respective afterschool teacher. This helped the participants deal with the various amounts of adversity that presented itself to these high school students over the course of their four years. As a result, these students strengthened their educational resiliency (Rouse et al., 2001) and increased the odds of staying in school, since these adult bonds were formed through their afterschool programs (Huang et al., 2011). The participants used these afterschool teachers as a source of adult guidance to help them work through certain problems that might have caused students without an adult connection to drop out of school. These connections also strengthened the overall trust level that these students had for adults by allowing them to see their teachers in a non-formal setting that allowed them to show a more humanistic side to the learning process.

It should be noted for this theme involving adult connections that two participants were not included in the discussion since there was no evidence of this adult connection within their data. Neither John nor Robert displayed clear evidence that a clear adult connection had been formed through afterschool programs. An adult was briefly

mentioned by each in their interviews, but there was no substantial evidence that presented itself through the research relating to the adult connection theme.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This study focused on the role afterschool programs played on students who had graduated high school. A hermeneutical phenomenological research design was implemented with this qualitative study in order to gain more vivid data by focusing on how and why these afterschool programs played a role in students graduating high school. This design allowed the researcher to interpret the lived experiences of the students' time spent in an afterschool program. Purposeful sampling was used in order to give the researcher access to students who had already expressed the belief that afterschool programs had affected them in a positive way. An in-depth interview was conducted with each of the nine participants that utilized the open-ended and conversational aspects consistent with the hermeneutical phenomenological design.

Summary

That afterschool programs played a role in the participants' graduation from high school was a given since the participants were purposefully selected for the study. However, it was unknown how significant that role would be and to what extent it affected them over the course of the time that was spent concurrently in high school and an afterschool program. The best summary of the research findings would be to recap the themes that were uncovered.

The most significant theme uncovered in the research process involved the reasoning behind the increase of a student's self-worth due to the participation in an afterschool program. Previous research indicated that afterschool program involvement improved student's interpersonal skills, relationships with peers, and their sense of belonging at the school (Hammond & Reimer, 2006). However, the research from this study provided evidence that this theme of an increased self-worth had a ripple effect on

87

everything from the students' grades to their overall involvement in school. This ripple effect linked to their eventual graduation because each student either expressed directly or indirectly the influence that afterschool programs had on their path to high school graduation through this increased self-worth. This influence centered on positives associated with their increased inner confidence and the many factors associated with having a sense of belonging in the world and at the school. This sense of belonging is a major contributor to students staying in school (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

The connection between high school and career opportunities was a surprising theme that emerged during the data analysis. Previous research concluded that students were more likely to drop out if they felt there was no connection or underlying reason to focus on their current schoolwork and life after high school (Bridgeland et al., 2006). This connection and, more specifically, its magnitude had not been considered by the researcher for this study prior to beginning the research. However, it was more than evident that this theme was a factor in the role that afterschool programs had on students graduating from high school. Most of the participants had no idea what they wanted to do with their life after graduation, but the afterschool programs in which they participated gave them a link to their post-secondary future. There was a direct link for some of the participants, while others described a journey of self-discovery that linked their career path to their participation with afterschool programs. This connection that was formed between afterschool programs, a future career, and high school graduation were each intertwined and directly related to one another according to the participants in this study. The programs provided a sense of relevance that was related to the students' high school time and post-secondary future, and this sense of relevance made them more likely stay

in school, stay motivated, and take advantage of their educational opportunities (Huang et al., 2011).

The theme regarding the connection of a student to an adult was the easiest to identify based on the researcher's previous knowledge regarding high school dropout literature, as well as a number of studies that stated this point (Bridgeland et al., 2006: Allensworth & Easton, 2007: Chapman et al., 2011). However, the hermeneutical phenomenological design of this study allowed each participant to discuss and explain this theme in a more precise manner. Seven participants involved in the study gave an in-depth testimonial regarding this connection and the role it played on high school graduation. These adult connections that were formed continue to this day for all of these participants and have given each of them an adult mentor who they hold in high esteem. The lack of an adult connection in school is another major indicator regarding possible future dropouts that could have affected these students (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). Most of the participants did not have a proactive support system in place that included an adult so these adult connections filled a large void in their lives. That void had been a major factor for the participants, and this connection that formed while they were in high school caused each of them to view the school and all the adults in the school in a higher esteem.

Limitations

This study interpreted the role that afterschool programs had on graduating high school for these nine students through an interview process. As with any study, this study had certain limitations that were present in the research. A number of different factors could present an emergence of alternate themes in future studies.

For example, this study included five males and four females. A study including all males or all females might produce a different overall result with the research. This gender specific study might shed light on the lack of female consistency in the career theme.

Another factor to consider that could change the results of the study might be the location of the school involved in the study. This study included a school in a rural area with a high rate of poverty. An urban or middle-class suburban area might produce alternate results. Also, the income level of the surrounding community might be another factor that could influence the data.

The results of this study were based on the responses of public school students. Students from private schools might produce different challenges to staying in school than their public school counterparts. The review of literature section focused solely on public school research and terminology so private school educators might find little merit in the results of this study.

Race was not considered as a factor in the researcher's results. All the participants in the study were Caucasian so there was no analysis regarding the ethnicity of the results. There could be no diversity among the results because that diversity did not exist in the research. A study involving multiple races might uncover a variety of other themes not discovered in this study.

