LIFE SATISFACTION: A STUDY OF ENGAGEMENT AND THE ACADEMIC PROGRESS OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WITH SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITIES

by
Rebecca Lawhorne Dilling
Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment Of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Education

Liberty University
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand how high school students with specific learning disabilities describe life satisfaction and its impact on student motivation, academic engagement, and academic progress. Bruner’s constructivist theory guided this research. Other theories included: Piaget’s cognitive development theory, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory, Vygotsky’s social learning theory, Erikson’s psychosocial development theory, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory, Bowlby’s attachment theory, Dewey’s brain-based learning theory, Glasser’s control theory of motivation, Bandura’s social cognitive theory, and Vygotsky’s social learning theory, Piaget’s cognitive development theory, Erikson’s psychosocial development theory, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory, Bowlby’s attachment theory, Dewey’s brain-based learning theory, Glasser’s control theory of motivation, Bandura’s social cognitive theory, and Bandura’s self-efficacy theory. Data collection tools included the researcher’s journal, classroom observations, student interviews, two student focus groups, and a life satisfaction questionnaire. Data analysis included bracketing, highlighting significant statements from the data, and developing consequential themes which included: (a) confusion of mood and happiness, (b) getting what you want in life, (c) having a good friends, (d) reaching personal goals (e) a belief that God is real (f) positive parental influence, (g) having a specific learning disability, (h) having a specific learning disability (i) positive relationships with teachers, (j) a belief that not only is God real but that he cares about people. One discovery was a deep connection between participants’ self-descriptive level of happiness, and that of the role of parents, teachers, and God. Another was the deep relationship between the special education teachers and the participants. A third was the bonding force of the community and finally, a discovery of the number of participants who believe in God and have a relationship with Him. Many felt God was the source of life satisfaction and academic progress.

Keywords: engagement, happiness, life satisfaction, motivation, self-determination
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Dedication

There are many people who have inspired me, kept me afloat, and loved me unconditionally. My grandparents were godly people who showed me how to love God. Julie Denham, my sister, has been my life-long friend, co-lover of education, and constant reminder of the importance of life consistency and stability. My precious daughters, Callie and Addison, patiently allowed me to go to school as they were growing up; always seeming to understand the goal ahead of me. They were so good. My mother is the very source of my life. Words can’t express how much I owe her. And to my husband, Brian, who, at the end of the journey, challenged me to stay focused and to achieve my goal . . . thank you! But my sweet Daddy is the one who pushed me to desire advanced degrees. He loved learning. When life got tough, he reminded me that the sun would always come up in the morning and that my life would be great; just believe. He cheered me on, helped me through the tough days, and loved me until he took his last breath. He is the one to whom I dedicate this part of my educational journey and success to the most. He is my father, Ernest Miller Lawhorne- the best of the best. And as with everything in my life…to God be the ultimate glory and the ultimate praise!
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The growing focus in the United States (US) concerning educational value and status among world nations, leaves educators perplexed and frustrated. Some are digging in their heels, ready to take on the challenge of fixing whatever is discovered to be our national problem and yet others are throwing in the towel, giving up on the once esteemed profession. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, challenged schools in the US to achieve educational goals for children as the single outcome measure of school effectiveness (Thum, 2003).

Since that challenge, the educational system in the US has been scrutinized by negative reports and media, initiating the hunt for someone or something to blame for student underachievement and failure (Hanushek, Peterson, & Woessmann, 2012). Consequently, this hunt has launched an outpouring of educational research with the intent of increasing student academic achievement and test scores; spanning into all areas of education and impacting the lives of high school students with specific learning disabilities.

The intent of the NCLB, was to establish educational goals that would make schools in America more effective. Effectiveness can be defined as an establishment “doing the right thing in the right way, while striving to achieve its objectives” (Ahmed, 2013). As a result of NCLB, funding strategies and teacher performance standards are being scrutinized and have been given a large portion of responsibility for student academic progress or failure. Research devoted to school effectiveness has developed into increased school funding and stricter teacher accountability. However, there is another possible source of impact: the academic disengagement of students stemming from an insufficient level of life satisfaction (Huebner, Lewis, Malone, & Valois, 2011).
Effectiveness, or doing the “right thing” in education (Ahmed, 2014), means helping students be successful and this involves considering the link between life satisfaction and academic engagement. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to add to the existing literature by exploring life satisfaction and understanding its impact on the academic motivation, engagement, and progress as described by high school students with specific learning disabilities (SLD). Research was focused on the quality of the learning experiences and learner satisfaction of these students. Applying the information gleaned from the literature and research, participant, could assist parents, educators, and legislators to do the right thing for these students.

**Background**

The amount of available research on life satisfaction or happiness of children pales in comparison to that of adults, particularly within the context of school (Huebner et al., 2011). Furthermore, research conducted on student engagement in school is not specifically devoted to high school students identified as having a specific learning disability.

The Individuals with a Disability Education Act (IDEA) determines that a child has a specific learning disability if he does not achieve adequately for his age or meet state-approved grade-level standards. The student is identified as having a specific learning disability (SLD), after being provided with learning experiences and research-based intervention appropriate for his age, and still fails to meet the standards in one or more of the following areas: oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skills, reading fluency skills, reading comprehension, mathematics calculation, and problem solving. If a child exhibits a pattern of strengths and weaknesses in performance, achievement, or both, relative to age, state-approved grade-level standards, or intellectual development, he can be identified as having a SLD (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).
Related research has shown that supportive learning environments are strongly influenced by other contexts such as parental bonding and healthy home situations (Eccles, 2004; Libbey, 2004). Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological theory of human development connects a person’s development to multiple life contexts (outside of school) as being primal in student academic engagement (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, in Lerner & Dammon (Eds.).) However, research is lacking in regard to the links between academic motivation and engagement and life satisfaction; including family and spirituality. Highlighting the impact that life satisfaction has on high school students with SLD and how it relates to their academic engagement was the goal for this study. Further, connecting a spirituality or religiosity to life satisfaction and constructing evidence for more accurate origins of student disengagement and lack of academic progress was explored.

Ideas from the research of Bruner, Piaget, Brofenbrenner, Vygotsky, Erikson, Maslow, Bowlby, Dewey, Glasser, Bandura, Deci and Ryan, and Bandura, along with testimonies from selected students established a new foundational understanding of the impact of life satisfaction on academic motivation, engagement and progress for students with SLD. When students are motivated and engaged in school, they perform better academically; finding purpose in their education and widening the doors to future success.

**Situation to Self**

I am concerned about the future of young people, students and, in particular, those with SLD. I was initially interested in this research for three reasons. First, I wanted to use the research data as an avenue in which to gain greater understanding of the issues behind the lack of academic progress and disengagement in school of high school students with SLD. Secondly, I wanted to provide current information regarding the origin of student motivation, engagement
and academic success of those students with SLD. The third source of interest was to use collected data in understanding the role that spirituality and other social factors have on life satisfaction, student motivation, engagement, and academic progress of high school students with SLD. In seeking understanding of this phenomenon, the transcendental perspective allowed me to conduct research on this subject without allowing my bias to interfere with the lived experiences and testimonies of the student participants.

**Problem Statement**

The established research and increasing data, indicates that the US education system has been trying to teach students without addressing the psychological reasons why children could be turned off to learning (Gordon & Gordon, 2013). Educators know that “engaged students are more successful in school by many measures” (Holcombe & Wang, 2010, p.001). Educators also know that many students are not engaged in school and that this poses a problem for student academic progress.

Research has indicated that life satisfaction is a predictor of positive outcomes in many areas of life, including education. It has been observed that students with higher life satisfaction tend to have higher GPAs compared to students with a lower level of satisfaction (Huebner, Lewis, Malone, and Valois, 2011).

Low life satisfaction and unhappiness are both linked to depression and psychological disorders (Lewinsohn, Redner, & Seely, 1991); both negatively impacting academic engagement and progress. While this informative research has impacted general education, less research has been completed in determining whether the connection between life satisfaction and school engagement in adolescents with learning disabilities has an impact of similar magnitude.
Maintaining an honest view of society allows us to consider the critical issues in education that our culture experiences today. “Much research has investigated how individual components of subjective well-being (e.g., life satisfaction, positive affect, negative affect) influence adolescent functioning. Little is known, however, about how the third component of subjective well-being (SWB), life satisfaction, contributes to positive adolescent outcomes when investigated simultaneously with positive and negative emotions” (Heffner & Antaramian, 2016, p. 1681). In addition, the impact of gleaning knowledge regarding life satisfaction and how this phenomenon can academically impact students with learning disabilities will fill a gap in the research.

Funding and teacher effectiveness are extremely important in the education of children. However, the challenge of engaging students may be unreachable by either of these tentative solutions. While ample research has been conducted based on a testing perspective or on a teacher evaluative perspective, regarding student engagement and academic progress, little research has been conducted on a phenomenon, directly impacting student engagement and that globally spans humanity: life satisfaction.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand how high school students with SLD describe life satisfaction and its impact on student motivation, academic engagement, and academic progress. Life satisfaction (LS) was defined as “human happiness” for the purposes of this study (Diener & Pavot, 2008). Its source and the role it plays in the academic progress of high school students with SLD was explored through the eyes of the participants.
Significance of the Study

President George W. Bush’s educational initiative in 2006 declared that the foundation of America’s competitiveness among world nations is education and a skilled workforce (Hanushek et al., 2012). This initiative continues today under President Obama’s administration implementing programs such as Highly Qualified Teachers, Testing Accountability, Title I, Educational Technology grants, English Language Acquisition grants, and Twenty First Century Learning Centers Programs. Despite intervention programs, American students continue to underachieve. In 2010, only 6% of students tested in the advanced range in math and in 2011, only 32% of eighth graders in the US were even proficient in math (Hanushek et al., 2012). One year later, the US scored below 29 nations and education systems. This dropped the US from 23rd in 2009 to 29th in 2013. Poland, Vietnam, Austria, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Latvia and Luxembourg passed the United States for the first time (National Center for Educational Statistics, NCES, 2013). American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, made the following statement regarding these statistics:

The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores proved that a decade of top-down, test-based schooling created by No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top — focused on hyper-testing students, sanctioning teachers and closing schools — has failed to improve the quality of American public education. (Fensterwald, 2013, p.1)

The accountability results for those high school students with SLD is even more concerning. Compared to the total student population tested, students with SLD still fall well below the average. Such can be seen at the state level, such as in Virginia; reported on Table 1.
Table 1

**Virginia Department of Education Accountability Results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percent of English proficiency with SLD students/total population</th>
<th>Percent of math proficiency with SLD students/total population</th>
<th>Percent of science proficiency with SLD students/total population</th>
<th>Percent of social studies proficiency with SLD students/total population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012-2013</td>
<td>43 / 75</td>
<td>41 / 71</td>
<td>67 / 81</td>
<td>60 / 85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-2014</td>
<td>43 / 71</td>
<td>43 / 74</td>
<td>66 / 80</td>
<td>58 / 84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014-2015</td>
<td>45 / 79</td>
<td>48 / 79</td>
<td>68 / 82</td>
<td>60 / 86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Information for this chart was compiled from the Virginia Department of Education website regarding data from the 2015-2016 school year.

Although educators and government officials constantly look for ways to support students and to increase academic success, the low achievement and lack of academic progress of students continues to frustrate those concerned. Academic engagement and achievement have consistently been found by educational research to be strongly connected (Farb, Lohman, Mahatmya, & Matjasko, 2012). Understanding a student’s developmental history is also a critical component in the complex issue of academic progress and for the purposes of this study, life satisfaction the focal entity.

In his social cognitive theory, Vygotsky explained that culture is the main determinant of how people develop. Consequently, the way a child learns is largely affected by the culture in which he lives. This includes the family environment (Vygotsky, 1978).

Emotional engagement impacts an individual’s entire life including academic progress once the individual enters school. Deficits in social competencies can hinder a student’s ability to make connections to other people or contexts within the educational setting (Farb et al., 2012). If a student is not happy or satisfied within his or her personal life, then life inside the school hallways will be negatively impacted. Life satisfaction, therefore, is an important indicator of
positive psychological well-being and has been defined as a “cognitive evaluation of one’s overall life or important domains such as family and school” (Diener, 1994, p. 103-104).

Within the requirements of academic engagement and success is the need of students to be happy or to at least acquire some level of satisfaction in life. The significance of this study was to glance into the reality of the overlying social and personal structures that impact the level of life satisfaction and academic functioning in the daily lives of high school students with SLD.

As available research on the happiness of high school students with SLD is limited compared to that of adults (Huebner et al., 2006), this study was developed in order to add to current literature and provide further data. This could invite additional study comparison and discussion leading to the discovery of ways to improve education for high school students with SLD.

Research Questions

My research questions explored how students describe life satisfaction and how that phenomenon impacts their academic engagement, motivation, and success. The questions sought to expose past academic experiences and other related personal and social experiences as seen through the eyes of the participants. Available research on the happiness, or life satisfaction, of high school students with SLD is limited compared to that of adults (Huebner et al., 2006), and therefore, an investigation of the phenomenon took place using the following questions:

1. How do high school students with SLD describe life satisfaction?

According to Huja (2011), individuals who can better understand themselves and who can manage their feelings, responding appropriately to different situations, will perform better. This is referred to as Emotional Intelligence (EI). Yadav (2011) added to the definition of EI as
“someone’s ability to acquire and apply knowledge from his/her emotions and the emotions of others to be more successful and lead a more fulfilling life” (p. 315).

2. What past or present personal or social factors do high school students with SLD describe as impacting life satisfaction, motivation, school engagement and academic progress?

Bruner’s social constructivism theory determined that learning is an active process and that students naturally construct new ideas or concepts based on their current or past knowledge (Bruner, 1966). The participants’ success of going to class and learning new content each day is directly dependent on their experiential perceptions already in place. Current events and culture also play a large role in the lived academic experiences of those students. Vygotsky emphasized this interactive importance of individual, interpersonal, and cultural historical factors, as they all affect learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

3. What past or present spiritual factors do high school students with SLD describe as impacting life satisfaction, motivation, school engagement and academic progress?

Spiritual intelligence (SI) can be defined as the ability to create meaning based on deep understanding of existential questions, and awareness of and the ability to use multiple levels of consciousness in problem solving” (Vaughan, 2002, p. 315). SI is multifaceted and can support people in any context (corporate, community, or family) with spiritual awareness, capacity and intelligence. SI also allows individuals to use that intelligence to be more effective in the routines of daily life (Misra & Srivastava, 2012). SI is the ability for students to find meaning, purpose, and value in life and to connect those assets to academic motivation and progress in school. “Spirituality can be viewed as a form of intelligence because it predicts functioning and
adaptation and offers capabilities that enable people to solve problems and attain goals” (Hosseini, Elias, Krauss, & Aishah, 2010, p.315).

**Research Plan**

A qualitative, transcendental phenomenological study was conducted to gain insight directly from high school participants with SLD concerning the essence of life satisfaction and the influence it has on school success. Phenomenology, “aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (Patton, 2002, p. 49). The objective is to explicate the essence of the lived experiences of a person or a group of people, around a specific phenomenon” (Christensen, Johnson, & Turner, 2010). The phenomenological approach is the most optimal method through hearing from participants concerning their personal life experience (Creswell, 2012).

Phenomenological research however, per Husserl, cannot begin until the transcendental methodology has been applied (Schmitt, 1959). Transcendental phenomenology provides logical, systematic, and coherent design elements that lead to an essential description of the experience. This qualitative study uses the transcendental approach to allow the researcher to look at the phenomenon with a fresh eye and open mind (Moustakas, 1994); establishing new knowledge stemming from the essence of actual lived experiences of the participants.

Purposeful sampling, the non-random method of choosing participants, was chosen for this study because it keeps the focus of the research on quality rather than quantity (Bowen, 2005). The researcher selected information-rich cases for this study to learn about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research. Purposeful sampling dictates the method (not vice-versa) including even the type of participants” (Hycner, 1999, p.156). It is considered by Welman and Kruger (1999) as the most important kind of non-probability sampling to identify
research participants. It uses those who “have had experiences relating to the phenomenon to be researched” (Kruger, 1988, p. 150).

Homogeneous sampling is another strategy within purposeful sampling which assigns certain similar characteristics to all study participants. These characteristics were a specific learning disability, the grade level (8th-12th grade), and the same public high school. My goal was 20 students, however after the permission slips were returned, there were two students who did not qualify because they had different identifying disabilities.

Having 18 participants in this qualitative study helped me build a closer relationship with the participants which lead to more open and honest exchange of information. This sample size was in line with published guidelines (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994) and helped reduce some of the bias and validity threats that could arise in qualitative research with a larger number of participants (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006).

After determining my participants, I collected data through a variety of methods: classroom observations of each grade level in both general education and special education classrooms, individual interviews, two student focus groups (one for eighth - ninth grade students and one for tenth - twelfth grade students), and a student life satisfaction questionnaire. Beneficial and valid research relies on the reliability of the data. Therefore, in this study, triangulation of the data was used. Triangulation is utilizing a variety of data sources in research to produce understanding. This research method also ensured that my account is well developed and comprehensive (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

To fully grasp the experiences of research participants, and to maintain the integrity of a transcendental-phenomenological study, a researcher needs to forego all personal biases. Before data collection, I described my own experiences, through journaling, as a way of staying alert to
personal and underlying feelings about the research topic. This is referred to as *epoche* (Moustakas, 1994).

**Delimitations**

All research has delimitations. These are characteristics that limit the scope of the research and define its boundaries (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). There are also different opinions about the nature of delimitations. Dukes (1984) determined that phenomenology is not a method at all. He claimed that there is not a “clear recipe” (p. 202) on how the process of a phenomenological should be conducted. For this reason, self-checking and flexibility must be present and constant throughout the study (Dukes, 1984). Moussakas, however, published clear procedures in 1994 for a phenomenological research design. His procedures were used in this study.

One delimitation in this study was time. Phenomenological research is time consuming (Dukes, 1984) and requires extensive hours in the field. I felt that more time spent with the students in observation and interviews could have been beneficial, however, that could also lead to deeper relationships impeding the role of an objective observer. I struggled with this somewhat due to the age and issues of my participants. However, the true intent and benefits of *epoche* (Moustakas, 1994) became clearer to me as I considered the amount and balance of time spent in the field.

Other delimiting considerations for this study included the location of the research, the age of the participants, and the participant disability qualifiers. Only smaller, public high schools were considered. Environmental factors play a significant role in the level of life satisfaction a person experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Also, the study participants had to be of high school age, which for this study was 8th-12th grade. In many school divisions, 8th grade is still considered to be middle school. Finally, each potential participant was required to have a specific learning disability in math, reading, or writing or any combination of these areas as defined in 1997 by the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).
Definitions

1. *Attachment* – a lasting psychological connectedness between human beings” (Bowlby, 1979).

