

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY: THE ROLE OF SPIRITUAL SUPPORT
IN THE PERSISTENCE OF ONLINE
DOCTORAL STUDENTS

by

Clara Jean Tickal

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 transcendental phenomenological study was to investigate the role of spiritual support in the persistence of online students who have completed their doctorate in education. The definition of internal spiritual support used in this study was “support perceived in the context of an individual’s relationship with God” (Maton, 1989, p. 319). Internal support included the prayers, personal Bible study, and other forms of spiritual interaction between the doctoral student and God. For the purpose of this study, external spiritual support was defined as the spiritual aspect of social support. External support included the spiritual support provided by the prayers, Bible verses, and other forms of spiritual encouragement given by peers, friends, family, and professors. Persistence was defined in this study as “. . . the result of students’ decisions to continue their participation in the learning event under analysis” (Berge & Huang, 2004, p. 4). A purposive sampling of seven students who persisted and graduated from an online doctoral program in education was utilized. The setting was a Christian university in the Eastern United States with an online doctoral program. Interviews, journaling, and site documents were used as methods of data collection. The data analysis procedure included epoche/bracketing, horizontalization, clusters of meanings, textural descriptions, and structural descriptions. Composite description was the final step and revealed the essence of the participants’ experiences (Creswell, 2007).

Keywords: persistence, social support, spiritual support, transcendental phenomenology, post-secondary education, doctoral persistence

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List of Abbreviations

Central Research Question (CQ)

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Reusable Learning Object (RLO)

Sub-question (SQ)

Unique Numerical Identifier (UNI)

Universal Serial Bus (USB)

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

In this chapter, the need for a study on the role of spiritual support on the persistence of online doctoral students and the background of the problems facing online learners are explored. Past studies revealing the need for this research are discussed, and my motivations for doing the research are revealed. After this discussion, the problem statement, purpose, and significance of the study are presented. Next, the study's research questions and plan are explored. In the final two sections of the chapter, the study's delimitations, limitations, and definitions are reviewed.

Background

Online classes are becoming the norm for 21st century students. Students enrolled in online classes must learn to adapt to the many challenges of learning in a virtual environment in order to persist in their studies. Instead of being in a classroom with an instructor and fellow students who are available face-to-face, online students must learn to communicate virtually. Students new to the virtual world often have trouble experiencing social forms of support and interaction, which help many persist in their programs of study. Studies have shown that without these critical support systems, students have difficulty developing a sense of community, or a sense of connection and belonging with their instructor and peers. Without this sense of community, research has shown that students frequently feel isolated and unable to form relationships online (Rovai, Whiting & Liu, 2005). These relationships are often essential to the optimal learning and persistence of online doctoral students.

I experienced a feeling of lack of social support and thus a lack of sense of community when I began my online doctoral program. This experience of isolation fueled my desire to improve my social support systems in order to improve my sense of community and persistence

in my doctoral studies. Because of my desire to integrate the spiritual aspect to my social support system, I initiated the creation of online spiritual/ academic social support groups within my doctoral classes, which allowed me to develop a better sense of community with both peers and my instructor. These support groups became an essential part of my learning process and helped me to persist in the program.

Because of the isolation I initially perceived in my online doctoral program, my review of the literature began with a thorough search of the varying forms of social support available to learners and the persistence of these learners. Due to the gap in the literature I discovered in my research on the spiritual aspect of social support, my focus shifted to the literature on this aspect of social support and the role it has in the persistence of students.

My search of the literature began with the theoretical roots of social support theory and the learning process and persistence of learners. The social aspect of learning revealed in the literature provided the foundation for the support system I was seeking in my classes. Based on a thorough review of the literature, I began my research on the social aspect of learning with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which he created in the 1930's. This theory focused on the importance of social-interaction in the learning process. In my opinion, this theory laid the groundwork for many of the social support learning theories that followed. Sarason (1974) added to Vygotsky's work by introducing his social support theory on the importance of developing a "psychological sense of community" among learners. Both theorists stressed the positive aspects of social support and interaction on the learning process of students.

McMillan and Chavis (1986) expanded Sarason's social support theory on community. They described it as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their

commitment to be together” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). They emphasized the importance of developing this sense of community among learners. Rovai (2002a) expanded McMillan and Chavis’ ideas on sense of community by identifying ways to build a sense of community in the online learning environment. He emphasized that building an online sense of community helps to “. . . dissipate feelings of isolation by creating ‘connections’ with other online students” (Rovai, 2002a, p. 10).

Recent research studies fueled my desire to continue my research in order to fully understand the absence of certain social support factors among online learners, and explore possible solutions to the problem. Some of these important studies on social support systems and learning were conducted by Glazer and Wanstreet (2011), Young and Bruce (2011), and Shackelford and Maxwell (2012). They were significant to my study because they revealed the importance of a perceived sense of social support, including a sense of community on the learning process of online students. My review of the literature on social support and doctoral students revealed a large gap in the literature of studies on the spiritual aspect of social support. My study investigated this largely unexplored area, and its relationship to the persistence of online doctoral learners, by allowing the true voices of these learners to be heard.

Situation to Self

I was motivated to do this research because I was an online student for the last five years. I achieved a sense of community in many online classes by developing personal spiritual support systems, which enabled me to be able to persist in these classes. Three important assumptions formed the foundation of my personal theoretical framework for my study. The first assumption was that spiritual forms of social support were important to the persistence of online Christian students in doctoral programs. The second assumption was that spiritual forms of support were

important to the sense of community of Christian students, and positively influenced the persistence of many of these students. The third assumption was that sharing a Christian perspective with participants allowed me to better understand and study the spiritual aspect of their doctoral journeys.

I was interested in conducting this qualitative phenomenological study on spiritual support factors for two reasons. First, I experienced a lack of spiritual support in some of my online classes. Second, I found a gap in the literature regarding qualitative studies on the role of spiritual support in the persistence of online doctoral students who graduated from an education program. I believe this study is important because students are transitioning from brick and mortar classes to online classes. The voices of the online doctoral graduates who participated in my study helped to expand the research on social support to include the important aspect of spiritual support. This study made a difference because learning more about the phenomenon of spiritual forms of social support and the persistence of online graduate students helps Christian colleges, and universities design programs, which provide spiritual support and enhance the sense of spiritual community of these students.

Problem Statement

The problem that formed the basis of this study was a perceived lack of the spiritual aspect of social support in the lives of online doctoral students, and the role this played in their persistence. According to Rovai et al. (2005), online students often experience isolation and loneliness. The focus of my study was to investigate the role of spiritual support in the lives of online doctoral students and in their persistence in their programs of study. The participants in the study included a purposive sampling of seven doctoral students who persisted and graduated with their doctorate in education from a Christian university. This research was empirically

significant because it was built on the research of Glazer and Wanstreet (2011), Young and Bruce (2011), Jairam and Kahl (2012), Shackelford and Maxwell (2012), and others on the topic of social support. My study expanded the research on social support factors and delved into the role of the spiritual aspect of social support on the lives and persistence of online doctoral students.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to investigate the role of spiritual support on the persistence of doctoral students who completed their online program of study in education and graduated from a Christian university. The definition of internal spiritual support was “support perceived in the context of an individual’s relationship with God” (Maton, 1989, p. 319). Internal support included the prayers, personal Bible study, and other forms of spiritual interaction between the doctoral student and God. For the purpose of this study, external spiritual support was defined as the spiritual aspect of social support. External support included the spiritual support provided by the prayers, Bible verses, and other forms of spiritual encouragement of faculty, peers, friends, family members, and others. In this study, persistence was defined as “. . . the result of students’ decisions to continue their participation in the learning event under analysis” (Berge & Huang, 2004, p. 4).

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study was that it helped fill the gap in the empirical research literature on the role of internal and external forms of spiritual support in the lives of online doctoral graduates and in their persistence. It was important to add a qualitative aspect to this study of the spiritual forms of social support because most of the related studies on social support

have been quantitative in nature. This qualitative, phenomenological study gave real voice to the spiritual experiences of online students who persisted in their doctoral journeys.

This study is important to the Christian university where it was conducted because it gave the university deeper insight into spiritual support factors and the specific needs of their online doctoral students. This knowledge will help the university better design their online doctoral classes to include spiritual support systems that enhance the spiritual experience of online doctoral students. Studies by Comeaux (2013), and others validated the need for my study on spiritual support and the persistence of online doctoral students. Comeaux (2013) discussed the major gap in the literature of studies on the spiritual growth of online students. His study investigated the role of spiritual growth in online graduate students learning experiences. I added another important dimension to his study by exploring the role of spiritual types of social support systems in online doctoral students' lives and in their persistence in their studies.

Research Questions

My strategy of using a central research question (CQ) followed by sub-questions (SQs) was discussed by Creswell (2007) who advocated for “. . . a single overarching question and several subquestions” (p. 108). The purpose of my study was to bridge the gap in the literature I found on spiritual support and persistence while conducting my review of the literature. Below I discuss the literature that helped me to formulate the CQ and each of the SQs of my study.

The CQ for my study was:

How do online doctoral graduates describe the meaning of spiritual support in their lives and in their persistence in their program of study?

My central research question was derived from the purpose of my study, which was to explore the role of spiritual support and persistence of online doctoral students. Both Olges

(2012) and Comeaux (2013) discussed the lack of research on the spiritual aspect of support of online students in their studies. Comeaux (2013) said, “Given the significant growth in online education and the importance of spiritual development, more research is warranted in this area” (p. 59). By investigating this topic, my study helped to fill this gap in the literature. The SQs for my study that were developed to support and help answer the central research question are discussed below:

SQ1. How do doctoral graduates describe the meaning in their lives of spiritual support from the faculty, and/or the school, and their persistence?

Past studies discussed the importance of social support from school related sources. For example, Fitzpatrick (2013) and Colbert (2013) both revealed the importance of support from faculty to doctoral students. This sub-question expanded this past research by focusing on the spiritual aspect of social support given by faculty and/or the school. The responses of participants to this question in my study added valuable information to help answer the central research question.

SQ2. How do doctoral graduates describe the meaning in their lives of spiritual support from their peers, and their persistence?

The importance of peer support to persistence of doctoral students has been documented in the social support literature. For example, Sessana’s (2012) study revealed the importance of peers to the persistence of female doctoral students. Comeaux’s (2013) study also discussed the importance of peers to the persistence of doctoral students. The results of my study added important new information to this topic by focusing on the spiritual dimension of social support from peers.

SQ3. How do doctoral graduates describe the meaning in their lives of spiritual support from family, and/or friends, and their persistence?

The importance of social support from family and friends to the persistence of doctoral students is found in the literature. For example, doctoral students in Jairam and Kahl's (2012) study discussed the importance of social support from family and friends to their persistence. Participants in Gardner and Gopaul's (2012) study also confirmed the importance of this support. I designed this sub-question to extend previous social support research on friends and family to include the spiritual aspect of this support.

SQ4. How do doctoral graduates describe the meaning of spiritual support in their lives from their church and their persistence?

This sub-question was added because there is a gap in the literature on the role of spiritual social support from church on the persistence of online doctoral students. I did not find any literature on this important resource for spiritual support. The responses of my participants helped to fill this gap in the literature. Alex, Cara, Frances and Greg in my study all revealed positive spiritual support experiences from their churches.

SQ5. How do doctoral graduates describe the meaning in their lives of internal spiritual support systems, such as praying, or Bible study and their persistence?

During my review of the literature, I found a gap in the literature on studies on the topic of internal spiritual support systems and the role it plays in doctoral persistence. I added this sub-question because information on this topic was needed to fully answer my central research question. The majority of the participants in my study discussed the importance of internal spiritual support to their persistence. For example, Debra discussed her spiritual support from

God when she said, “I questioned many times why God wanted me to pursue the path that I was on, and He answered me loud and clear. Keep going!”

SQ6. How do doctoral graduates describe the role of technology and other forms of communication on their spiritual support, and their persistence? (e.g. emails, texts, cell phones, phone calls)

I included this sub-question because the literature I reviewed had many examples of technology being used to communicate support among online learners. For example, the participants in Andrews and Tynan’s (2012) study on the role of technology in online programs revealed that many students preferred discussing material from class on Facebook. All of the participants in my study revealed they used some form of technology to communicate spiritual support. For example, Greg said, “Getting emails from my dissertation committee asking how things were going and what they could be praying about was truly meaningful to me.”

SQ7. What other possible sources of spiritual support would have enhanced these doctoral students’ perceptions of spiritual support?

This sub-question was designed to allow the participants the opportunity to share anything not covered in their interviews, journals and site documents that would have enhanced their spiritual support experiences during their doctoral programs. The responses from this question provided valuable information for faculty, future online doctoral students, and for the university. I shared this information in the practical implications section of Chapter Five.

Research Plan

My study was qualitative, employing a transcendental phenomenological research design. The sampling was a purposive sampling. Seven participants were selected from graduates of an online doctoral education program. The setting was a Christian university in the Eastern United

States with an online doctoral program in education. Interviews, journaling, and site documents were used as methods of data collection. I used the steps for transcendental phenomenological data analysis created by Moustakas (1994) and refined by Creswell (2007). These steps included: epoche/ bracketing, horizontalization, clusters of meanings, textural experiences, structural descriptions, and composite description. This step revealed the essence of the participants' shared experience. This approach was chosen because it enabled me to hear the voices of the online doctoral students studied.

Delimitations and Limitations

Certain delimitations were chosen for this study. First, the participants were all graduates from an online doctoral program in education at a Christian university. Second, the participants were selected based on their experiences with spiritual support systems in their doctoral programs. These participants were all volunteers. The majority of the data collected from them was self-reported. The number of participants was limited so that a more in-depth study could be conducted. The rationale for the decision to do a small, qualitative, phenomenological study was because many of the studies reviewed on the subject of online social support systems, including sense of community, were quantitative in approach. My study added a qualitative study on an unexplored form of social support to the literature, by investigating the spiritual aspect of social support factors and their role in the persistence of doctoral learners. By exploring the role of spiritual support in the persistence of online doctoral graduates, I helped to fill the gap I discovered in the literature on this important subject.

There were some potential limitations to my study. First, the study was conducted at a Christian university. This limited the generalizability of the study to non-Christian universities. Second, the eastern geographic location of the university was a limitation because the results of

the study are not generalizable to other parts of the country. Third, the ethnicity of the doctoral participants was limited due to the size of the sample and thus the results are not generalizable to all ethnic groups. Fourth, the gender of the participants was a limitation because there was more of one gender than the other, because participation in the study was voluntary. Fifth, the study was limited because most of the data was self-reported.

Definitions

Below are the definitions of terms used in this study:

1. *Confirmability* - How well the findings of a study represent, as far as (humanly) possible, the situation being researched rather than the beliefs, pet theories, or biases of the researcher (Gasson, 2004).
2. *Credibility* - How we ensure rigor in the research process and how we communicate to others we have done so (Gasson, 2004).
3. *Internal Spiritual Support* - Support perceived in the context of an individual's relationship with God (Maton, 1989).
4. *Persistence* – “The result of students’ decisions to continue their participation in the learning event under analysis” (Berge & Huang, 2004, p. 4).
5. *Phenomenological Research* - A qualitative strategy in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants in a study (Creswell, 2013).
6. *Sense of Community* - A sense of belonging among learners (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).
7. *Social Integration* - The success students have becoming members of a social network of peers in their particular institutions and departments (Barnett, 2008).

8. *Transcendental Phenomenological Approach* - In this approach, the researcher sets aside prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being investigated. Also, the researcher relies on intuition, imagination, and universal structures to obtain a picture of the experience and uses systematic methods (Moustakas, 1994)

Summary

In Chapter One I discussed the need for my study on the role of spiritual support on the persistence of online doctoral students and the literature supporting this need. My motivation for conducting the study was revealed and my study's purpose and significance were discussed. In the next two sections, the research questions and plan were reviewed. In the final sections of the chapter, I discussed the many delimitations and limitations of my study and in the last section listed the important definitions found throughout my study.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The main purpose of this chapter was to present a review of the literature related to the role of spiritual support on the persistence of doctoral students. In the first section of the chapter, I discussed my personal theoretical framework and the social support theories forming the foundation for my study. In the second section, I focused on reviewing the literature related to the topic of the relationship of spiritual support to the persistence of online learners. In the final section, I present a detailed summary of this review of the literature.

Theoretical Framework

The three assumptions composing my personal theoretical framework for the study were introduced in Chapter One. The first assumption was that spiritual forms of social support are important to the persistence of online students in doctoral programs. The second assumption was that the spiritual aspect of social support was important to the sense of community of these students, and positively influenced the persistence of many of them. The third assumption was that sharing a Christian perspective with participants allowed me to better understand and study the spiritual aspect of their doctoral journeys.

The second part of the theoretical framework of my study was based on the theories developed on the positive role of social support factors on the learning process. These social support theories formed the theoretical foundation for my study on the spiritual aspect of this support. As discussed in Chapter One, Vygotsky (1978), Sarason (1974), and McMillan and Chavis (1986) each contributed theories on the importance of the social aspect of learning as an integral part of the learning process. Tinto (1993) explored the role this social support had on the persistence of doctoral learners.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory focusing on the importance of social-interaction was the foundation for many later social support theories. Vygotsky (1978) discussed the importance of learning as a social process. He determined that students learned new skills best through social interaction. Like Vygotsky, Sarason (1974) believed the social interaction aspect of the learning process was important. He added to Vygotsky's theory by discussing the importance of building a "psychological sense of community" (Sarason, 1974, p. 157). Sarason believed that this sense of community was the key to enhancing the learning process of students. McMillan and Chavis (1986) further developed Sarason's ideas and created a new, expanded definition of sense of community among learners. In their definition, they emphasized the importance of "belonging" and "commitment" to a group, as key ingredients of sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9).

Like the McMillan and Chavis (1986) theory on sense of community, Tinto's (1975) theory described the importance of social integration to the retention of college students. During his early research, he created a model of student integration. This model explained all the factors that influence a student's decision to leave college. One of the primary factors Tinto discussed was a student's amount of social integration in college. The Tinto (1993) theory refined his earlier theory on the importance of social integration to learners' retention, and included his revised doctoral persistence model, which discussed the importance of social integration to learners' persistence. Tinto's (1975, 1993, 1997) theoretical research laid the groundwork for many future studies on the attrition and persistence of college students. The work of the theorists and researchers discussed in this section showed a progression of thought and studies on the importance of the social aspect of learning in the 20th century.