The students in this study participated in an afterschool program that was club oriented instead of academic oriented. In other words, the afterschool program was not designed to focus solely on skills remediation or skills enhancement. The students in this study participated in afterschool programs designed around clubs at their school. An

academic based afterschool program might produce different responses from the students involved the study.

Another limitation to consider involved the researcher's experience with interviews and the research process as a whole. The researcher had no experience conducting interviews related to phenomenological research. Another researcher with more experience conducting this type of research might have been more effective extrapolating the data from the participants.

Implications

The most simplistic implication of this study involves helping more students graduate high school. The study produced the following three themes related to the role that afterschool programs had on students graduating high school: improved self-worth of students, tangible connection between high school and career opportunities, and the establishment of connections between adults and students. These themes should be recognized by schools that are struggling to keep students from dropping out of school. The study gives a glimpse into the thoughts of students in a real-world setting and schools should be able to use this data to better recognize future dropouts.

Another implication for educators should be to put more emphasis on afterschool programs in a high school setting. State and federal standards are mandating that more of an emphasis should be placed on not only graduating from high school, but also transitioning quickly to a college or career (Wallis, 2008). Afterschool programs should be used more as a bridge between high school and the student's post-secondary future based on the results of this study. This study provides data from former students that provide examples of this post-secondary bridge being utilized successfully in an afterschool setting.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study was designed to try and determine the role that afterschool programs played in students graduating high school through interpretations of their lived experiences. The study produced data and results related to the research questions. However, as with any study, there are a wide variety of avenues that could be explored in the future based on the results of this study.

Based on the limitations of the study, it would be interesting to see if changing the demographics of this study would yield substantially different results. These future studies could focus on parameters such as gender, race, socioeconomic factors, or students with disabilities. Results from these studies could provide a wider net of data and give educators the opportunity to see if the results are consistent across various demographic indicators.

Another recommendation for future researchers would be to focus on geography as it relates to the tax base and income status of the participants' families. This study included a school from a rural area with a low tax base. A future study from an affluent or urban area could be easily replicated based on this study's design. Once again, this would give educators a wider net to see if results from the current study are consistent across social statuses and income levels.

This study showed evidence of a substantial link between postsecondary opportunities and high school graduation. The participants were able to form connections between their afterschool programs and possible future careers, which gave relevance to the general concept of school. This connection needs to be explored on a deeper level in order to better capture this link. This study only scratched the surface on this factor, and

a study that focused solely on this connection between future career opportunities and afterschool programs should be considered.

One aspect that was noted by researcher relating to the themes involved the female participation in the career connection theme. The three participants that did not show evidence of a connection to their future career and afterschool programs were all females. Future research could focus on this aspect and help schools make sure that female career opportunities in schools and afterschool programs is sufficient for all female students.

Another intriguing study would be a longitudinal study that followed a group of students from the time they entered high school until they had been out of high school a few years. This would present a large amount of data over an increased time span. However, a study of this type would be very difficult to conduct based on a large amount of uncontrollable factors such as students changing schools, recording and cataloging such a large amount of data, and the commitment necessary to implement the study. Also, the purposeful selection process implemented in the current study would be impossible to replicate due to the fact that students entering high school would have no idea if afterschool programs are going to influence their future graduation. However, a longitudinal study of some capacity that might build upon the results of the current study could provide a larger picture of how afterschool programs play a role in students graduating high school.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine what role afterschool programs had on students graduating high school. The study attempted to offer a new viewpoint to the existing dropout prevention and afterschool program literature by exploring the in-depth

perspectives and experiences of high school graduates who participated in an afterschool program. This study was needed based on the literature gap that existed in regards to the personal thoughts of students and the role of afterschool programs on these students graduating from high school. The results of this study highlighted the continued emphasis that needs to be placed on helping students graduate with the help of afterschool programs. The qualitative design utilized in this study allowed a more personal approach to the research process than most quantitative studies were able to provide and took advantage of former students thoughts based on their lived experiences. Most students need some form of extra support, and these afterschool programs provided a logical link for the students in this study as evidenced by the three themes that were discovered in the research process. These themes provided evidence on how afterschool programs had a specific impact on their graduation from high school. I hope the results of this study will be used by educators to help explore avenues to help students not only graduate but also thrive as productive members of society.

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APPENDICES
Appendix A: Questionnaire

Role of Afterschool Programs on Students Graduating High School: A Focus on Lived Experiences

Dear Former Student:

I am a student at Liberty University and I am conducting a research study on afterschool programs and their role in students who have graduated from high school. I am looking to determine how and why afterschool programs influenced students. This will be accomplished through an in-depth interview process with former graduates who participated in an afterschool program.

The afterschool program director at your former high school indicated to me that you participated in an afterschool program prior to graduating high school. As you know, this participation in an afterschool program makes you eligible to participate in my study concerning afterschool programs and students graduating high school. Thank you for returning the consent form and agreeing to participate in this questionnaire related to the study.

Please answer the following questions in order to determine your eligibility in the study:

1. What year did you graduate high school?

2. Did you participate in your high school's afterschool program?

3. Do you believe there is a relationship between students graduating high school and participating in afterschool program?

4. Did participating in an afterschool program help you graduate high school?

5. Would you be willing to participate in two interviews regarding the role of afterschool programs and students graduating high school?

6. In this interview, would you also be willing to discuss your personal experiences in afterschool programs and how they helped you graduate?

7. Are you willing to participate in this study? A detailed consent form will be sent at a later date and you can decide not to participate at any time.