2. *Belief in God* – Acceptance and trust that God is the origin of truth and gives meaning and purpose in life (Greg, 2014).

3. *Developmental tasks* – age-graded normative tasks based on societal expectations about the developmental milestones that should be reached in specific life phases (Havighurst, 1972; Kuo, Masten, & McCormick, 2011).

4. *Faith* – an internal feeling, a sense that there is something more than what can be seen (Greg, 2014).

5. *Happiness* – subjective well-being which specifically refers to “an individual’s own assessment of his or her own life not the judgements of experts and include satisfaction (both global and satisfaction with specific domains), pleasant affect, and low negative affect” (Diener et al. 2004 p.189, cited in Lewis et al. 2011). When basic needs are fulfilled, an individual can find certain amounts of happiness within (Bradley & Corwyn, 2004).


7. *Learned Helplessness* – a learned behavior; a conditioned response that can be treated (Gordon & Gordon, 1982). It is also defined as a disruption in motivation, affect, and learning following exposure to noncontingent (uncontrollable) outcomes (Fincham, 1986).

8. *Life Satisfaction* – a conscious evaluative process that allows individuals to rate his or her own range of happiness level based on a presumed standard set of criteria that meets the expectation of the individual (Lewis, 2011; Pavot & Diener 1993). Others define it as a
“global assessment of a person’s quality of life according to his chosen criteria” (Johnson & Shin, 1978, pp.478).

9. Motivation – “factors that activate, direct, and sustain goal-directed behavior” (Nevid, 2013).

10. Self-determination – a person’s construction of his own personal goals and the acceptance of responsibility for his actions in attaining those goals (Brugnaro & Timmons, 2007).

11. Specific Learning Disabilities – neurological disorders that affect the brain’s ability to receive, process, store, and respond to information. Individuals with SLD are of at least average intelligence but lack skills that are essential for meeting state-approved grade-level standards and achieving academic success. The student is identified as having a SLD after being provided with learning experiences and research-based intervention appropriate for his age, and still fails to meet the standards in one or more of the following areas: oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skills, reading fluency skills, reading comprehension, mathematics calculation, and problem solving (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

12. Spirituality – the paths a person’s faith travels as it seeks meaning, purpose, and significance. Spirituality results when one’s faith is activated (Greg, 2014).

13. Student Engagement – the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, extending to the level of motivation they should learn and progress in their education. The concept of “student engagement” is predicated on the belief that learning improves when students are inquisitive, interested, or inspired, and that learning tends to suffer when students are bored, dispassionate, disaffected, or otherwise “disengaged” (Abbott, 2014, p. 1).
Summary

Educators know that “engaged students are more successful in school by many measures” (Holcombe & Wang, 2010, p. 633). Also known is the idea that the social construct of parents and family plays a vital role in the weaving of student engagement throughout early education and well into high school (Eccles & Wang, 2012). If being effective means being successful (Webster’s Dictionary, 2015) and if doing the “right thing” in education means helping students be successful, then this involves considering the link between life satisfaction and academic engagement.

Researchers have not ventured far enough into the reality of high school students with SLD. The lack of research in this area specifically contradicts what is known to date about the importance of school engagement to academic progress. This study used classroom observations, interviews of high school students with SLD, two student focus groups, and a student life satisfaction survey to gain further information and insight into the connection between life satisfaction and student success.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

As the researcher, it is necessary to provide a literary synopsis regarding the increasing educational phenomenon of student disengagement among high school students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) as it relates to life satisfaction. Also, included in this study is the definition and discussion of life satisfaction, spirituality or religion, and the connection that these entities have on levels of academic motivation, engagement, and progress of those students with SLD. Chapter two of this study assesses and compares pertinent literature to establish four pillars of research. These pillars include (a) a theoretical framework as it relates to the issue being researched, (b) the methodology chosen for this study, (c) identification of data types being collected, and (d) a description of the analysis techniques being used to draw conclusions and to make connections.

Theoretical Framework

Learning theories are designed to guide effective learning (Wang, 2012). While some are teacher focused, others are student-focused but all are designed to create positive growth and cognitive development. In general, learning theories relate teachers to students and researchers to the phenomenon being studied. The theoretical framework for this research, allowed me to build connections between life satisfaction, the levels of academic engagement, and the academic progress of high school students with specific learning disabilities.

Constructivist Theory

The work of Jerome Bruner provided much of the framework for my study. The foundational premise of Bruner’s social constructivism theory is that learning is an active process and students naturally construct new ideas or concepts based on their current or past
knowledge (Bruner, 1966). Although constructivism is viewed as a relatively new school of thought, it has deep historical roots and maintains that learners construct their own understanding.

Socrates emphasized helping students construct their own meanings rather than relying solely on transmission (Jowett, 1911). John Dewey felt that education should work with students’ current understanding; considering prior ideas and interests (Dewey, 2010). To learn from reflective practice, Dewey felt that weaknesses as well as strengths of students need to be thoroughly examined (Dewey, 1939b). The ideas of Vygotsky also influenced constructivism by emphasizing the interactive importance of individual, interpersonal, and cultural historical factors; all affecting learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

Educators view constructivism as a learning theory that focuses on students’ prior ideas, experiences, and knowledge interact with new experiences and their interpretations of the environment around them. The knowledge-building process is driven by cognitive conflict. Cognitive conflict occurs for learners when they encounter and recognize discrepancies between what they already know. Differences in what students know and what they are learning cause cognitive tension and require the students to make adjustments in their thinking. When students resolve these discrepancies, they can reconcile their prior understanding with new information (Clark et al., 2009).

Past knowledge begins at birth and is influenced by early family structure and events. Bruner teaches that people select and transform information, make hypotheses about information, and then make decisions. This process relies on a cognitive structure. Cognitive structure provides meaning and organization to experiences and allows people to generalize new knowledge to what is already known (Bruner, 1966). Bruner’s work focuses a great deal on
building of knowledge within a culture. His earliest work stressed cultural transmission. A student’s culture is thought to represent the educational content needing to be transmitted to that student. It then becomes the role of an educator to locate the most important parts of culture that would increase a student’s cognitive capacity to learn and to find an effective way to communicate that content.

Bruner’s more recent contribution to his constructivism theory, however, emphasized the importance of understanding culture as the place where the life experiences of student may be interpreted. This context includes exploring the values and meanings of student experiences. Bruner encouraged a focus on constructing various methods of meaning-making and communicating; using multiple methods in which learning can take place. This is in opposition to the mode of learning in which the cultural context is absent (Bruner, 1996).

Culture, according to Bruner, is the “toolkit” for sense-making and communicating (Bruner, 1996, p. 3); as such, it enhances our (presumably) natural endowment in action, perception, sense-making, and thought (Bruner, 1966, p. 126). Bruner’s theories regarding the construction of knowledge accepts that “individuals are not mere receptacles of facts, nor is culture a mere collection of unambiguous and immutable facts; individuals construct meanings and culture is always in the process of change. Education is a process of negotiation between the individual and culture” (Takaya, 2008, p.4). Having information is not adequate. It must be structured so that individuals can expand and deepen existing knowledge more efficiently, and to be able to go beyond what is simply given.

Bruner’s work set the framework for studies regarding learning and culture. He stated, “it is man’s participation in culture and the realization of his mental powers through
culture that make it impossible to construct a human psychology on the basis of the
individual alone” (Bruner, 1996, p. 12). He also said, “to treat the world as an indifferent
flow of information to be processed by individuals each on his or her own terms is to lose
sight of how individuals are formed and how they function” (Bruner, 1996, p. 12). Bruner
was influenced by Piaget’s ideas about cognitive development in children.

**Cognitive Development Theory**

During the 1940s Bruner’s work focused on the range of impact that children’s basic
needs, motivations, and expectations (“mental sets”) had on individual perception (Piaget, 1979).
Piaget’s theory affirms the idea that children’s ways of thinking are developed around their
interactions with the world. However, he extended this idea by explaining that this development
happens in four stages: sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal
operational (Piaget, 1979).

The goal of Piaget’s four stages theory is to explain the processes by which the infant,
and then the child, develops into a person who can reason and think. Cognitive development,
according to Piaget, occurs as mental processes mature and reorganize in conjunction with
environmental experiences (Piaget, 1979). Children construct an opinion or perception of their
world and then experience discrepancies between what they discover in their environment and
what they already know or have discovered through life experiences. High school students with
SLD who have experienced a lack of academic success in school at an early age and/or social
challenges within the home environment or with peers, see Piaget’s discrepancies well before
they reach the high school classroom.
Ecological Systems Theory

Looking at a child’s development within the context of the system of relationships that form his or her environment, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory also connects personal life experiences to academic learning. Bronfenbrenner’s theory defines the system as having multi-layers of environment, each influencing a child’s development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Bronfenbrenner’s multi-layers include factors in the child’s own maturing biology, his immediate family and the community or social environment in which she or he functions daily (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

Changes or conflict in any one layer of a child’s development will have a consequential ripple effect on the other layers. Thus, in order to understand a child’s development, a researcher must look at the child and her immediate environment as they relate to and within the larger environment.

Similar to the theories of Bruner, Piaget, and Bronfenbrenner, is the idea of social constructionism. There are aspects of social constructionism that are used in social theory and applied to learning disabilities and special education (Anyona, 2010). Of importance to this study are anti-essentialism and anti-realism. Anti-essentialism demands that there is more than just one contributing factor. For example, there is more than just a neurological process problem that creates a disability. Anti-realism suggests that there is not just one objective, observable, and measurable factor, such as an IQ test, external to the individual that determines a disability.

Students either enter high school prepared with adequate skills and equipped for academic engagement or are unprepared with the prerequisites needed for high school success. The engagement and achievement of students is strongly linked to the amount of positive social interaction, love, support, and intellectual stimulation that is provided by parents and caregivers.
Social Learning Theory

Vygotsky’s social learning theory stresses the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition (Vygotsky, 1978) as he believed strongly that community plays a central role in the process of “making meaning.” Other theorists such as Piaget, believed that a child’s development precedes his learning, Vygotsky argued, “learning is a necessary and universal aspect of the process of developing culturally organized, specifically human psychological function” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 90). Therefore, social learning tends to precede development. Vygotsky’s theory is complementary to Bandura’s work on social learning and a key component of situated learning theory as well. Because Vygotsky’s focus was on cognitive development, it is interesting to compare his views with those of a constructivist (Bruner) and a genetic epistemologist (Piaget). Also of interest is the common thread that links Bruner, Piaget, and Vygotsky to an idea that learning does not begin when students enter school but much earlier; the idea of epigenetics. Epigenetics refers to external modifications to DNA; things that turn the developing cells on and off. These modifications do not change the DNA sequence. However, they do affect how a person’s genetic cells are read (Rettner, 2013). These cells dynamically respond to the environment and can be influenced by stress, diet, behavior, toxins, and other factors that regulate gene expression and that which are environmentally linked.

Psychosocial Development Theory

Within the ideas of social learning, life for students claims to begin at birth; not when they enter high school. Erikson maintains that personality develops in a predetermined order. Each stage a person enters in life is building upon a previous stage. This is called the epigenetic principle (Erikson, 1959). Erikson’s (1959) theory of psychosocial development has eight stages (See the following website for related graph: http://www.simplypsychology.org/attachment.html).
In his theory, Erikson explained that the nature of life involves human psychological needs resting in a state conflict with the needs of society. According to the theory, each stage has to be successfully completed so that the individual develops a healthy personality and basic virtues. Erikson described basic virtues as characteristics and personal strengths that the individual can use to resolve subsequent crises. However, Erikson explained that if a person fails to successfully complete a stage, he or she minimizes the ability to complete those remaining stages of personal development (Erikson, 1959). The basis of Erikson’s theory becomes intertwined with those of others, already mentioned. Bruner (1996) maintains that student participation in culture is how subsequent learning is constructed. Bronfenbrenner (1977) adds life experiences to those factors that impact learning and Vygotsky (1978) claims that social interaction is critical to cognitive development. Bowlby (1978) asserts that developing early relational attachments with family and in particular, mothers, also directly impacts cognitive growth and future academic learning. These theories combined support the notion that culture, environmental context, and family relationships play extensive roles in life satisfaction and in the future academic engagement and success of students.

This information merges with several other theories or concepts including: Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory, attachment theory, brain-based learning theory, control theory of motivation, social cognition theory, self-determination theory, and the self-efficacy theory. These theories provide additional information and perspectives regarding cognition development and factors that impact individual cognition; both of which play an important role in student engagement and in academic progress of students with SLD.
Hierarchy of Needs Theory

In 1954, Maslow presented a model which can be divided into basic human needs and growth needs. Maslow’s original five stage model includes: (a) biological and physiological needs (basic life needs: air, food, drink, shelter, warmth, sex, and sleep); (b) safety (protection, security, order, law, limits, and stability); (c) belongingness and love (family, affection, relationships, and work groups); (d) self-esteem (achievement, status, responsibility, and reputation); (e) self-actualization (personal growth and fulfillment) (Maslow, 1954). He reasoned that everyone is capable of, and has the innate desire to reach a higher level of hierarchical needs, with the goal of self-actualization.

Unfortunately, as Maslow points out, progress is often disrupted by a failure to meet lower level needs. Life experiences such as divorce, lack of parents, or loss of family income may cause an individual to fluctuate between levels of hierarchy. Hierarchy of needs, can be applicable across many contexts, including education (Maslow, 1968). Educators are looking for the root of our decline in education and at the present time, we are concentrating efforts on teacher performance and evaluation. According to Maslow (1968) however, without the bottom layers of human needs being satisfied, all other needs (including those needs which are educational in nature) will not likely be met.

Maslow’s original five-level hierarchy of needs model is a classical representation of human motivation. At the top of the chart is self-actualization. This step, according to Maslow, is where students reach a point where they focus on personal growth and self-fulfillment (Maslow, 1968). This is the place where students have to reach in order to experience motivation, and academic progress.
Maslow also coined the term “Maslow’s Hammer” also called “The Law of the Instrument”, which metaphorically describes what happens when a person has just one “tool” (approach or method available or known). When this happens, a student treats every situation the same and is unable to generalize skills or apply basic knowledge to new situations; making the classroom more difficult and increasing the level of student discouragement. Maslow explains, “I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail” (Maslow, 1968). It is important for educators to understand and identify this occurrence in students to support them and guide them into academic engagement and progress. In his book, *The Psychology of Science: A Reconnaissance*, Maslow wrote, “Being a full human being is difficult, frightening, and problematical” (Maslow, 2004). For students with learning disabilities, this human nuance is even more academically impacting.

**Attachment Theory**

Aligning with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is the attachment/extended attachment theory. Bowlby and Ainsworth (1991) describe the relationship between a child’s bond with the mother and the detrimental effect that can be caused by disruption through separation, deprivation, and bereavement (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). The extended attachment theory springboards off the earlier attachment theory of Bowlby and Ainsworth, which indicates that positive relationships between parents and children, promote feelings of security in the child. Emotional security in turn is considered to be a necessary precondition for exploration of the environment which then naturally leads to student engagement in school, which finally leads to higher academic achievement (McCuskey, 2007).

Additionally, Bowlby noted children who were exposed to prolonged periods of deprivation, were essentially “affectionless” (Bowlby, 1979, p. 8). Bowlby determined that this
lack of affection and care created a sense of disengagement in young children that stayed stagnant, not changing as the children became older and advanced in grades at school. In 1980, Bowlby wrote, “Intimate attachments to other human beings are the hub around which a person’s life revolves, not only when he is an infant or a toddler or a school child but throughout his adolescence and his years of maturity as well, and on into old age” (Bowlby, 1980, p. 442). Bowlby (1980) observed, in a specific population of affectionless children, signs of what he termed “partial deprivation” and “complete deprivation” (p. 9). Partial deprivation resulted in an excessive desire for love or revenge, guilt, and depression, whereas complete deprivation gave rise to feelings of listlessness, unresponsiveness, developmental disruptions, and a lack of focus and concentration (Bowlby, 1980).

Bowlby’s attachment theory “provides an essential framework for understanding the impact of early social-emotional relationships on cognitive-affective structures used by the child to construct views of the world, self, and others” (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004, pp. 247).

For the classroom, Bowlby addressed the social-emotional development from the perspective of both process and outcome and has identified a variety of markers predictive of later academic performance, social competence, and psychopathology (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004). The research of Bowlby and Ainsworth (1991), emphasize the impact of parental relationships on students; reaching across both cognitive and motivational development. These findings are crucial components in the academic engagement and progress for students in general. However, likely are these findings to have an even greater impact on those students with learning disabilities, as their academic deficits would stem from both cognitive and social realms of development.
Brain-based Learning Theory

Since the 1990s, there has been a mass production of academic prose reflecting on the learning processes of the brain, and the need to implement brain-based methods in education (Roberts, 2002). Dewey, an early education traditionalist, supported experiential learning, suggesting that the creation of the classroom goes against everything the brain was designed to do (Dewey, 2010). Based on the reflection of learning processes and brain functioning, Brain-based learning evolved. Dewey determined that the brain is a parallel processor, being able to perform several activities at once. He also concluded that learning engages the whole physiology, the search for meaning is innate, the search comes through patterning, emotions are critical to patterning, and that learning is enhanced by challenge and inhibited by threat (Dewey, 2010). Deckard and Pantana from Liberty University add to these principles with *The Twelve Principles of the Brain-Based Learning Theory* (see Table 2).

Table 2

The Twelve Principles of the Brain-Based Learning Theory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principles of the Brain-Based Learning Theory</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Learning involves both attention and peripheral perception.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Learning is both conscious and unconscious.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Two approaches to memory (rote &amp; spatial/contextual/ dynamic memory system).</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Learning is developmental.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Each brain is uniquely organized.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Complex learning is enhanced by challenge and inhibited by threat associated with helplessness and fatigue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. All learning engages entire physiology.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. The brain/mind is social.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9. The search for meaning is innate.

10. The search for meaning occurs through patterning.

11. Emotions are critical to patterning.

12. The brain/mind processes parts and whole simultaneously.

Note. The information from this table is taken from Deckard and Pantana, (2007). *Brain-Based Learning Theory: An Online Course Design Model*. Virginia Educational Research Association (VERA) conference, Charlottesville, VA. Used with permission (see Appendix M).