Related Literature

Social Support

Empirical studies in the 21st century continued to expand the knowledge on the importance of the social aspect of learning. Tinto's (1993) research on the role of academic and social integration on persistence laid the foundation for the later work of Rovai (2002) in these areas. Rovai (2002a) identified connectedness and sense of belonging as important elements needed to build a sense of community. His study found that online learning was enhanced if learners felt connected to their professors and fellow students. Rovai expanded the definition of sense of community of a group to include the components of "spirit, trust, interaction, and commonality of learning expectations and goals" (Rovai, 2002a, p. 11). Rovai's study was significant because these components are all important parts of sense of community and integral to the spiritual aspect of social support systems explored in my study.

Rovai (2002) expanded Tinto's (1993) research on retention and persistence to online learners when he explored the link between sense of community and the persistence of students enrolled in leadership and graduate education programs online. This study revealed that there was a relationship between sense of community and the persistence of the learners. Rovai also revealed ". . . students with stronger sense of community tend to possess greater perceived levels of cognitive learning" (Rovai, 2002, p. 331).

Ouzts (2006) confirmed Rovai's (2002a) findings on the importance of the social support provided by students in making connections with classmates and professors in their online courses. Ouzts found that ". . . online courses through the combined use of current computer technology and social constructivist learning activities may facilitate connectedness and allay some concerns about quality" (Ouzts, 2006, p. 293). This research was important because it

discussed the importance of making online connections to the learning process. These online connections were a critical part of my study on the role of spiritual support and persistence of online doctoral learners. While continuing to explore the social support factors studied by Ouzts, I expanded her research by adding the spiritual aspect to the social support component and delving into the role it played in the persistence of online doctoral learners.

Cameron, Morgan, Williams, and Kostelecky (2009) conducted a quantitative research study on the impact of social tasks within online group assignments on participants' sense of community. In this study, the researchers implemented a survey that was created from surveys by Ouzts (2003), Rovai (2002a), and Bonk and Wisner (2000). The study was significant because the survey revealed that the social tasks assigned in the participants' group were important to the completion of their assignments but not to their sense of community.

This social task study was important to my study on the role of the spiritual aspect of the social support experience of doctoral students and their persistence because it showed that social tasks are considered important in online group assignments, but do not always impact the group's sense of community. The study was important to me because it indicated that not all online students correlated social tasks in their group assignments to a development of their sense of community.

Exter, Korkmaz, Harlin, and Bichelmeyer (2009) also used Rovai's Classroom Community Scale (Rovai, 2002b) to conduct their study on the impact of the social support provided by social interaction on the sense of community of online students. Students participating in the study surfaced specific types of student interaction and suggestions for improvement of sense of community. A majority of the online students interviewed wanted to develop friendship with their peers and be known by their professors. Most of the online

students also expressed a desire to interact and develop a sense of community with their peers (Exter, Korkmaz, Harlin, & Bichelmeyer, 2009). This study was significant to my study because it revealed the importance of social support systems to online students. My study expanded the research of this social support study by adding information on the importance of the spiritual aspect of social support systems to the persistence of online students.

Liechty, Liao, and Schull (2009) discussed their review of the literature on the factors helping and hindering dissertation completion. They used Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory on the importance of social-interaction to the learning process, as the foundation for their theories on the importance of relationships in the during the dissertation process. Liechty et al. (2009) discussed doctoral students' perceptions of the positive impact of the social support provided by peer support groups, and dissertation chairpersons on the learning experiences of these doctoral students.

Liechty et al. (2009) also discussed how Vygotsky's (1978) theory on the importance of social interaction and Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) validated their own ideas on the importance of the social interaction of peers and interaction with faculty. Liechty et al. (2009) stated:

Such interaction with mentors and more expert peers is part of the 'hidden curriculum' of doctoral study—the embedded and social ways in which academic culture and 'tools' of research are gradually transmitted to students, thus assisting them to expand into ZPDs (p. 487).

This study was significant to my study because it delved into the critical role of positive social support in the learning of doctoral students.

Higenell's (2009) mixed-methods study focused on doctoral students' sense of community and its influence on informal mentoring relationships. Doctoral students identified three types of support that helped them the most during their studies. The three types of support were emotional support, social support, and academic support (Higenell, 2009). The study revealed that social support often led to academic help as well. Student academic support groups were found to be important to students' sense of community. Higenell's (2009) study was relevant to my study because it explored social support factors affecting doctoral students. My study increased research knowledge on social support factors by including information on the role of the spiritual aspect of social support and the persistence of online doctoral learners.

Gallagher-Lepak, Reilly, and Killion (2009) conducted a study that delved into the importance of communication as a form of academic and non-academic social support that impacts participants' sense of community. Their qualitative study used focus groups to explore the impact of different forms of communication on the sense of community of nursing students in online classes. From these focus groups, the researchers discovered students felt more of a sense of community if they were able to communicate, in both formal and informal ways, with both the instructor and their classmates using different forms of technology to facilitate this communication (Gallagher-Lepak, Reilly, & Killion 2009). One example of communication found to be highly effective was introductions via a discussion board. Gallagher-Lepak et al.'s research was significant to my topic because I also explored the role of both informal, and other social support forms, and the persistence of doctoral students. My study expanded the Gallagher-Lepak et al. (2009) study by delving into spiritual support, which is a form of social support not studied previously in the literature.

Like Gallagher-Lepak et al. (2009), I explored a form of social support supplied by instructors and peers. The main difference was that I expanded their research to include spiritual support systems and the role these systems have on the spiritual sense of community and persistence of online doctoral students.

Stracke (2010) designed a study to describe the experiences of doctoral students in social support groups located on a campus. Her research was conducted while she was a supervisor for a support group for PhDs on the campus. Stracke collected data from the peer group and recorded the students' impressions about the group in a journal. According to Stracke, the data collected from the social support group participants was positive in nature. They discussed the importance of the social support they received from both their supervisor and fellow students and how it positively impacted their doctoral journeys.

This study was significant to my research because it shows the impact of social support on doctoral students. I expanded on Stracke's research on social support groups, by adding a spiritual dimension to my study of social support groups and revealed the role of the spiritual aspect of social support in the lives of doctoral students and how this support impacted their persistence.

Reinhart (2010) designed a quantitative study that explored the relationship between graduate students' communication practices and their perceived sense of community. In her study, Reinhart examined sense of community of both on-campus and off-campus learners. She explored whether their communication practices made a difference in the sense of community they felt. Reinhart conducted a correlational analysis and found there was a positive relationship between the frequency of students' communications with peers in the class, frequency of communication with professors teaching the class and the students' sense of community. There

was also a positive correlation between students' communications with members of the faculty and peers outside the class (Reinhart, 2010)

This study on graduate students' social and academic communication practices inspired me to include another type of social support communication practice in my study. I extended Reinhart's (2010) research to include the spiritual aspect of social support communication practices of participants. My study explored the support provided by spiritual communication practices and the role it played on the persistence of online doctoral students.

Brown (2011) used a mixed-methods approach to delve into the social support provided by learning communities created by doctoral students in a cohort. The doctoral students in her study revealed the variety of sources they relied on for social support during their doctoral journeys. It was significant because her research revealed that students relied on peers, co-workers, faculty, and family members for their major sources of social support. One of the reasons Brown's study was important was because it explored doctoral students in an educational program, which was also a specific area of interest of my study.

Another reason my study was similar to Brown's research was because it also delved into social support factors important to doctoral students. My study was similar to Brown's (2011) study because it included the role of the support provided by peers, faculty, family, and others. It added to her research of part-time doctoral students by specifically exploring the spiritual support systems developed by online doctoral graduates, and the role these support systems played in their persistence.

Fiege (2011) conducted a quantitative study on the sense of community in online classes at a college in Virginia. He used a non-experimental design for his research to survey both faculty and students. Fiege's research delved into students' perceptions of sense of community

in the beginning of the class compared to later times in the class term. He explored the perceptions of sense of community of the faculty as well. The results of his study showed a decline in sense of community of students as the term progressed. Fiege's study revealed a lack of sense of community among most of the online participants.

My study was an important addition to Fiege's (2011) study because it added spiritual types of social support to the investigation of other social support factors impacting students. Participants discussed the spiritual support systems they developed. The findings of my study revealed the important role of continued spiritual support throughout the programs of the online doctoral students at the Christian university. The goal of my study was to explore the essence of each doctoral participant's experience with spiritual support in order to add valuable information to the literature on this largely unexplored area of research. The findings of the study included information on possible ways to prevent a lack of sense of spiritual community among online doctoral students. It also provided new knowledge on the important role of spiritual support to online doctoral students, and their perceptions of the role it played in their persistence in their programs of study.

Glazer and Wanstreet (2011) investigated the perceived sense of community of online doctoral students in their quantitative study. There were four types of social systems explored. The two types of support systems related directly to my study, were the relationships between students and faculty and students and peers. Most of the learners surveyed reported they felt connected to each other to some degree, while a small group of learners reported they felt no connection to other learners. Most of students in the study reported that they felt a connection to their professors and other faculty members (Glazer & Wanstreet, 2011). Glazer's and Wanstreet's (2011) study was significant to my study because it added new information on the

positive impact of social support provided by colleagues and faculty on learners. I added to their study by exploring the spiritual types of social support given by peers and faculty in an online doctorate program and the role of this support on the persistence of these students.

Hildebrandt's (2011) qualitative research study explored the impact of social support supplied by social network usage on doctoral students. His goal was to see if usage of these sites increased doctoral students' sense of belonging. Hildebrandt used surveys and interviews to delve into the lived experiences of doctoral students and their usage of social networks.

Hildebrandt's research revealed a majority of the doctoral students were already using Facebook and other social networking sites. Most of the doctoral students interviewed indicated that they believed that using social networking sites would be a way to increase their sense of belonging in their doctoral programs.

Hildebrandt's (2011) study was important to me because it demonstrated the high level of interest of doctoral students in the integration of social network sites into their academic and social support experiences. Hildebrandt's research indicated that communication methods used by online doctoral students affected their sense of community, and thus their persistence in doctoral programs. I was also interested in Hildebrandt's study because I wanted to add to his investigation of social support by delving into the unexplored dimension of spiritual social support. The findings of my study added valuable new information to Hildebrandt's study on learners' social and academic social support systems. My study expanded on Hildebrandt's research, and explored whether social network sites were used as a part of the spiritual support systems developed by many online doctoral students to increase their spiritual sense of community and their persistence. Facebook was the only social network site mentioned by a

participant in the study as being helpful to her spiritual and academic support in her doctoral studies.

Kusch's (2011) study expanded the research on techniques to enhance social interaction online, which research has shown can positively influence sense of community. Kusch's study was conducted to determine if social support provided by interaction in an online class would be impacted by adding a special learning module on teamwork to the regular course instruction. The learning module that was added to some of the online classes was called a Reusable Learning Object (RLO). The results of this study showed no measurable difference in sense of community between the groups with the teamwork RLO and those without the RLO. Kusch hypothesized that the reason for this lack of impact was related to the nature of the university itself. Since the university was a faith-based university, he believed that the level of teamwork was probably different from other universities that are not faith-based.

Kusch's (2011) study was relevant to my study because it was conducted at a faith-based university. Like Kusch, I gathered new information to use in the battle to prevent isolation and a lack of sense of community for online graduate students. I broadened his research by adding to the social and academic social support factors he studied.

My study extended the work conducted by Kusch (2011) in three ways. First, it provided knowledge about online learners' experiences with spiritual types of social support, which were largely unexplored in the research. Second, my study focused on online doctoral graduates, which is another area that had been under-explored in the research literature. Third, I deepened Kusch's research by conducting a phenomenological qualitative study. Unlike his quantitative study, my study interviewed online doctoral graduates and gave them an opportunity to share their unique, individual, spiritual support experiences. The findings from Kusch's study revealed

the need for researchers to be aware of the importance of the pre-existing sense of spiritual community of students as a factor influencing the results of social support studies at faith-based universities. Knowledge of this factor was an important consideration when I designed and implemented my spiritual support study.

Mentor's (2011) study explored whether text messaging increased social connectedness. He began with a study in 2008 followed by a study in 2010. Both studies included 33 graduate students as participants. All the participants received the texts that were sent simultaneously. Mentor found that texting promoted the social connectedness of the students in the study and discussed the possible use of smart phones for texting for students off campus as well.

Mentor's (2011) study was significant to my research because it showed texting could be used to build a social community for students. His research was important to my study because texting is one of the ways doctoral students communicate with each other. Texting has been the communication tool used most often by students in doctoral support groups I have formed in the past. It was one of the multiple modes of technological communication explored in my study, which examined the role of spiritual support in the lives of doctoral graduates and its impact on their persistence.

Another study dealing with social support provided by interaction was the Spiro (2011) mixed-methods study, which discussed the impact of different types of social interactions in the online doctoral classroom. Spiro discussed the many emerging technologies that are changing the landscape of online classrooms. The focus of the study was to determine what forms of interaction the instructors were using, and to get the reaction of the students to these methods of interaction.

The section of the study showing the positive impact of learner-to-learner interaction was significant to my study because my study also explored the role of learner-to-learner interaction as part of developing sense of community for online doctoral students. Spiro (2011) explored some of the most popular online areas for this interaction. For example, she discussed the use by many participants of the “Social Lounge” for learner-to-learner social interaction. Another area of social interaction mentioned was the discussion board.

Spiro’s (2011) study was relevant to my study because it explored interaction in an online classroom, which is often an essential part of the development of social support. Spiro’s study was significant to my study because it revealed the important influence of learner-to-learner interaction on the social support factor of sense of community. I extended Spiro’s study of learner-to-learner interaction by including learner-to-learner spiritual interaction in my study and exploring the role it played in the persistence of online doctoral students. I also broadened Spiro’s research, by delving into the spiritual form of social support provided by faculty, family members, and others.

Young and Bruce (2011) completed quantitative research on the role of a social sense of community in the online learning experience of students. The authors discussed their research on the impact of the social support provided by the relationships of instructors and peers of online students. They discovered four activities that students felt correlated most with their perception of community and connectedness with other students: working, interacting, helping, and connecting in a personal way. Young and Bruce also found that instructors, who were involved the most with interacting with their students, were the ones who had the greatest impact on their students’ sense of community.

This research study was significant to my research because it showed the importance of peer social support and instructor social support. My research expanded Young and Bruce's (2011) study by researching the role of the spiritual aspect of social support provided by instructors and peers in the lives of online students. I further expanded their study by investigating the role of spiritual support provided by friends, family, and the church on the persistence of online doctoral students.

The West, Gokalp, Peña, Fischer, and Gupton (2011) mixed-methods study revealed the social support systems most important to the doctoral students surveyed in the study. For example, the relationship to the students' chairpersons was highly valued by the study's participants. Another important social support system for many of the students surveyed was their relationship with other students (West et al., 2011, p. 318).

According to West et al. (2011), "Strong relationships with classmates and peers allowed students to remain resilient and persevere through difficulties encountered in the dissertation process" (p. 318). This research study was relevant to my study because it discussed the importance of social support systems for doctoral students. My study went a step beyond this study on the social aspect and academic aspects of social support systems, and included the role of the spiritual aspect of social support and the persistence of online doctoral students who have completed their programs of study.

Cardona-Divale (2012) conducted a study exploring the impact of Facebook and Twitter on the social networking of college students. The study discussed the influence of these sites on the sense of community of students. The results of the study revealed that usage of Facebook and Twitter as parts of courses was low. An analysis of the data indicated that usage of

Facebook and Twitter did not affect the sense of community and level of social support in the classes where it was offered (Cardona-Divale, 2012, p. 4).

The Cardona-Divale (2012) study was significant because it attempted to assess the impact of social networking on the sense of community of students. Even though this study found no impact of social networking and sense of community of students, it opened the door for future studies to be conducted to further delve into this issue. Cardona-Divale suggested that a possible improvement on her research design “would be to have a group of faculty teaching two similar online class sections where one section had a special Facebook site that students were encouraged to use and the other where Facebook was not used” (Cardona-Divale, 2012, p. 175).

My study helped to shed light on this issue by researching the spiritual types of social support communication practiced by online doctoral graduates. Two of the possible communication methods explored included usage of types of communication using technology and network sites such as Twitter and Facebook. My study also allowed participants to discuss the role spiritual types of social support played in their persistence as online doctoral learners. It was interesting to discover that only one participant in my study discussed using Facebook for academic and spiritual support. Twitter was not mentioned by any of my participants as a helpful social communication tool for spiritual forms of social support. The social communication tools discussed as useful by the majority of my participants were email and texting.

The purpose of Olges’ (2012) quantitative research was to discover the differences in the perceptions of online undergraduate students and those students on-campus regarding their sense of community. His study delved into the social aspect of sense of community. Olges’ study revealed that participation in a small group provided the social support needed to increase the

sense of community of on-campus and online students. It is interesting that participation in a small group helped the online students achieve as much sense of community as the on-campus students who were not in a small group.

The primary reason that Olges' (2012) study was relevant to my study was because it was conducted at a faith-based college. Like Olges, I also conducted my study at a faith-based site. Based on his research at this college, Olges discussed his belief that faith-based colleges supply a large amount of "affective support" to students (Olges, 2012, p. 13). My study extended Olges' research by exploring the impact of spiritual support on the persistence of students in online classes. Spiritual support is a type of affective support, which has been largely unexplored by researchers in the past. By using a qualitative approach, my phenomenological qualitative study deepened the quantitative research conducted by Olges.

A second reason Olges' (2012) study was important to my research was that he revealed a gap in the literature on the impact of ". . . Christian discipleship and small group affiliation on students' perception of community within on campus and online communities" (Olges, 2012, p. 13). I addressed this gap in the literature about spiritual support by focusing my research in this area. By focusing on the impact of spiritual types of social support on online doctoral students, I added a new dimension to the numerous social support studies of doctoral students, that have been conducted in the past.

In another quantitative study, Shackelford and Maxwell (2012) focused on student-to-student interactions and the impact these interactions have on students' sense of community. They explored online whole group and small group discussions, collaborative group work, peer teaching, and face-to-face meetings. The goal of the research was to discover which forms of student interactions most helped students' sense of community.