8. If you are willing to participate, please list your contact info (name, address, phone, email.)

Thank you for considering this request,

Jason Bell

Appendix B: Site Consent Form

Dear Director of Schools:

As a graduate student of Liberty University's School of Education, I am requesting your approval for a research project. The study will be looking to see what role afterschool programs have on students graduating high school. I will be required to do the following:

1.   Interview seven former students with questions related to afterschool programs and graduation.

If you are willing to have your district participate in this project, please provide me with written authorization on your district's letterhead. I will provide copies of your letter to interviewees to assure them that you are aware and approve of the study.

You may also contact my dissertation committee chair, Dr. Ralph Marino, at rmarino@liberty.edu for any additional information regarding my study.

Thank you for considering this request.

Sincerely,

Jason Bell

Appendix C: Site Consent Form

Dear Administrator:

As a graduate student of Liberty University's School of Education, I am requesting your approval for a research project. The study will be looking to see what role afterschool programs have on students graduating high school. I will be required to do the following:

1. Interview seven former students with questions related to afterschool programs and graduation.

If you are willing to have your school participate in this project, please provide me with written authorization on your school's letterhead. I will provide copies of your letter to interviewees to assure them that you are aware and approve of the study.

You may also contact my dissertation committee chair, Dr. Ralph Marino, at rmarino@liberty.edu for any additional information regarding my study.

Thank you for considering this request.

Sincerely,

Jason Bell

Appendix D: Consent Form

Role of Afterschool Programs on Students Graduating High School: A Focus on Lived Experiences

Christopher Jason Bell
Liberty University
School of Education

Dear Former Student:

You are invited to be in a research study of the role of afterschool programs on students graduating high school. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a recent graduate who participated in an afterschool program. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Christopher Jason Bell, Liberty University Department of Education

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to better understand the role of afterschool programs on students graduating high school. The researcher is looking to determine how and why afterschool programs influenced students. This will be accomplished through an in-depth interview process with former graduates who participated in an afterschool program.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:
- Complete a questionnaire that will be mailed to your home. The questionnaire will contain questions regarding your interest in the study and should take between 5-10 minutes to complete.
- Participate in one interview at Copper Basin High School. This interview will be audio and video recorded for review and should last between 30-60 minutes. Not everyone who completes a questionnaire will be able to participate in the study due to the design parameters of the study.
- Also, it is possible that you might be contacted again via phone or email for a few follow-up questions. This will not be necessary for every participant, but these follow-up questions might be needed for clarification purposes. These follow-up questions would take between 5-10 minutes.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

There is minimal risk to you in this research study, and great care will be taken to ensure the confidentiality of each participant.

The benefits of the study involve providing quality data that might provide a better understanding of strategies to help students graduate high school.

Compensation:

Participants will receive a $25 gift card in order to compensate them for their time committed to the study and the research process as a whole.

Confidentiality:

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

The analyzing of the data will be conducted with pseudonyms in order to protect the identity of the participants. The participants' contact information, audio recordings, video recordings, and all other data will be stored in a locked file cabinet as well as a password protected laptop. Only the researcher will have access to this data. All materials related to the participants and the study's data collection will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study**.**

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 Copper Basin High School. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time with out affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Christopher Jason Bell. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at 706-455-2394 or cjbell3@liberty.edu. You may also contact Dr. Ralph Marino at Liberty University at 607-795-2404 or rmarino@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, Dr. Fernando Garzon, Chair, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1582, Lynchburg, VA 24502 or email at fgarzon@liberty.edu.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep 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.

{[   ]
Initial

Check One

[]   ] I agree that I would like to be contacted about participating in an interview and the study as a whole.
[]   ] I would not like to participate in the study and do not wish to be contacted regarding the study.

Check One

[   ] I give my consent to have my voice recorded during the interview process.
[   ] I would not like my voice recorded during the study and realize that this excludes me from participating in the study.

Signature:_____   Date:_____

Signature of Investigator:_____
         Date:_____

Appendix E: Possible Interview Questions

Possible interview questions are as follows:

1. Tell me about yourself: family, age, school/work, etc.

2. Tell me about your overall high school experience.

3. What aspect of the school's afterschool program did you participate in? Describe the program.

4. Why was it important for you to graduate high school?

5. How were afterschool programs a positive for you?

6. Can you think of a specific instance or instances where afterschool programs impacted you academically? Socially?

7. How did the afterschool program help you become more involved in school?

8. How did the afterschool program allow you to connect more to the school and the adults in the school?

9. How would you describe the experience of participating in an afterschool program?

10. Tell me about the role afterschool programs played in you graduating high school.

11. At any time in high school, were you in danger of not graduating (an at-risk student)? Did afterschool programs change this status?

12. Did participating in the afterschool program make you a better overall student? Person?

13. Is there anything else you want to add or want to clarify about afterschool programs and their role on you graduating high school?