Brain-based learning theory is based on the function and structure of the human brain; a brain which from conception is constantly growing and developing, establishing patterns of knowledge. Jensen emphasized the importance of studying the brain and how it is impacted. For example, students who attend school from kindergarten through secondary school typically spend more than 13,000 hours of their developing brain’s time with teachers. Secondly, brains are highly susceptible to social, physical, cognitive, and emotional environmental influences. Therefore, student brains are changed by the experiences they have in school (Jensen, 1998). Student brains are often inhibited by discouragement, feelings of being ignored, and negative life experiences. Students with learning disabilities are especially prone to these feelings simply by their academic abilities or weaknesses.

People identify learning and intelligence in two distinct ways, according to Dweck (2010). Individuals with a *fixed mindset* believe that intelligence is a trait that you are born with. Everyone has a certain amount and will maintain that amount throughout life. According to Dweck, students with a fixed mindset do not like effort. They believe that if you have ability, everything should come naturally. They tell us that when they have to work hard, they feel dumb. “Students with a growth mindset, in contrast, value effort; they realize that even geniuses have to work hard to develop their abilities and make their contributions” (Dweck, 2010, pp 16).
These students become discouraged or defensive when they don’t succeed right away, as is the challenge of learning disabilities. Students with the fixed mindset may quickly feel that their intelligence is being questioned, withdraw their effort, blame others, lie about their scores, or consider cheating.

Individuals with a growth mindset believe that they can develop their intelligence over time (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Dweck, 1999, 2007). Research confirms that students who believe that intelligence is not a fixed entity and can be shaped and changed, tend to have stronger learning goals. They tend to hold positive beliefs about effort and earn better grades throughout school. The framework regarding the brain-based learning theory can be viewed as a predictor of academic progress and student success (Blackwell et al., 2007).

**Control Theory of Motivation**

Unlike other theories of personal motivation, the control theory has one distinction that separates it from other educational schools of thought. It has characteristics connected to the study of mechanical processes. “Research suggests that the modern control theory originated with Wiener’s 1948 Cybernetics, though it conceptually dates to Plato” (PSU WC L.9, 2014, p. 2). The word “control” means the “art of steering” in the original Greek language. The Control Theory was originally used to describe systems and how they work by studying the links between them, once broken down into individual parts (PSU WC L.9, 2014). Though once used more in engineering, today, in the field of psychology, humans, their social environment, and their behavior serve as the system. This theory can link fields together by describing how separate systems function as a whole. Control theory looks at different systems and determines the relationships and connections between them (PSU WC L.9, 2014). Genesis teaches that God made man in His own image (Genesis 1:27). However, it is necessary to point
out the commonalities between characteristics of machines and those of humans, to make the control theory applicable to humans. There are basic beliefs in the Control Theory: (a) People are self-regulating systems which try to reestablish and maintain equilibrium by setting and pursuing goals; (b) People desire feedback on their actions, and use that feedback to set goals and change their actions to achieve goals (PSU WC L.9, 2014). Once these ideals are accepted, the systems are broken down into individual pieces. The pieces are then studied separately, in relation to one another, and also as a complete system.

William Glasser, author of *The Control Theory of Motivation* contends that an outside force or stimulus is never the cause of a behavioral response. In other words, what a person wants the most at any given time, is what will inspire or produce a certain behavior (Glasser, 1986). Glasser suggests that students are not motivated today and are disengaged because all living creatures control their behavior to maximize their need for satisfaction. Students who are disengaged do not see school as relevant to their basic human needs (Glasser, 1986).

**Social Cognition Theory**

Social cognitive theory (SCT) is the belief that people learn by watching others. In psychology, personality is defined in terms of how a person thinks about and responds to his social environment. SCT started as the social learning theory (SLT) in the 1960s by Albert Bandura. Bandura (a pioneer in SCT) argued that when people see someone else awarded for behavior, they will behave in the same manner to receive the same award (Boston School of Public Health, 2013). Students will likely imitate others with whom they identify or with those who have the most influence in their lives.

The SLT focused on reciprocal determinism which refers to the dynamic and reciprocal interaction of a person, his environment, and his behavior. A person’s environment impacts
behavior and behavior then impacts the environment. Other points of the SLT includes behavioral capability (a person’s ability to perform a behavior through essential knowledge and skills), observational learning (people can witness and observe a behavior conducted by others, and then reproduce those actions), reinforcements (the internal or external responses to a person’s behavior that affect the likelihood of continuing or discontinuing the behavior), and expectations (the anticipated consequences of a person’s behavior). Self-efficacy (the level of a person’s confidence in his or her ability to successfully perform a behavior), was added later when Bandura’s SLT was assimilated into the SCT (“Boston School of Public Health,” 2013).

As described by the SCT, culture is the main influencer of human development. Human beings, as children, develop in the context of the family culture into which they are born. Core principles in this theory are: (a) cognitive development results form a dialectical process whereby a child learns through problem-solving experiences shared with someone else, usually a parent, (b) initially, the person or people interacting with the child the most, assume the responsibility for guiding their children towards problem solving, (c) interactions with surrounding culture and social agents, such as parents and more competent peers, contribute significantly to a child’s intellectual development (Askew, 2013).

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory is the study of motivation that focuses attention on internal factors that influence why people behave or act as they do. White (1959) introduced a theory of motivation, which suggested that there is an intrinsic energy source that motivates people. Over 30 years later, Deci (1992) summarized a self-determination theory as the motivational dynamics underlying activities that people do freely and those that they feel coerced or pressured to do. Being a self-determined person means someone that engages in an activity with a full sense of
wanting and choosing to be engaged. Self-determined people “act in accord with or express themselves” (Deci, 1992, p. 44).

Deci and Ryan (1985) further defined self-determination as the capacity to choose and to have those choices, rather than reinforcement contingencies, drives, or any other forces or pressures, to be the determinants of one’s actions. Self-determination is more than a capacity; it is also a need. People have a basic, innate propensity to be self-determining that leads organisms to engage in interesting behaviors (Deci & Ryan, 1985). In order for students to become motivated to engage in school, which is a precursor to learning, three basic psychological needs have to be fulfilled: the need for relatedness, for competence, and for autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Once these needs (the need for relatedness, competence, and autonomy) are met, student engagement in learning activities will increase and these students will perform better on achievement tests and receive higher grades (Furrer, Kindermann, & Skinner, 2009).

Nelson, an educator from the Inclusive School Network, described self-determination as having three significant precursory functions. First, in response to environmental input, the brain has to make physical changes. Intelligence only accounts for 30%-40% of a student’s performance. Hard work, the ability to work with others to complete an assignment, and high expectations are those other areas that provide the needed energy and focus to overcome learning challenges and disabilities (Nelson, 2012). These are the “other requirements” that come from within an individual that impact the level of self-determination.

Secondly, according to Nelson, research supports that only information that has personal meaning for a student will transfer from short term memory to long term memory. This is a foundational learning experience on which student engagement and academic progress rely. However, not all academic information holds the same meaning for all students as family culture
and environment maintain a certain portion of responsibility for building this learning construct. For students with learning disabilities, this can be a deficit area, making learning a challenge and lessen student determination.

A third finding from recent research relates how the brain learns and deals with the effects of chronic stress. Chronic stress, stemming from that which students perceive as having no control over, is linked to serious health, learning and behavior problems (Nelson, 2012). Educators must be wise and consider the stress a student carries when he is not successful among his peers. This is also true for parents. A child’s early family experiences shapes the ability he has to handle life’s issues and demands because that experience is based upon a particular psychological foundation. Parents identify certain values for their children that are important for the development of their children (Goldsmith, 2000).

The Family Pediatrics Report (2003) indicates that family units are the most central and important influence on the well-being and happiness of a child which strongly impacts the educational growth of a student. Elkin and Handel (1978) define the family as “the first unit with which children have a continuous contact and the first context in which socialization patterns develop” (p.118).

Affection and protection are crucial for the health of a child and therefore, children need to receive love and protection for healthy emotional development. Family structure is a critical component of a student’s development in early life; impacting education. According to The Family Pediatrics Report (2003), the risks for emotional, behavioral, and educational problems are lower, on average, among children in two-parent households. A stable, well-functioning family is potentially the most secure, supportive, and nurturing environment in which children may be raised.
Self-Efficacy Theory

The final theory on which this research is based is that of self-efficacy; an extension of Bandura’s social learning theory developed in the 1960s. Bandura claimed that how we think, process, and perceive life and knowledge is greatly impacted and embedded in the culture in which we function (Bandura, 1977). As humans, according to Bandura, we are “agents” that influence the functioning of life and the circumstances surrounding life. Self-efficacy is a significant factor in the goals one chooses to strive for as well as in the effort and persistence in working toward the achievement of those goals (Bandura, 1997). Bandura’s study is about the self-efficacy of students with learning disabilities, however, there is a direct parallel to the self-efficacy level of parents. Parent self-efficacy impacts the behavioral goals that parents set themselves regarding their involvement in their children’s education based on their appraisal of their own capabilities in the situation (Bandura, 1989).

Parents who maintain a high level of efficacy tend to take a more active role in the engagement of their child’s education (Bandura, 1989). These parents are also more likely to persist when faced with challenges and difficulties; working their way through to successful outcomes. As likely, parents who display relatively weak self-efficacy for their child’s academic involvement are often associated with lower parental expectations. These lower expectations create limited efforts in helping the child succeed in school and display relatively low persistence in the face of challenges.

Within life’s functioning, Bandura (1989) established three modes of agency: direct personal agency, proxy agency, and collective agency. The first, personal agency, occurs when humans use cognitive skills to function individually. People use their own influence and means
to directly manage their own lives without the dependence on others for well-being or success. Individuals exercise the second agency, proxy, when they seek well-being or success through the support of others to maintain everyday life. The third agency occurs when people do not live their lives autonomously. What people in this agency seek or desire, cannot be attained independently and therefore, society has to intervene and provide resources and support. This is a collective agency model. Bandura claimed that in order to find success, people have to use an “agentic blend” of all of these modes (Bandura, 2001).

The self-efficacy theory branches out further to focus on a person’s individual abilities and capabilities as being foundationally linked to human cognition; how people think they can function, not function, achieve, or not achieve in life. How people are able to cognitively process information plays an important role in establishing and maintaining new behavior patterns (Bandura, 1977, p. 191). “Individuals with a low sense of self-efficacy will possess negative thoughts and think of task’s demands as threatening not as challenging and therefore set low objectives for themselves” (Aid, Wan, & Wan, 2009; Bandura, 1994).

A few things can be applied from Bandura’s research. First, a person’s response to information is a major part of the learning process. Second, a person must understand that much of one’s human behavior is influenced or shaped by human modeling; whether the modeling is positive or negative. Students with learning disabilities can develop a low self-esteem from their own feelings of inferiority, the negative behaviors of peers, or from the negative reactions of significant adults (parents) around them as a result of the struggles that accompany a disability.

**Related Literature**

Prior to Sputnik in 1960, research was conducted and data recorded primarily based on literacy and more specifically, whether someone could sign a name to legal document (Barton,
Harvard history professor, Bailyn, stated that 1960 “marked the beginning of revisionism in history of American education” (Bailyn, 1960, p. 2). Bailyn challenged educators to view education beyond academics and to examine more broad educative institutions such as family and the church (Bailyn, 1960).

**Influence of Family on Academic Progress**

In 2003 Harvard Professor Putnam found that the breakdown of the traditional family began with the decline in social capital starting in the 1960s (Putnam, 2000). According to Putman this resulted in a decline of “reciprocity, honesty and trust” and will have detrimental costs (Putnam, 2000). When parents are involved with their children and a healthy level of trust, honesty, and reciprocity exists, positive links developed in different areas of a child’s life. Research has shown a clear link between parent involvement and children’s success in school. This phenomenon results from the established correlation between students’ intrinsic academic motivation and parent involvement (Gottfried, Fleming, & Gottfried, 1994). According to Bellas, Friendly and Grolnick (2009), families have a strong influence on a variety of school outcomes, including the development and maintenance of positive motivation. “When parents believe in their children’s competence and have high expectations for them, provide the resources that children need to feel connected to others, and facilitate a sense of autonomy by supporting children’s initiations and problem-solving, children’s motivation is most likely to thrive,” (Bellas et al., 2009, p. 295). Even if parents are not knowledgeable on certain subject matter that their children are learning and are unable to assist with homework or studying, they can still play an important role. Parents can increase their child’s academic motivation in school
and success by encouraging the child’s feelings of competence and by supporting positive attitudes towards academics (Bellas et al., 2009).

Bellas et al. further explain that parents’ expectations play a vital role in school success. The expectations of parents regarding how well their children can achieve and their own attitudes about the value of the task their children are working on is vital to children’s academic motivation (Bellas et al., 2009). Interestingly, a basic by-product stemming from this research on parental involvement is the consideration of the actual source of parental involvement.

Implications of the reviewed research, regarding the impact of parental involvement on student motivation and academic success, are well defined, however, much of the research has examined only frequency and types of involvement behaviors. This information is what is initially important but it does not necessarily look at theoretical questions about quality of involvement and student-parent interaction. (Closson et al, 2005). Beyond the initial findings is the need for understanding the source of parental involvement.

Parental relationships are proven to be fundamental to human growth and contentment (Bellas et al., 2009). The Blessing, written by Smalley and Trent (2009) warned that whatever happens in our relationships with our parents, can greatly affect all our present and future relationships. In a more recent study, Al-Yagon (2004) reported that when compared to peers without disabilities, teens with learning disabilities are less likely to have secure attachment relationships to their mothers. This lack of attachment also carries over into relationships with teachers (Al-Yagon, 2014). The absence of close and supportive relationships with parents can harm both a teenager’s social and emotional functioning, which can lead to behavioral problems. These problems can sometimes be a result of isolation, depression, and aggression. For this study, Al-Yagon measured the socioemotional state and the security of attachments to parents.
and teachers for 181 adolescents with learning disabilities. The students were all between the ages of 15-17 (Al-Yagon, 2014). The participants answered questionnaires involving their attachment to their parents and how they perceived teacher availability. The questions also included concepts of rejection, loneliness, experience of positive and negative emotions and behavioral problems (Al-Yagon, 2014). The results of this study report that those students within the disabled group, who had more secure attachments to their parents, or who believed their teacher to be caring and available, experienced fewer negative emotions. They experienced fewer feelings of loneliness, and displayed fewer behavior problems which can interfere with learning (Al-Yagon, 2014). The role that parents play in the level of motivation and academic engagement of students with a learning disability is profound and worthy of exhausted attention among parents and educators.

Bruno Bettelheim, an expert in child psychology, wrote a book called, *On Learning to Read*, where he pleads with educators to focus on the psychological reasons why students fail. Bettelheim and Zelan (1982) express concern in that although there has been a great focus placed on the number of students who are unable to read and on how to address this problem, there has been very little focus placed on the valid psychological reasons why a child cannot read. Further stressing the notion that children may passively resist or actively refuse to become literate because of these psychological problems (Bettleheim & Zelan, 1982). There is the breakdown or disconnection between what a child should be able to do and what that child is academically producing. “Learned helplessness” is a type of behavior that reflects this occurrence and can be diagnosed, by some, as a learning disability.

Gordon and Gordon (2013) have written a book entitled, *The Turned-Off Child, Learned Helplessness and School Failure*, which offers a new dimension on why students are disengaged
and are failing to find academic success. Learned helplessness is a conditioned response to failure that creates cognitive, motivational, and emotional deficits in our children. Rather than being a disability, learned helplessness is a behavior; a conditioned response that can be treated.

An article written in *Self-Esteem Today* claims that more young people today may be dying from a sense of helplessness than from other deaths related to guns, knives, drugs, alcohol, or suicide (Kramer, 1992). Kramer found that when children first enter school, 80% of them feel good about who they are. However, by graduation, if they haven’t already dropped out, only 5% feel important to anyone or valued. They become disengaged with school and with learning. Parents are initially the source of a child’s self-esteem; providing a sense of value to students. This phenomenon is even more likely for those students with learning disabilities (Kramer, 1992).

It is the role of a parent to be a student’s first teacher. Deuteronomy says,

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

(Deuteronomy 6:4-9, ESV)

One of God’s great commandments is to love our neighbor as we do ourselves. This teaching begins in the home. Students should learn how to resolve conflicts God’s way, as opposed to the world’s way as encouraged by Ephesians 4:25-32 and 1 Peter 3:8-12. They should also learn
how to speak in a manner that builds up rather than tears down as taught in Ephesians 4:29. These are skills and attributes that help students with peer and teacher relationships during the school day. The results are positive experiences with academic engagement and motivation which ultimately leads to academic progress.

**Influence of the Church and Faith in God on Academic Progress**

Just as the link between family or parental relationships and academic progress has been researched and positively established, the same is true for the institution of the church. Bakhshayesh (2011) studied the relationship between trust in God and academic achievement. His study found that there is a significant positive relationship between the two. The theoretical literature (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) also supports the notion that academic achievement cannot be fully attained without overall health and quality of life. “Spirituality is an essential part of the existential domain measured in quality-of-life scores. Positive reports on those measures—a meaningful personal existence, fulfillment of life goals, and a feeling that life to that point had been worthwhile” (Cohen, Mount, Strobel, & Bui, 1995, pp. 207-208). For this study, spirituality can be defined as the paths a person’s faith travels as it seeks meaning, purpose, and significance. Faith is an internal feeling, a sense that there is something more than what can be seen. Spirituality represents the effort to find out what that “something more” might be. Spirituality results when one’s faith is activated. Someone’s belief represents the truth claimed because of a spiritual journey (Greg, 2014). Someone who believes in God has accepted and trusted that God is the origin of truth and gives meaning and purpose in life.

Part of trusting in God is developing godly character qualities. Hebrews 12:10 says that God disciplines (trains) us so that we may share His holiness. Having a trusting relationship with God means that a person tries to display the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience,
kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control. These are needed when students enter the academic classroom. Character traits teach students how to deal with trials with the right attitude which increases the chance for academic success. These teachings are many times taught to children in church which is where they get foundational teaching from the Bible.

Peer socialization is a large part of a student’s academic life as it is directly impacts emotional well-being and student motivation. Students with learning disabilities struggle more with social relations than those non-disabled students. They tend to leave everyone on edge because their behavior is unpredictable, erratic, inconsistent and full of ups-and-downs. Students with learning disabilities and ADHD are usually disorganized. They have trouble dealing with sequences and order, so they don’t plan well. They are distracted easily and often impulsive (Smith, 2015). Problems with other students frequently occur because of misunderstanding or from poor communication skills. Additionally, children with learning disabilities tend to fall apart, withdraw into day dreaming, or strike out in one form or another while at school; all of which impede academic progress. Emotionally, this population is very immature and fragile and friendships are challenging. Students need to learn how to be discerning in choosing friends as taught by 1 Corinthians 15:33 and 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1.