The results of the study showed five types of interaction were the most effective. These four interactions were introductions, collaborative group projects, contributing personal experiences, whole group online discussions, and sharing resources (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012). Shackelford and Maxwell's (2012) research was significant to me because I studied the role of spiritual types of social support in the lives and persistence of online doctoral students. My research deepened the Shackelford and Maxwell study of the social and academic types of social support and sense of community, by focusing on the spiritual aspect of social support. This focus was an important addition to the majority of studies, which dealt exclusively with the other types of social support. My study was significant because it added to the literature on social support, sense of community and on persistence of online learners.

Bircher's (2012) phenomenological study on part-time doctoral student socialization expanded on Spiro's (2011) research by delving specifically into the role of peer mentorship as an important type of social support among doctoral students. Bircher's research was significant to my study because she was interested in expanding Bircher's study on the impact of one of the social aspects of learning. My study was significant because it delved into an unstudied social support factor, part-time doctoral students' experiences. I expanded Bircher's (2012) research on peer mentorship on campus by exploring the importance of the spiritual aspects of social support experiences. My study added to the growing literature on social support systems and sense of community by discussing the role of spiritual forms of social support on online doctoral learners' lives and persistence.

Jairam and Kahl (2012) explored the role of social support in the doctoral process. The researchers asked participants to describe the social support that helped and hindered their progress in the doctoral process. They discussed the three types of social support most cited as

helpful: academic friends, family, and their relationship with their professors and advisors. The Jairam and Kahl study also discussed the need for faculty to be supportive of doctoral students and encouraging in their communications with them. This research study was significant to my study because it revealed the importance of social support networks. I expanded the social support research of their study to include the spiritual forms of social support provided by school-related sources and non-school-related sources. The school-related sources were faculty, peers, and school. The non-school-related sources were family, friends, church, and God. I also explored the role of this spiritual social network in the persistence of online doctoral students.

Simmons-Johnson (2012) used a mixed-methods approach to examine doctoral students' perceptions of the social support systems available at Pepperdine University. Simmons-Johnson's research focused on students' perceptions of the usefulness of the student dissertation web site and other support systems. In the qualitative portion of the mixed-method study participants were invited to discuss their own ideas of how to improve the support systems that were available. Doctoral students participating in the qualitative part of the study revealed their keen interest in mentoring, student support groups, and e-mentoring as possible additional support systems to the current Pepperdine dissertation web site. My study included the role of the spiritual aspect of social support in the persistence of online doctoral students. My study was significant because it added important new information on an aspect of social support not discussed in the Simmons-Johnson study, or in other previous studies.

Andrews and Tynan (2012) used a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of students in online programs and their usage of mobile devices as a form of social support to increase their connectedness. The results of this study revealed that the most effective student networks were informal ones rather than more formalized social support systems. For

example, many students in the study preferred discussing class material on Facebook rather than on the university's discussion board.

The Andrews and Tynan (2012) study was relevant to my study for two reasons. First, it was important because my study included the role of informal social support on students learning in online programs. Second, their study was relevant to my study because it discussed the importance of using mobile devices as a way of increasing the connectedness felt by online students. My study expanded Andrews and Tynan's research by delving into the role of technology such as mobile devices on the spiritual aspect of social support of online doctoral students. My study also explored the role of spiritual support in the lives and persistence of these students.

Hirsh (2012) conducted a quantitative study to investigate the impact of Twitter on the learning experience of online students. Her hypothesis was Twitter usage would increase the academic performance of all of the students participating in the study. Unfortunately, the results of her study did not substantiate her original hypothesis. Instead, Hirsh discovered that a majority of the students in the study who stated that tweeting increased their "level of engagement" were found to have a "higher academic performance" in the class (Hirsh, 2012, p. 184). Hirsh's study provided valuable information for my study on ways to use a form of internet technology to increase student engagement as a quick way for peers to communicate with each other and the professor.

Hirsh's (2012) study demonstrated Twitter's value as a way for students to connect and potentially increase their sense of community in their online classes. This study was significant to my study because Twitter is one of the ways available for online doctoral students to communicate. I expanded Hirsh's study on social support using Twitter by adding the role of

spiritual support from all forms of technology and other social communication sites. My study explored this spiritual support has in the lives and persistence of online doctoral students.

Spiritual Support

Culpepper (2004) conducted a qualitative study of strategies women doctoral students used to reach their goals. Some participants in the study discussed the important role their spiritual beliefs played in their success in their doctoral studies. One of the participants said, “As a Christian . . . I knew God was with me. I acknowledged him in the acknowledgment section of the dissertation” (Culpepper, 2004, p. 68). Another participant eloquently described how her belief in God helped her through her doctorate when she said, “I grew up as a Christian in a Christian home. God can help you through anything” (Culpepper, 2004, p. 80). The Culpepper study was significant to my study for two reasons. First, because it was a qualitative study, Culpepper used the same interview techniques I used in my study. Second, the interviews she conducted gave the participants the opportunity to discuss the spiritual nature of their experiences and how their support from God helped them complete their doctoral journeys. Like Culpepper, my study gave participants a chance to discuss their spiritual journeys and the role of spiritual support in their persistence.

Osborne (2008) explored spiritual community-building in his qualitative study. The purpose of this study was to develop a grounded theory on the most effective ways to develop a spiritual community among Christian online learners. Osborne developed his grounded theory by investigating spiritual community from two perspectives. He delved into both the instructional design of online courses and the communication methods that best promoted spiritual community in classes. As a result of his study, Osborne found that a majority of

students interviewed perceived the discussion board as having a positive impact on their spiritual community development.

The Osborne (2008) study was significant to my study because he explored online learners' sense of spiritual community at a Christian college. My study expanded Osborne's study by focusing on the role of spiritual support factors, on the persistence of online doctoral students at a Christian university.

Kopp (2009) conducted a phenomenological study to explore the experiences of doctoral students who successfully graduated from their programs of study. The participants in the study discussed a number of experiences that helped them overcome obstacles and finish their doctorates. For example, some of the participants discussed the positive impact of peers and study groups, and several of the participants discussed prayer to God as the method they used to overcome many of their obstacles and persist in their doctoral quest. This study was significant to my study because it revealed the role of spiritual support from God in the persistence of some doctoral students. My study extended Kopp's research by focusing specifically on the role of spiritual support in the lives of online doctoral students and their persistence.

Lowe (2010) conducted a study on the impact of online courses on the spiritual formation of adult students. The sampling of participants was taken from students in a theological program of study. The participants in the study discussed the positive ways their online class impacted their spiritual growth. A majority of the participants reported that their online studies had a positive impact on their spiritual formation, "The community aspect of spiritual formation was addressed throughout the study" (Lowe, 2010, p. 12). Participants in the study noted that their faith was enhanced by their interaction with others online.

The terms used by the participants to describe their experiences included: “. . . uplifting, prayer support, encouragement, and reinforcement” (Lowe, 2010, p. 7). Lowe’s (2010) study was significant to my study because a majority of the participants discussed the positive impact of their online course on their spiritual formation. Like the Lowe study, I delved into the spiritual support aspect of social support. My study expanded Lowe’s study on adult learners, and studied doctoral level students. My study also extended Lowe’s study by exploring the role of spiritual support factors and the persistence of online learners.

Sessana’s (2012) qualitative study explored obstacles 13 female doctoral students faced due to unexpected events in their lives. The purpose of the study was to delve into the types of support systems the students developed in order to overcome these obstacles and persist to their doctoral goals. Sessana’s study revealed friends, peers, and program advisors all provided important support systems for participants. Four of the 13 participants also reported that their faith was one of the reasons they were able to de-stress and focus themselves on their goals of completing their doctorates. This study was significant to my study of doctoral students because it showed that prayer was a form of spiritual support that helped some of the doctoral students persist in their quests to attain their doctorates. The findings of my study also showed the importance of spiritual support through prayer to the persistence of doctoral students.

Butler (2013) explored the impact of instructor interaction on the spiritual development of online students. The qualitative study was conducted by interviewing instructors and students in three online religion sections at an evangelical university. Participants in the study discussed the positive impact instructors had on their spiritual growth. The instructors interviewed in the study discussed the importance of encouraging their students both academically and spiritually.

The Butler (2013) study was significant to my study in two important ways. First, it was significant because Butler (2013) conducted a study that revealed the positive impact of instructors' spiritual forms of support and interactions with their students. In my study, I also delved into the role of positive instructor interaction with students. Second, Butler recommended a follow-up study that aimed “. . . to understand what factors contribute to the students' overall interactions as related to spiritual development in an online environment” (Butler, 2013, p. 128). My study followed Butler's recommendation and explored the role of spiritual support in students' interactions and their persistence.

Comeaux (2013) referred to the Lowe (2010) study on spiritual studies on college students when he observed, “I found only one study that examined the spiritual growth of students in the online educational format” (Comeaux, 2013, p. 4). One of the purposes for Comeaux's study was to fill the gap in the literature on the importance of spiritual community to the online experience of students.

The participants in Comeaux's (2013) study who were on-campus related that their interactions with faculty, staff, and fellow students had influenced their spiritual growth. Online graduate students in the study discussed being thankful for the interactions they had with faculty, staff, and other students, which enhanced their spiritual growth while in their programs of study. Online students also discussed the need for more “. . . targeted programming in the area of spiritual growth” (Comeaux, 2013, p. 122). Comeaux's study was significant to my study for two reasons. First, his study revealed the large gap in the literature on spiritual growth of online graduate students. Second, the results of the study indicated the need for more targeted programs to enhance the spiritual growth of online graduate students. My study on the role of spiritual

factors in the lives and persistence of online doctoral students helped to fill this gap in the literature on the spiritual aspects of the doctoral journey.

Forrest's (2013) study delved into the spiritual formation of the spouses of graduate students at a seminary. Forrest's study added to the findings of the Comeaux (2013) study on the spiritual growth of online graduate learners by exploring the spiritual growth of online graduate students' spouses. The study's findings revealed the spiritual growth of the spouses helped them provide positive spiritual support to their spouses during their seminary studies. Forrest's study's findings made an important contribution to the empirical literature on spiritual support because the participants in his study discussed the many positive spiritual support experiences they shared with their spouses. The study was significant to my research because the findings revealed the importance to online graduate learners of spiritual support from their spouses, which I further explored in my study.

Persistence Studies

Robole (2003) investigated the impact of primary relationships on doctoral student persistence. The doctoral students in her study discussed their personal experiences in their cohort program and the impact their primary relationships had on their persistence. The students emphasized the importance of positive relationships and collaborative experiences on their persistence and discussed the encouragement they received from the peers in their cohort. They also discussed the need for more focus groups in their program so they could discuss their ideas on support systems. According to Robole, the participants liked the focus group the researcher led in her study because it gave them a chance to really “. . . sit down and talk about it,” referring to their doctoral experiences (Robole, 2013, p. 62). This study was significant to my study

because it was also qualitative and discussed the positive impact of peer support during the doctoral journey.

Barnett (2008) conducted a phenomenological study about the experiences influencing doctoral students' completion of their degrees in educational administration. Students in Barnett's study discussed two major areas influencing their persistence that were related to my study. These two areas were their academic and social integration experiences in their studies during their doctorates. Barnett defined academic integration as "the success students had infusing themselves into academic norms of their particular institutions, departments, and fields of study" (Barnett, 2008, p. 203).

Barnett (2008) defined social integration as "the success students have becoming members of a social network of peers in their particular institutions and departments" (p. 203). The students who had positive experiences in these two areas were more likely to persist in their programs of study. In contrast, Barnett found that students that had negative experiences in these two areas were less likely to persist. Students discussed their positive social integration experiences with peers and family, and discussed how these experiences helped them to persist in their programs of study. The Barnett study was significant to my study because it explored social integration, which was the goal of the spiritual aspect of social support explored in my study.

Holmes, Birds, Seay, Smith, and Wilson (2010) described the benefits of doctoral students' participation in a cohort model, which is one type of social support group used during the doctoral process. The cohort model has been one of the most studied types of doctoral social support systems. Holmes et al.'s (2010) study revealed the impact of the social support supplied by this model on the persistence of the students. According to the authors, they ". . . gained the

power to continue beyond the obstacles and develop personal inner-strength within this supportive environment” (Holmes et al., 2010, p. 6). Holmes et al. discussed the importance of the cohort and their idea that the collaboration they experienced within the cohort was the main reason they were able to complete their dissertations and complete their doctorates.

The Holmes et al. (2010) study was significant to my study because their research revealed the importance of having a support group of peers as part of doctoral students’ social support systems. Their research revealed the positive effect this model has on doctoral students’ persistence in their studies. My study also explored varying types of social support systems that are important to the persistence of students. I expanded the research to include the role of spiritual support. For the purpose of my study, I included spiritual support systems composed of peers, faculty, family, and others to explore the role these factors played in the persistence of online doctoral students.

Lambert (2011) conducted a quantitative study to investigate the impact of psychosocial factors on the success of doctoral students. His study revealed the importance of three types of interaction for the success and persistence of doctoral students’: interactions with other learners, interactions with the instructor, and interactions with course content. This study was significant to my research because it showed the positive impact of some social factors on the academic success and persistence of doctoral students. My study expanded on Lambert’s work by adding spiritual support and investigating the role it played in the persistence of online doctoral students in an education program.

Gardner and Gopaul (2012) explored the experiences of 10 part-time doctoral students. These students discussed their main sources of social support on their doctoral journeys. Family support was discussed as extremely important to their persistence in their programs. Husbands,

wives, and other family members were cited as the sources of daily support that helped these doctoral students persist in and finish their programs of study. This research was significant because the role of family was also explored in my study of the role of spiritual support in the persistence of online doctoral students.

Gibbs (2012) conducted a mixed-methods study to explore the persistence of doctoral students. The students in her study discussed the importance of peer, family, and friend support during their doctoral journeys. The researcher revealed that 100% of the participants she interviewed viewed family and peer support as two highly important factors that helped them, persist in successfully complete their studies. Participants in the study also discussed the importance of academic peer support. They stressed the important role this support played in their persistence in their doctoral programs. This study was significant to my study because it discussed the importance of peers, family, and academic peers. All three of these informal social support factors were essential parts of social support systems of doctoral students. My study included these social factors and added the spiritual form of social support. As a result, my study delved into the role of an added form of social support on the persistence of online doctoral students.

Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012) conducted a qualitative phenomenological study exploring the factors doctoral students perceive to most help them persist in their doctoral quests. The researchers discuss many factors affecting doctoral students' persistence in the doctoral program. Social factors were among those factors discussed as very important to the students' persistence. Two important social support systems discussed by doctoral students were family and friends. Other important aspects of participants' personal social support systems were their chairperson and committee members. According to the study, all of these social

support factors contributed to the persistence of doctoral candidates interviewed in the study (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). This study added valuable new information to my research on the importance of personal social support systems as part of the doctoral process. My research provided additional useful information for online doctoral students by delving into the role of spiritual forms of social support on the lives and persistence of online doctoral students.

Wyman (2012) completed a phenomenological study of doctoral students that did not complete their online course of study. The purpose of this study was to delve into the experiences of these students to discover their perceptions of why they were unable to complete their course of study. According to Wyman (2012), about half of the participants in the study stated they left the program due to family issues. All of the participants stated they felt a need for more academic and social integration, which validates the ideas previously discussed by Tinto (1993) in his doctoral persistence theory. Participants in the study also discussed their feelings of isolation, which was emphasized by Rovai (2002) in his study of the impact of sense of community on persistence.

The Wyman (2012) study was relevant to my study in more than one way. First, she conducted a phenomenological study, which was the same type of study I implemented. Second, she studied online doctoral students, which was the same population I studied. Third, her participants validated the need for social integration, which was also explored as a part of my study. There are two major differences between our two studies. The first difference was that my study explored the experience of students who completed their online doctoral program, and the Wyman study explored non-completers. The second difference was that my study went

beyond general social support factors impacting persistence and focused on the specific role of the spiritual form of social support.

Zahl (2013) conducted a qualitative study that delved into how sense of community affects the persistence of part-time doctoral students. The purpose of her study was to explore the social factors that lead part-time doctoral students to complete their studies. The part-time doctoral students Zahl interviewed discussed how they felt a lack of community between themselves and their academic department. Participants in the study revealed that the social support they received from their peers was important to their persistence and completion of their doctoral programs.

The Zahl (2013) study was extremely relevant to my study. She explored the impact of the social support systems of part-time doctorate students on their sense of community and persistence in their programs of study. My study added to her research in two ways. First, I explored a social support factor not included in her research by delving into the role of the spiritual form of social support in the lives and persistence of doctoral students. Second, my study focused on the experiences of online doctoral students.

Santicola (2013) investigated persistence through a doctoral cohort program. He conducted a phenomenological study to discover the reason for the persistence of nine students over three years in a doctoral management and leadership program. At the end of his study, four characteristics emerged as reasons for the persistence of the participants: the participants' commitment to the program, their ability to put the doctorate as their highest priority, the ability to work independently, and full-time employment. This study indicated that the nine doctoral students in the study were independent learners and that their persistence in their programs was not impacted by their participation in the cohort model.

Santicola's (2013) study was significant to my study of spiritual types of social support factors and persistence because it showed the importance of the selection of the sampling of participants. I used a purposive sampling because I was seeking to explore a phenomenon of online doctoral students who shared a common characteristic. The Santicola study made me realize the importance of using a purposive sampling of participants whose common characteristic was that they shared the experience of some type of spiritual support in their doctoral programs. I believe recruiting participants who had experience with at least one form of spiritual support was vital to the success of my study.

Fitzpatrick (2013) studied the persistence of doctoral students in a cohort by using a quantitative survey method. Her purpose was to explore the impact of peer relationships, faculty involvement, and student characteristics on the persistence of doctoral students. The results of her study indicated that educational peer relationships within the cohort positively impacted the participants' persistence. The results also indicated that a positive relationship between faculty and participant was important to persistence as well.

Fitzpatrick's (2013) was significant to my study because it showed that the connection between student to student and between student and faculty was important to the persistence of doctoral students. Fitzpatrick's study was related to my study because her study showed the impact of some of the same social support factors that were used in my study. The major difference was my addition of the spiritual form of social support to my study.

Colbert (2013) conducted a phenomenological research study to investigate the perceptions of students who had successfully completed their doctorates in a cohort, on the factors contributing to their completion. The majority of the students in the study related the importance of their relationships with their peers in their cohort. They also discussed how their

departments' commitment to their persistence and eventual completion of their doctoral programs helped them to persist. All of the participants stated that having the support of friends and family had a positive impact on their persistence in their doctoral programs. The participants in the study also noted the positive impact of having a caring advisor and chairperson. This study was significant to my study because it was similar to my study. Like Colbert, I delved into the relationships of doctoral students with their peers, faculty, friends, and family. My study extended Colbert's research by looking specifically at the role of the spiritual support experiences of these students by their social support network and their persistence.