Appendix F: IRB Application

I. APPLICATION INSTRUCTIONS

- To submit a protocol, complete each section of this form and email it and any accompanying materials (i.e. consent forms and instruments) to irb@liberty.edu. For more information on what to submit and how, please see our website at: www.liberty.edu/irb. Please note that we can only accept our forms in Microsoft Word format.
- In addition, please submit one signed copy of the fourth page of the protocol form, which is the Investigator's Agreement. Also submit the second page if a departmental signature is required for your study. Signed materials can be submitted by mail, fax (434-522-0506), or email (scanned document to irb@liberty.edu). Signed materials can also be submitted via regular mail or in person to our office: Campus North, Suite 1582.
- Please be sure to use the grey form fields to complete this document; do not change the format of the application. You are able to move quickly through the document by using the "Tab" key.
- **Note: Applications with the following problems will be returned immediately for revisions: 1) Grammar/spelling/punctuation errors, 2) A lack of professionalism (lack of consistency/clarity) on the application itself or any supporting documents, 3) Incomplete applications. Failure to minimize these errors will cause delays in your processing time.**

II. BASIC PROTOCOL INFORMATION

Protocol Title: **Role of an Afterschool Program on Students Graduating High School: A Focus on Lived Experiences**

Principal Investigator (PI): **Christopher Jason Bell**

Professional Title: **Principal**   School/Department: **Polk County High School**

Mailing Address: **310 Covenant Drive Cleveland, TN 37323**

Telephone: **706-455-2394**   LU Email: **cjbell3@liberty.edu**

Check all that apply: ☐ Faculty ☒ Graduate Student ☐ Undergraduate Student ☐ Staff

This research is for: ☐ Class Project ☐ Master's Thesis ☒ Doctoral Dissertation

☐ Faculty Research ☐ Other (describe):

Have you defended and passed your dissertation proposal? ☐ Yes ☒ No ☐ N/A

If no, what is your defense date?

Faculty Advisor: **Dr. Ralph Marino, Jr.**

School/Department: **Assistant Professor & Instructional Mentor**

Telephone: **607-795-2404**   LU Email: **rmarino@liberty.edu**

Non-key Personnel:

Name and Title:

School/Department:

Telephone: LU Email:

Consultants:

Name and Title: **Dr. Jared Bigham: Adjunct Professor**
                Dr. Kim Conley: Adjunct Professor

School/Department: **Education**

Telephone: **706-455-0200**
           229-318-9094   LU Email: **jbigham@liberty.edu**
                                                            gkconley@liberty.edu

Liberty University Participants:
Do you intend to use LU students, staff, or faculty as participants in your study? If you do not intend to use LU participants in your study, please indicate "no" and proceed to the section titled "Funding Source."
If yes, please list the department and classes you hope to enlist, and the number of participants you would like to enroll.

☒ No   ☐ Yes

Department   Class(es)

In order to process your request to use LU participants, we must ensure that you have contacted the appropriate department and gained permission to collect data from them. Please obtain the original signature of the department chair in order to verify this.

Signature of **Department Chair**   Date

Funding Source: If research is funded please provide the following:

Grant Name (or name of the funding source):

Funding Period (month/year):

Grant Number:

Anticipated start and completion dates for collecting and analyzing data: **May 2012-July 2012**

III. OTHER STUDY MATERIALS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Does this project call for (more detail will be required later):

Use of voice, video, digital, or image recordings?	☒ Yes ☐ No
Participant compensation?	☒ Yes ☐ No
Advertising for participants?	☐ Yes ☒ No
More than minimal psychological stress?	☐ Yes ☒ No
Confidential material (questionnaires, photos, etc.)?	☐ Yes ☒ No
Extra costs to the participants (tests, hospitalization, etc.)?	☐ Yes ☒ No
The inclusion of pregnant women?	☐ Yes ☒ No
More than minimal risk? *	☐ Yes ☒ No
Alcohol consumption?	☐ Yes ☒ No
Waiver of Informed Consent?	☒ Yes ☐ No
The use of protected health information (obtained from healthcare practitioners or institutions?	☐ Yes ☒ No
VO2 Max Exercise?	☐ Yes ☒ No
The use of blood?	☐ Yes ☒ No
Total amount of blood	
Over time period (days)	
The use of rDNA or Biohazardous materials?	☐ Yes ☒ No
The use of human tissue or cell lines?	☐ Yes ☒ No
The use of other fluids that could mask the presence of blood (including urine and feces)?	☐ Yes ☒ No
The use of an **Investigational New Drug (IND) or an Approved Drug for an Unapproved Use?**	☐ Yes ☒ No Drug name, IND number, and company:
The use of an **Investigational Medical Device or an Approved Medical Device for an Unapproved Use?**	☐ Yes ☒ No Device name, IDE number, and company:
The use of **Radiation or Radioisotopes?**	☐ Yes ☒ No

Minimal risk is defined as "the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests." [45 CFR 46.102(i)]

IV. INVESTIGATOR AGREEMENT & SIGNATURE PAGE

BY SIGNING THIS DOCUMENT, THE INVESTIGATOR AGREES:
1. That no participants will be recruited or entered under the protocol until the Investigator has received the final approval or exemption email from the Chair of the Institutional Review Board.
2. That no participants will be recruited or entered under the protocol until all key personnel for the project have been properly educated on the protocol for the study.
3. That any modifications of the protocol or consent form will not be initiated without prior written approval, by email, from the IRB and the faculty advisor, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazards to the participants.
4. The PI agrees to carry out the protocol as stated in the approved application: all participants will be recruited and consented as stated in the protocol approved or exempted by the IRB. If written consent is required, all participants will be consented by signing a copy of the approved consent form.
5. That any unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others participating in the approved protocol, which must be in accordance with the Liberty Way (and/or the Honor Code) and the Confidentiality Statement, will be promptly reported in writing to the IRB.
6. That the IRB office will be notified within 30 days of a change in the PI for the study.
7. That the IRB office will be notified within 30 days of the completion of this study.
8. That the PI will inform the IRB and complete all necessary reports should he/she terminate University Association.
9. To maintain records and keep informed consent documents for **three years** after completion of the project, even if the PI terminates association with the University.
10. That he/she has access to copies of 45 CFR 46 and the Belmont Report.