Following this thought process, Hodge (2007) did a study in a public school, involving a relationship with God and the church. He found that during a release time in public schools, which is time where students can be absent from classes to attend spiritual instruction off campus, something happened that was unexpected by many. Students participating in these “church-like” activities did not gain lower academic scores for missing their classes. Instead, the academic progress and achievement of those students who were participating in this religious program were enhanced (Hodge, 2007).
Walker and Dixon (2002) also concluded in a similar but separate study, that spiritual beliefs and religious participation were positively related to academic performance. Those students who were involved in church activities and professed a faith in God, performed better academically than those students without the influence of church and God.

Jeynes (2002) also found that religious schooling and religious commitment both had a positive impact on the academic performance of students. He discovered that students who went to church or who believed that God is real were well behaved in school. The positive behavior was then linked to greater school engagement and better academic performance.

In 2005, Line performed similar research in Iowa and found a strong relationship between academic performance and a student’s faith or religious belief. He found this to be especially true in the area of personal scripture study, living up to church standards, and personal prayer life (Line, 2005). When students enrich themselves with Scripture, abide by their church standards, and have a consistent prayer life, their academic performance responds positively (Line, 2005).

In a study called, The Influence of Religion upon the Academic Performance of Youths in Disadvantaged Communities, Regnerus (2006) found that when students attend church, they are more likely to stay focused in school. Church involvement also helps students from high-risk neighborhoods to achieve better academic progress. Regnerus concludes that church attendance reinforces values that are conducive to educational achievements. These achievements would include ideals such as self-confidence, academic competence, emotional health, self-control, and decision making (Regnerus, 2006). Literature firmly establishes that students involved in church or religious practices, tend to do better in school: as their church involvement and faith increases, so does their academic achievement.
A link has been created and defined by theorists and researches in relation to human development and how a child first begins to learn. This link is traceable from the birth and the toddler stage, into early and middle childhood as well as into the high school years. However, an additional link, which can be seen in literature as a by-product of family interaction and parental behavior and values, is that of spirituality or a belief system about God. Scripture regarding parents and the family culture (Deuteronomy 6:5-7 ESV), depicts how parents treat their children can be the natural result of a spiritual relationship with God and faith in God. Bishop Alexander Mileant (2001) brings this connection to a more focused point which seals the links between family impact, life satisfaction in students, and student engagement in school.

All aspects of a man’s life - his character, sense of responsibility, good and bad habits, ability to cope with difficulties, and his piety - are shaped primarily during his childhood. The bright memories of his childhood can strengthen and warm a man during trying times, and, contrarily, those who have not had a happy childhood can in no way remake it. When we meet an orphan who has never had parental affection, or a step-son or step-daughter whose broken spirits are a result of difficulties at home, or those left to the care of strangers, we can sense in them the imprint of painful early impressions. (Mileant, 2001, p.1)

Bishop Mileant explains,

The absence of a religious upbringing unfailingly manifests itself in a person’s character - a sort of fissure can be perceived in his spiritual makeup. A child is extraordinarily receptive to religious impressions. He is instinctively drawn toward everything that opens up the beauty and meaning of life. Take this away from him and his soul will become dulled and he will feel lonely in an unfriendly and cruel world. Something
similar happens with the physical appearance of a child. If he lives in dismal, damp surroundings, he will grow underdeveloped, ailing and without joy. In both cases of malady, physical or spiritual, the fault lies with the parents. On the other hand, when we consider prominent and successful people, people of great integrity and energy, we see that the majority of them came from large, hard-working families, brought up in religious traditions (Mileant, 2001, p.1).

Scripture teaches that if parents “train up a child” in the ways of the Lord, that child will not depart from those teachings (Proverbs 22:6, ESV). Galatians goes even further to describe those characteristics as being: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22, ESV.) This type of beginning-of-life training allows a child to attain these pre-requisite qualities; important for life satisfaction and future school engagement and success.

Recently, the field of positive psychology has illuminated the importance of studying individual happiness as it relates to optimal functioning. This is known as subjective well-being (SWB). Life satisfaction, the key indicator in SWB, is an evaluation of a person’s quality of life (Linley, Maltby, & Proctor, 2009) and an important construct in connecting student engagement and academic progress in students with learning disabilities. Philosophers and theologians have always been concerned with the ideals of happiness, achievement, and the good life (Linley et al., 2009). Scripture also provides instruction on personal joy. “He that handles a matter wisely shall find good and whoever trusts in the Lord, happy is he (Proverbs 16:20 ESV). Also found in Scripture,

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s
commandments and abide in His love. These things have I spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. (John 15: 9-11, ESV)

Theoretical models, such as these, are connected by concepts of basic human characteristics, needs, human attachment, and self-motivation which lead to the umbrella idea of overall life satisfaction. Human satisfaction creates happiness and contentment which can entice students to become more engaged in the learning process. Student engagement can also then lead to higher levels of academic achievement and to improved student progress.

**Impact of Student Engagement on Academic Progress**

Engagement has been mistakenly interchanged with the idea of motivation; seen as active participation. However, engagement, itself, can be difficult to observe and cannot be used synonymously with the ideas of motivation or active participation. Newman (1992) defined student engagement within the classroom as the “student’s psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote.” (Newman, 1992, p.12). Schlechty (2011) indicated that students whom are truly engaged, reflect three characteristics: (a) they are attracted to the work, (b) they are persistent in that work, and (c) they delight in accomplishing the learning task. This concept is multi-dimensional, however.

According to Wang (2010), student engagement is composed of three components: behaviors, emotions, and cognitions. Behavioral engagement includes the students’ actions and practices regarding school. Emotional engagement is how a student responds to school, and cognitive engagement is the ability of the student to be self-regulated and to develop strategies necessary for the classroom (Wang, 2010, p. 634). What motivates students with learning
disabilities to be attracted to academics, to be persistent in the work, and to be delighted in accomplishing tasks is the question that remains.

**Impact of Motivation on Academic Progress**

Motivation occurs when people are “moved to do something” (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Being motivated in school each day is imperative to learning and a precursor to academic success. Students who attend school regularly, avoid disruptive behavior, follow school rules and are interested in learning, get better grades and perform better on standardized testing (Wang, 2010). Motivation is defined as “the act or process of motivating; the condition of being motivating; a motivating force, stimulus, or influence; incentive; drive; something that causes a person or student to act” (Merriam-Webster, 1997.) The theories explaining how a person becomes motivated to achieve are bountiful but there is no single one that comprehensively or adequately explains all from which human motivation is comprised. Human beings are complex, individualized, and have many layers of emotions, needs, strengths, and weaknesses. What motivates one student, may not motivate another (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2014).

The origin of motivation comes from within, for some students. This is what is defined as intrinsic motivation. Other students need motivation to be pushed on them from a source other than themselves, or extrinsic motivation. Basically, the distinction between these two types of motivation, is that intrinsic refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable, and extrinsic refers to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Motivation is difficult to manipulate for students because people have not only different amounts, but also different kinds of motivation. According to Deci and Ryan (2000), Orientation of motivation concerns the underlying attitudes and goals that give rise to action—that is, it concerns the why of actions. As an example, a student can be highly
motivated to do homework out of curiosity and interest or, alternatively, because he or she wants to procure the approval of a teacher or parent. (Deci & Ryan, 2000, pp.54)

Determining how students are motivated and how to increase motivation in students is a difficult but necessary task for educators. “Intrinsic motivation has emerged as important phenomena for educators because it is a natural wellspring of learning and achievement that can be systematically catalyzed or undermined by parent and teacher practices” (Deci, Peletier, Ryan, & Vallerand, 1991, pp. 337-338). It results in high-quality learning and creativity. However, being able to increase the amount extrinsic motivation is also a strategy that teachers need to exercise in the classroom as many of the tasks that educators want their students to perform are not inherently interesting or enjoyable. Without student motivation, academic progress and successful completion of content is improbable.

**Summary**

The theoretical framework on which this research-based study rests includes: Bruner’s social constructivism theory, Piaget’s cognitive development theory, Bronferbrenner’s ecological theory, social learning theory of Vygotsky, Erikson’s psychosocial development theory, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, and Bowlby’s and Ainsworth’s attachment theory. Also foundational are Jensen and Dewey’s brain-based learning theory, Glasser’s control theory of motivation, Bandura’s social cognition theory, Deci and Ryan’s work in the self-determination theory, and Bandura’s extended theory of self-efficacy. The literature review also included information regarding life-satisfaction and faith in God, and how these ideals relate to student motivation and academic progress. Parental roles and responsibility in the education of children as well as the Biblical perspective regarding these concepts are addressed within chapter two. The literature for this study is foundational as it allows the researcher to examine the functioning
of human beings and in particular, high school students with SLD. The information gleaned from the literature allowed the researcher to weave a link throughout discussions of cognitive patterns, theories, and academia; highlighting the manner in which these factors particularly impact high school students with SLD within the classroom.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

Chapter Three discusses the research design of the study. Following this description, the research questions are identified and explained to direct the rest of the study. The setting will then be disclosed and explained as well as the chosen participants. After this initial information is disclosed, the procedure is discussed and clarified.

The researcher’s role is discussed to connect the technicality with human sensitivity that is important in transcendental, phenomenological research. Data collection is next in the methods process. Included in the data are classroom observations, interviews, two focus groups, and a student questionnaire. Data analysis procedures are then described in detail, along with the discussion of trustworthiness and ethical issues. All documents used for this research have been validated by experts in the field and can be found in the appendices.

Design

This study has its foundational roots in qualitative research. According to the Qualitative Research Consultants Association (2016), qualitative research focuses on a topic or issue by revealing a target audience’s range of behavior and the perceptions regarding that topic or issue. Qualitative research produces results that are not predictive of a certain phenomenon, but are descriptive of that phenomenon (QRCA, 2016). Qualitative studies in the field of psychology often refer to a person’s “lifeworld” and researchers try to explain an individual’s grasp of the world in terms of perception (Smith, 2015).

The research design for this study is phenomenological. The objective of a phenomenological study is to study the meaning, structure and essence of a person’s experience regarding a certain phenomenon (Christensen, Johnson, & Turner, 2010). This type of approach
allows for deep conversation and sorting through of emotional issues that can be difficult to explain as they relate to an everyday occurrence such as student school engagement (Creswell, 2012). It does not begin with a theory but with a phenomenon.

Phenomenology is an umbrella term. It is both the philosophical movement and the range of research approaches in which to study a happening or an occurrence. The phenomenological movement was initiated by Husserl (1970) as a way of looking at philosophy. He was more concerned with the “whatness” of a thing as opposed to moving from a natural consciousness to a philosophical wisdom (Laitinen, 2010). However, Moustakas is considered the founder of phenomenological research. Moustakas encouraged the idea that research should focus on the wholeness of experience and behavior as an integrated and inseparable relationship when one studies a certain phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Moustakas determined, like Bruner, that there are strong links between phenomenology and constructivism (Chiari & Nuzzo, 1998), which is a supporting factor for the type of approach chosen for this particular study. A phenomenological approach illuminates the specific—identifying an occurrence through how it is perceived by those acting in the situation. Researcher using this approach study the experience and then use bracketing or grouping of those taken-for-granted assumptions and perceptions (Lester, 1999). It is concerned with the relations that exist between human beings and the world around them (Sherman & Webb, 2001).

The following research bears a transcendental dimension of a phenomenological study; further exploring the lived experiences of the participants as seen from their own perspective. Transcendental phenomenology is focused on experiences of individuals and groups without the biases of the researcher.
In this study, I practiced *epoche* (Moustakas, 1994) as I described my own related experiences (see Appendix K). *Epoche* is a technique used to increase alertness of the researcher’s underlying feelings about the research topic. Using this method, the researcher is better able to relinquish biases and to look at the topic with a fresh eye (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). *Epoche* goes back to the things themselves and looks only at the pure vision of what the phenomenon is essentially about (Crotty, 1998).

Another term applied to this idea of taking out personal biases is bracketing; a form of *epoche*. Bracketing is a mathematical term that refers to leaving out parts of an equation so as to focus on another. The part left out remains constant but is not being considered (Sanders, 1992). Cohen adds another dimension of research into phenomenology, which is researcher intuition. This approach focuses on uncovering rather than accuracy, and amplification without the influence of prior knowledge (Cohen, 2011). Researchers who incorporate transcendental phenomenology, accept the idea that there are many perspectives of a phenomenon. It does not have a step-by-step method or analytical requirements.

The topic of this research was chosen as a result of the researcher’s concern over the educational disengagement condition of high school students with specific learning disabilities (SLD). Also a concern is how life satisfaction and individual happiness seem to be foundational in the academic engagement and progress of these students. For this reason and in order to generate the best description of the chosen phenomenon, this study proposed to use the transcendental sector of phenomenology.

**Research Questions**

This study was guided by three research questions. The questions are as follows:

1. How do high school students with SLD describe life satisfaction?
2. What past or present personal and/or social factors do high school students with SLD describe as impacting life satisfaction, motivation, school engagement and academic progress?

3. What past or present spiritual factors do high school students with SLD describe as impacting life satisfaction, motivation, school engagement and academic progress?

**Setting**

The participants for this research study were affiliated with one high school in Virginia. Mill Creek High School is the pseudonym used when talking about this school. It is a small public high school housing only 8-12 grades, with approximately 400 students.

Mill Creek High School (MCHS) was originally established in 1920. In many ways, the school is the center of activity in this small city, with sports being a local favorite. MCHS is the only high school in the district with an approximate total of 400 students. The percentage of reading proficiency is 82% and math proficiency is 51% according to the 2015 News and World Report (U.S. & World Report, 2015). MCHS includes the following in its mission statement: Prepare for change, maximize learning, honor yourself and others, and seek success.

The school system administrators support the idea that students need a diverse educational experience consisting of core curriculum and extra-curricular activities. Students also deserve a safe, positive, and physically comfortable environment and that education is a community effort. The teacher handbook informs staff of the school division requirement:

Each classroom in each school of the division will begin each day with the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag of the United States of America. The School Board as authorized by section 22.1-203 of the Code of Virginia directs that a daily observance of a one-minute period of silence be instituted in each classroom in each school. The teacher
responsible for each classroom will take care that all students remain seated and silent, and make no distracting display, to the end that each student may, in the exercise of his or her individual choice, meditate, pray or engage in any other silent activity which does not interfere with, distract, or impede other students in the like exercise of individual choice. (FSP, 2015)

Participants

“A qualitative inquiry is not without ambiguities. There are purposeful strategies instead of methodological rules. There are inquiry approaches instead of statistical formulas” (Patton, 1994, pp. 184-185). My goal was 20 students and to use purposeful sampling to select participants for this study. Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 1998, p. 61). Maximum variation is a type of purposeful sampling that seeks to capture the most divergent viewpoints (Merriam, 1998).

The characteristics for participants required them to have a specific learning disability, (qualifying for special education under IDEA) be of high school age, and attend the same public school in a selected location. They varied in age, race, and cultural backgrounds. After administration identified those who qualified, 20 permission slips were sent out and returned. However it was later determined that two students did not qualify as having a Specific Learning Disability but rather other disabling conditions.

Having 18 participants in this qualitative study helped me build a closer relationship with the participants which lead to more open and honest exchange of information. This sample size was in line with published guidelines (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994) and also helped reduce
some of the bias and validity threats that could arise in qualitative research with a larger number of participants (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006).

**Procedures**

Support and initial research approval from Mill Creek High School (MCHS) was provided. Research approval from both the Liberty University Internal Review Board (Appendix A) and MCHS was completed before the data collection began. I received the IRB Informed Consent forms (Appendix B), and took copies for all of those who qualified for my study to MCHS. I also took consent forms for those who might be interested. At that time, I didn’t know who the potential participants were and therefore, the special education team help me with the distribution of the flyers (Appendix C) and consent forms. Once interested participants were identified, written consent forms were secured from each of them as well as their parents. After two weeks of the special education team collecting consent forms, the lead called to let me know that he had them all in his office.

The special education lead informed me of the times that were good to observe the participants in different classrooms. After collecting the consent forms, I began observing in the classrooms at MCHS. These observations took place in all four grade levels and in a variety of subjects, both in the general education classrooms and the special education classrooms. The observations were guided by a checklist utilized for each classroom visit (Appendix D).

Individual interviews were then scheduled and conducted based on the convenience of the school administration and staff. The individual interviews were held for students in order to allow for more open sharing and honest input about their experiences (Creswell, 2012). The initial plan was to finish the classroom observations and then begin the interviews. However, I ended up beginning with a few observations, but then weaving them throughout the entire
research process. This was due to the school schedule and to sensitivity to what was going in the individual classes at that time. The information collected during these interviews was used in establishing any similar themes later in the study. Premade questions were also utilized for these interview sessions (Appendix E). Individual interviews were recorded on a personal recording device by the researcher and later transcribed by the researcher. All papers were secured in a locked file cabinet and electronic files were password protected by the researcher.

After the individual interviews, two focus groups met, as the school schedule allowed. Premade questions were also used to initiate conversation and dialogue within these group meetings (Appendix F). The two focus groups allowed for rich interaction among participants, which provided the best information about the situation being explored (Creswell, 2012). One group was for 8th and 9th grade students and the other group was for 10th – 12th grade students. I acted only as the moderator so as to allow the participants to fully discuss the nuances of life satisfaction, as they perceive and experience them on a daily basis. The focus group sessions were also audio recorded for transcription by the researcher and password protected.

After the focus group sessions, I (the researcher) handed out an expert validated (Appendix L) Life Satisfaction Questionnaire (Appendix G) to each student. This questionnaire had a cross-sectional survey design. The data was collected at “one point in time” (Creswell, 2012, p. 377). This questionnaire was designed to examine the current attitudes and beliefs of participating students. It reflected their opinions and ways in which they think about life satisfaction and how it impacts their academic motivation and progress. I asked that the questionnaires with student responses be returned to me by the end of the meeting day. The information from the questionnaires was collected and analyzed for common themes among the participating students (Appendix J).
One piece to add to the study procedures was journaling. I maintained a journal from the very first contact with the participating school, until the last part of the study was completed. This part of the study, called *epoche* (Moustakas, 1994), allowed me to relay my own experiences and already established perspectives about the phenomenon in order to avoid prejudgments and bias thoughts that could affect the objectivity of the study. A sample of the journal can be found in Appendix K.

**Researcher’s Role**

As a teacher of over 20 years, both in special education and within the general education classroom, I have become increasingly concerned about factors that could actually be impacting the levels of student engagement of high school students with SLD that actually do not begin or end inside school walls. I have watched students for years struggling with academics but only in recent years, have I seen students so completely disengaged in school. This, I believe, is the ultimate source of poor performance and the cause of the perceived decline in U.S. world rankings regarding education.