Summary

The purpose of this review of the literature was to explore the social and spiritual aspects of learning and the role they play on the learning process and the persistence of learners. The first focus of this review of the literature was on studies discussing the impact of social support factors on learners. These social factors included social support and sense of community. The second area of focus of my review of the literature was on researchers' work dealing with spiritual types of social support experiences of learners. In this section of the review, studies were reviewed that revealed references by participants to the types of spiritual support they used as a part of the learning process. As I noted earlier, there were no studies found specifically on the role of spiritual support to online, or traditional doctoral learners, and their persistence, which was the topic of my study. The third focus of this review of the literature was on the theoretical background of persistence studies and types of support systems, which have been explored by this research.

The literature reviewed on the social, spiritual, and persistence studies spanned from Vygotsky's theories in the 1930's to Colbert's (2013) research. This literature review began

with the theoretical background of the social aspect of learning, and then explored the many paths taken by researchers attempting to understand the impact of these social support systems on the sense of community and academic success of students. There were two major goals of my review of the literature.

The primary goal of the review of the literature was to explore the studies that discussed the roles of both social and spiritual support on the learning process and persistence of students. The purpose of this exploration was also to reveal the many forms of social and spiritual support that are available and to help build a sense of community among learners. The second major goal of the research was to explore the studies that provided insight into factors influencing the persistence of learners in their programs of study. This research revealed the importance of both social support and sense of community on the persistence of many online students. A majority of the research on social support systems revealed that this form of support improved online students' perceptions of their sense of community in their respective educational programs, which has an impact on the persistence of many students.

The first gap I discovered in the literature was on methods used by online doctoral students to grow personal social support systems during their studies. The Zahl (2013) study was the only study I found that suggested effective ways doctoral students developed social support systems that impacted both their sense of community, and persistence. Participants in Zahl's study revealed the supportive relationships they built during their doctoral journeys, and discussed the positive impact these relationships had on their sense of community and persistence. My study helped to fill the gap in the literature I discussed, and expanded Zahl's research by using online doctoral students who have completed their programs of study.

The second gap in the literature was the total lack of research on the role of spiritual support and its relationship to the persistence of online doctoral students. I was unable to locate any research on this specific area. I was able to fill this gap by including the exploration of the spiritual support experiences of online doctoral students, and the role of these experiences on their persistence in their studies.

My study was important because it gave a voice to online doctoral students and their perceptions of the role of spiritual support on their lives and in their persistence in their doctoral journeys. It is my hope that this study will influence future online doctoral students to explore the creation of their own personal spiritual support systems.

It is my belief that knowledge of the role of spiritual support in the persistence of doctoral students is important in two ways. First, this knowledge will help Christian universities explore ways to implement methods of spiritual support for online doctoral students, which will greatly enhance their spiritual experiences. Second, I believe this knowledge will help doctoral students understand the meaning of spiritual support in both their doctoral journeys and in their lives beyond their doctorate.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to investigate the role of spiritual support in the lives and persistence of online doctoral students at a Christian university. The major aspects of the study explored in this chapter included the design, research questions, setting, participants, procedures, the researcher's role, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and summary.

Design

My study employed a transcendental phenomenological research design. Creswell (2013) defined phenomenological research as “. . . a qualitative strategy in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants in a study” (p. 245). This research design was appropriate for my study because I wanted to identify the essence of the experience of spiritual support and persistence, from online doctoral students' descriptions of spiritual support. My study used a transcendental approach. Moustakas (1994) described transcendental phenomenology as “. . . a scientific study of the appearance of things, of phenomena just as we see them and as they appear to us in consciousness” (p. 49). Creswell (2007) used Moustakas' description of the transcendental phenomenological approach to formulate a concise definition. He stated, “In this approach, the researcher sets aside prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being investigated. Also, the researcher relies on intuition, imagination, and universal structures to obtain a picture of the experience and uses systematic methods as advanced by Moustakas (1994)” (Creswell, 2007, p. 237).

Moustakas' (1994) transcendental approach was appropriate for my research because it allowed me to explore the essence of online doctoral students' shared spiritual support

experiences. I was able to put aside my own judgments on spiritual support made before the study and use “intuition, imagination, [and] universal structures” to discover the essence of my participants’ experiences (Moustakas, 1994, p. 22). The transcendental approach allowed me to view this essence of the phenomenon of spiritual support among online doctoral students “. . . in its totality, in a fresh and open way” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34).

Research Questions

My strategy of using a CQ followed by SQs was discussed by Creswell (2013) who advocated for “. . . a single overarching question and several subquestions” (p. 138). The purpose of my study was to bridge the gap in the literature I found on spiritual support and persistence while conducting my literature review. Both Olges (2012) and Comeaux (2013) also revealed this same dearth of studies on the spiritual aspect of support of online students. My CQ was derived from the purpose of my study, which was to explore the role of spiritual support in the persistence of online doctoral students.

The CQ for my study was the following: How would online doctoral graduates describe the meaning of spiritual support in their lives, and in their persistence in their program of study?

The SQs for my study were the following:

- SQ1. How do the graduates describe the meaning in their lives of spiritual support from the faculty, and/or the school, to their persistence?
- SQ2. How do the graduates describe the meaning in their lives of spiritual support from their peers, to their persistence?
- SQ3. How do the graduates describe the meaning in their lives of spiritual support from family, and/or friends, to their persistence?

SQ4. How do the graduates describe the meaning of spiritual support in their lives from their church to their persistence?

SQ5. How do graduates describe the meaning in their lives of internal spiritual support systems, such as praying, or Bible study to their persistence?

SQ6. How do graduates describe the role of technology and other forms of communication on their spiritual support, to their persistence? (E.g. emails, texts, cell phones, phone calls).

SQ7. What other possible sources of spiritual support would have enhanced their perception of spiritual support and persistence of the doctoral students?

Setting

The setting for this study was an anonymous Christian university in the Eastern United States. The university had a large online enrollment. The online student population was comprised of approximately half as many men as women. Students were enrolled online from across the United States and in countries from throughout the world. This setting was chosen for two main reasons. First, it was chosen because it was a site which could “. . . purposely inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). The second reason it was chosen was because I have a first-hand knowledge of the setting, and the online education program (Anonymous University Website, 2013).

Participants

Seven online doctoral students were selected to participate in the study. The doctoral students were selected from the education program at the Christian university discussed in the setting section below. Participants were selected who met the following three criteria. First, doctoral students were invited to participate who were in an online doctoral program in

education. Second, students were selected based on their experiences with spiritual support in their program of study. Third, they had to show persistence and completion in their program. There were no restrictions on gender, race, or religious backgrounds.

Sampling

A purposive sampling of participants was used in this study. Creswell (2007) described purposive sampling as a technique used where the researcher “. . . selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p. 125). I selected this type of sampling procedure because in my study, online doctoral graduates were selected who understood the problem that a lack of perceived spiritual support has on doctoral persistence. These selected online doctoral graduates were chosen because they experienced in some way the phenomenon of spiritual support during their program of study.

Participant Demographics

I have included demographic information on the participants. I have generalized the occupations to protect the identities of the participants since participants might be identified by their actual occupations.

Table 1.

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Marital Status	Degree	Occupation
Alex	Male	40s	African American	Married	EdD	Professor
Brian	Male	30s	Caucasian	Married	EdD	Teacher
Cara	Female	50s	Caucasian	Married	EdD	Teacher
Debra	Female	50s	Caucasian	Married	EdD	Professor
Elaine	Female	50s	Caucasian	Married	EdD	Professor
Frances	Female	50s	Caucasian	Married	EdD	Professor
Greg	Male	30s	Caucasian	Married	EdD	Teacher

Procedures

First, before data collection began, I submitted a proposal of the study to the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). This proposal included the site, setting, sampling procedure, methods of data collection, and methods of data analysis. After I received approval from the IRB (see Appendix B), I began to recruit my participants.

Two main methods were used to select a purposive sampling of participants. First, I used my personal knowledge of students who had graduated from the online education program. Second, I selected doctoral graduates from the education program who discussed spiritual support in the acknowledgement sections of their published dissertations. Once I had a list of seven possible participants, I e-mailed them with invitations to join the study (see Appendix C).

This e-mail explained the nature of the study and asked them to send their mail addresses if interested. The e-mail also explained that if they sent their addresses, they would be mailed recruitment letters (see Appendix I), consent forms (see Appendix A), and one-question questionnaires on spiritual support.

After receiving the e-mails with their addresses, I mailed the recruitment letters, consent forms, and one-question questionnaires on spiritual support. This was done through the mail so that I would have their original signatures on the forms. I used the approved template for these consent forms from the university's website.

After I received the informed consent forms and one-question questionnaires from each of the seven participants, I began data collection using three of the methods discussed by Creswell (2007). These three methods were collection of site documents, interviews, and journaling (Creswell, 2007). Site documents on the topic of spiritual support for each participant were collected first. After the first site documents were collected, the first interviews were conducted. Journaling by participants was conducted after the first interviews. More site documents were then collected for each participant. At the end of the study, a final interview was conducted and a final journal reflection was collected from each participant. When necessary, additional site documents from participants were collected at the end of the study.

My data analysis technique combined Moustakas' (1994) and Creswell's (2007) approaches. I maintained much of the descriptive terminology of Moustakas, while using Creswell's "... simplified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method" (Creswell, 2007, p. 159). This approach included the bracketing/epoche process, horizontalization of participant statements, clusters of meaning or themes from these statements, textural experiences, and structural descriptions (Creswell, 2007). The final step was the composite description, which

revealed the essence of the phenomenon. These important steps are described in detail in my data analysis section.

The Researcher's Role

Lincoln and Guba (1985) were the first to discuss the importance of the researcher as the “human instrument” in a study (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 193). As the human instrument for this study I collected and analyzed all of the data I received from the participants myself. During this process, I conducted initial one-on-one interviews with the participants. I followed up these interviews with journal prompts and follow-up interviews. Because participants were academic peers, I bracketed out my experiences from their experiences using the epoche process described in detail later in this chapter. I used this process throughout my study. In the next section, I wrote about my personal background and my experiences that I bracketed out before I began the data collection process.

My father was an aerospace engineer and my mother was a secretary during World War II and became a homemaker after the war. My grandmother was a teacher, and my grandfather was a coal miner. He also was a gifted painter, violinist, and handcrafted violins as a hobby. Education was always highly encouraged in my family. Most importantly, my family taught me the importance of believing in God, being a Christian, and in the power of prayer.

During my life, I have had many different careers. My first career was as a Russian linguist in the Army. Next, I was a civilian government employee, and taught soldiers remedial math, English, and artillery observer courses. At the middle school level, I taught Spanish for six years and served as an Instructional Coach for the district. At the elementary level, I worked as a guidance counselor and as an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher.

Currently I have taken a teaching sabbatical to complete my doctorate in education. I also am completing my coursework to maintain my licensure as a mental health counselor.

As a Christian, I believe God has called me to share my gifts with my children, grandchildren, and students. For the last four years, I have been on an exciting educational journey to achieve a doctorate in education. My experiences in my online doctoral classes led me to understand the importance of sense of community in my own educational learning process. This need for a sense of community led me to establish online spiritual and academic support learning groups for doctoral students in my classes.

Data Collection

Data triangulation was an integral part of the data collection process. Data triangulation is defined as a researcher's “. . . use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence” (Creswell, 2007, p. 208). I achieved data triangulation by using three sources of data in the following order: site documents, interviews, and journaling. Creswell (2007) endorsed using of all three of these data sources. Data triangulation was one of the methods I employed to assure data saturation. Fusch and Ness (2015) discussed the importance of data triangulation to data saturation. They said, “There is a direct link between data triangulation and data saturation; the one (data triangulation) assures the other (data saturation)” (Fusch & Ness, 2015, p. 1411).

As previously discussed in the procedure and data collection sections in this chapter, after IRB approval (see Appendix B) and consent was obtained from participants, I collected site documents and sent out a one-question questionnaire on spiritual support. The initial site documents collected were used as part of the participant's background data. The one-question questionnaire was given to potential participants and indicated whether or not they had

experienced some sort of spiritual support as part of their doctoral experiences. Next, interviews were conducted which gave even more in-depth information about each participant's spiritual experience. Journaling followed the interviews because it gave participants an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of the spiritual support experience they encountered after we discussed their experiences in their interviews.

I believe it was necessary for me to collect the data in this sequence. Starting with site documents gave me more background information on each participant before I conducted the interviews. The interviews came before the journaling because I wanted the participants to journal their reflections of their interview experiences.

Site Documents

As discussed in the introduction to this section, the first method of data collection was the collection of site documents. This included e-mails, text messages, and dissertations of doctoral graduates selected to participate in my study. Creswell (2007) gave some examples of site documents as being public documents, journals, diaries, and letters. He categorized e-mail and text messages under audiovisual materials. For the purposes of my study, all audiovisual materials were considered site documents. These documents were collected and stored in a database on an encrypted drive in my office. The data was only able to be retrieved by me using a special password that protected participants' security. Site documents were appropriate for my study because they were written documents that revealed the meaning of spiritual support to participants.

The data collection method of site documents was chosen because this technique was being utilized to answer my first five sub-questions. I collected e-mail, texts, and other site

documents dealing with the topic of the meaning to participants of external and internal types of spiritual support covered in these sub-questions.

Interviews

Interviews were the second type of data collection used in the study (see Appendices E and G). Prior to conducting interviews with participants, colleagues with earned doctorates not involved in the study conducted a peer review of the interview questions. This peer review of the interview questions prior to the study was done in person, via e-mail, telephone, and Skype. The peer interview review was conducted to refine the interview questions the participants would be asked.

A standardized open-ended interview was conducted by e-mail, or by telephone with each participant after initial site documents were collected. Patton (2002) described a standardized open-ended interview as an interview, which “. . . requires carefully and fully wording each question before the interview” (p. 344). Recent research demonstrating the effectiveness of this standardized open-ended interview approach was the Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012) study on factors that doctoral students perceive contributed to their persistence. Table 2 below contains the interview questions I used in my study.

Table 2.

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

-
1. How would you describe the meaning to you of your spiritual support from faculty, school, and/or peers to your persistence?
 2. How would you describe the meaning to you of spiritual support from your family, friends, and/or church to your persistence?
 3. How would you describe the meaning to you of internal spiritual support system such as praying, or Bible study to your persistence?
 4. How would you describe the meaning to you of spiritual support from e-mails, texting, or other use of online technology to your persistence?
 5. Is there anything else you would like to mention about your perception of the spiritual support experience and/or your persistence in the online doctoral program?
-

The purpose of interview questions one and two were to elicit the meaning of participants' in-depth experiences with external spiritual support, and their persistence in their classes. These two questions related to one to four of my research questions. The purpose of question three was to delve into the meaning of participants' in-depth experiences, in relation to their internal spiritual support systems. This question related directly to question five of my research questions. Interview question four elicited the participants' experiences with online technology and the influence it had on their persistence. This question related to research question six. Interview question five related to the seventh sub-question. I used Creswell's five-question protocol for interviews (Creswell, 2007). Creswell recommended using five open-

ended questions to gather the information needed to describe the participants' shared phenomenon.

I read and reread all the participants' interviews regarding the shared phenomenon of spiritual support. The reason multiple readings of these interview transcriptions was important was because I used this method to uncover the themes, which are a critical part of phenomenological research. These transcriptions were stored on a password protected computer in my private office.

The data collection method of interviews was chosen because this technique was utilized to answer all seven of my sub-questions. I conducted in-depth interviews that began with the internal and external spiritual support issues covered by my first five sub-questions. Next, I covered the topic of the role of technology discussed in my sixth sub-question. I ended my interviews covering the topic discussed by my seventh sub-question, which gave participants an opportunity to brainstorm other resources of spiritual support that might have enhanced their spiritual support experiences.

Journaling

The third type of data collection utilized in my study was journaling. Creswell (2007) described journaling as a popular form of data collection. Ortlipp (2008) wrote about using reflective journals in the qualitative research process. Billups and Kite (2010) successfully used reflective journaling in their study of doctoral students' perceptions of factors that contributed to their success. This method of data collection was accomplished by the participants answering a journal prompt reflection on their spiritual support interviews upon the completion of the interview. Journaling was appropriate because participants were able to reflect and journal about the meaning of spiritual support to their online doctoral experiences.

The data collection method of journaling was chosen because this technique was utilized to answer my seven sub-questions for my research. Each participant wrote reflections of their interviews (see Appendices F and H). These reflections gave participants an opportunity to discuss topics from all seven of the sub-questions. Topics they reflected on were internal and external support systems, technology, and other possible sources of spiritual support.

Data Analysis

Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (2007) both discussed similar steps useful in phenomenological data analysis. Data analysis in my study combined the steps discussed by both theorists. This section describes each step in the process: epoche/bracketing, horizontalization, clusters of meanings, textural descriptions, structural descriptions, and the final composite descriptions of the experience

Epoche/Bracketing

According to Moustakas (1994), the epoche process is used so that the researcher can put his or her own ideas about the phenomenon aside so that “no position whatsoever is taken . . . nothing is determined in advance” (p. 84). Moustakas (1994) said, “. . . the focus of the research is placed in brackets, everything else is set aside so that the entire research process is rooted solely on the topic and question” (p. 97). By using this epoche process, I was able to put aside my background and personal experiences with the phenomenon of spiritual support in online classes. This process of bracketing the focus of my research on the spiritual support experiences of the online doctoral students in the study, allowed me to move beyond my own experiences and focus on the experiences of the participants in my study (Bircher, 2012; Moustakas, 1994).

Horizontalization

Moustakas (1994) defined the next step of data analysis as horizontalization of the data.

Moustakas stated:

. . . every statement initially is treated as having equal value. Later, statements irrelevant to the topic and question as well as those that are repetitive or overlapping are deleted, leaving only the *Horizons* (the textural meanings and invariant constituents of the phenomenon) (p. 97).

I accomplished horizontalization by compiling a list of participant statements on experiences with spiritual support. This list was taken from the interviews and other sources of data. Each of these statements was treated equally. This process helped me develop a list of significant statements about spiritual support and the persistence of the online participants in the study. From my review of the literature, I discovered Liu (2008) used horizontalization in her data analysis of student interaction experiences in distance learning courses.