_____   _____   _____

Principal Investigator (Printed)   Principal Investigator (Signature)   Date

FOR STUDENT PROPOSALS ONLY

BY SIGNING THIS DOCUMENT, THE FACULTY ADVISOR AGREES:
1. To assume responsibility for the oversight of the student's current investigation, as outlined in the approved IRB application.
2. To work with the investigator, and the Institutional Review Board, as needed, in maintaining compliance with this agreement.
3. That the Principal Investigator is qualified to perform this study.
4. **That by signing this document you verify you have carefully read this application and approve of the procedures described herein, and also verify that the application complies with all instructions listed above.** If you have any questions, please contact our office (irb@liberty.edu).

Dr. Ralph Marino, Jr.   Dr. Ralph Marino, Jr.   April 29, 2012
_____   _____   _____
Faculty Advisor (Printed)   Faculty Advisor (Original Signature)   Date

*The Institutional Review Board reserves the right to terminate this study at any time if, in its opinion, (1) the risks of further experimentation are prohibitive, or (2) the above agreement is breached.

V. PURPOSE

1. **Purpose of the Research.** Write an original, brief, non-technical description of the purpose of your project. Include in your description: Your research hypothesis or question, a narrative that explains the major constructs of your study, and how the data will advance your research hypothesis or question. This section should be easy to read for someone not familiar with your academic discipline.

   The purpose of this study is to determine the role of an afterschool program on students graduating high school. The following questions will guide this study:
   1.   What role did afterschool programs play in students who graduated from a high school that incorporated the program?
   2.   More specifically, how do students describe their lived experience of participating in afterschool programs and graduating high school?
   The focus of the research will be to describe the lived experiences of students who participated in an afterschool program and successfully graduated high school. The study will attempt to offer a new viewpoint to the existing dropout prevention and afterschool program literature by exploring the in-depth interview responses of high school graduates.The study will include seven students who recently graduated high school and participated in a school's afterschool program. A qualitative design will be used with hermeneutical phenomenology being the focus in order for the researcher to highlight and interpret the lived experiences of the participants. Data will be collected through interviews with recent graduates. The researcher's field notes will also be used as a data collection procedure. The researcher will analyze the data by coding the transcribed interviews and specifically identifying common themes regarding the experience of afterschool programs and the role after school programs have on graduating high school students.

VI. PARTICIPANT INCLUSION/EXCLUSION CRITERIA

1. **Population.** From where/whom will the data be collected? Address each area in non-scientific language:
   a. The inclusion criteria for the participant population including gender, age ranges, ethnic background, heath status and any other applicable information. *Provide a rationale for targeting this population.*
   b. The exclusion criteria for participants
   c. Explain the rationale for the involvement of any special population {Examples: children, specific focus on ethnic populations, mentally retarded, lower socio-economic status, prisoners}.
   d. Provide the maximum number of participants you seek approval to enroll from all participant populations you intend to use and justify the sample size. You will not be approved to enroll a number greater than this. If, at a later time, it becomes apparent you need to increase your sample size, you will need to submit a Change in Protocol Form.
   e. **For NIH, federal, or state-funded protocols only:** Researchers sometimes believe their particular project is not appropriate for certain types of participants. These may include, for example: women, minorities, and children. If you believe your project should not include one or more of these groups, please provide your justification for their exclusion. Your justification will be reviewed according to the applicable NIH, federal, or state guidelines.

The research will be conducted at a high school that incorporates an afterschool program. The site was chosen due to a variety of reasons. The school is in the same geographic region as the researcher so accessibility to information is more prevalent. This allows the research to take place at a school which will give the researcher greater accessibility in the research process. Also, the school has a similar type of afterschool program as the researcher's school so familiarity with the strategies and management aspects of the program will be helpful in the

study. One final aspect in terms of rational for the site is that, like the researcher's, the chosen school is in Tennessee which will keep educational terminology more closely aligned. Participants must be former students who have graduated, participated in the afterschool program, completed the survey, and expressed an interest to further discuss the lived experience of afterschool programs and their relationship to high school graduation. Each participant will read and sign a consent form based on a phenomenological design which will include such information as the purpose of the study, the procedures for the study, the data collection process, confidentiality information, and information about their right to withdraw at any time from the study (Van Manen, 1990).

2. **Types of Participants.** Check all that apply:

☒ Normal Volunteers (Age 18-65)
☐ Minors (under age 18)
☐ Over age 65
☐ University Students
☐ Inpatients
☐ Outpatients
☐ Patient Controls
☐ Fetuses
☐ Cognitively Disabled
☐ Physically Disabled
☐ Pregnant Women
☐ Participants Incapable of Giving Consent
☐ Prisoners or Institutional Individuals
☐ Other Potentially Elevated Risk Populations

VII.   RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS

1. **Contacting Participants.** Describe in detail *how* you will contact participants regarding this study. Please provide all materials used to contact participants in this study. These materials could include letters, emails, flyers, advertisements, etc. If you will contact participants verbally, please provide a script that outlines what you will say to participants.

These students will be purposefully chosen for the study using a questionnaire examining their thoughts on afterschool programs and the program's role in their graduation from high school. The program director of the afterschool program at the selected site will narrow the field of possible participants by only allowing the researcher to send the questionnaire to those former students who were most likely positively influenced by afterschool programs. The questionnaire will be mailed to the homes of the former students and returned to the researcher via a self-addressed envelope. The addresses of the possible participants will be received from the program director of the afterschool program. The seven students used in the study will be selected from returned questionnaires that fulfill the requirements of the study.