Everyone functions out of a “basic set of beliefs that guide action” (Guba, 1990). I function from a constructivist point of view in that I seek to understand the world of identified special education students who are disengaged in school. As a “human instrument,” (Creswell, 2007) my interaction with these students helped in my exploration of how they described life satisfaction and how it impacts student motivation, engagement, and academic progress.

Recommendations by Moustakas (1994) for methods and procedures were used for data analysis. I was the human instrument of data collection by way of classroom observations, individual interviews, 2 focus groups, and a student life-satisfaction questionnaire. Moustakas (1994) also discussed *epoche* as a way for the human instrument to set aside any bias in the
research which helped in some a few particular areas where I felt I may have a bias of some
degree. I have been a teacher of special education for over 20 years and had witnessed the
struggles of students with specific learning disabilities first hand. I have also been a believer in
God for forty years and have experienced the joy and fulfillment that a relationship with Jesus
Christ can bring to someone’s life. Although these are positive experiences, they could still
considered a definite type of bias for this study.

*Epoche* was realized when I recognized that I had biases related to this study. This
process helped me to clear my mind of my own thoughts before I interacted with the students in
the data collection and analyzing process. Notetaking, recording interviews, and using my
transcriptions helped limit the bias that I could have possibly put forth in this research as well as
member checking, which allowed the participants to read and give feedback on their
contributions to the research.

There is something to communicate about educating high students with SLD; something
deeper and more relationally important than test scores. Life satisfaction is a concept that
saturates all areas of a student’s life and to understand where this comes from was another point
of interest upon which this research focused. Conducting research on the lived experiences of
those participating in the study, reporting the findings, and describing those things which define
life satisfaction, contributed to my overall goal of describing the impact of life satisfaction on
student academic progress as seen from their own perspective.

In addition to adding to the body of knowledge of student engagement and life
satisfaction for high school students with SLD, and giving encouragement to these students by
listening to them and representing their experiences, I hope to give challenge to the United States
education system. Schools should return to the foundational focus on God and moral living in
order to re-engage children within the classroom. A level of spirituality and an encouragement to see a faith and trust in God needs to return to school even if this is not initially happening in the home as this places emphasis on values and personal character.

Data Collection

Phenomenological research methods requires data collection to focus on how the participants experience the phenomenon. For this study, data was collected through a variety of methods that included classroom observations of each grade level in both general education and special education classrooms (Appendix D), individual interviews (Appendix E), two student focus groups (Appendix F), and a student life satisfaction questionnaire (Appendix I). Beneficial and valid research relies on the reliability of the data. Therefore, in this study, triangulation of the data was used. Triangulation is utilizing a variety of data sources in research in order to produce understanding. This research method also ensured that my account is well developed and comprehensive (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006)

Observations

Classroom observations allowed the researcher to better understand the context in which the participants were interacting. Observing does not just involve vision, but all senses and the interpretation of that sense data (Fox, 1998). Also, by being on site, as the researcher I did not rely on prior knowledge or perceptions of the setting or participants being observed. Another benefit to utilizing observation in the research method is that the researcher may be able to see things that people within that normal setting on a daily basis may miss (Patton, 2002). When researchers observe, they are active collectors of data. Brains are engaged as well as the eyes and ears. This is how the data can be organized and used to make sense of that which is being
studied (Fox, 1998). I observed in several classes throughout the study. A pre-established note-taking or checklist form was shared with staff and then used for the observations (Appendix D).

**Interviews**

Interviews are important in a study as to hear first-hand accounts of a person’s real life experiences. “Stories are a way of knowing” (Seidman, 2006). The student interviews for this study took place after parental consent forms were returned at MCHS in a location chosen by the administration. Rapport was established with students by telling them about me, explaining that I was still learning, and that they were helping me with my school work so I could graduate. Being able to talk one-on-one in a private setting with these participants allowed me as the researcher to hear and to understand the day-to-day functioning of the students’ lives, as it pertains to life satisfaction and academic engagement and progress. Taking an interest in others is at the heart of the interviewing technique. It demands that our actions as interviewers display the worth of others’ stories (Seidman, 2006).

I had a pre-approved set of interview questions (Appendix E) for all participants. The interviews addressed each of the three main research questions. Each of the participant’s answers were recorded, transcribed (for sample, see Appendix H), analyzed, and used to elicit significant statements that can be sorted into themes.

The purpose of questions 1-10 was to address the definition of life satisfaction according to the participants; focusing on the first research question. Determining how students understand the relationship between life satisfaction and happiness is foundational for this study. Also, addressing how satisfaction is relational to academic engagement and progress is critical to determining student perspective regarding this phenomenon.
Happiness has been operationally defined as subjective well-being which specifically refers to “an individual’s own assessment of his or her own life not the judgements of experts and include satisfaction (both global and satisfaction with specific domains), pleasant affect, and low negative affect” (Diener et al., 2004, p.189, cited in Lewis et al., 2011). When basic needs are fulfilled, an individual can find certain amounts of happiness within (Bradley & Corwyn, 2004) It has also been observed that students with higher life satisfaction tend to have higher GPAs compared to students with a lower level of satisfaction (Huebner et al., 2011).

The purpose of questions 11-12 was to elicit ideas from the participants regarding who or what is responsible for life satisfaction, happiness, and school motivation and success. From their own experiences and thoughts, understanding the social and personal influences of life satisfaction is important and will support the second research question.

Bruner’s social constructivism theory supports the idea that learning is an active process and students naturally construct new ideas or concepts based on their current or past knowledge (Bruner, 1966). Knowledge begins at birth and is impacted by culture and familial experiences. Culture, according to Bruner, is the “toolkit” for sense-making and communicating (Bruner, 1996, p. 3); as such, it enhances our (presumably) natural endowment in action, perception, sense-making, and thought” (Bruner, 1966, p. 126).

John Dewey felt that education should work with students’ current understanding; taking into account prior ideas and interests (Dewey, 2010). The role of teachers, therefore, from a student perspective is an important part of this study to explore. These prior ideas and interests are rooted in all facets of life from birth until a child enters school and therefore, the student perspective of family relationships is also crucial to understand. The ideas of Vygotsky
emphasized the interactive importance of individual, interpersonal, and cultural historical factors; all affecting learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

The third research question was addressed in questions 13-14 of the questionnaire. These questions relate spiritual ideas and beliefs to the level of student life satisfaction or happiness. Related to this phenomenon is how spirituality or a belief in God can be connected to personal happiness and the amount of academic engagement and progress.

The questions 15-20 addressed the thoughts of students in regards to what they think could make a difference in their level of life satisfaction and happiness. They were asked their opinion on what could change their present level of academic motivation and progress.

Glasser suggested that students are not motivated today and are disengaged because all living creatures control their behavior to maximize their need for satisfaction. Students who are disengaged do not see school as relevant to their basic human needs (Glasser, 1986). These last questions, 15-20, directed the research study in a direction of understanding how students perceive what meets their needs in life, what motivates them and how they can achieve a higher level of academic motivation and success.

**Focus Groups**

Focus groups are interviews with a small group of people. Focus group expert, Krueger (1994) explained the importance of carefully planning for this group so that it is non-threatening and enjoyable to the participants. Patton (2002) suggests many advantages for focus groups such as cost-effectiveness, enhancement of data quality, quick assessment of participant views, and overall enjoyment of the experience by the participants.

There were two separate student focus groups at MCHS (8-9 grades, 10-12 grades) and they were organized to encourage a detailed discussion of life satisfaction, student engagement,
and academic progress of students with SLD. The sessions were held at the school in a location chosen by the administration and at a time chosen by the administration. The focus group sessions were audio recorded and later transcribed for analysis (Appendix I).

Specific questions were previously compiled to guide the Focus Group sessions (see Appendix F) with the hopeful opportunity for spontaneous discussions to develop. I also explained to the participants that their opinions were needed and that not everyone had to agree. It was explained that there were no “wrong” answers (Gibson, 2012). This spontaneity provided the researcher with a more in-depth insight into the thoughts and conclusions of the subjects throughout the analysis process.

The first eight questions on this survey were devoted to understanding how students define life satisfaction and happiness in relation to how well they do in school. The field of positive Psychology has illuminated the importance of studying individual happiness as it relates to optimal functioning. This is known as subjective well-being (SWB). Life satisfaction, the key indicator in SWB, is an evaluation of a person’s quality of life (Linley et al., 2009) and an important construct in connecting student engagement and academic progress in students with learning disabilities. Philosophers and theologians have always been concerned with the ideals of happiness, achievement, and the good life (Linley et al., 2009). Scripture also provides instruction on personal joy. “He that handles a matter wisely shall find good and whoever trusts in the Lord, happy is he (Proverbs 16:20 ESV).

Questions 9 and 10 dealt with student perspectives on spirituality or a belief in God and how this impacts overall satisfaction with life and how well students stay engaged in school and perform academically. Regnerus (2006) found that when students attend church, they are more likely to stay focused in school. Church involvement also helps students from high-risk
neighborhoods to achieve better academic progress. Regnerus (2006) concluded that church attendance reinforces values that are conducive to educational achievements. These achievements would include ideals such as self-confidence, academic competence, emotional health, self-control, and decision making (Regnerus, 2006). Literature firmly establishes that students involved in church or religious practices tend to do better in school: as their church involvement and faith increases, so does their academic achievement.

The last two questions were included in this focus group as a way for students to discuss their opinions and ideas on how they could improve their life satisfaction levels and how this could impact their academic engagement and progress. Understanding how these high school students with SLD think about the explored phenomenon was the foundation of this research. The amount of available research on life satisfaction or happiness of adolescents pales in comparison to that of adults, particularly within the context of school (Huebner et al., 2011). Furthermore, research conducted on student engagement in school is not specifically devoted to high school students identified as having a SLD. It is important that these students are understood and that their perceptions are explored and documented.

Each participant was given a life satisfaction questionnaire. A questionnaire is type of survey designed to provide a glimpse into how things are at a specific time among a specific group of participants. This was chosen as one of the data collection methods as a basis for determining if the participant was satisfied with life. A qualitative survey can be used as a means of collecting verbatim statements from the study participants. The life satisfaction questionnaire (Appendix G) asked the participants to rate certain statements.
**Data Analysis**

Data analysis for this study was based on the methods recommended by Moustakas (1994) for a phenomenological research study. The analysis procedures described below were used to analyze the data collected for this transcendental phenomenological study. Before beginning any part of the data analysis, however, I studied my own thoughts and experiences regarding the phenomenon.

**Epochen**

I took into account my own experiences with high school students who have specific learning disabilities and my spiritual beliefs in order to identify personal judgments and prejudices; called *epoche* (Moustakas, 1994). This process was important, in that, I have been a special education teacher for more than 20 years and also a person of strong faith and spirituality, or belief in God. I did not want to allow my own thoughts from previous experiences or beliefs to interfere with those of my participants.

**Horizonalization**

Individual and focus group transcripts were recorded and transcribed verbatim. I did this, myself, as the researcher, with no outside assistance. All of the transcripts were then read “several times to obtain on overall feeling for them” (Creswell, 2007, p.270). According to Moustakas (1994), the first step in analyzing my data is the process known as horizonalization. Horizonalization began when I started to separate, or *braket*, information into what was constant and what was being set apart to be studied (Moustakas, 1994). As a side note, this is also where I found the textual description beginning that describes what the participants were saying and what they described as the relevant topics.
**Significant Statements**

Bracketing allowed me to pick out specific participant statements, from the individual and focus group interviews, that provided information about their lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Those statements having similarities in content and value were then highlighted in various colors. This was done with the intent of organizing the information into a table. (see Table 3) For readers to be able to identify the range of perspectives about the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994), this was a necessary part of the analysis process. The list of significant statements was then identified and evaluated for themes which were “non-repetitive and non-overlapping” (Moustakas, 2007 p.180).

Table 3

*Enumeration Table from Individual and Focus Group Interviews*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Significant Statements of students (Pertaining to life satisfaction or happiness)</th>
<th>Meaning Units / Themes</th>
<th>Evidence in Participant Statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>· Getting what you want</td>
<td>· A lack of understanding the difference between mood and genuine happiness.</td>
<td>· “[Happiness/satisfaction] Depends on the day” (Jimmy, individual interview, April, 19, 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Whatever makes you happy</td>
<td></td>
<td>· “In-between and depends on my mood” (Kelsey, individual interview, April, 19, 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· I don’t know</td>
<td></td>
<td>· [source of happiness and satisfaction] “emotion” (Kelsey, individual interview, April 19, 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Having good family and friends</td>
<td></td>
<td>· “Sometimes happy, sometimes not” (Brian, individual interview, April, 12, 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Being stable and not having much stress from bills and stuff</td>
<td></td>
<td>· “If you are in a bad mood then you will not do anything” (Mike, individual interview, April, 19, 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Anything that keeps you satisfied</td>
<td></td>
<td>· “being happy.” (several students identified being happy with being content with how life is.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Doing my goals I aim for, making people happy, helping people</td>
<td></td>
<td>· “having a stress-free life without having to worry about paying bills would create satisfaction in life” (John, individual interview, April 19, 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Being happy with life and having my family and friends to help me with life</td>
<td></td>
<td>· One participant shared a personal story about dealing with being a homosexual and being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· What you want your life to be</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>· Something you are doing that you are ok with</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Playing sports I guess</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Getting along with my dad</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· If you are happy, then you will be motivated to do good in school and will pass the SOLs.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· If you are happy you go to class and are motivated to do work.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>· When people are happy, it makes them satisfied and they make good grades.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Happiness affects what I do in school and everything.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· When I am happy, I am motivated to pass and get help from teachers.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Happiness gets me going for my future.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Happiness gets me through the day faster.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Being happy or satisfied gets my work done.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Getting what you want in life results in life-satisfaction and personal happiness.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Having good friends impacts the level of satisfaction/happiness with life, engagement and</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pertaining to motivation</td>
<td>Pertaining to academic engagement</td>
<td>Pertaining to a belief in God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing sports motivates me.</td>
<td>Being engaged makes me happy because I get good grades and do good in class.</td>
<td>God is always happy but when you do something bad, He is not happy so I shouldn’t do bad things.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation comes from my mind.</td>
<td>It helps me get better grades.</td>
<td>He give me hope for everything.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaching personal goals.</td>
<td>It helps me get a lot of my work done.</td>
<td>I don’t understand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A belief that God is real</td>
<td>I don’t know.</td>
<td>I am not happy when work is hard and I can’t do it but I am happy when it is in-between easy and hard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive parental relations are important in student academic success.</td>
<td>There is impact.</td>
<td>If you are happy, you will look at school in a different way and you won’t get in trouble.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student boredom and laziness.</td>
<td>I don’t know.</td>
<td>If you are in a bad mood, then you will not do anything.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A disability makes academic success more difficult but it is not the most influential component in your life (Robert, focus group, April 22, 2016)</td>
<td>A disability makes academic progress more difficult but it is not the most influential component in your life (Robert, focus group, April 22, 2016)</td>
<td>Having good friends impacted his life (Robert, focus group, April 22, 2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“If you’re not happy with life then I guess you probably wouldn’t care what happened to you in school and you wouldn’t try” (Jimmy, individual interview, April 19, 2016)</td>
<td>“If kids are worried about their life outside of school, then they won’t focus in school or be satisfied with what they are doing in school” (Ann, individual interview, April 19, 2016).</td>
<td>Another participant shared that he would be happier in life if he had more friends (Austin, individual interview, April 12, 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“If you really do believe in God and like you think He will help you in any type of way you need Him to help you with, then you should be satisfied or happy in life because you have someone who has your back. He will always have your back.” (Luke, individual interview, April 19, 2016).</td>
<td>“If you’re not happy with life then I guess you probably wouldn’t care what happened to you in school and you wouldn’t try” (Jimmy, individual interview, April 19, 2016)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“They are my parents. They created me. I don’t know what I would do if I lost them” (Brett, individual interview, April 11, 2016).</td>
<td>“They motivate you to do good in school so you can graduate” (Robert, individual interview, April 12, 2016).</td>
<td>Another participant shared that he would be happier in life if he had more friends (Austin, individual interview, April 12, 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“They play a big role because they explain stuff I don’t understand” (Debbie, individual interview, April 12, 2016).</td>
<td>“They help you reach your goals and pressure you to do good in life” (David, individual interview, April 19, 2016)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“They help you reach your goals and pressure you to do good in life” (David, individual interview, April 19, 2016).</td>
<td>“Classes need to be not so boring. We need to do more fun stuff maybe” (Rachel, individual interview, April 11, 2016)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Class is boring…need less paper work and to do more experiments” (Mike, individual interview, April 12, 2016).</td>
<td>“They motivate you to do good in school so you can graduate” (Robert, individual interview, April 12, 2016).</td>
<td>“They help you reach your goals and pressure you to do good in life” (David, individual interview, April 19, 2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need to have “an extra teacher in the room who has your back. He will always have your back” (Luke, individual interview, April 19, 2016).</td>
<td>“Classes need to be not so boring. We need to do more fun stuff maybe” (Rachel, individual interview, April 11, 2016)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zeke confided that he needed “less racket” in the classroom” (Zeke, individual interview, April 19, 2016).</td>
<td>“They help you reach your goals and pressure you to do good in life” (David, individual interview, April 19, 2016)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zeke confided that he needed “less racket” in the classroom” (Zeke, individual interview, April 19, 2016).</td>
<td>“Classes need to be not so boring. We need to do more fun stuff maybe” (Rachel, individual interview, April 11, 2016)</td>
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<td>“They play a big role because they explain stuff I don’t understand” (Debbie, individual interview, April 12, 2016).</td>
<td>“They help you reach your goals and pressure you to do good in life” (David, individual interview, April 19, 2016)</td>
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<td>“They help you reach your goals and pressure you to do good in life” (David, individual interview, April 19, 2016)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
He plays a big role. He is always there when you need someone.
The Bible tells you to be happy and do good things.
God has a big role in my life.
He is your main father and He helps me.
He has no role in my life.
If you really believe in God and think He will help you in any way you need His help, you should be satisfied and happy in life.
I don’t know.
God is always in my life and He makes good days and bad days.
He is your main father and He helps me.
God is always there and always has your back. And He will never give up on you. He is always there by your side. You don’t ever have to worry about Him leaving you.
Believing in God impacts happiness and your satisfaction in life.
If you have a test and you know you won’t do good, then you just pray to have the answers.
If you have faith in God, He will help you get through school and your work and all that.

 academic engagement, motivation, and success.

 Positive relationships or personal connections with teachers play a big part in student motivation, engagement, and academic progress.

 Belief that not only is God real but He cares about people.