I used highlighters of varying colors, and the highlight coloring function on my computer to code statements that were significant during this process. Isaacs (2011) used different colored highlighters during horizontalization to code the significant statements of participants in her study of the role of African-American faculty on the success of African-American students in their undergraduate studies.

Clusters of Meanings

The third step was when these significant statements, (or Horizons), were clustered into themes. Creswell (2007) defined this as the “clusters of meanings” step (p. 235). The interview data was read and reread in order to identify a list of meaningful statements. I carefully analyzed this list of meaningful statements derived from the horizontalization of data. I then grouped these

meaningful statements into themes. This process of reading and rereading the data multiple times revealed the major themes of the statements of the participants (Bircher 2012; Creswell, 2007; Skinner, 2013). In order to track the different themes during the analysis, I used different colored highlighters and continued to use the color highlighting function on my computer. Skinner (2013) used colored highlighters in her transcendental phenomenological study to “. . . mark certain phrases, thoughts, or words so that each would stand out and could easily be grouped” (p. 68).

Textural Description and Structural Description

The fourth step was to use the major themes that emerged from the participants’ statements to discuss the textural and structural descriptions of the participants. The textural descriptions were defined as “what” participants experience (Creswell, 2007, p. 237). In my study, this was a verbatim account of what online students experienced with their spiritual support systems, and the role of these experiences in their lives and in their persistence in their program of study. This process gave the “textural description” of the online students’ experiences (Moustakas, 1994, p.121). Bircher (2012) effectively used this technique of data analysis in her study of peer mentorship among doctoral students.

The “structural description” was defined as “how the experience happened” (Creswell, 2007, p. 159). This description revealed how the online participants experienced the spiritual support. The structural description of the participants in my study also revealed where in the virtual environment they experienced spiritual support. Bircher (2012) used structural descriptions as part of her data analysis of the experiences of the part-time doctoral students she studied.

Composite Description

The composite description of the participants' experiences was the final step of my data analysis. Creswell (2007) defined this composite description as the "what" and "how" of this experience (Creswell, 2007, p. 159). This formed the "essence" of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007, p. 159). Bircher (2012) used this important step in data analysis to discover the essence of the phenomenon of doctoral students' experiences with peer mentorship.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) discussed the importance of transferability, confirmability, credibility and dependability of studies, and their trustworthiness. Gasson (2004) updated and expanded their ideas on these important concepts determining trustworthiness. In this section, I detail each of these four concepts and how I achieved them in my study.

Transferability

Gasson (2004) defined the concept of transferability by stating that it is the extent one can generalize findings from a study and ". . . how far a researcher may make claims for a general application of their [sic] theory" (p. 98). This definition is parallel to the ideas on transferability espoused by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Although my study may be directly transferable to another Christian university with an online doctoral program, the transferability may be reduced under varying circumstances. For example, there may be transferability to a Christian university with an online program; however, the researcher at that university would need to conduct his or her own validation of transferability to confirm.

Creswell (2007) discussed the importance of rich, thick, description to the transferability of the study to other settings (p. 209). I achieved transferability in my study by using rich, thick,

description throughout the study to describe the participants and their stories about the role of spiritual support and its effect on their persistence.

Confirmability

According to Gasson (2004), confirmability was defined by how well the findings of a study “. . . represent, as far as (humanly) possible, the situation being researched rather than the beliefs, pet theories, or biases of the researcher” (p. 93).

By using the epoche process described by Moustakas (1994), I was able to increase the confirmability of my study. During this process, I put aside my own beliefs and theories and focused on the experiences with spiritual support and persistence in the lives of the online doctoral students participating in my study.

Credibility

Gasson (2004) defined credibility as “. . . how we ensure rigor in the research process and how we communicate to others we have done so” (p. 95). The first technique I used for determining credibility of the study results was member checking. Member checking was defined as when “. . . the researcher solicits participants’ views of the credibility of the findings and the interpretations” (Creswell, 2007, p. 208). In my study, I had participants review the theme statements that emerged from their interviews to see if they accurately described their experiences of spiritual support.

The second technique I used to increase the credibility of my study was triangulation of data collection sources which was defined by Creswell (2007), and discussed in the beginning of my data collection section. In my study, I used three different forms of data collection to increase the credibility of the findings by allowing me to collect evidence from three different

sources. Milacci's (2003) study of spirituality and adult education was an example of a study that also increased its credibility by using triangulation of multiple data sources.

The third technique I employed was peer review. A peer review or debriefing is where a peer provides an external check of the research process (Creswell, 2007; Milacci 2003). In my study, competent peers periodically reviewed the research process. This was important because these peers gave me insight into possible areas of bias in the study and added professional perspectives on the processes used throughout the study. This outside critique of the study made it more credible. Creswell (2007) recommended the use of member checking, triangulation, and peer review, which all impact the credibility of a study. Thus, since I used these three techniques in my data analysis, I was able to increase the likelihood of increasing both the credibility and transferability of my study of the role of spiritual support systems in the lives and persistence of online doctoral students.

Dependability

According to Gasson (2004), the definition of the dependability of a study was determined by how it was conducted. Gasson stated “. . . the way in which a study is conducted should be consistent across time, researchers, and analysis techniques” (p. 94). Creswell (2007) discussed the contrast between quantitative reliability and qualitative dependability when he stated, “Rather than reliability, one seeks dependability that the results will be subject to change and instability” (p. 204). By using the prescribed data collection and analysis methods of both Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (2007) described in previous sections, I was able to achieve more dependability in my study.

Ethical Considerations

The first step I followed was to apply to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval for the study. Ethically, I was unable to begin data collection until the study was approved. Once I made my application to the IRB, the IRB members reviewed the type of research being conducted and the procedure I selected to protect the identity of the participants, and to ensure they would not be harmed. I was aware I needed to maintain the confidentiality of all the participants and the research, even though it was of a type that would not cause any physical or emotional harm to the participants. In addition, it was critical to get consent from all participants in the study. Pseudonyms were used for all participants in the study. A pseudonym was also used for the name of the university. By maintaining complete confidentiality, I was able to maintain high ethical standards during the study. This study was voluntary in nature. A letter and consent form (see Appendix A) was mailed to online doctoral graduates requesting their participation. If a graduate did not respond to the letter, or if they responded indicating they did not want to participate, then the tally of non-participants was incremented and their name deleted from my list of participants. If a graduate responded indicating they did wish to participate, then the tally of participants was incremented and their name added to the list of participants. If the graduate agreed to participate, but did not mail back the signed consent form, I mailed a replacement consent form. If the graduate did not mail back the signed consent form the second time, I did not include the graduate in the study.

If a graduate decided to participate in the study, he or she was free to withdraw from the study at any time. If a graduate responded to part of the study, then these responses were used in the study, but sections of the study the graduate did not participate in were annotated as a non-response. If a withdrawing student would have indicated he or she wanted to withdraw, which

did not occur, I would have removed all data received from the graduate and indicated that this was a non-participant and the student's name would have been removed from the list of participants.

I maintained all paper research data in a locked filing cabinet when not in use. All electronic files were stored on an encrypted external Universal Serial Bus (USB) hard drive that was stored in the locked filing cabinet. I maintained a master contact list with the names, descriptors, and contact information for all participants involved in the study. This master list contained a unique numerical identifier (UNI) associated with each participant. This UNI was used on all data tables and other references used for the study instead of the participant's name or other identifier. The signed consent forms were stored in a separate locked filing cabinet.

Summary

In this chapter, I explored the major aspects of my study on the role of spiritual support on the persistence of online doctoral students. In the first few sections of the chapter, the transcendental research design, my central research question, the setting of the study, and the participants were described. In the next sections of the chapter, I discussed the procedures I followed, my role as a researcher, my methods of data collection, and analysis. I concluded the chapter by discussing how I determined the trustworthiness of the study and my ethical considerations before, during, and after the study.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the role of spiritual support in the persistence of online students who have completed their doctorate in education. This chapter presents the results of the analysis of the data gathered throughout this investigation. To analyze this data, I used the procedure described in-depth in Chapter Three. This procedure included epoche/bracketing, horizontalization, clusters of meanings, textural descriptions, and structural descriptions. Composite description was the final step and revealed the essence of the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2007). This chapter begins with a discussion of the epoche method I implemented before, during and after my study. Next, I provide in-depth descriptions of the participants. Third, I discuss the results of the study and answer the research questions. Fourth, I discuss the themes I uncovered and end the chapter with a summary of my findings.

Epoche/Bracketing

According to Moustakas (1994), the epoche process allows the researcher to take a “fresh” look at a phenomenon being studied. As discussed in the previous chapter, the purpose of the epoche (or bracketing) process was to set aside my own experiences with spiritual support and persistence in obtaining my doctorate, so that I could look at the shared experiences of my participants with this phenomenon, hearing their voices, and not my own, as they told their stories. I took time to think about, and write my own experiences with spiritual support and persistence throughout my study. The next section gives an example of some of the thoughts and experiences with spiritual support and persistence I wrote down during the time I was awaiting IRB approval for my study.

My Experiences with Spiritual Support and Persistence

I have had an amazing experience with spiritual support during my doctoral journey, which I know has helped me to persist. My primary source of spiritual support came from God through prayer. I believe in the power of prayer. I believe God has heard my prayers, and has helped me to persist in my quest to complete my doctoral journey. I also have asked for the prayers of friends, family members, peers, faculty, and others at the university to help me through this process. I believe I would not have made it as far as I have without all of the prayer support I received. The main thing I learned from my experience with spiritual support during my doctoral journey is that if you seek it, you will find it!

Participants

The focus of this dissertation was the seven participants' shared experience with spiritual support and persistence in their doctoral programs. There were three males and four females who participated in the study. As discussed in Chapter Three, six of the seven participants were Caucasian and there was one African-American. All participants had completed their doctorates in education and were employed in educational settings during the study. All participants indicated on their one-question questionnaire administered in the beginning of the study that they had experienced some form of spiritual support during their doctoral programs. Table 1 in Chapter Three provided the demographic information on all of the participants. The following sections are rich, thick participant descriptions. Quotes from participants were used to reveal their experiences with spiritual support in their own words. Pseudonyms were used to protect the anonymity of all the participants.

Alex

Alex is currently a professor teaching in the Midwest since 2013. He is married and has four children. Throughout his interviews, journals, and other site documents he often discussed his belief in the importance of the spiritual support he received during his doctoral program. He revealed many sources of spiritual support during his doctoral journey. For example, discussing his dissertation chair he said, “My chair took many hats for my progress as a mentor, friend, and spiritual leader in my education pursuit.”

Brian

Brian works as a professor at a university in the Midwest and also teaches younger children. He is married and has two children. In his interviews and journals, he discussed many positive experiences he had with spiritual support during his doctoral journey. He described his positive spiritual experience with peers while on campus when he said, “All throughout the week I was inspired by others’ stories and their commitment to Christ as evidenced by their actions, their communications, and their willingness to help one another.”

Cara

Cara is a teacher at a public school and revealed her mother was also a teacher. She has taught in the public schools for 28 years and is currently teaching at a public high school. She is married with two children. Cara described many of her positive spiritual support experiences throughout the study. For example, she said, “I honestly cannot think of any spiritual support that I did not receive. From the admissions, financial aid, records, counselors, and teachers- they ALL gave me words of encouragement and offered prayer.”

Debra

Debra has been teaching for more than 14 years. She has spent 8 years teaching on the college level in the Southern part of the United States. She has been married for 11 years and has 2 stepsons and 2 grandsons. She said that her students describe her as an easy going and approachable person. Debra discussed her spiritual support from God when she said, “I questioned many times why God wanted me to pursue the path that I was on, and He answered me loud and clear. Keep going!”

Elaine

Elaine grew up in the Midwest. She has worked in schools and taught online at the university level. She is married and in the past lived outside of the United States with her husband who is in the military. She described her spiritual support experience when she said, “The spiritual support I received included my dissertation chair checking in on me and saying she was praying for me. It was very meaningful to get an email from my dissertation chair telling me that she was lifting me up.”

Frances

Frances works as an assistant professor at a college where she teaches education courses. She has been married for 37 years and has four children. Three of her four children are still in high school. Frances discussed the importance of family and friends when she said, “Without the spiritual support from my family and friends, I probably would not have persisted. Their support was invaluable, and without it, I would have despaired.” Frances also discussed the positive spiritual support she received from her prayer partner at church during her doctoral program.

Greg

Greg grew up in the Southern part of the United States. He lived and taught at a school overseas during his doctoral program. He has been married for more than 18 years and has two children. Greg revealed his experience with spiritual support when he said, “The only spiritual support came once I had my dissertation committee in place and my chair/committee members showed spiritual concern for me.” Greg discussed his feelings during his dissertation phase of his doctorate when he said, “It was something I felt I was supposed to do and I didn’t seek support from others, and no one else really offered it”.

The participants’ responses to the research questions discussed in the next section are filled with rich, thick, descriptions of the participants themselves and of their experiences with spiritual support and persistence. Fusch and Ness (2015) discussed the importance of rich and thick data descriptions to achieving data saturation. Creswell (2013) also discussed the importance of rich, thick description when he said, “This procedure can add to the validity of the findings (p. 202).”

Results

As discussed in-depth in the last chapter, I first used horizontalization of all the data from participants’ interviews, journal prompts, and site documents to find meaningful statements on spiritual support and persistence. I then searched for the “clusters of meanings” described by Creswell (2007, p. 235) by reading and rereading the significant statements. I used colored highlighters to code the significant statements I gathered during both the horizontalization and as I clustered the meanings and transferred these significant statements to my computer. I created Appendix J on the horizontalization process and Appendix K on the color-coding of themes. The

significant statements of participants experiences are discussed in the order of my seven sub-questions below:

Spiritual Support of Faculty, School and Peers

In this section, I have included the rich, thick, responses of participants to the first two sub-questions on the meaning to them of the school-related spiritual support they received. The first participant interviewed was Alex, who eloquently described his positive experiences with his school-related support. He revealed that the communications he received from his chair and committee were “very encouraging spiritually” and said the emails he received from them encouraged him to trust in God. He said “When I was not sure of the way forward, I was waiting for any word of encouragement from my chair and the rest of committee.” Alex also discussed the positive spiritual support he received during intensives at the university while meeting with a group of peers and sharing the word of God during his preparation for the comprehensive exam. He said these meetings resulted in “. . . persistence in what we were doing at the time.”

Brian was the next participant interviewed. He summarized his experience of support from faculty, school, and peers when he said, “The spiritual support provided by the faculty, school, and my peers—collectively—helped push me onward in the pursuit of my educational goals.” Brian discussed how faculty and others helped him to persist “. . . I prayed all the time and knew that my Chair and others were praying for me as well.” He revealed his positive perception of the spiritual support from the university when he said, “I was so impressed by how the university and the School of Education were able to marry Biblical principles and the message of Christ throughout the varied aspects of my doctoral experience.” He discussed the spiritual support he received from peers during a school intensive when he said, “All throughout

the week I was inspired by others' stories and their commitment to Christ as evidenced by their actions, their communications, and their willingness to help one another.”

When asked about the meaning of spiritual support from faculty and school, Cara described university staff, teachers, and others she met as “blessings.” Later she added another example of a meaningful spiritual support experience when she said, “My doctoral panel prayed aloud for me before I presented my defense.” She also discussed her spiritual experience with her peers during an intensive when she said, “We prayed together and studied together.” In her journal Cara praised her overall spiritual experience when she said it was “wrapped in the loving arms of Jesus” due to the faculty and staff of the university. In an e-mail to me, she described her ability to persist during an especially difficult time when her husband was in the hospital. She said that her university family “. . . prayed for my husband and me. This support is what kept me going.”

Debra said the spiritual support she received from the faculty was “invaluable.” She felt a “blanket of support” from faculty members who were praying for her and really wanted her to succeed. Regarding her peers and the intensives, she said, “. . . I met some of the most Godly people that I have encountered in my lifetime. We supported each other through the process.” Debra summarized her experience by saying “I have always felt the spiritual support from faculty, staff, and peers. I do not believe that I would have made it through if not for them.”

During the course of her interview, Elaine discussed the prayers she received from her chair as very meaningful to her.

The spiritual support I received included my dissertation chair checking in on me and saying she was praying for me. It was very meaningful to get an email from my

dissertation chair telling me that she was lifting me up. I was going through some family issues and I knew she was supporting me.

In her journal, Elaine described in detail the spiritual and academic support she received from her peers when she said:

I knew I was being prayed for. I knew I could call on any one of them to pray for me and help me spiritually, but also academically. I could call one for editing, one for stats help, and one for prayer. It was the only way I would want to do this process.

In a later e-mail to me Elaine further discussed the encouragement she received from friends who were her peers when she said “. . . having friends going through the process and having people praying for me encouraged me.”

Frances described her support from her chair when she said, “I will add it was meaningful to me that my chair constantly told me that he was praying for me. Also, it was calming to have him pray at the beginning of my Proposal and Dissertation defenses.” In this interview, she also discussed peers’ emails, texts, and Facebook messages when she said, “I had a few friends from my program with whom I texted off and on throughout the process. She noted that these messages were encouraging to her but more than anything, “. . . they provided accountability.”

When interviewed Greg described his perception of the spiritual support from faculty. He stated:

What little spiritual support I received from faculty was appreciated. I do not really feel that the university provided any real spiritual support while I was working on my doctorate. The only spiritual support came once I had my dissertation committee in place and my chair/committee members showed spiritual concern for me. They would

occasionally ask how I was doing, what my prayer needs were, how my family was doing etc.

In his journal, Greg described his positive experience with support from his committee in the last phase of his doctoral journey.

Finally, I reached the dissertation stage, which brought with it a committee of people that were actually concerned with my well-being. They asked questions about my life, not just my project. This did help me to persevere and showed me that I was important to someone at the university.

In his final email Greg clarified his perceptions of the role of faculty and others on his spiritual support during his doctorate when he said, “Other than my wife's spiritual support, and the occasional encouraging word from a friend or co-worker, I did not have a lot of spiritual support on this journey.”

Spiritual Support of Family, Friends, and Church

In this section, the participants shared their experiences with spiritual support from family, friends, and the church. Alex was the first participant interviewed about the meaning to him of this support. He said, “My wife and my kids prayed with me from the time I started my education . . . to the end. They knew my struggles, and they prayed and spoke words of encouragement throughout the journey.” When asked about church support he added, “Any time I would meet an obstacle in my academic pursuit they were there praying and speaking words of encouragement.”