2. **Location of Recruitment.** Describe the location, setting, and timing of recruitment.

The recruitment will be based on the questionnaires returned by the high school graduates who are interested in participating in the study. The researcher will allow a two-week time frame for the recruitment process to be completed.

3. **Screening Procedures.** Describe any screening procedures you will use when recruiting your participant population.

Participants must be former students who have graduated, participated in the afterschool program, completed the survey, and expressed an interest to further discuss the lived experience of afterschool programs and their relationship to high school graduation. The demographic information of the students involved in this study will be random in nature since demographic specifics cannot be controlled with this sample group.

4. **Relationships.** State the relationship between the Principal Investigator, Faculty Advisor (if applicable) and Participants. Do any of the researchers have positions of authority over the participants, such as grading authority, professional authority, etc.? Are there any relevant financial relationships? If yes, please answer number 5 below.

The school the researcher is using in the study is the researcher's alma mater. However, the researcher has not lived in the area for 15 years and does not expect to have any preexisting relationship with any of the students involved in the study. If a relationship is discovered, that former student will be excluded from the study.

5. **Safeguarding for Conflicts of Interest.** What safeguards are in place to reduce the likelihood of compromising the integrity of the research? (Examples: Addressing the conflicts in the consent process, emphasizing the pre-existing relationship will not be impacted by participation in research, etc.).

It will be important for the researcher to clearly state this personal bias when the research begins in order to achieve full disclosure before interpretations of the experiences begin. This personal bias will be controlled by using interviews, but the researcher's personal beliefs can never truly be separated from the actual hermeneutical interpretations (Gall et al., 2007). The researcher will use bracketing to set aside, as far as humanly possible, all preconceived experiences about afterschool programs role on students graduating high school during the early stages of the research process. This will help the researcher best understand the experiences of all the participants in order to help combat bias and ensure the trustworthiness of the study (Creswell, 2007). .

VIII. RESEARCH PROCEDURES

1. **Description of the Research.** Write an original, non-technical, step-by-step description of what your participants will be required to do during your study and data collection process. Do not copy the abstract/entire contents of your proposal. (*Describe all steps the participants will follow. What do the data consist of? Include a description of any media use here, justifying why it is necessary to use it to collect data*). The partipants will be required to complete three steps during the research process:
1. The participants will complete a written questionnaire that is mailed to the researcher.
2. The participants will participate in an in-depth interview with the researcher. The interview will be audio and video recorded for validity purposes.
3. The participants will participate in a follow-up interview that will be shorter in length than the original interview. Once again, the interview will be audio and video recorded for validity purposes.

*Also, please submit one copy of all instruments, surveys, interview questions or outlines, observation checklists, etc. to irb@liberty.edu with this application.

2. **Location of the Study.** Please describe the location in which the study will be conducted (Be specific; include city and state). **The study will be conducted at Copper Basin High School in Ducktown, Tennessee.**

3. Will participant data be collected anonymously? Describe.

   no

IX.   DATA ANALYSIS

1. Estimated number of participants to be enrolled in this protocol or sample size for archival data: **7**
2. Describe what will be done with the data and resulting analysis: **A composite description of the phenomenon based on the data analysis will represent the culminating aspect of the study. This data will be published within a dissertation that will be submitted to Liberty University for final approval.**

X.   PROCESS OF OBTAINING INFORMED CONSENT

1. **Consent Procedures.** Describe in detail how you will obtain consent from participants and/or parents/guardians. Attach a copy of all Informed Consent/Assent Agreements. The IRB needs to ensure participants are properly informed and are participating in a voluntary manner. *Consider these areas: amount of time spent with participants, privacy, appropriateness of individual obtaining consent, participant comprehension of the informed consent procedure, and adequate setting.* For a consent template and information on informed consent, please see our website. If you believe your project qualifies for a Waiver of Consent, note that here, go to section XV, and answer its questions. **All participants will sign the consent form that details the research and the research process used in the study.**

2. **Deception.** Are there any aspects of the study kept secret from the participants (e.g. the full purpose of the study)?

   a. ☒ No (Skip to #3)

   b. ☐ Yes
       Describe:

3. Is any deception used in the study?

   a. ☒ No (Skip to #4)

   b. ☐ Yes
       If yes, describe the deception involved and the debrief procedures. Attach a post-experiment debriefing statement and consent form offering participants the option of having the data destroyed:

4. Will participants be debriefed?

    a. ☒ No

    b. ☐ Yes

       Attach a copy of your Debriefing Statement. If the answer to protocol question IX (3) is yes, then the investigator must debrief the participant. If your study includes participants from a participant pool, please include a debrief statement.

XI. PARENTAL PERMISSION*

1. Does your study require parental permission?
    a. ☐ Yes
    b. ☒ No

2. Does your study entail greater than minimal risk, without potential for benefit?
    a. ☐ Yes (If so, consent of both parents is required)
    b. ☒ No

*Please refer to the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) regulations (45 CFR 46.408) to determine whether your project requires parental consent and/or child assent. This is particularly applicable if you are conducting Education research.

XII.   ASSENT FROM CHILDREN AND WITNESS SIGNATURE

1. Assent is required unless the child is not capable (age, psychological state, sedation), or the research holds out the prospect of direct benefit that is only available within the context of the research. If the consent process (full or part) is waived, assent may be also. See our website for this information.
2. Is assent required for your study?
    a. ☐ Yes
    b. ☒ No
3. Please attach assent document(s) to this application.