“They play a big role by being there when I need them in general” (Debbie, individual interview, April 12, 2016)
“They pressure us to get work done and to focus to get your grades up” (David, individual interview, April 19, 2016)
“Teachers have confidence in you and motivate you to do your work and they want what is best for you” (E.J., individual interview, April 19, 2016).
“Teachers play a big role because they help me get my work done. They help me figure out ways to finish my work…how long I should take on a test…a lot of things” (Brett, individual interview, April 12, 2016).
Brett also mentioned that he “probably couldn’t do anything without his teachers. I couldn’t learn without my teachers and I am glad that I have my teachers” (Brett, individual interviews, April, 12, 2016).
“Teachers are like a parent” (Zeke, individual interview, April 19, 2016).
“I know that there is someone out there that can always help you” (Austin, focus group interview, April 22, 2016)
“If you are having a test and you know you won’t do good, then you just pray to have the answers”
“If you have faith in God, He will help you get through school and your work and all that.”

As I concluded my study of interview transcripts, my focus then fell on the life satisfaction questionnaires. Upon gathering the data, I used an Excel spreadsheet to tally the number of students who described life as satisfying or not satisfying, and the degree of either of these descriptors. This information was then compared to the data from both the individual interviews and the focus groups, looking for degree of commonalities and relationships. (see Table 4).
Table 4

Degree of Commonalities and Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Slightly Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Slightly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My life is close to being how I would like it to be.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The conditions of my life are excellent.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am satisfied or happy with my life.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have gotten the important things that I want out of life so far.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wouldn’t change anything in my life, even if I could.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the information gathered on this survey, 17 out of the 18 students surveyed agreed to some degree that they were happy or satisfied with life. Sixteen of the 18 described their lives as being in excellent condition. Seventeen reported that their lives were at least close to how they want them to be. Fifteen informed me that they have gotten the important things that they want out of life so far and fourteen or the eighteen students surveyed shared that they wouldn’t change anything in their lives if they could. Comparing this to the individual and focus group interviews, where 14 out of the 18 described themselves to be happy in life and 16 out of the 18 describe themselves to be satisfied with life to some degree, the results were fairly consistent.

Classroom observations was the last piece of collected data to be analyzed. This data was collected from the first school visit to the last. Information taken from this part of data collection was used to gain a different (indirect) perspective of student engagement. A spreadsheet was made of the different categories (see Table 5) and tallies of each area were made in order to find
commonalities. Those commonalities became part of the significant statements which then
determined the themes resulting from my research data.

Table 5

*Classroom Observations*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of students observed with SLD</th>
<th>Times Observed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Online academy (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed Classroom Behaviors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging in activities unrelated to the class.</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading or writing something related to class.</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to the instructor or student talking about something related to class.</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking directly to the instructor /reading something to the entire class or writing something on the board.</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking with one or a group of students on the subject matter.</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On average, during a 60 minute period and in 6 classes, the students were disengaged at least 33 times as opposed to the 9 times (on average) they were engaged in something related to class.

This included listening, talking, reading or writing as long as the activity pertained to class.

This data was not consistent with the individual and focus group interviews. Ten out of the eighteen claimed to have a medium to high level of interest in school and nine out of 18 claimed
to be motivated in school. This discretion could have been due to the small amount of students randomly selected for the observation or it could have something to do with how students perceive themselves in the classroom as opposed to how they actually behave while in class; impacted by a number of factors such as peer behavior, teacher instruction, distractions in the classroom, or students’ physical well-being. These observations were just a snapshot of the different students on four different days and in six different classes.

**Textual and Structural Descriptions**

Next, textual and structural descriptions were formed. According to Moustakas, structural descriptions require imaginative variation, reflection, and analysis on my part to bring about a greater description of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, I put great effort into trying to explain how life satisfaction impacts the academic progress and success of high school students with specific learning disabilities. I was able to form these descriptions by using verbal examples from the individual interviews and focus groups. Significant statements were applied to support the themes.

The textual descriptions were created after the themes were developed and provided the reader with the nature of the participants’ experience; using support from actual text taken from the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Both the structural and textual factors in my study assisted me in unveiling the full picture of their experiences. Imaginative variation, the task of looking at the phenomenon or experience from different perspectives or possibilities, (Moustakas, 1994), was then drawn upon to create the structural descriptions. This process was done as I looked at themes within the transcripts (textual) and the why (structural).
The individual textural-structural descriptions allowed me to form a “composite description” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). This incorporated the meaning and the essence of the impact of life satisfaction on the academic progress and success of high school students with specific learning disabilities. The essence was made clear through by using my research questions as a guide.

Qualitative researchers spend a lot of time analyzing transcripts and other collected data in order to determine the themes of the research. Developing themes is a slow process of repeatedly looking at data and recognizing similarities and differences and then assigning meaning to each. This was done until no new ideas or units of meaning could be retrieved from the data; also known as saturation. At that point in my study, themes could be determined from my significant statements. These themes are presented with more clarity and explanation under the appropriate research questions.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of a research study is important as it evaluates the worth of the study. The trustworthiness of a research study can be ensured by focusing on several important areas. For this study each of the following areas were addressed to ensure its trustworthiness: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Trustworthiness can also be protected by the way we communicate the study to other people (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility

Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined credibility as being the truth of the findings or the accuracy of which the findings describe the reality of the phenomenon. Practically, it is the
internal consistency that ensures the rigor in the research process. As one method cannot adequately shed light on a phenomenon, this study used data triangulation or using information from different data sources to build a coherent justification for the themes. Triangulation methodology helped facilitate deeper meaning and understanding of the phenomenon while adding to the credibility of the study.

I evaluated the credibility of my study by ensuring that my research accurately described the phenomenon of life satisfaction on the academic engagement and progress of high school students with SLD as described from their own perspectives. I used a committee of experts to review my research tools to check for appropriateness. The research tools were found by the committee to be appropriate for my qualitative study. Also, as a credibility strategy, I made sure that I spent a prolonged time with my student participants so that I could determine whether or not participants were simply giving rote answers to my questions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For added credibility, I also provided a detailed description of the environment under which I conducted my research so that the conditions under which data was obtained could be easily understood.

Member checks were also completed throughout the research process. The participants were given a copy of the transcribed interviews and focus groups for review. The participants were given the opportunity to read the interviews to determine if their answers were communicated as they had intended. All documents were open for review and were disclosed to the school and to those who were participants in the study (Christiansen, Johnson, & Turner, 2010). Member checks provided credibility to ensure findings were accurate in describing the activities and findings. This is often viewed as the most crucial technique for establishing credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
Dependability

This area of trustworthiness is showing or proving that the findings are consistent and that they could be repeated (Lincoln & Gupa, 1985). To aid in this process, I created an audit trail (see Appendix N). An audit trail is a transparent description of the steps taken from the start of the research to the conclusion. These records explained each step of the study and what was done in the investigation for the purpose of recreating the research at a different time or place. (Christiansen, Johnson, & Turner, 2010).

Even as researchers collect qualitative data, the environmental circumstances surrounding their research are constantly changing. However, as part of the bracketing process, I began keeping a journal at the beginning of my research. I was able to track any changes or abnormalities in the research gathering process in this manner. I conducted bracketing; the setting aside of my own ideas and experiences in order to get a fresh look at the phenomenon from the eyes of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Throughout my research, I developed by own epoche (Moustakas, 1994). This allowed me to describe what was happening during the time I spent at the school with the participants. I also recorded my thoughts and experiences, regarding the phenomenon, in order to put any personal biases aside. Creating an audit trail, bracketing my information, and utilizing the epoche process provided a means to verify the accuracy of data and increase the dependability of this study.

Transferability

This area of transferability means that research findings have applicability in other contexts (Lincoln & Gupa, 1985). An in-depth description of my research setting, the school and classrooms within the school, can be used to define how much of the results relate directly to the research methods. For instance, the findings of my study, or at least portions of the study, of the
high school students with identified SLD at Mill Creek High School, could possibly be replicated with similar group of students in different locations or school divisions.

The applicability of this study could only be determined by a rich and thick contextual description. Textual and structural descriptions were therefore provided. Although the site name and participant names were not included for the sake of confidentiality, some of the demographic information of the site and environmental details were described. Descriptions give the reader valuable information about the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The research themes and the essence of the experiences are supported by textual descriptions. However, intuition, judgment, thinking, and considering all possibilities, was used to create the structural descriptions which were developed from the textual description (Moustakas, 1994).

**Confirmability**

Confirmability is the degree of neutrality that the study displays. It is the extent to which the results of a study are shaped by the participants and not researcher bias or interest (Lincoln & Gupa, 1985). Moustakas (1994) suggested the use of *epoche* for confirmability of the study. This journaling process was used to ensure that I was separating my own ideas and thoughts, coming from my own experiences, from those of the participants. A contextual description was established for confirmability as I identified my own background and education, through this journaling process (see Appendix K); providing a greater understanding of any biases and assumptions that might shape the study’s conclusions (Lincoln & Gupa, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). Although it may not be completely possible for researchers to be completely objective, they should strive for it as a way to confirm the study (Patton, 2002).
Ethical Considerations

The ethical boundary of research is critical for any study. Lipson (1994) grouped ethical issues into informed consent procedures, deception or covert activities, confidentiality toward participants, sponsors, and colleagues, benefits of research to participants over risks; and participant requests that go beyond social norms. From the onset, my participants were made fully aware of the purpose of the study, leaving out any deceptive means.

As the researcher of this study, I sought to protect the identities of the participants and the school by assigning pseudonyms instead of using actual names. Also, all confidential information, including written and recorded data, was kept in a locked file cabinet at my personal residence, of which only I have access to the key. The data will be kept for three years and then destroyed (IRB, 2016). Personal experiences were left out of the study when talking with participants during interviews. This ensured the integrity of the data (Creswell, 2012).

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental, phenomenological research design was to illuminate the specific; the understanding of the impact of life satisfaction on school engagement and the academic progress of high school students with SLD, as described by the students, themselves. It focused on the subjective experiences of individuals and groups and sought to understand this complicated phenomenon from the participants’ voices and experiences. Little research has been conducted on the impact of life satisfaction on student engagement, motivation, and academic success with those students identified as having specific learning disabilities as compared to that of adults (Huebner et al., 2006). Therefore, more studies regarding this population of students is needed to fill in the informational gap.
The data collected in the attempt to fill in the gap came from participant individual interviews and focus groups as well as from life-satisfaction questionnaires, and classroom observations. The data was bracketed into significant statements or unit meanings which resulted in the determination of research themes. By exploring the participants’ experiences and perspectives regarding life satisfaction and happiness and their beliefs about God or spirituality, this research aimed to describe the impact of these entities on academic engagement, motivation, and academic success and to also provide implications to benefit the education of students who are identified as having specific learning disabilities.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand how high school students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) describe life satisfaction and its impact on student motivation, academic engagement, and academic progress. Since the purpose of Chapter four is to present the findings from the data analysis, the essence of experiences provided by the participants, are addressed in a comprehensive manner. Using transcendental phenomenology, I studied participants who all experience the described phenomena by listening to or observing them within their natural environment (Miller & Alvarado, 2005, p. 348).

From the onset of the study, I used journaling, or epoché (Moustakas, 1994), in order to bracket my research so no real attempt to determine significant topics was initially made from one interview, focus group, or other piece of data being collected. Bracketing occurred, along with the data collection and analysis of several pieces of data collection. This data collection included individual interviews with the 18 participants, two participant focus groups, classroom observation checklists, and life satisfaction surveys. I provided rich descriptions by including quotes from the participants. In this chapter, I reported the findings from the observations, interviews, focus groups, and the life satisfaction questionnaires.

Three research questions guided this study. They were addressed as they related to the observations, questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups. The questions were then explored in order to understand the impact that life-satisfaction has on the engagement, motivation, and academic progress of 18 high school students with SLD.

The first research question was designed to identify the various perceptions that the participants had for the concept of life satisfaction or happiness. I felt that how they defined
personal satisfaction or happiness in life could impact all other areas of the study as it prompted the participants to be self-reflective regarding an abstract concept. This was initially addressed in the individual student interview questions, then in the focus group discussions, and then also in the anonymous life satisfaction questionnaire.

The second and third research questions were designed to describe the factors that the participants perceive as impacting their level of happiness or satisfaction with life. These factors could be social or personal; such as having no friends or having a negative home environment. They could also be described as spiritual such as a belief or nonbelief in god. I wanted to hear what types of “life experiences” determine what makes a person happy or not as described by the high school participants.

Once all of the data was collected and analyzed, I was able to develop a structural and textural description of the phenomenon; common to all participants. The data collection and analysis went according to the outline in chapter three.

**Research Questions**

1. How do high school students with SLD describe life satisfaction?

2. What past or present personal and/or social factors do high school students with SLD describe as impacting life satisfaction, motivation, school engagement and academic progress?

3. What past or present spiritual factors do high school students with SLD describe as impacting life satisfaction, motivation, school engagement and academic progress?

The research questions were developed to elicit participant responses that would describe the perceptions of high school students with SLD as they relate to life-satisfaction or personal happiness, academic engagement, student motivation, and academic progress. The collective
voices of the participants were heard throughout the data collection process as these questions were asked. This was an attempt to establish a rich description of the phenomenon.

**Participants**

The desired participants for this study were minors and therefore, in order to protect confidentiality, the administrators allowed the resource teachers to disperse flyers and permission slips to the appropriate students and their parents. From those possible students, 20 brought back parental permission slips and agreed to participate in my study. However, two of the participants were identified with other disabilities rather than a SLD and could not be included in this study. This left 18 student participants for the study.

The participants all agreed to volunteer for this research project and from my own perspective and observations, I made a list of characteristics that represent these students. From that, I assigned them all a pseudonym in order to protect their identities. All quotes from the participants are presented verbatim which includes verbal ticks and grammatical errors in speech and writing to more accurately depict participants’ voices.

**Jimmy**

Jimmy was a sweet natured young man. He enjoyed talking and had a friendly disposition. He hates math but loves P.E., strength training, Mrs. Jolly (teacher), and English. He stated that the hardest thing in his life was not having his dad around. He said he has “good grandparents who give him what he needs” (Jimmy, individual interview, April, 19, 2016). Jimmy stated that he believes in God and goes to church regularly. He lives with his mother and step-dad and he has two siblings. He claims to be happy and that one goal of his is to have money.
Ann

Ann shared that reading is her weakness. She hates to read but loves art and earth science. She described the worst things in her life as being her struggle with depression and the recent death of her grandmother. Ann stated that she has a great family and boyfriend. Her parents are divorced and she lives with her mom and stepdad and five siblings. She believes in God and goes to church sometimes. Her goal is to walk across the stage at graduation in her senior year and to “keep going in life” (Ann, individual interview, April 19, 2016). Ann could be described as sweet and outgoing—very friendly.

Robert

Robert loves art and earth science. His weakness, he said, is in reading. The worst thing in his life is bullying due to his “coming out of the closet” and his attempted suicide. This young man stated that his family and friends were the “best things in life” (Robert, individual interview, April 12, 2016). Robert believes in God and goes to church where he loves to sing in the choir. He lives with his stepmother, biological father, and five siblings. Robert said that his goal is “to get into a college of Arts and Music and then get a great job” (Robert, individual interview, April 12, 2016). This young man was open and honest when talking about life and things that he struggles with. He shared that he has learned a lot over the past few years and that “talking about things helps” (Robert, individual interview, April 12, 2016).

Brian

Brian was a friendly young man who stated that his disabilities were in reading, writing, and math. He likes P.E., fishing, and hunting. He believes in God and goes to church sometimes. He lives with his biological mom, stepdad, and one sister. His goals are to “get good grades and to have money” (Brian, individual interview, April 12, 2016).
Chris

Chris was a tall young man with a sweet and friendly personality. He loves art, lunch, and robotics but does not like earth science. His said that the hardest things in life are “jerks and school” (Chris, individual interview, April 12, 2016). His favorite things to do are playing games with friends and playing sports. Chris believes in God and goes to church when his mom will take him. He lives with his mom and stepdad and four siblings. His goal is to graduate from high school.

Kelsey

Kelsey stated that she hates to read and says that she “isn’t good at it” (Kelsey, individual interview, April 19, 2016). She loves choir, Spanish, and public speaking. Kelsey said she believes in God but “only goes to church when her mom takes her” (Kelsey, individual interview, April 19, 2016). Her goal is to get a good job. Kelsey could be described as kind hearted and outgoing.

Rachel

Rachel revealed that she struggles with reading. She loves lunch and art. The hardest thing about life to her right now is “people being mean” (Rachel, individual interview, April 11, 2016). She said that she loves sports and plays them all. She believes in God but she does not go to church. She stated that she is happy. Rachel lives with her mom and her sister. Her goal is to go to college.

Brett

Brett confided that he has dyslexia and struggles in school. He hates math but loves science. He said that he has a good family and lives with his biological mom, dad, and two
sisters. He believes in God and goes to church sometimes. Brett stated that he was happy and satisfied with life and has a goal “to achieve” (Brett, individual interview, April, 12, 2016).

David

David shared that his favorite subject is chorus and his disability is in math, which he “hates” (David, individual interview, April 19, 2016). He shared that the worst thing in his life is “having to work” but the best thing is “having money” (David, individual interview, April 19, 2016). David believes in God and goes to church. He lives with his biological father, stepmom, and three siblings. He said he is “happy and just wants to get through school” (David, individual interview, April 19, 2016).

Austin

Austin was a student who “likes P.E a lot but hates math” (Austin, individual interview, April 12, 2016). The worst thing in his life, he confided, is his dad—“not having one” (Austin, individual interview, April 12, 2016). The best things in life, according to Austin, are “money and family” (Austin, individual interview, April 12, 2016). He believes in God and goes to church regularly. His goal is to “get out of high school and get a house” (Austin, individual interview, April 12, 2016).

Debbie

Debbie was a very soft-spoken, quiet, young girl with a sweet smile and friendly disposition. She was a little shy when sharing about herself but she said that her grades were “pretty good” (Debbie, individual interview, April 12, 2016) and that she “tries to do all of her work” (Debbie, individual interview, April 12, 2016). Debbie shared that she “likes school but not the work” (Debbie, individual interview, April 12, 2016).
E. J.

E. J. was fairly new to the participating school. He was very enthusiastic about being a part of this study but was absent a few times during the research process. He seemed to be a happy student initially but E. J. shared that he “doesn’t like school much because the work is too hard and other students are mean sometimes” (E.J., individual interview, April 19, 2016). E. J. was a friendly student and shared about himself with ease.

John

John described himself as “nice but a little rebellious” (John, individual interview, April 19, 2016). He said he “does not like school at all and never has” (John, individual interview, April 19, 2016). He stated he has struggled all throughout school with grades and relationships with other students and teachers. He has also experienced family tragedy and difficulties, but according to John, he still “tries to be a good person” (John, individual interview, April 19, 2016). John was very open when sharing about himself and his life.