Brian said, “My wife was the only person that even really knew I was working toward my doctorate. I know she prayed frequently for me.” Regarding his friends and the church he

added, “My friends and church served to strengthen me per my daily spiritual walk, but not necessarily toward completion of my degree.”

Cara said her church family gave her a lot of support. According to Cara, “I truly think I asked for support every single Sunday!” She summed up her support from church and family by saying that their motivation is what “. . . kept me plugging along.” Debra summarized her spiritual support from family when she said, “My family supported me every step of the way. I know that they all prayed for me and I could feel the support.” Elaine discussed spiritual support from family and friends when she said, “I had my family supporting me and I had friends who were regularly praying for me.” In a later e-mail, she described the meaning of the spiritual support from academic friends who were her peers, when she said, “. . . having friends going through the process and having people praying for me encouraged me.”

Frances said, “Without the spiritual support from my family and friends, I probably would not have persisted. Their support was invaluable, and without it, I would have despaired.” Frances also detailed a spiritual support experience she had with a prayer partner at church. She told her prayer partner about the writing block she was having with her dissertation and, “. . . she said she would pray for me to be able to start writing again.” Frances found “unusual liberty to write” after that, and continued with the same prayer partner several more times at church. In a later e-mail to me Frances summarized the importance of prayer to her persistence when she said, “I knew people were praying for me, and that gave me encouragement to continue working. They would follow up and I knew I needed to indicate that I was making progress.”

Greg related how his wife and son prayed for him throughout the dissertation process. “They encouraged me to persevere during this process and reminded me that God was in control of the process.” Later Greg added, “As I reflected, I realized that my life group did provide

support as they would continually ask how things were going and how they could pray for me as I worked on the dissertation process.”

Spiritual Support Between Participant and God

Alex was the first to discuss the fifth sub-question on the meaning of internal spiritual support systems such as praying, or Bible study on his persistence. He said:

I committed my education plan to God in prayer daily while I was a student. I also used the Bible to read the word of God that would encourage me and gain strength in my academic work. When things were hard and it seems there was no progress, I would seek comfort in prayer and word of God that He will make a way for me. Yes, He did it for me. I can confidently say it is God who did it for me.

In a later e-mail to me, Alex added three things that helped him persist, “. . . personal and group prayer, word of God in my personal devotion, and church fellowship.”

In his journal, Brian revealed how prayer inspired him to persist on his doctoral journey when he said:

In 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Paul reminds us to ‘pray without ceasing.’ When the rigors of the program, or the dissertation, coupled with ‘life stressors’ started to weigh heavily on me, the Holy Spirit would remind me to pray, to ask for wisdom, to ask for clarity.

In a later e-mail to me, Brian summarized what made him move forward when he said, “I prayed all the time and knew that my Chair and others were praying for me as well.”

Cara said, “As God answered each of my prayers to keep going, I felt that he had his hand on me, leading me toward the goal.” In a later e-mail to me, she said, “The spiritual support I received is what kept the fire going. It gave me the drive to continue when I felt tired of the re-writes, changes, and edits.” Debra described her spiritual support from God when she

said, “I questioned many times why God wanted me to pursue the path that I was on, and He answered me loud and clear. Keep going!” She summed up her reason for persisting in her journal when she said, “What kept me going throughout the doctoral program was the presence of the Lord with me every step of the way.” Elaine described her spiritual support from God when she said, “So, I was praying just to keep my study going rather than anything else. Prior to the move, I knew the Lord was in all of it so I didn’t stress too much about it.” After another very difficult time in her life, she said, “So I relied again on the Lord to meet my needs and hold me up.” Frances described the importance of Bible study and prayer to her persistence when she said:

Throughout my dissertation, I maintained consistent personal Bible study and daily devotions, which strengthened me throughout the process. Prayer was the secret to my writing success. I prayed specifically about each section and sought the Lord for His help for clarity and creativity. He was faithful to encourage me through His Word and through prayer.

Greg summed up his internal spiritual support experience with God during his doctoral journey when he said, “To be honest my personal spiritual walk took a back seat over this past five years as I worked through this process.” During an interview by e-mail Greg later said, “. . . my personal quiet time and prayer-life diminished. As things got crazy, I let God and prayer slip down the list of priorities.” Later he revealed, “I persevered because I had a passion for finishing this degree and because I felt that it was what God wanted me to do.”

Spiritual Support and Technology

The sixth sub-question was on the role of technology in the spiritual support and persistence of participants. All of the participants discussed how they used technology for

spiritual support in their interviews and journals. Alex discussed the encouragement he received from e-mails and texts from his “network of people.” He said, “. . . they would text or write emails to let me know they were praying for me. He revealed that he would also text and e-mail his friends “. . . requesting their prayers, especially during comprehensives, dissertation writing, and defense.” Brian noted that he received many e-mails and texts from his chair and others, and said, “I benefited more from the use of YouTube more than any other technological medium.” He emphasized the importance of YouTube to his doctoral journey when he said, “I CHOSE to use YouTube to play the aforementioned songs/poems including other worship songs on a daily basis. I also used YouTube to listen to various other ministries and sermons.”

Cara discussed the meaning of the spiritual support she received from her professors using technology during her doctoral journey when she said, “They always opened with prayer when it was on-line live, and they always mentioned in emails that they would be praying for my success. It all meant so much.” Debra discussed the role of spiritual support from e-mails in her doctoral journey. Debra said:

Email was invaluable. I emailed friends and instructors for support constantly. The nature of the support varied, but many times it was spiritual. Simply asking someone to pray for me and keep me in their thoughts. I did not use text or Skype, etc. Email was the only technology that I used. It certainly assisted in my persistence.

Elaine referred to prayers via email when she said, “It was very meaningful to get an email from my dissertation chair telling me she was lifting me up.” Frances mentioned the role of technology in her doctoral journey when she said friends’ emails, texts and Facebook messages encouraged her, but more than anything “. . . provided her with accountability.” Greg discussed the meaning of the use of technology when he said:

Getting emails from my dissertation committee asking how things were going and what they could be praying about was truly meaningful to me. I appreciated their desire to spiritually support me, and it was one of the few sources of meaningful support that I experienced during this time.

Possible Other Sources of Spiritual Support

In answer to the last sub-question, Alex wrote that he missed the “. . . praise, worship, and guest speakers visiting the campus to meet the spiritual needs of the student.” He also said he felt he did not get a “real gist” of being a student at the university because of missing these events. From his statements, it is evident that Alex’s experience would have been enhanced if there had been opportunities for him to participate in these spiritually uplifting events on campus.

Brian wrote, “I can think of no specific ways my spiritual experience could have been strengthened based on my aforementioned comments.” Cara wrote, “I honestly cannot think of any spiritual support that I did not receive. From the admissions, financial aid, records, counselors, and teachers- they ALL gave me words of encouragement and offered prayer.”

Debra wrote in her journal:

Mind you, my professors were fantastic and extremely Christ-centered individuals. I just didn’t feel that infusion of faith into the last, and most needed leg of the process. What would have enhanced my experience as a doctoral student would be to begin each course, each process, everything with prayer.

Elaine wrote two ways she felt the spiritual and academic support could have been enhanced during her doctoral journey. She said, “I would have liked to have a group in my area that would get together maybe once a semester.” She also said, “I also would have liked to have

some aspect of the courses synchronous.” Frances revealed a possible source of spiritual support that could have been enhanced during her doctoral journey when she wrote, “My research consultant never mentioned that he was praying for me. His answers were very direct, concise, and to the point, but prayer or the Lord was never mentioned.” Greg wrote in his journal that he would have been able to encourage others to pursue an online doctorate if he had received more support for his “spiritual well-being” from his professors.

Data Saturation

According to Fusch and Ness (2015), there is more than one way to assure data saturation. One of the major ways I assured data saturation was through data triangulation. As I discussed in Chapter Three, I used interviews, journals, and site documents as recommended by Creswell (2007) to ensure I collected rich, thick descriptions of the participants’ experiences. When discussing the data saturation process Fusch and Ness (2015) said, “Rich and thick data descriptions obtained through relevant data collection methods can go a long way towards assisting with this process when coupled with appropriate research design that has the best opportunity to answer the research question” (Fusch & Ness, 2015, p. 1413).

Answers to Research Questions

As discussed in the last section, the first sub-question asked participants to describe the meaning of spiritual support from faculty and school to their persistence. Alex, Brian, Cara, Debra, Elaine, and Frances described faculty spiritual support as meaningful. Alex, Brian, Cara and Debra, discussed school spiritual support as meaningful. For example, Brian said faculty, school, and peers “. . . pushed me onward.” The second sub-question asked about the meaning of spiritual support from peers. Alex, Brian, Cara, Debra and Elaine revealed that spiritual support from peers was meaningful. Alex described how sharing the word of God with a group

of his peers during his intensive helped him to persist. Cara described being able to persist when her husband was in the hospital because she received prayers from her university family. Debra said that she “made it through” due to spiritual support from faculty, staff, and peers.

The third sub-question asked about the meaning of support from family and friends. The significant statements of all the participants described family spiritual support as meaningful, and Alex, Debra, Elaine and Frances discussed friends’ spiritual support as meaningful. These responses indicate that the spiritual support of family and friends was perceived to be meaningful by more than half of the participants. For example, Frances said she would have “despaired” without support from friends and family. The fourth research question asked about church as a source of spiritual support. Alex, Cara, Frances and Greg described the church as a meaningful source of spiritual support. For example, Cara said the spiritual support from her church and family motivated her to keep “plugging along.”

The fifth sub-question investigated spiritual support from God by asking about the meaning of internal spiritual support experiences to their persistence. The significant statements of Alex, Brian, Cara, Debra, Elaine and Frances described this type of spiritual support as meaningful. It is evident from their responses, that the majority of participants in the study perceived spiritual support from God as a major form of support. Alex said “. . . it was God who did it for me.” Debra described the reason she persisted was “. . . the presence of the Lord every step of the way.” Prayer was discussed as the major way participants communicated with God during their doctoral journeys. Brian said praying helped him move forward. Cara said “. . . God answered my prayers to keep going.” In her dissertation acknowledgement section, Elaine attributed her persistence to the strength she received from Christ. See Appendix L for a detailed summary of participants’ responses to the first five sub-questions.

The sixth sub-question was on the role of technology on the spiritual support and persistence of participants. The significant statements of all of the participants described their usage of some form of technology to provide and/or receive spiritual support. One of the participants directly credited their persistence to the spiritual support she received through technology. Debra said that email “. . . assisted with her persistence.” Please refer to Table N1 in Appendix N for a summary of the participants’ use of technology.

The seventh sub-question gave participants the opportunity to discuss other possible sources of spiritual support that would have enhanced their perceptions of spiritual support during their doctoral journeys. All of the participants discussed specific ways spiritual support during their doctorate could have been enhanced. Alex said his spiritual support experience at the university would have been enhanced by having the opportunity to attend some of the spiritually uplifting events offered on campus. Debra discussed the need for more prayer throughout the entire doctoral process. Elaine said that a group meeting in her area, and having some of the courses offered synchronously would have helped her perception of both the academic and the spiritual support she received. Frances mentioned that prayers from her research consultant would have enhanced her experience. Greg discussed his belief that more overall support for his “spiritual well-being,” would have improved his online experience during his doctorate.

Answer to the Central Research Question

As discussed previously, my central research question (CQ) was on how online doctoral graduates describe the meaning of spiritual support in their lives and in their persistence. Using site documents, interviews, and journals of participants, I combined the phenomenological reduction processes of both Creswell (2007) and Moustakas (1994) to answer the central

research question. The answer to this question was that spiritual support from school-related sources, non-school-related sources, and God through prayer was the most meaningful to participants and to their persistence in their doctoral journeys. Prayer was the spiritual support communication method used by the majority of the participants. Technology was used as a communication tool for sharing prayers and other types of spiritual support.

Themes

As I discussed in Chapter Three, I began my data analysis by horizontalization of the participants' significant statements on spiritual support (see Appendix J). Next, I used Creswell's (2007) technique of clustering the meanings. I identified these clusters or themes, by reading and rereading multiple times all the participants' significant statements related to my research questions. I printed out these significant statements and used colored highlighters to code the different themes during this process. Next, I created Appendix K by using the computer highlighter function to color-code the three themes I had previously identified and color-coded on paper with highlighters. The next section discusses these three major themes.

School-Related Spiritual Support

The first major theme that emerged was the importance of school-related spiritual support through prayer from faculty, peers, and others at the university. This support was meaningful to the majority of the seven online doctoral students and to their persistence. The majority of the participants revealed in their textual descriptions that spiritual support from faculty members, peers or the university was meaningful to them. My findings on the importance of spiritual social support from faculty, peers, and the university supported the empirical research findings I discussed in Chapter Two. Many of the empirical studies discussed in Chapter Two revealed the importance of social support from these three sources (Fitzpatrick, 2013; Glazer &

Wanstreet;2011; Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Lambert, 2011; West et al. 2011;). I will discuss the positive relationship of the themes from my study to the findings of past empirical studies in more depth in the discussion section of Chapter Five. The next section discusses examples of participants' statements supporting the theme on the importance of spiritual social support through prayer from faculty, peers, and/or the university.

Cara discussed the positive peer support she experienced during intensives on campus when she said, "We prayed together and studied together." She was able to persist in the program when her husband was in the hospital because her university family ". . . prayed for my husband and me." Debra described feeling a "blanket of support" from faculty members who had told her they were praying for her. Elaine explained the positive spiritual support from peers through prayer when she said, "I knew I could call on any of them to pray for me." These statements reveal the textural descriptions of spiritual support as "what" was experienced according to participants, and the structural descriptions of prayer as "how" these spiritual support experiences were most often experienced. The responses of participants to the sixth-sub-question revealed this important spiritual support from faculty, peers, and /or the school was often communicated by e-mail, text, Skype, or even live when participants were at intensives or defending dissertations. Please refer to the school-related columns within Table L1 in Appendix L for a summary of sources of spiritual support.

Non-School-Related Spiritual Support

The second important theme that emerged from the responses to the sub-questions for my research was that spiritual support from non-school-related sources through prayer was meaningful to a majority of the participants. The non-school-related spiritual support in my study came from participants' families, friends, and churches. All of the participants in my study

described spiritual support from family as being meaningful to them. The majority of the participants discussed spiritual support from friends and/or the church as meaningful to them during their doctoral journeys. The majority of participants' structural descriptions of their experiences described prayers as "how" they received their spiritual support most often from family, friends, and/or the church. My findings on the importance of spiritual social support from family, and friends to persistence support the findings in the empirical literature on the importance of family and friends (Colbert, 2013; Gibbs, 2012; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). In the section below, I discuss examples of participants' experiences, and/or statements, on the importance of spiritual support through prayer from family, friends, and/or the church.

Alex discussed praying with his family about his education, and that his church group prayed for his education. He revealed that he received emails from his "network of people" telling him they were praying for him. Brian discussed the positive meaning to him of his wife praying for him and the strength he received from his friends and church. Elaine described the importance to her of prayers from family and friends during her doctoral journey. Frances commented on the importance to her of the prayers from her prayer partner from church. Greg mentioned the importance of prayers from his life group at church. Please refer to the non-school-related columns within Table L1 in Appendix L for a summary of sources of spiritual support.

Spiritual Support between the Participant and God

The third important theme that emerged from my analysis of participants' responses to the sub-questions for my research was that spiritual support from God through prayer was meaningful to a majority of the participants. The textural descriptions of participants revealed that spiritual support was "what" participants experienced. The structural descriptions of a

majority participants revealed prayer was “how” they communicated their spiritual needs to God. Throughout the interviews, site documents, journals, and other email responses, participants indicated they knew people were praying for them because they received e-mails or texts from them. The results of my study supported the previous findings in the empirical literature of the importance of God to participants’ persistence (Culpepper, 2004; Kopp, 2009; Sessana, 2012). The section below discusses some examples of participants’ experiences, and statements illustrating the theme of the importance of spiritual support from God to their persistence.

Alex said, “When things were hard and it seems there was no progress, I would seek comfort in prayer and word of God that He will make a way for me.” Brian discussed praying all the time, and that his prayers to God helped him move forward in his program. Cara discussed believing her prayers to God led her to complete her doctorate. Debra said, “What kept me going throughout the doctoral program was the presence of the Lord with me every step of the way.” Elaine said she prayed to God to help her keep her studies going. Frances said her prayers to God helped her succeed in her writing of her dissertation. She said, “I prayed specifically about each section and sought the Lord for His help for clarity and creativity.” Table L1 in Appendix L, has a Summary of Sources of Spiritual Support. The last column shows how God was a direct source of spiritual support for six of the seven participants. Table M1 in Appendix M shows the number of participants who indicated God was a source of their spiritual support into a percentage.

Summary of Themes and Essence of the Shared Experience

As discussed earlier, I used the phenomenological process described by both Creswell (2007) and Moustakas (1994) to formulate the textural and structural descriptions of participants from the site documents, interviews, and journals. These composite descriptions formed the

themes that helped describe the essence of the participants' shared experiences with the phenomenon of spiritual support and persistence. Thus, the essence of the participants' shared experiences was that spiritual support through prayer was meaningful to their lives and persistence during their doctoral journeys.

Summary

This chapter revealed the results of my transcendental phenomenological study on the role of spiritual support in the persistence of online doctoral students who completed their programs of study. I began the chapter by describing my epoche process of setting aside my own spiritual experiences and shared an example of the process I completed before I started the study. Second, I summarized the participants, and described the focus of the study on their shared experiences with spiritual support and persistence. Third, I discussed the results of the study that I extracted from participants' site documents, interviews, and journals. Fourth, I answered the research questions based on the results of the data I gathered during the study. Fifth, I discussed the three major themes that emerged from the study and revealed the essence of participants' shared spiritual support experiences.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

The purpose of my transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the role of spiritual support in the persistence of online students who have completed their doctorate in education. In this study, I used the Maton (1989) definition of spiritual support as “. . . support perceived in the context of an individual’s relationship with God” (p. 319). Internal and external types of spiritual support were investigated in this study. Persistence was defined in this study as “. . . the result of students’ decision to continue their participation in the learning event under analysis” (Berge & Huang, 2004, p. 4).