XIII.   WAIVER OR MODIFICATION FOR REQUIRED ELEMENTS IN INFORMED CONSENT PROCESS

1. Waiver of consent is sometimes used in research involving a deception element. See Waiver of Informed Consent on the IRB website (link above). If requesting a waiver of consent, please address the following:
    a. Does the research pose greater than minimal risk to participants (greater than everyday activities)?

    b. Will the waiver adversely affect participants' rights and welfare? Please justify.
    c. Why would the research be impracticable without the waiver?
    d. How will participant debriefing occur (i.e. how will pertinent information about the real purposes of the study be reported to participants, if appropriate, at a later date)?

XIV.   CHECKLIST OF INFORMED CONSENT/ASSENT

1. Please see our Informed Consent materials and Informed Consent template to develop your document. Attach a copy of all informed consent/assent documents.

XV. WAIVER OF INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

1. Waiver of signed consent is sometimes used in anonymous surveys or research involving secondary data. If you are requesting a waiver of signed consent, please address the following (yes or no):
   a. Does the research pose greater that minimal risk to participants (greater than every day activities)?

   b. Does a breach of confidentiality constitute the principal risk to participants?

   c. Would the signed consent form be the only record linking the participant and the research?

   d. Does the research include any activities that would require signed consent in a non-research context?

   e. Will you provide the participants with a written statement about the research (an information sheet that contains all the elements of the consent form but without the signature lines)?

XVI. PARTICIPANT PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

1. **Privacy.** Describe what steps you will take to protect the privacy of your participants. Remember privacy is referring to persons and their interest in controlling access to their information. **The confidentialy of the participants will be maintained throughout the research process. Pseudonyms will be used when conducting the data analysis process and reporting of the data. The participants' data will be kept in a locked file cabinet as on a password protected laptop.**

2. **Confidentiality.** Please describe how you will protect the confidentiality of your participants. Remember confidentiality refers to agreements with the participant about how data are to be handled. Indicate whether the data are archival, anonymous, confidential, or confidentiality not assured and then provide the additional information requested in each section. The IRB asks that if it is possible for you to collect your data anonymously (i.e. without collecting the participants' identifiable information), please construct your study in this manner. Data collection in which the participant is not identifiable (i.e. anonymous) can be exempted in most cases.
   a. **Are the data archival?** (Data already collected for another purpose).
      ☐ Yes (please answer i-iv below)
      ☒ No (please skip to b in this section)

      Please note: if your study only includes archival data, answer no to 2-b, 2-c, 2-d, and leave 2-e blank.

      i. Are the data publicly accessible?
         ☐ Yes (please skip to ii) ☐ No (Please answer below)

         Please describe how you will obtain access to this data and provide the board with proof of permission to access the data.

      ii. Will you receive the data stripped of identifying information, including names, postal addresses, telephone numbers, email addresses, social security numbers, medical record numbers, birth dates, etc.?
         ☐ Yes (see below) ☐ No (see below)

If yes, please describe who will link and strip the data. Please note that this person should have regular access to the data and they should be a neutral third party not involved in the study.

If no, please describe what data will remain identifiable and why this information will not be removed.

iii. Can the names of the participants be deduced from the data set?
☐ Yes (see below) ☐ No (skip to iv)

If yes, please describe.

Initial the following: I will not attempt to deduce the identity of the participants in this study: _____

iv. Please provide the list of data fields you intend to use for your analysis and/or provide the original instruments used in the study.

b. **Are the data you will collect anonymous?** (Data do not contain identifying information including names, postal addresses, telephone numbers, email addresses, social security numbers, medical record numbers, birth dates, etc., and cannot be linked to identifying information by use of codes or other means. If you are recording the participant on audio or videotape, etc., this is not considered anonymous data).

☐ Yes (see below) ☒ No (skip to c)

i. Describe the process you will use to collect the data to ensure that it is anonymous.

ii. Can the names of the participants be deduced from the data?
☐ Yes (see below) ☐ No (skip to c)

If yes, please describe:

If you agree to the following, please type your initials: I will not attempt to deduce the identity of the participants in the study:

c. **Are the data you will collect confidential?** (Confidential data contain identifying information and/or can be linked to identifying information by use of codes or other means). Please note that if you will use participant data (such as photos, videos, etc.) for presentations beyond data analysis for the research study (classroom presentations, library archive, conference presentations, etc.) you will need to provide a materials release form to the participant.

☒ Yes (see below) ☐ No (skip to d)

Please describe the process you will use to collect the data and to ensure the confidentiality of the participants. Verify that the list linking codes to personal identifiers will be kept secure by stating where it will be kept and who will have access to the data. **Data will be collected during an interview process with the participants. The analyzation of the data will be conducted with pseudonyms in order to protect the identify of the participants. The participants contact information, audio recordings, video recordings, and all other data will be stored in a locked file cabinet as well as a password protected laptop. All materials related to the participants and the**

study's data collection will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study.

d. **Will you not assure confidentiality in the study?** (For example, will the identity of the participant be known or will it be easily deduced?) Please note that if you will use participant data (such as photos, videos, etc.) for presentations beyond analysis for the research study (classroom presentations, library archive, conference presentations, etc.) you need to provide a materials release form to the participant.