Billy

Billy seemed to enjoy sharing, he was friendly, open, and personable. He struggles with most all of his academic classes but said that school was “ok” and that he “just wants to graduate” (Billy, individual interview, April 19, 2016). Billy said that other kids have picked on him over the years but things were better this year. He doesn’t like school because of the work and other kids but he “just tries to pass” (Billy, individual interview, April 19, 2016).

Mike

Mike had a very sweet and quiet disposition but also seemed to be outgoing with his peers and teachers. He always had a smile on his face during the research process. Mike stated that he doesn’t go to church but he does believe in God. Academics have been difficult for Mike
and he does not like school “except for seeing friends every day” (Mike, individual interview, April 19, 2016). He lives with his mother, step-father, and brother. His goals are “to get out of high school, get a good job, and make money” (Billy, individual interview, April 19, 2016).

Zeke

Zeke was a polite, soft-spoken, friendly young man. He stated that he “tries to work hard and stay out of trouble” in school (Zeke, individual interview, April 19, 2016). He struggles with reading and staying on top of his work. Zeke stated that he “has gotten better with school work since starting high school a few years ago” (Zeke, individual interview, April 19, 2016). Zeke wants to go into the Army when he graduates.

Luke

Luke was a student who struggles with some medical issues as well as academic. He stated that his attitude and his grades have “gotten better this year” (Luke, individual interview, April 19, 2016). Luke shared that he “tries harder” (Luke, individual interview, April 19, 2016). According to Luke, he just tries to “keep a positive attitude and get my work done” (Luke, individual interview, April 19, 2016). He was a cooperative and pleasant student to talk with.

Josh

Josh could be described as a quiet and guarded young man. He said, “I have never really liked school, but I try” (Josh, individual interview, April 19, 2016). Josh has had academic struggles to overcome as well as personal and environmental obstacles. He was reserved and a bit reluctant to talk but a very nice young man.

Out of the 14 male and 4 female participants, 3 live at home with both biological parents. Four students live with one biological parent and one non-biological parent. Four of the participants live with their mother only and the remaining students live with a mother and
grandparents. Although this information was strictly voluntary, I thought this was important information to include as it was given by the students and pertained to the basic research questions and were part of the impacting social or environmental factors.

**Results**

The qualitative data presented in this chapter includes a description of each student’s perception of the impact of life satisfaction and happiness on their academic success. This information was taken from individual student interviews, student focus groups, a life satisfaction questionnaire, and classroom observations. Presented first are the individual structural and textural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). Descriptions are broken down by topics consistent with the research questions: participants’ descriptions of life satisfaction or happiness, past or present personal or social factors that impact academic success according to the participants, and any past or present spiritual factors that impact academic success according to the participants.

Textual and structural descriptions were formed and supported by significant statements from the participants’ own words. Next, all outcomes were combined to portray a composite experience to embody the essence of the participants’ experiences. Themes were then extracted to both provide answers to the research questions and to evoke the essence of students’ perceptions and experiences. These themes included: (a) a lack of understanding the difference between mood and genuine happiness, (b) getting what you want in life results in life-satisfaction and personal happiness, (c) having good friends and family, (d) reaching personal goals, (e) a belief that God is real, (f) positive parental relations, (g) student boredom and laziness, (h) a disability makes academic success more difficult, (i) positive relationships or personal connections with teachers, and (j) belief that not only is God real but He cares about people.
Theme Development

Research Question One

How do high school students with a specific learning disability, describe life-satisfaction or happiness? According to the Life-Satisfaction Questionnaire, 16 out of the 18 participants claimed to be satisfied with their life. When asked about personal happiness, however, five students claimed their level of happiness was high, seven described their level of happiness as medium, one student’s level was described as low, and five were neither high nor low. These students made statements such as “depends on my mood” (Kelsey, individual interview, April, 19, 2016), “depends on the day” (Debbie, individual interview, April, 12, 2016), or “I don’t know” (Rachel, individual interview, April, 11, 2016). Of interest to the study is the differentiation the students made between life satisfaction and happiness. Where 16 claimed to be “satisfied with life,” only 12 claimed to be somewhat happy with their lives.

Theme one: Mood and happiness. During the individual interview process, the participants were asked about their level of happiness and satisfaction with life. This was a challenge for many of them as these terms are abstract. I had not entertained the idea of mood before the interviews began but it came up as I interacted with the participants. It was at that point in this study that the teenage confusion between mood and happiness was introduced as a possible theme.

Eight of the participants either defined happiness and satisfaction with the word mood or used terminology indicating the concept of the term mood. When asked about his level of personal happiness, Jimmy responded, “Depends on the day (Jimmy, individual interview, April, 19, 2016). Kelsey responded with “in-between and depends on my mood” (Kelsey, individual interview, April, 19, 2016). She also explained that the source of her happiness and satisfaction
was an “emotion” (Kelsey, individual interview, April 19, 2016). Brian stated, “Sometimes happy, sometimes not” (Brian, individual interview, April, 12, 2016). When asked about the impact of happiness and satisfaction on academics, Mike answered, “If you are in a bad mood then you will not do anything” (Mike, individual interview, April, 19, 2016). According to the collected data, the participants viewed happiness, satisfaction, and mood as the same entity.

**Theme two: Getting what you want in life.** Most of the students felt that getting or having what they want in life gives them satisfaction. A few defined it as being just “being happy.” John stated that “having a stress-free life without having to worry about paying bills would create satisfaction in life” (John, individual interview, April 19, 2016).

All of their definitions included things, coming from external sources that provide or would provide them with some level of life satisfaction. However, when asked to define happiness, more of the participants responded with things that come from internal sources such as the brain, the heart, your mind, emotions, love, God, inside you, myself, and joy. Although three of the students claimed to not know where happiness or life satisfaction came from, most of them were able to automatically relate more to the term happiness than that of life-satisfaction.

**Theme three: Having good friends.** Having good friends was also a commonality among the participants. Of the 11 who provided answers to questions regarding life-satisfaction and happiness, 8 of the participants claimed that having good friends or family to spend time with was the source of their satisfaction and happiness in life. Many talked positively about their friends or with the number of friends that they had. They made it very clear that positive peer relations keeps them motivated and interested in school. In the focus group discussions, they talked about the difference in a good day at school and a bad day, and the impact of having friends to support them and to help them deal with situations and daily life at school. The
younger focus group shared a lot about their experiences with bullying and the critical impact of having good friends. One participant shared a personal story about dealing with being a homosexual and being bullied at school (Robert, focus group, April 22, 2016). He attempted suicide a few years prior to our interview due to the treatment from his peers that he experienced each day. However, he claimed that having a few good friends helped him through the year. Another participant shared that he would be happier in life if he had more friends (Austin, individual interview, April 12, 2016).

**Theme four: Reaching personal goals.** From the collected data, twelve of the participants stated that their goals were to make good grades, pass the SOLs, go to college, get a job, make money, or to have what they wanted in life. In the focus group session, participants agreed that if they are not happy or satisfied with life, then they won’t want to do their school work which causes bad grades. However, if they are happy and satisfied with life, then they will work harder to make better grades. One participant stated, “If you’re not happy with life then I guess you probably wouldn’t care what happened to you in school and you wouldn’t try” (Jimmy, individual interview, April, 19, 2016) Another shared, “If kids are worried about their life outside of school, then they won’t focus in school or be satisfied with what they are doing in school” (Ann, individual interview, April, 19, 2016). Also, Rachel shared, “You gotta be happy to do good in school. If I’m not happy, I don’t care about doing school work (Rachel, individual interview, April11, 2016). Billy shared that being happy or being satisfied with life, “gets me going for my future (Billy, individual interview, April 19, 2016). Fifteen of the 18 participants claimed that having personal happiness and life satisfaction definitely helped them get closer to their academic goals and pushed them to keep striving to meet those goals.
Theme five: Believing God is real. Luke stated, “If you really do believe in God and like you think He will help you in any type of way you need Him to help you with, then you should be satisfied or happy in life because you have someone who has your back. He will always have your back” (Luke, individual interview, April 19, 2016). Chris believed that happiness is “in your heart and God made it” (Chris, individual interview, April 12, 2016).

From the focus group data collection, individual interviews, the questionnaire, and the classroom observations, five significant statements were identified relating to the definition of life-satisfaction or happiness and research question one: (a) mood and happiness; (b) getting what you want in life; (c) having a good family and friends; d) reaching personal goals and (d) belief in God.

Research Question Two

What past or present personal and/or social factors high school students with SLD describe as impacting life satisfaction, motivation, school engagement and academic progress. At the onset of this study, I wanted to see if, in fact, the participants were engaged in the classroom and to what extent. I went into six different classrooms from different grade levels and content. I wanted to observe the participants in the classroom environment in order to “understand the world from the participants’ point of view, by listening to or observing a person in a natural environment” (Miller & Alvarado, 2005, p. 348). I did not tell the students who I was or what I was doing in order to maintain confidentiality and to avoid being an instructional distraction. Observing the participants gave me a deeper insight. On average, during a 60 minute period and in 6 classes, the students were disengaged at least 33 times as opposed to the 9 times (on average) they were engaged in something related to class. This included listening, talking, reading or writing as long as the activity pertained to class.
This data was not consistent with the individual and focus group interviews, when ten out of the eighteen claimed to have a medium to high level of interest in school and nine out of eighteen claimed to be motivated in school. However, these observations were just a snapshot of the different students on four different days and in six different classes. I felt like it gave me a basic feel for the level of academic engagement and motivation of the participants. I was able to hear their voices within the classroom and to immerse myself within the daily environment and experiences of the participants.

Research question two was designed to determine what past or present personal and/or social factors high school students with SLD describe as impacting life satisfaction, motivation, school engagement and academic progress. From the data collected, four significant statements developed: (a) parental influence; (b) boredom and laziness; (c) having a specific learning disability; and (d) the role of teachers.

**Theme six: Positive parental influence.** Parental relationships were a major social factor that students claimed impacts the level of life satisfaction, motivation, school engagement and academic progress. Eleven out of 18 participants felt that parents play a big role in their happiness or life satisfaction. One said, “They are my parents. They created me. I don’t know what I would do if I lost them” (Brett, individual interview, April 12, 2016). “They motivate you to do good in school so you can graduate” (Robert, individual interview, April, 12, 2016). The others stated, “They play a big role because they explain stuff I don’t understand” (Debbie, individual interview, April 12, 2016). “They help you reach your goals and pressure you to do good in life” (David, individual interview, April 19, 2016). Another student answered this research question with, “Well, when my dad was alive, he use to always tell me to be the best I could be. My mom has always told me ‘You know your dad always told you to be the best you
could be but you gotta be happy with what you choose to do’ (John, individual interview, April 19, 2016).

The participants were very much aware of family influence on life-satisfaction and academic success. Luke stated, “It all depends on who your parents are. Like, it depends on if they have had a bad life . . . if they didn’t have a good home environment, then you’re not going to have a good life either” (Luke, individual interview, April 19, 2016). “Parents play a big role in life-satisfaction because if you have bad parents, then you’ll wind up being bad parents” (Mike, individual interviews, April 19, 2016).

Three participants claimed that parents play a medium role and one participant, Kelsey, said that her parents “don’t make me happy so they don’t have a role” (Kelsey, individual interview, April 19, 2016). A point of interest in this case, is that this participant is the same one who claimed that she is an Atheist and is dissatisfied or unhappy with her life. Billy said “Dad is pretty happy. Some days he isn’t. He has four kids” (Billy, individual interview, April 19, 2016). This answer was not obviously related to the question, however, it could possibly imply that the father’s struggles are troubling enough to impact this participant’s level of life satisfaction or personal happiness.

**Theme seven: Boredom and laziness.** Academic motivation and engagement are strongly related and are both of interest in research question two. The interview questions asked the participants about the source and level of their motivation and how it could be increased in the classroom. Four of the participants claimed to have a high level of motivation in school. Five claimed to have a medium level of motivation in school and nine claimed to have little to no motivation in school. The commonalities for the source of motivation were: trying to pass in school, making family proud, some teachers, friends, and self. However, one of the sources of a
lack of motivation was said to be boredom. One student claimed “Classes need to be not so boring. We need to do more fun stuff maybe” (Rachel, individual interview, April 11, 2016). Mike responded that he “needed less paper work and to do more experiments” (Mike, individual interviews, April 19, 2016). E.J. suggested that to be less boring the “class could play a game together or an activity on the Smartboard, partner work, or group work” (E.J., individual interview, April 19, 2016). Austin thought that teachers needed to teach “things kids are interested in; things that catch their attention; things they like to do” (Austin, individual interview, April 12, 2016).

Some of the participants felt that it was their own behaviors that caused the lack of motivation in the classroom and that they needed to do something themselves to change their level of engagement. Their reasons for not engaging were largely internal. Luke described himself as being “lazy” (Luke, individual interview, April, 19, 2016). Zeke claimed that he was “quiet and just didn’t talk out loud in class” (Zeke, individual interview, April 19, 2016). Kelsey stated that she is “just lazy and motivation “depends on my mood” (Kelsey, individual interview, April 19, 2016).

The participants had some suggestions that may help increase both their levels of engagement and motivation in class. To increase levels of motivation, seven of the 18 participants responded with more group or partner work, more fun things to do, less worksheets, and more experiments. More common answers for how to possibly increase motivation, however, were to ask teachers for more help and encouragement, to have less work, to get more friends, to keep thinking about graduation, and to study more. Six of the participants claimed that they didn’t know how to increase student motivation.
The participants also gave suggestions on how to help increase student engagement. Four participants suggested more note taking, focusing, and listening to the teacher. Other responses were for teachers to give more group/partner work, for teachers to teach on things that the students are interested in, and for teachers to use the Smartboard more often.

**Theme eight: Having a specific learning disability.** A few students eluded to the idea that perhaps some of their lack of motivation or classroom engagement is a result of their struggle with learning. Having a specific learning disability gives students a different perspective on school and a different experience with learning. Therefore, sometimes there are external things that could help increase academic motivation and engagement, such as more teacher encouragement. Another suggested having “an extra teacher in the room” (Josh, individual interview, April 19, 2016). Zeke confided that he needed “less racket” in the classroom” (Zeke, individual interview, April 19, 2016). These responses were indicative of students who struggle with specific learning disabilities.

**Theme nine: Positive relationships with teachers.** According to participant data, teachers play a significant role in the happiness or satisfaction level of high school students struggling with specific learning disabilities. Fifteen of the participants claimed that teachers have a medium to large role in their academic engagement, motivation, and success. The following are participant statements regarding happiness or life satisfaction and the role of teachers. “They play a big role by being there when I need them in general” (Debbie, individual interview, April 12, 2016). “They pressure us to get work done and to focus to get your grades up” (David, individual interview, April 19, 2016). “Teachers have confidence in you and motivate you to do your work and they want what is best for you” (E.J., individual interview, April 19, 2016). “Teachers play a big role because they help me get my work done. They help
me figure out ways to finish my work . . . how long I should take on a test . . . a lot of things” (Brett, individual interview, April 12, 2016). Brett also mentioned that he “probably couldn’t do anything without his teachers. I couldn’t learn without my teachers and I am glad that I have my teachers” (Brett, individual interviews, April, 12, 2016). “Teachers are like a parent” (Zeke, individual interview, April19, 2016). Comprehension difficulties, weak attention abilities, and a need for a different teaching style, are issues with which students with SLD struggle and that can create a lack of motivation and disengagement in the classroom. Teachers, according to these participants, make a big difference. A few of the participants mentioned their special education teachers, specifically, and gave those teachers the credit for their academic success.

**Research Question Three**

What past or present spiritual factors high school students with SLD describe as impacting life satisfaction, motivation, school engagement, and academic progress? Research question three was designed to determine from this part of the discussion with the participants during individual interviews and focus group sessions, one significant statement continued to surface: God exists and cares about them. According to the participants, this impacts their life satisfaction and personal happiness.

**Theme ten: God not only exists but cares about people.** When asked specifically how belief in God impacts overall happiness and success at school and in the future, Brett replied that his level is good because “God made us how He wanted to make us” (Brett, individual interview, April12, 2016). Other participants responded with “I know that there is someone out there that can always help you” (Austin, focus group interview, April 22, 2016); “If you are having a test and you know you won’t do good, then you just pray to have the answers”; “If you have faith in God, He will help you get through school and your work and all that.”
Eleven of the 18 participants mentioned that God played a significant role in the way they handled life and were able to find happiness in life. One participant shared, “God plays a really big role in my life because of things that I really wouldn’t be able to get through by myself. You have to pray about it and it helped me. It makes me feel a bit better” (Austin, individual interview, April 12, 2016). Brett claimed that God “gives him hope” (Brett, individual interview, April 12, 2016). One participant said, “Pray to God and have a better chance at success” (David, individual interview, April 19, 2016).

Four of the participants claimed that their belief in God plays a medium role in their level of life satisfaction and personal happiness. Three of the participants shared that their belief in God played a very small role to none at all in the level of life satisfaction or personal happiness that they experience each day. These three students also had the lowest life satisfaction scores on the life satisfaction questionnaires. Overall, 15 of the participants shared that their belief in God directly impacts their satisfaction with life, their personal happiness, how motivated and engaged they are in school and therefore, how it impacts their academic progress and success.

Summary

Chapter four discussed what was found or discovered in this study. This discussion included a characterization of the participants and both a structural and textural description. (Moustakas, 1994). I put great effort into using the voices of the participants to describe the impact of personal happiness and life satisfaction on the academic progress and success of high school students with specific learning disabilities. In order to truly capture the experiences of the participants, I used verbal examples from both the individual interviews and the focus groups. From the data analysis in chapter three, I used the individual interviews and those from the focus
groups to recognize significant statements. As a result, themes were established and connections were made between the research questions and the identified themes.

Imaginative variation is the task of looking at the phenomenon or experience from different perspectives or possibilities, (Moustakas, 1994). This concept is what was drawn upon to create the structural descriptions as I looked at themes within the transcripts (textual) and the why (structural). The textual descriptions were developed in order to provide the reader with the nature of the participants’ experience; using support from actual text taken from the individual participants (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) describes the next step of study as being a synthesis of meaning from both the textual and structural descriptions. I tried to do this intuitively and reflectively as I described the essences of the phenomenon.

Chapter five will provide a summary of the findings included an appropriate discussion of the findings and the implications of the research. Limitations of the study will be recognized and explored. Finally, recommendations for further research and study will be made.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to understand how high school students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) describe life satisfaction and its impact on student motivation, academic engagement, and academic progress. Chapter five provides a synthesis of the literature from chapter two along with the findings of the research found in chapter four. Chapter five is organized by sections: (a) summary of findings, (b) discussion and reflection of researcher reflections, (c) discussion of themes, (d) implications, (e) limitations, (f) recommendations for future research, and (g) a final summary of the study.