Summary of Findings

In this section, my findings from the study are reviewed, beginning with a discussion of the answers to the sub-questions by participants. As discussed in Chapter Four, the first sub-question asked participants to describe the meaning of spiritual support from faculty and school. Alex, Brian, Cara, Debra, Elaine and Frances described faculty support as meaningful and Alex, Brian, Cara and Debra discussed school spiritual support as meaningful. The second sub-question asked them to describe the meaning of spiritual support from peers. Alex, Brian, Cara, Debra and Elaine revealed that this type of spiritual support was meaningful. The third sub-question asked participants about the meaning of support from family and friends. All of the participants described support from family as meaningful, and Alex, Debra, Elaine and Frances discussed friends’ spiritual support as meaningful. The fourth research question asked about church as a source of spiritual support. Alex, Cara, Frances and Greg described the church as a meaningful source of spiritual support. The fifth sub-question explored spiritual support from God by asking about the meaning of internal spiritual support experiences to the participants.

The significant statements of Alex, Brian, Cara, Debra, Elaine and Frances described internal spiritual support as meaningful. Throughout the study, participants discussed prayer as the major way they communicated their personal spiritual needs to God. The sixth sub-question asked participants about the role of technology on their spiritual support and persistence. All of the participants indicated they used technology as a tool that helped them communicate and/or receive spiritual support during their doctoral journeys. The seventh sub-question asked about possible sources of spiritual support that would have enhanced participants' perceptions of spiritual support during their doctoral journeys. All of the participants responded to this question by discussing specific ways they felt their spiritual support experiences could have been enhanced at the university.

The participants' answers to all of the sub-questions were analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) and Creswell's (2007) phenomenological reduction methods described in-depth in Chapter Three. These methods included: horizontalization of the significant statements, clustering them by meaning, and identifying the textural and the structural descriptions (Creswell, 2007). Appendix J describes the horizontalization step in detail. The final step was achieved by using these descriptions to create composite descriptions of participant experiences. This analysis revealed the answer to the central research question: Spiritual support from school-related sources, non-school-related sources, and God through prayer was meaningful to online doctoral students and a positive factor in their persistence during their doctoral journeys. Technology was an important tool used to communicate spiritual support to others.

According to the textural and structural descriptions of participants from site documents, interviews and journaling of their experiences discussed in Chapter Four, and illustrated in Appendix K, three major themes emerged from a majority of the participants. The first theme

that emerged was that school-related spiritual support from faculty, school, and peers through prayer was meaningful to participants and their persistence. The second theme revealed was that non-school-related spiritual support through prayer from family, friends, and the church was meaningful to participants and their persistence. The third theme that emerged from my study was that spiritual support from God, received through prayer was meaningful to participants and their persistence. Appendix K illustrated the color-coding process used to cluster the significant statements into the above themes.

Discussion

The purpose of this section is to discuss the theoretical and empirical literature in relation to my findings. My study's findings confirmed Vygotsky's (1978) and Tinto's (1993) theories discussed in Chapter Two. Both theorists believed social support was important to the learning process. According to Vygotsky, "Human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (1978, p. 88). Tinto took Vygotsky's theory a step further by discussing the importance of social support to the persistence of doctoral learners.

The results of my study, discussed in Appendix L and Appendix M, confirmed the results of past empirical studies on the importance of school-related and non-school-related social support in three ways. First, participants in my study confirmed the positive role of faculty, peers, and school support on their persistence discussed by Glazer and Wanstreet (2011) and others, (Fitzpatrick, 2013; Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Lambert, 2011; West et al. 2011) in their research. Second, the findings of my study confirmed the positive findings of Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012) and others, (Colbert, 2013; Gibbs, 2012) on the importance of the non-school-related social support from family and friends. Third, the majority of the participants

in my study said that spiritual support from God was important to their persistence, which confirmed the findings of Culpepper (2004) and others (Kopp, 2009; Sessana, 2012). My study makes a novel contribution to past social support empirical research because it is the first study to explore the role of spiritual support on online doctoral graduates' persistence, helping to begin to fill the huge gap in the empirical literature on this topic.

Implications

Theoretical Implications

The purpose of this section is to discuss the theoretical implications of my study based on my findings, and on the theoretical literature discussed in the last section. As I revealed in my discussion of the theoretical literature above, my research findings confirmed both Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory on the importance of social interaction to the learning process and Tinto's theory on the positive role of social support in the persistence of learners. Based on the statements of my participants, the major theoretical implication of the study was that the spiritual aspect of social support was a positive factor in the learning and persistence of the online doctoral students. This implication supports the importance of social support in the learning process discussed by Vygotsky (1978) when he said learning happens, ". . . when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers" (p. 90). This theoretical implication also is supported by Tinto's (1993) persistence theory that ". . . social interaction with one's peers and faculty becomes closely linked not only to one's intellectual development but also to the development of important skills required for doctoral completion" (p. 232). Some examples of the experiences and statements of my participants from Chapter Four supporting the positive role of spiritual social support are discussed below.

Brian, Cara, and Elaine discussed the positive role of spiritual social support in their persistence. Brian said, “The spiritual support provided by the faculty, school, and my peers—collectively—helped push me onward in the pursuit of my educational goals.” Cara revealed the spiritual support experiences from faculty and staff helped her persist when she said, “My doctoral experience was totally wrapped in the loving arms of Jesus through the university faculty and staff.” Debra said, “I always felt the spiritual support from faculty, staff, and peers at the university. I do not believe that I would have made it through if not for them.” See Appendix K for the complete list of statements of participants on the positive role of the spiritual aspect of social support on their persistence.

Empirical Implications

The first empirical implication of my study was that the spiritual form of social support from school-related sources was important to the persistence of online doctoral students. As revealed in the discussion section above, the findings of many studies reviewed in Chapter Two revealed social support from faculty, peers, and the school was important to doctoral persistence. The statements of the doctoral graduates in my study supported the importance of the spiritual aspect of this social support to their persistence.

Alex said:

I would like to state the importance of having a dissertation chair who would lead, guide, and pray for you as a candidate. I considered my chair to have contributed greatly to my spiritual support. She literally directly contributed to my finishing my degree at the specified time otherwise I could have lost my job.

Brian revealed the positive nature of the spiritual support he received from the school when he said, “I was so impressed with how the university, and specifically the School of

Education, were able to marry Biblical principles and the message of Christ throughout the varied aspects of my doctoral experience.” Debra discussed the positive nature of the spiritual support from her peers when she said, “I do not believe that I would have made it through if not for them. I am strong willed on my own, but knowing that I had so many others praying for and supporting me was priceless!”

The second major empirical implication was non-school-related spiritual social support from family and friends helped the learning and persistence of doctoral students. The participants in empirical studies on social support reviewed in the discussion section above revealed the importance of both family and friends (Colbert, 2013; Gibbs, 2012; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). The majority of the participants in my study also discussed the importance of spiritual support from these two sources (See Appendix L and Appendix M). For example, as discussed in Chapter Four, Frances discussed the positive meaning of the support from family and friends when she said, “Without the spiritual support from my family and friends, I probably would not have persisted.”

The third major empirical implication was the importance of God to learning and to the persistence of doctoral students. Participants in three of the empirical studies in Chapter Two discussed the importance of God in their persistence in their studies (Culpepper, 2004; Kopp, 2009; Sessana, 2012). For example, a participant in the Culpepper (2004) study discussed the importance of God in her persistence when she said, “As a Christian. . . I knew God was with me.” The statements of the majority of the participants in my study also indicated spiritual support from God was important to their persistence. For example, Cara discussed praying and God helping her to persist when she said, “I felt that he had his hand on me, leading me toward the goal.”

Methodological Implications

A transcendental phenomenological study was the best method to use to explore the essence of the shared spiritual support experiences of online doctoral students and their persistence because they were able to share their experiences of spiritual support in a much deeper way than possible through a quantitative study on this topic. Through interviews, journaling, and site documents, participants shared rich, thick descriptions of the positive nature of the spiritual support they received. An example of one participant's description of his positive spiritual support experience at a university intensive on campus is revealed below:

All throughout the week, I was inspired by others' stories and their commitment to Christ as evidenced by their actions, their communications, and their willingness to help one another—just get through. On the last day of class, I remember the final group ended their presentation by playing the song “I Know That I Can Make It” by Kirk Franklin. While I cannot remember what their presentation was about, I do remember feeling like I was in a worship service—the presence of God was so evident. I felt such a sense of peace and almost a prophetic proclamation that “yes” I know I will make it to the end of this doctoral process.

Practical Implications

The major practical implication from the findings of my study is the valuable information from the participants on the importance of the spiritual aspect of social support on their persistence during their doctoral journeys can be of tremendous help to current, and future, online doctoral students, faculty, administration, and other university policy makers. This section details my recommendations to these major stakeholders.

Faculty. First, I recommend faculty at faith-based universities continue to integrate the spiritual aspect of social support into their classes. This recommendation is based on the positive experiences with spiritual support discussed by a majority of my participants. Alex discussed the importance of spiritual support from his dissertation chair when he said, “This gave me the assurance that all will be well as long as my chair is standing with me in prayer.” My second recommendation to faculty is based on participants’ responses to the seventh sub-question on sources of spiritual support that would have enhanced their spiritual experiences with faculty during their doctoral programs. For example, Debra revealed feeling a lack of an “infusion of faith” in the last phase of her doctoral program. She discussed the need for faculty to continue their spiritual support through the final stage of the doctoral program when she said, “What would have enhanced my experience as a doctoral student would be to begin each course, each process, everything with prayer.” Frances said, “My research consultant never mentioned that he was praying me. His answers were very direct, concise, and to the point, but prayer or the Lord was never mentioned.” Greg discussed not receiving support for his “spiritual well-being” from his professors.

Online doctoral students. Based on my findings on the importance of spiritual support in the persistence of online students, my first recommendation is for online doctoral students to read about the positive spiritual support strategies described by participants in my study. Many of the online doctoral graduates’ stories are inspirational and filled with the positive spiritual support strategies they implemented. These spiritual support strategies can help current, and future students achieve their doctoral goals.

Alex discussed some of his successful spiritual support strategies during an interview, when he said, “As doctoral students, there are many challenges, and I knew I needed more and

more prayers. I sought prayers from my family members (my parents and my wife and my kids) used to pray for me on daily basis. He also asked for and received prayers from his chair. “Many times I would wait for her email to read and hear she is praying for me.” Alex was also proactive about seeking spiritual support from his church prayer group. This prayer group helped him persist because any time he met an obstacle “. . . they were there praying and speaking words of encouragement.”

University administration and policy makers. Based on the findings of my study on the importance of spiritual support from school-related sources, I have five recommendations for university administration and policy makers at the university in my study and at other faith-based universities. First, I recommend that administrators and other policy makers encourage faculty to study and implement the spiritual support strategies that my study’s participants said helped them persist. This was discussed in-depth throughout Chapter Four and in my recommendations to faculty and online doctoral students above. Second, due to the current lack of literature on spiritual support and doctoral persistence online, discussed in Chapter Two by Comeaux (2013) and others, I recommend faith-based universities consider supporting future qualitative and quantitative studies by faculty on this topic. The third recommendation is for these universities to continue to provide the positive spiritual support of their online doctoral students discussed by the majority of the participants in my study. For example, Cara described the importance of positive spiritual support from the university in her persistence when she said the prayers from her university family “. . . is what really kept me going.” The fourth recommendation is for faith-based universities to provide opportunities for online doctoral students to attend more spiritually uplifting events on-campus. Alex said he missed the “real gist” of being a student at the university in my study because he missed the spiritually uplifting events on campus. The

fifth recommendation is for faith-based universities to provide more synchronous online courses and meetings with student groups in their geographic areas. As Elaine said in her final interview, “I would have liked to have a group in my area that would get together maybe once a semester.” She also said, “I also would have liked to have some aspect of the courses synchronous.”

Limitations

As discussed previously in this dissertation, my study had many limitations. The first limitation was that the location of the study was at a Christian university, which made the study not generalizable to non-Christian universities. Second, the university was located in the Eastern United States, which limited the study’s generalizability to other parts of the country. Third, due to the size of the sample, the ethnicity of participants was limited to only two ethnic groups, Caucasian and African-American. Fourth, because four women and only three men volunteered, the gender of the participants was not balanced, which was a limitation. Fifth, because of the small size and volunteer nature of the study, the ages of the participants were a limitation. Ages of participants ranged from mid-thirties to mid-fifties. There were no participants below the age of thirty or above sixty. Sixth, the data was predominantly self-report data from participants, which was a limitation.

Recommendations for Future Research

Due to the limitations, delimitations, and findings of my study, I have multiple recommendations, and a new direction to follow for future research. First, because my study was at a Christian university, I recommend research be conducted on the role of spiritual support in the persistence of doctoral learners in a non-Christian university. A second recommendation is that quantitative research be conducted on the role of spiritual support in the persistence of online doctoral learners. This research can increase the size of the study and broaden the

demographics of the participants in order to make the findings more generalizable to other universities. My third recommendation is that further qualitative research be conducted on the role of spiritual support among non-persisting online doctoral students at faith-based universities. This study could focus on the perceptions of the ways enhanced spiritual support might have helped with the persistence of these students. My fourth recommendation is research be done which focuses on spiritual support from academic friends and non-academic friends. I did not make the distinction between these two types of friends, which was a weakness of my study. Fifth, based on results from participants to my sixth sub-question, I recommend further research on the types of technology most useful to communicate spiritual support to online doctoral students. Sixth, due to the responses of participants to the seventh sub-question, I recommend further research to explore the ways universities can enhance the spiritual support to online doctoral students during the dissertation phase of their doctorates. Seventh, I recommend a follow-up study in five to seven years, when many of the avid “tweeters” and “instagramers” will be coming of doctorate age.

Summary

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate the role of spiritual support in relation to the persistence of online doctoral students. The secondary purpose was to fill the gap in the literature on this subject. Seven online graduates accepted the invitation to participate in this important study. Data collection from participants’ site documents, journaling, and interviews told their spiritual support stories. The data analysis process of phenomenological reduction recommended by Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (2007) was used to answer each of the sub-questions and the central research question of the study. The participants’ answers to the first two sub-questions discussed the meaningful nature of spiritual support from the school-

related sources of faculty, school, and peers. Participants' responses to the third, fourth, and fifth sub-questions discussed the positive role of the non-school-related sources of family, church, and God on their persistence. More than half of the participants described all these sources as positive factors in their persistence. Participant responses to the sixth sub-question described the important role of technology as a communication tool for their spiritual support during their online doctoral journeys. Participants' answers to the seventh sub-question discussed ways they perceived their spiritual support experiences might have been enhanced during their doctoral programs.

The three themes that emerged from the study revealed the major importance of spiritual support from school-related sources, non-school-related sources, and God. The answer to the central research question affirmed the importance of this support. The essence of the shared phenomenon of online doctoral students in the study was that spiritual support through prayer from school and non-school support systems was meaningful to their lives and persistence. The first big take-away from the findings of the study was that school-related spiritual support through prayer from faculty, peers, and the school was a positive factor in the persistence of the majority of the participants. The second big take-away from my study's findings was that the majority of online doctoral students perceived spiritual support through prayer from the non-school-related sources of family, friends, and church to be important to their persistence. The third big take-away from the study was that spiritual support from God was discussed by the majority of participants as important to their persistence.

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APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORM

[redacted] Institutional
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this document for use from
3/12/15 to 3/11/16
Protocol # 2092.031215

CONSENT FORM

A Phenomenological Study: The Role of Spiritual Support
in the Persistence of Online Doctoral Students

Clara Jean Tickal

[redacted]

School of Education
Doctoral Candidate

You are invited to be in a research study of the role of spiritual support in the persistence of online doctoral students. You were selected as a possible participant because you completed your doctoral studies in education within the last three years, and indicated your experience with the phenomenon of spiritual support in your dissertation. I ask that you read the attached consent form and either call or email me with any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Clara Jean Tickal, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education, at [redacted] is conducting this study.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to explore how online doctoral students who have completed their doctoral study describe the meaning of spiritual support in their lives and in their persistence in their program of study. Participation in this study will allow you to reflect on your experiences with spiritual support.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things (but you are not required to complete all of them):
Share site documents (such as e-mail, texts, and/or other non-course materials) reflecting the spiritual support you experienced in the program. These documents will be collected from you during the two month data collection portion of the study. It will take you short amounts of time, (less than 5 minutes), to send these e-mails, texts and other non-course materials to me. You will complete an interview by phone regarding these experiences (this should take about 20 minutes). After the interview, you will reflect on the interview and your experiences during your doctoral studies and complete a short, written reflection of the interview by e-mail (this should take 10-15 minutes). After a month, final interviews will be conducted by telephone. The final interview will allow you to expand on any of the interview questions that you want to discuss further (this will take no more than 10 minutes). After the interview, you will be asked to mail me your final, written reflections on your spiritual support experiences (this should take no more than 10 minutes).

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

No study is without risk. The risks are no more than the participant would encounter in everyday life.

There are no direct benefits to participation in this spiritual support study. First, this study allows participants to share their own personal spiritual support experiences. Sharing their personal

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spiritual support stories allows participants to reflect on the spiritual support that helped them the most through their doctoral journeys. These spiritual support stories may help future online doctoral students find the spiritual support systems that help them to persist in their studies. This study may also be of use to the university, professors, friends and families of online doctoral students.

How to Withdraw from the Study:

If you decide to withdraw from the study, you will notify me in writing of your wish to withdraw. I will then ask you to let me know if you want me to both retain and analyze already collected data from you up to the time of your withdrawal or destroy your data and exclude it from any analysis. I will respect your wishes in either case.

Compensation:

There is no compensation for participation in this study.

Confidentiality:

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

To maintain the confidentiality of all participants, I will be the only one with access to the master contact list with the data and linking codes. I will also be the only one with access to the coded research data. (Both will always be locked up separately when not in use). I will maintain a master contact list with the names, descriptors, and contact information for all persons involved in the study. This master list will contain a unique numerical identifier (UNI) associated with each participant. This UNI will be used on all data tables, site documents, audio recordings, journal reflections, interview transcriptions, and on all other study data instead of the participant's name or other identifier. The study data will be kept in a separate locked file cabinet from the master contact list when not in use. All screening questionnaires and signed consent forms will be locked in a filing cabinet separately from collected study data. The audio recording of all interviews will be coded with a UNI and locked up separately from the master contact list. The transcription of the interview will also be coded and locked in a filing cabinet separate from the identifying data. All electronic files will be stored on an encrypted external USB hard drive that will be stored in the locked file cabinet when not in use. I will be the only person with access to the locked storage cabinets used to store the research material and the master contact list. Password protection will be used to keep any computer file of the data collected secure. These computer files will be kept on a hard drive that can be removed and kept locked in a file cabinet. I will be the only one with the passwords and keys to the locked files. Once the three-year retention period is completed, the hard drive data platters will be crushed and the other written data that has been locked in the file cabinet will be shredded using a crosscut pulping shredder. Audio recordings will be erased and crushed at this time. There will be no future use of the study data, interview recordings, or transcriptions besides inclusion in my dissertation.