☐ Yes (see below) ☒ No (skip to e)

Please describe why confidentiality will not be assured.

e. If you answered "No" to ALL of the questions in section XVI (2), please describe how you will maintain confidentiality of the data collected in your study. This includes how you will keep your data secure (i.e. password protection, locked files), who will have access to the data, and methods for destroying the data once the three year time period for maintaining your data is up. *

5. **Media Use.** If you answer yes to any question below, in question VI (1), Description of Research, please provide a description of how the media will be used and justify why it is necessary to use the media to collect data. Include a description in the Informed Consent document under "What you will do in the study."

   a. Will the participant be recorded on audiotape?   ☒ Yes ☐ No
   b. Will the participant be recorded on videotape?   ☒ Yes ☐ No
   c. Will the participant be photographed?   ☐ Yes ☐ No
   d. Will the participant be audiotaped, videotaped, or photographed without their knowledge?
                                                               ☐ Yes ☒ No

   i. If yes, please describe the deception and the debriefing procedures: Attach a post-experiment debriefing statement and a post-deception consent form offering participants the option of having their tape/photograph destroyed.

   e. If a participant withdraws from a study, how will you withdraw them from the audiotape, videotape, or photograph? Please include a description in the Informed Consent document under "How to withdraw from the study." **If any participant chooses to withdraw from the study, any previously collected data will be destroyed including the erasing of audio and video files.**

*Please note that all research-related data must be stored for a minimum of three years after the end date of the study, as required by federal regulations.

XVII. PARTICIPANT COMPENSATION

1. Describe any compensation that participants will receive. Please note that Liberty University Business Office policies might affect how you compensate participants. Please contact your department's business office to ensure your compensation procedures are allowable by these policies. **All partipants will be given a $25 gift card at the conclusion of the research in order to compensate the participants for the time committed to the study and the research process as a whole.**

XVIII. PARTICIPANT RISKS AND BENEFITS

1. **Risks.** There are always risks associated with research. If the research is minimal risk, which is no greater that every day activities, then please describe this fact. **The research in this study involves minimal risk, which is no greater than every day activities.**

    a. Describe the risks to participants and steps that will be taken to minimize those risks. Risks can be physical, psychological, economic, social, legal, etc.

    b. Where appropriate, describe any alternative procedures or treatments that might be advantageous to the participants.

    c. Describe provisions for ensuring necessary medical or professional intervention in the event of adverse effects to participants or additional resources for participants.

2. **Benefits.** Describe the possible direct benefits to the participants. If there are no direct benefits, please state this fact. **There are no direct benefits to the participants other than their desire to better understand ways to help students graduate high school for future generations.**

    a. Describe the possible benefits to society. In other words, how will doing this project be a positive contribution and for whom (keep in mind benefits may be to society, the knowledge base of this area, etc.)? **Society could better understand specific strategies that help students graduate high school.**

3. **Investigator's evaluation of the risk-benefit ratio.** Please explain why you believe this study is still worth doing even with any identified risks. **I believe afterschool programs can be a viable link to graduation and want to talk to students in a research setting in order to study that belief. I am highly passionate about students graduating high school because I have witnessed the success of a highly at-risk student and the failure of a student who I had no idea was contemplating dropping out of high school. This study can help me, and others, better understand high school age students and their needs for afterschool programs as they relate to staying in school and graduating.**

Appendix G: District Approval Letter

Polk County Department of Education
James Jones, Director of Schools
P.O. Box 665
Benton, TN 37307
(423) 299-0471   Fax (423) 338-2691
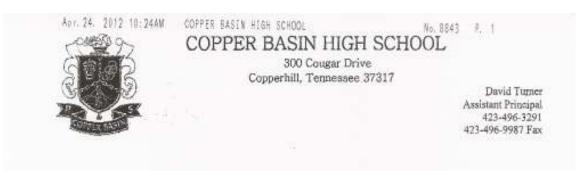
April 23, 2012

To Whom It May Concern:

I am excited to provide Mr. Bell with the opportunity to conduct research with recent graduates from our school district. It is my understanding that the data collected in the interview process will be used in his dissertation and I hereby approve this data collection process. Should anyone have any questions or need any additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

James R. Jones Ed.D.
Director of Schools
Polk County, Tennessee

Appendix H: School Approval Letter

COPPER BASIN HIGH SCHOOL

300 Cougar Drive
Copperhill, Tennessee 37317

David Turner
Assistant Principal
423-496-3291
423-496-9987 Fax

April 18, 2012

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter is to serve as documentation that Copper Basin High School gives approval for Mr.
Bell to work with recent graduates from our school. We also agree to let him use the facilities in
any way needed during the process. Should anyone have any questions or need any additional
information, please feel free to contact me or any other administrator at the school.

Sincerely,

David Turner

David Turner
Copper Basin High School

Appendix I: Study Acceptance Letter

Dear Former Student:

You have been selected to participate in my study that is focusing on the role of afterschool programs on students graduating high school. You were chosen based on your answers from your questionnaire as well as the timeliness in you returning the questionnaire. I will be contacting you soon to schedule an interview time.

Once again, if you have any questions **you are encouraged** to contact me at 706-455-2394 or cjbell3@liberty.edu. You may also contact Dr. Ralph Marino who is my dissertation committee chair at Liberty University at 607-795-2404 or rmarino@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, Dr. Fernando Garzon, Chair, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1582, Lynchburg, VA 24502 or email at fgarzon@liberty.edu.

Once again, thanks again for agreeing to be a part of this study. I will be getting in touch with you soon.

Sincerely,

Jason Bell