_____ Institutional
 Review Board has approved
 this document for use from
 3/12/15 to 3/11/16
 Protocol # 2092.031215

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 _____. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Clara Tickal. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her _____ or cell: _____. My advisor is Dr. Shante' Moore-Austin. Her e-mail is _____

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 _____

Please notify the researcher if you would like 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.

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

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

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

March 12, 2015

Clara Tickal
IRB Approval 2092.03 12 15: A Phenomenological Study: The Role of Spiritual Support in
the Persistence of Online Doctoral Students

Dear Clara,

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

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

Sincerely,

APPENDIX C: INITIAL EMAIL TO OBTAIN POSTAL ADDRESS

Date: _____, 2015

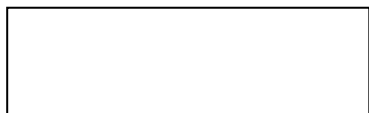
Greetings,

I am studying the role of spiritual support in the persistence of online doctoral graduates. You are receiving this email to determine whether you wish to be included in the study.

If you are interested in being considered for this study, please send me your US postal address and I will send you a letter, consent form and questionnaire. If you have any questions, you may either call or email me with any questions you may have about the study.

With deepest regards,

Clara Jean Tickal



APPENDIX D: SPIRITUAL SUPPORT SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE

This short questionnaire is to determine if you experienced spiritual support during your doctoral program of study. Some examples could be spiritual support from your professor, university, peers, church, friends, family, or even personal spiritual support such as your prayers to God during your program. Check the appropriate block below:

Did you experience some type of spiritual support during your doctoral program of study?

Yes

No

Once you have completed this questionnaire please return it in the enclosed, self-addressed stamped envelope.

Thanks,

Clara Tickal

Doctoral Candidate



APPENDIX E: SPIRITUAL SUPPORT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

For the first interview we will discuss all of the interview questions below:

1. How would you describe the meaning to you of your spiritual support from faculty, school, and/or peers to your persistence?

2. How would you describe the meaning to you of spiritual support from your family, friends, and/or church to your persistence?

3. How would you describe the meaning to you of an internal spiritual support system such as praying or Bible study to your persistence?

4. How would you describe the meaning to you of spiritual support from e-mails, texting, or other use of online technology to your persistence?

5. Is there anything else you would like to mention about your perception of the spiritual support experience and/or your persistence in the online doctoral program?

APPENDIX F: JOURNAL PROMPT AFTER INITIAL INTERVIEW

Thank you for participating in the first interview. Upon reflecting on your answers to the first interview, please write how spiritual support you experienced in your online doctoral program helped you to persist in the program.

APPENDIX G: FINAL SPIRITUAL SUPPORT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

For the final interview, please discuss the types of spiritual support you received in your online program, based on the new perspective you gained from both your first interview and your journaling experiences:

1. How would you describe the meaning to you of your spiritual support from faculty, school, and/or peers to your persistence?
2. How would you describe the meaning to you of spiritual support from your family, friends, and/or church to your persistence?
3. How would you describe the meaning to you of internal spiritual support system such as praying, or Bible study to your persistence?
4. How would you describe the meaning to you of spiritual support from e-mails, texting, or other use of online technology to your persistence?
5. Is there anything else you would like to mention about your perception of the spiritual support experience and/or your persistence in the online doctoral program?

APPENDIX H: JOURNAL PROMPT AFTER FINAL INTERVIEW

Thank you for participating in the last interview. Please reflect on the final interview, and your entire doctoral journey, and write a brief description about spiritual support experiences you did not experience, but you feel would have enhanced your online spiritual doctoral experience.

APPENDIX I: RECRUITMENT LETTER

April 04, 2015

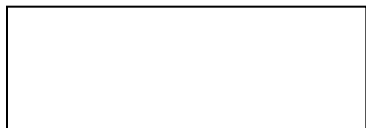
Greetings,

I am studying the role of spiritual support in the persistence of online doctoral graduates. You are receiving the attached consent form and questionnaire to determine whether you experienced spiritual support in your program.

If you are interested in being considered for this study, please sign the consent form signature page, check yes or no on the one-question on the questionnaire, and return these two pages using the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope. If you need to reach me, you may either call, text, or email me with any questions you may have about the study.

With deepest regards,

Clara Jean Tickal



APPENDIX J: HORIZONTALIZATION

During the horizontalization process, the participant statements were pulled from the responses for the first five sub-questions and duplicates were removed. Also removed were any statements that would be uniquely identifying. At this point the data was not grouped.

The following are the resulting significant statements from the participants:

1. All throughout the week, I was inspired by others' stories and their commitment to Christ as evidenced by their actions, their communications, and their willingness to help one another.
2. Also, it was calming to have him pray at the beginning of my Proposal and Dissertation defenses.
3. Any time I would meet an obstacle in my academic pursuit they were there praying and speaking words of encouragement.
4. As God answered each of my prayers to keep going, I felt that he had his hand on me, leading me toward the goal.
5. As I reflected, I realized that my life group did provide support as they would continually ask how things were going and how they could Pray for me as I worked on the dissertation process.
6. But, I do not feel I would have given up even without prayer and support.
7. Finally, I reached the dissertation stage, which brought with it a committee of people that were actually concerned with my well-being.
8. He was faithful to encourage me through His Word and through prayer.

9. I also used the bible to read the word of God that would encourage me and gain strength in my academic work.
10. I committed my education plan to God in prayer daily while I was a student.
11. I could call one for editing, one for stats help, and one for prayer.
12. I do not believe that I would have made it through if not for them.
13. I had a few friends from my program with whom I texted off and on throughout the process.
14. I had my family supporting me and I had friends who were regularly praying for me.
15. I knew I could call on any one of them to pray for me and help me spiritually, but also academically.
16. I knew I was being prayed for.
17. I knew people were praying for me, and that gave me encouragement to continue working.
18. I met some of the most Godly people that I have encountered in my lifetime.
19. I persevered because I had a passion for finishing this degree and because I felt that it was what God wanted me to do.
20. I prayed all the time and knew that my Chair and others were praying for me as well.
21. I prayed specifically about each section and sought the Lord for His help for clarity and creativity.
22. I questioned many times why God wanted me to pursue the path that I was on and He answered me loud and clear. Keep going!
23. I really think it was much easier on me as I was not working full time.

24. I told her my writing woes and she said she would pray for me to be able to start writing again.
25. I truly think I asked for support every single Sunday! The motivation from them all is what kept me plugging along.
26. I was going through some family issues and I knew she was supporting me.
27. I will add it was meaningful to me that my chair constantly told me that he was praying for me.
28. In 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Paul reminds us to 'pray without ceasing.'
29. Instead, having friends going through the process and having people praying for me encouraged me.
30. It gave me the drive to continue when I felt tired of the re-writes, changes, and edits.
31. It was the only way I would want to do this process.
32. It was very meaningful to get an email from my dissertation chair telling me that she was lifting me up.
33. My communication with my dissertation chair and the rest on the committee was very encouraging spiritually.
34. My doctoral panel prayed aloud for me before I presented my defense.
35. My family supported me every step of the way. I know that they all prayed for me and I could feel the support.
36. My university family prayed for my husband and me.
37. My wife and my kids prayed with me from the time I started my education at the university to the end.

38. My wife was the only person that even really knew I was working toward my doctorate. I know she prayed frequently for me. My friends and church served to strengthen me per my daily spiritual walk but not necessarily toward completion of my degree.”
39. Prayer was my foundation from the beginning.
40. Prayer was the secret to my writing success.
41. Prior to the move, I knew the Lord was in all of it so I didn't stress too much about it.
42. So I relied again on the Lord to meet my needs and hold me up.
43. So, I was praying just to keep my study going rather than anything else.
44. The resulted to persistence in what we were doing at the time.
45. The spiritual support I received included my dissertation chair checking in on me and saying she was praying for me.
46. The spiritual support I received is what kept the fire going.
47. The [spiritual](#) support provided by the faculty, school, and my peers—collectively—helped push me onward in the pursuit of my educational goals.
48. Their emails/texts/FB messages Encouraged me, but more than anything they provided accountability.
49. Their support was invaluable and without it, I would have despaired.
50. They asked questions about my life, not just my project.
51. They encouraged me to persevere during this process and reminded me that God was in control of the process.
52. They knew my struggles and they prayed and spoke words of the encouragement throughout the journey.
53. They prayed for my education on many occasions.

54. They would follow up and I knew I needed to indicate that I was making progress.
55. This did help me persevere and showed me that I was important to someone at the university.
56. This support is what kept me going.
57. Throughout my dissertation, I maintained consistent personal Bible study and daily devotions, which strengthened me throughout the process.
58. To be honest my personal spiritual walk took a back seat over this past five years as I worked through this process.
59. We prayed together and studied together.
60. We supported each other through the process. I have always felt the spiritual support from faculty, staff, and peers.
61. What kept me going throughout the doctoral program was the presence of the Lord with me every step of the way.
62. When I was not sure of the way forward, I was waiting for any word of encouragement from my chair and the rest of committee. During my Comprehensive and intensive, we formed a group that meet and discussed and also shared word of God together.
63. When the rigors of the program, or the dissertation, coupled with 'life stressors' started to weigh heavily on me, the Holy Spirit would remind me to pray, to ask for wisdom, to ask for clarity.
64. When things were hard and it seems there was no progress, I would seek comfort in prayer and word of God that He will make a way for me.
65. Without the spiritual support from my family and friends, I probably would not have persisted.

66. Yes, He did it for me. I can confidently say it is God who did it for me.
67. I would also text and e-mail friends requesting their prayers especially during comprehensives, dissertation writing and defense.
68. I emailed friends and instructors for support constantly. The nature of the support varied, but many times, it was spiritual.

APPENDIX K: COLOR CODING

During the data analysis process, after the significant statements were developed during horizontalization, color highlighting, markers, underlining and special fonts were used to differentiate the major themes in the participant responses.

Table K1

Key to Color Coding

Color	Sources
Yellow	Faculty / School / Peers
Green	Family/Friends/Church
Turquoise	God

Once the colors were determined, the data from the horizontalization process was highlighted and statements, which were not part of a major theme, were removed. The color coded statements were then grouped by major theme, as shown below:

Major Theme: Spiritual Support of Faculty, School and Peers

1. My communication with my dissertation chair and the rest on the committee was very encouraging spiritually.

2. When I was not sure of the way forward, I was waiting for any word of encouragement from my chair and the rest of committee. During my comprehensive and intensive, we formed a group that meet and discussed and also shared word of God together.
3. The resulted to persistence in what we were doing at the time.
4. The spiritual support provided by the faculty, school, and my peers—collectively—helped push me onward in the pursuit of my educational goals.
5. All throughout the week, I was inspired by others' stories and their commitment to Christ as evidenced by their actions, their communications, and their willingness to help one another.
6. Prayer was my foundation from the beginning.
7. I prayed all the time and knew that my Chair and others were praying for me as well.
8. My doctoral panel prayed aloud for me before I presented my defense.
9. We prayed together and studied together.
10. I met some of the most Godly people that I have encountered in my lifetime.
11. We supported each other through the process. I have always felt the spiritual support from faculty, staff, and peers.
12. I do not believe that I would have made it through if not for them.
13. The spiritual support I received included my dissertation chair checking in on me and saying she was praying for me.
14. It was very meaningful to get an email from my dissertation chair telling me that she was lifting me up.
15. I was going through some family issues and I knew she was supporting me.
16. I knew I was being prayed for.

17. I knew I could call on any one of them to pray for me and help me spiritually, but also academically.
18. I could call one for editing, one for stats help, and one for prayer.
19. It was the only way I would want to do this process.
20. I will add it was meaningful to me that my chair constantly told me that he was praying for me.
21. Also, it was calming to have him pray at the beginning of my Proposal and Dissertation defenses.
22. Finally, I reached the dissertation stage, which brought with it a committee of people that were actually concerned with my well-being.
23. They asked questions about my life, not just my project.
24. This did help me persevere and showed me that I was important to someone at the university.

Major Theme: Spiritual Support of Family, Friends, and Church

1. My wife and my kids prayed with me from the time I started my education at the university to the end.
2. They knew my struggles and they prayed and spoke words of encouragement throughout the journey.
3. They prayed for my education on many occasions.
4. Any time I would meet an obstacle in my academic pursuit they were there praying and speaking words of encouragement.
5. My wife was the only person that even really knew I was working toward my doctorate. I know she prayed frequently for me.”

6. My family supported me every step of the way. I know that they all prayed for me and I could feel the support.
7. I had my family supporting me and I had friends who were regularly praying for me.
8. Without the spiritual support from my family and friends, I probably would not have persisted.
9. Their support was invaluable and without it, I would have despaired.
10. They encouraged me to persevere during this process and reminded me that God was in control of the process.

Major Theme: Spiritual Support between Participant and God

1. I committed my education plan to God in prayer daily while I was a student.
2. I also used the Bible to read the word of God that would encourage me and gain strength in my academic work.
3. When things were hard and it seems there was no progress, I would seek comfort in prayer and word of God that He will make a way for me.
4. Yes, He did it for me. I can confidently say it is God who did it for me.
5. In 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Paul reminds us to ‘pray without ceasing.’
6. When the rigors of the program, or the dissertation, coupled with ‘life stressors’ started to weigh heavily on me, the Holy Spirit would remind me to pray, to ask for wisdom, to ask for clarity.
7. I prayed all the time and knew that my Chair and others were praying for me as well.
8. As God answered each of my prayers to keep going, I felt that He had his hand on me, leading me toward the goal.
9. The spiritual support I received is what kept the fire going.

10. It gave me the drive to continue when I felt tired of the re-writes, changes, and edits.
11. I questioned many times why God wanted me to pursue the path that I was on and He answered me loud and clear. Keep going!
12. What kept me going throughout the doctoral program was the presence of the Lord with me every step of the way.
13. So, I was praying just to keep my study going rather than anything else.
14. Prior to the move, I knew the Lord was in all of it so I didn't stress too much about it.
15. I really think it was much easier on me as I was not working full time.
16. So I relied again on the Lord to meet my needs and hold me up.
17. Throughout my dissertation, I maintained consistent personal Bible study and daily devotions, which strengthened me throughout the process.
18. Prayer was the secret to my writing success.
19. I prayed specifically about each section and sought the Lord for His help for clarity and creativity.
20. He was faithful to encourage me through His Word and through prayer.
21. To be honest my personal spiritual walk took a back seat over this past five years as I worked through this process.
22. I persevered because I had a passion for finishing this degree and because I felt that it was what God wanted me to do.

APPENDIX L: SUMMARY OF SOURCES OF SPIRITUAL SUPPORT

Table L-1

Summary of Sources of Spiritual Support

Name	School-Related			Non-School-Related			God
	Faculty	School	Peers	Family	Friends	Church	
Alex	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Brian	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
Cara	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Debra	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Elaine	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
Frances	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
Greg				✓		✓	
Total	6	4	5	7	4	4	6

APPENDIX M: PERCENTAGES OF SOURCES OF SPIRITUAL SUPPORT

The figure below was created using the findings discussed in Appendix L and illustrates the percentage of the participants indicating the importance of spiritual support from each source.

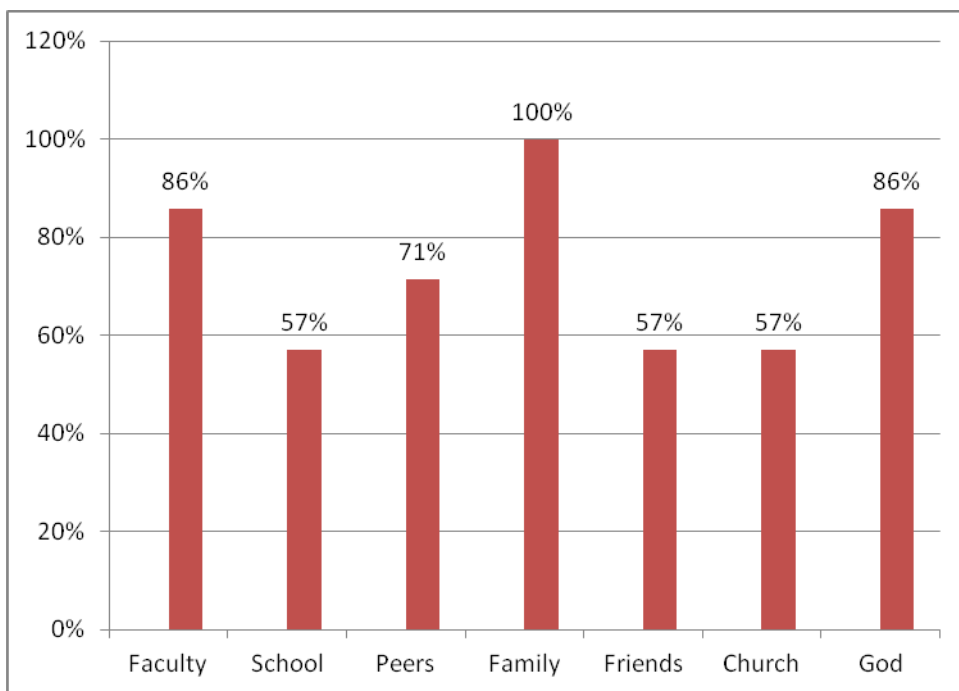


Figure M-1 –Percentages of Sources of Support

APPENDIX N: SUMMARY OF USE OF TECHNOLOGY

Table N-1

Summary of Technology Used by Participants

Name	Technology				
	Email	Text	Facebooks	Online	You-Tube
Alex	✓	✓			
Brian	✓	✓			✓
Cara	✓			✓	
Debra	✓				
Elaine	✓				
Frances	✓	✓	✓		
Greg	✓				
Total	7	3	1	1	1