Summary of the Findings

Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) stressed that in order to expose the phenomenon as experienced by the participants in chapter five, there has to be a synthesis of meaningful units and themes that appeared in chapter four. Upon analyzing the data, multiple themes, directly related to the impact of life satisfaction on academic engagement, motivation, and progress of high school students with SLD were identified. These themes are presented under each related research question. The three main research questions are: 1) How do high school students with a specific learning disability describe life satisfaction? 2) What past or present personal and/or social factors do high school students with specific learning disabilities describe as impacting life satisfaction, motivation, school engagement and academic progress? 3) What past or present spiritual factors do high school students with specific learning disabilities describe as impacting life satisfaction, motivation, school engagement and academic progress? After the themes are presented, a summary of the findings follows in paragraph form.
Through bracketing and coding of data from the 18 participants, five themes were identified regarding Research Question One: How do high school students with SLD describe life satisfaction? They were (1) confusion between mood and happiness; (2) getting what you want in life; (3) having good friends; (4) reaching personal goals; (5) believing that God is real.

Through bracketing and coding of data from the 18 participants, four themes were identified regarding Research Question Two: What past or present personal and/or social factors high school students with SLD describe as impacting life satisfaction, motivation, school engagement and academic progress? These themes are (6) positive parental influence; (7) boredom with class; (8) having a specific learning disability; (9) positive relationships with teachers.

Through bracketing and coding of data from the 18 participants, only one main theme was identified regarding Research Question Three: What past or present spiritual factors high school students with SLD describe as impacting life satisfaction, motivation, school engagement and academic progress? This theme is (10) believing that God is not only real but that He cares about people.

Overall the participants, 18 high school students who have been identified with a SLD, describe personal happiness and life satisfaction as having significant impact on academic engagement, motivation, and progress. The high school participants in this study have the desire to do well in school, to pass standardized tests, and to have a successful future. However, they recognize that a lack of personal happiness or a low level of life-satisfaction can make these things difficult; creating a hindrance for them in reaching academic progress, success and personal goals.
Daily issues such as not having what is needed in life in terms of material items or emotional or environmental support from family, being a victim of bullying, not having friends for various reasons, struggling in school for several years because of a specific learning disability or negative teacher relationships, dealing with physiological issues such as mood changes, and spiritual uncertainty and disbelief in God, create a ripple effect that spreads into the academic arena of students’ lives. The ripples coming from the dis-satisfaction or unhappiness in life are then displayed by the students as a low level of motivation for school. This then leads to a lack of student engagement in class and consequently, academic progress is low and academic success is minimal.

Students, however, speak in one voice when they discuss those critical components of daily life that make a difference in their success; both personally and academically as high school students. They noted how important it is to have a positive and caring home environment; giving them personal security and a foundation for self-confidence. Parents are entrusted with the most important role in their lives. Also important is the relationship that they have with their teachers. How teachers teach is important but the relationship that the students have with these teachers was expressed to be of even greater importance.

A belief in God as a real being who cares about them was expressed as having high value and impact on students. They felt that believing in God and knowing that He cared about them in terms of being happy, passing tests, dealing with friends, teachers, and parents, gave them the ability to be happier and satisfied with life. Consequently, this leads to a better chance of academic motivation, engagement, and academic progress.
Discussion

This discussion section reviews the conceptual framework and links the information between previous research and the findings within this study. It brings the information in the literature review together with the empirical information from this research. This section is a synthesis of chapter two and chapter four. This section also includes my own reflective discussion regarding this study.

Discussion of conceptual framework

Social constructivist theory. The overarching theoretic framework for this research study was Bruner’s social constructivist theory (1966). He instructed that learning is an active process and that students naturally construct new ideas or concepts based on their current or past knowledge (Bruner, 1966). Social constructivism maintains that learners construct their own understanding. Essentially, therefore, the question throughout the study focused on the understanding or connection between happiness and academic success that the participants had constructed and why.

The participants in this study struggle with SLD that created gaps in their learning early on in their academic experiences. Their prior knowledge before entering high school may not have been at the level needed for success in high school level courses, therefore putting them behind their peers academically. They described how tiresome academics had been over the span of 9-12 years of school.

Adding to the disability, Bruner’s work also focused a great deal on building of knowledge within a culture. The values and meanings of student experiences are emphasized because culture, according to Bruner, is the “toolkit” for sense-making and communicating (Bruner, 1996, p. 3). The culture in which the participants roots itself from a long history of
manufacturing and at times, a low socio-economic status of its citizens. This is important as seen from one of the themes from the study: having or getting what you want or need in life. Family stress from the inability to survive financially or maintain the basic needs of its members, was a significant statement that seeped through conversations with the participants as well as the lack of emphasis on education. Some of the participants shared stories regarding family issues that lead to insecurity and even fear of abuse, not having a home, or losing parents. All of these situations have impacted the participants in such a way, that student engagement and achievement have not reached as high a level as it could have reached with different environmental factors.

**Hierarchy of needs.** This is also described by Maslow in 1954, when he presented a model which can be divided into basic human needs (physiological, safety, love, and esteem) and growth needs (cognitive, aesthetics and self-actualization). He reasoned that everyone is capable of, and has the innate desire to reach a higher level of hierarchical needs, with the goal of self-actualization. Unfortunately, progress is often disrupted by a failure to meet lower level needs. Life experiences such as divorce, lack of parental involvement, or loss of family income may cause an individual to fluctuate between levels of hierarchy. Hierarchy of needs can be applicable across many contexts, including education (Maslow, 1968). The effects of divorce and in a few cases, the death of a parent, and low socio-economic situations, have also touched the lives of the research participants. This was evident in the individual interviews and focus groups.

**Attachment theory.** Aligning with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is the attachment/extended attachment theory. Attachment theory is the joint work of Bowlby and Ainsworth (1991) which describes the relationship between a child’s bond with the mother and
the detrimental effect that can be caused by disruption through separation, deprivation, and bereavement (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Bowlby reports that relationships between parents and children, promote feelings of security in the child. Emotional security in turn is considered to be a necessary precondition for exploration of the environment which then naturally leads to student engagement in school, which finally leads to higher academic achievement (McCuskey, 2007). Bowlby determined that this lack of affection and care created a sense of disengagement in young children that stayed stagnant, not changing as the children became older and advanced in grades at school. Some of the participants shared stories regarding family issues that lead to insecurity and even fear early on in life. A few have experienced bereavement and separation from parent figures. All of these situations have impacted the participants in such a way, that student engagement and achievement have not reached as high a level as it maybe could have reached.

**Brain-based learning theory.** John Dewey felt that education should work with students’ current understanding; taking into account prior ideas and interests (Dewey, 2010). In order to learn from reflective practice, Dewey felt that weaknesses as well as strengths of students need to be thoroughly examined (Dewey, 1939b). All of the participants have SLD and have been identified with at least one main weaknesses. They learn differently and at times, require a different style of instruction or a different setting. This is evident in the comments made by the participants in the last question of the individual interview. In particular, John commented that people often times people look at people with disabilities as being different or of lesser skills and abilities. He further commented that people “like him” who lack skills in one area make up for it in another (John, individual interview, April 22, 2016). Therefore, Dewey’s
theory that a student’s weaknesses and strengths need to be studied in order to determine the best instruction can be seen within this study and in regards to the participants.

Brain-based learning theory is based on the function and structure of the human brain; a brain which from conception is constantly growing and developing, establishing patterns of knowledge. Students who attend school from kindergarten through secondary school typically spend more than 13,000 hours of their developing brain’s time with teachers. Therefore, student brains are changed by the experiences they have in school. (Jensen, 1998). Student brains are often inhibited by discouragement, feelings of being ignored, and negative life experiences.

Students with learning disabilities are especially prone to these feelings simply by their academic abilities or weaknesses. The research participants described these same feelings of frustration when dealing with their SLD in the classrooms so as a result, they will disengage. Also, they experience feelings of inferiority and negativity that comes from academic lack of achievement or underachievement.

Control theory of motivation. Glasser, contends that what a person wants the most at any given time, is what will inspire or produce a certain behavior (Glasser, 1986). Students who are disengaged do not see school as relevant to their basic human needs (Glasser, 1986). This was described by the participants with the issues of boredom and lack of interest as seen in the classroom observations and as discussed in the interviews and focus groups. The participants made it clear that when children are not happy at home, or with their life outside of school, then they will not do well in school. This was also very evident in the focus group conversation with the student who attempted suicide. He was struggling with his emotions and with personal relationships. He shut down emotionally, was failing in school, and tried to take his own life. At the time of this research, he described himself as being happy most of the time because he
believed that God was real and that He actually cared about him and what his life was like. This participant had also learned how to talk to people about things that bother him. Basic human needs such as food, shelter, nurturing and love play an enormous part in the education of all students. This deemed especially true for the participants in this particular study who struggle with having a specific learning disability.

Social cognitive theory. People learn by watching others, according to this theory. In psychology, personality is defined in terms of how a person thinks about and responds to his social environment. Bandura argued that when people see someone else awarded for behavior, they will behave in the same manner to receive the same award (Boston School of Public Health, 2013). Students will likely imitate others with whom they identify or with those who have the most influence in their lives. A person’s environment impacts behavior and behavior then impacts the environment. As described by the SCT, culture is the main influencer of human development. Human beings, as children, develop in the context of the family culture into which they are born. In essence, they behave and live as what they have seen modeled. When students do not have positive experiences with success or feeling of self-worth, the level of their confidence in themselves is diminished. This is the extension of Bandura’s theory known as self-efficacy.

Four stage theory. Piaget’s four stage theory affirms the idea that children’s ways of thinking are developed around their interactions with the world. Cognitive development, according to Piaget, occurs as mental processes mature and reorganize in conjunction with environmental experiences (Piaget, 1979). Children construct an opinion or perception of their world and then experience discrepancies between what they discover in their environment and what they already know or have discovered through life experiences. The participants who had
experienced a lack of academic success in school at an early age and who also struggled with social challenges within the home environment or with peers, had a lower self-esteem and future expectations well before they had reached the high school classroom.

**Ecological Systems Theory.** Bronfenbrenner also connected personal life experiences to academic learning. Bronfenbrenner’s theory is multi-layered include factors in the child’s own maturing biology; his immediate family and the community or social environment in which she or he functions on a daily basis (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). This rang true throughout the interview process, both individually and in groups, when the students talked about the relationships with their parents and teachers as well as when they talked about the stigmas that they deal with being in a special education program.

**Social Learning Theory.** Positive social interaction has a strong hold on the development of cognition. Vygotsky (1978) believed strongly that community plays a central role in the process of “making meaning.” Therefore, social learning tends to precede cognitive development. The small town culture in which the participants live within has many benefits as well as many detriments; depending on the family culture. Within the ideas of social learning, life for students claims to begin at birth; not when they enter high school. Struggling with a disability starts before the first day of school. The participants discussed how they felt as though people thought of them as being different or stupid because of their specific learning disability and that this began many years ago.

**Psychosocial theory.** Erikson maintained that personality develops in a predetermined order. Each stage a person enters in life is building upon a previous stage (Erikson, 1959). Some of the participants shared stories of situations at home or at school that obviously helped shape their personalities, both positively and negatively. The students discussed the impact of
bullying on them as well as the impact of their teachers. Erikson’s theory was supported by participant stories that reached back a number of years as they reflected with one another in the focus groups or in the individual interviews. Most of the participants had grown up together and knew of each other’s stories. During their conversations, they would sometimes say to one another, “remember when…” Their life experiences early on had impacted the people they had become.

**Self-determination theory.** Motivational dynamics within the experiences of the participants was directly related to past experiences and the cultural in which they live. Deci & Ryan’s theory maintain that for students to be motivated in school, three basic needs have to be met. These needs are *relatedness, competence, and autonomy* (Deci & Ryan, 2000). It was easy to hear in the voices and mannerisms of my participants that many of them had suffered from all of these entities. In their conversations regarding their parents, they either described positive relationships or negative, either of which were developmentally critical. In conversation, the struggles with academic competence and feelings of failure and inferiority rang loud and clear. Student autonomy was missing in all of the participants as they voiced their heavy dependence on parent encouragement and their special education teachers’ constant shoves to keep them motivated and engaged in school.

**Discussion of RQ One**

**How do students describe life satisfaction?** For this study, life satisfaction and happiness were noted as definitionally the same but I wanted to see how the participants would define the terms individually in order to ensure that we were viewing life satisfaction in the same regard. The participants had many different definitions for life satisfaction. Some of which included: “Doing my goals I aim for” (Ann, individual interview, April 19, 2016); “Being happy
with life and having my family and friends to help me with life” (Brian, individual interview, April 12, 2016); “Getting along with my Dad” (Austin, individual interview, April 12, 2016); “What makes you happy. Doing your own thing instead of someone else’s” (David, individual interview, April 19, 2016); “Being stable and not having much stress from bills and stuff” (John, individual interview, April 19, 2016). There was also an emphasis on getting what you want out of life. Some of the participants either didn’t know what life satisfaction meant or could not verbalize a definition. A few examples are: “Anything that keeps you satisfied” (Mike, individual interview, April 19, 2016); “What you want your life to be” (Zeke, individual interview, April 19, 2016); “Something that you are doing that you are ok with” (Luke, individual interview, April 19, 2016); and 5 agreed with the statement, “I have no idea” (Josh, individual interview, April 19, 2016).

Participants defined life satisfaction as: “Something everyone should have, an emotion you feel inside…”(Brett, April 12, 2016); “Hard work, finishing school and going to college” (David, individual interview, April 19, 2016); “The warm tingling feeling that you feel when somebody tells you a joke or being with someone that makes you smile” (John, individual interview, April 19, 2016); “Being around people you love and people who love and care about you” (Ann, individual interview, April 19, 2016); “an emotion you feel” (Zeke, individual interview, April 19, 2016).

As with the definition of happiness, some students were unsure how to define life satisfaction: “I guess when you are happy” (Chris, individual interview, April 12, 2016); “Smiling and laughing” (Debbie, individual interviews, April 12, 2016); “Anything that makes you smile” (Mike, individual interview, April 19, 2016); “energetic way of saying ‘I like doing this’” (Brian, individual interview, April 12, 2016); “When you are happy all the time and
smiling” (Kelsey, individual interview, April 19, 2016) “Something that makes you happy” (Luke, individual interview, April 19, 2016). I determined that the participants made only a slight differentiation between life satisfaction and happiness; happiness seemed to be a result of being satisfied with life.

**Discussion of RQ Two**

What past of present personal factors do high school students with SLD describe as impacting life satisfaction, motivation, school engagement, and academic progress? From the individual and focus group interviews, the participants’ experiences regarding the personal factors contributing to life satisfaction and therefore school engagement, motivation, and success, mirrored one another’s. There were many statements made and lots of stories to tell, but from the data analysis and personal reflection, several factors were clear contributors. Among these contributors were: personal mood, the quality of the home environment (money, living conditions, effects of divorce, stability) and parental involvement with school, relationships with teachers and their teaching styles, friendships with peers and the quality of those friendships, the difficulties that stem from having a specific learning disability, and having some degree of a belief in God. With a few exceptions, the participants in this study were unique, in that they live in a small town and have grown up with each other. They are a part of the same social network or environment as are their parents, and in most cases, their grandparents. Their social factors weighed heavy on them as everyone knew everyone well and their personal stories. They shared that if something happened to them that should be confidential or private, there was no way to really keep it private and because of the small town environment, no one ever forgets those things. On the other hand, the participants also seemed to be truly invested in the lives of their school mates, in that, they cared what was happening to others around them. This clearly came
out in the focus group discussions. The participants had great compassion for one another when talking as a group. They openly discussed bullying and what can and has happened as a result of bullying. They even went as far to give advice to one another on how to handle bullying and offered support. What was observed in those focus groups was truly heart-warming and inspiring.

Discussion of RQ Three

What past of present spiritual factors do high school students with SLD describe as impacting life satisfaction, motivation, school engagement, and academic progress? All but two of the participants claimed to believe in God. The sixteen participants that claimed this felt that if a person truly believes in God and has faith that He cares about what happens to humans in daily life, then a person can find satisfaction in life and can be happy. From their comments, the participants seemed to have an idea that God is always with them and watching so that makes them behave a certain way and feel a certain way about life. They spoke of prayer being a part of their lives and about God personally answering their prayers in a variety of ways; including academic success (i.e. passing tests in school). They also discussed the fact that it was their parents or grandparents that were responsible for their belief because they have or always have taken them to church. It was important to their parents and/or grandparents that the participants believed in God, went to church, and prayed.

Discussion of Researcher’s Reflection

The research participants have dealt with a SLD since the beginning of their school career. The frustration and difficulties that have accompanied these students, has shaped them into who they are at this point in life. Some of them claimed to be very satisfied and happy with life but others shared a real story of struggle and challenge. They described what it was like to
be in high school and to struggle with a specific learning disability along with all of the other challenges that life brings to them. They were tough students with lots to share and with lots to overcome. Together, they provided insight into the impact that life satisfaction and personal happiness has on academic motivation, engagement, and progress.

According to the U.S. Department of Education website, during the 2012-2013 academic year, there were 6,429,431 youth ages 3-21 that received special education services under IDEA and 42% of those were high school students. Of those, 40% were students who were identified as having a SLD. In order to better instruct this large population of students and to meet their specific educational needs, it is important for their perspectives and perceptions to be understood and validated by teachers, parents, and society in general. It is important to listen to their voices and descriptions of their high school experiences. Based on personal experience in the public school setting, the academic rigor now pressed upon all students, including those with SLD, has increased more stress on teachers, parents, and, in particular, on students such as these participants.

One recurring response that the participants gave was on the very first interview question. The question asked them to describe themselves as students. Fourteen out of the 18 participants gave positive self-descriptions. They collectively described themselves as: outgoing, ready to learn, a good student, making good grades, wanting to get into a good college, energetic, kind, aiming for goals, getting work done, wanting a good education, focused, smart, social, easy to get along with, nice to others, and loved by teachers. At the end of the interview, the participants were asked what they would tell their parents about life satisfaction and success in school. Twelve out of the 18 responded with positive answers such as: “If I have satisfaction in my life, I will get a good college diploma and a great career” (Robert, individual interview, April 12,
2016); “I will graduate and make you (parents) proud and happy” (Ann, individual interview, April 19, 2016); “I am doing good in school” (Brian, individual interview, April 12, 2016); “I am pretty much working for what I want and need in life” (Zeke, individual interview, April 19, 2016); “I am doing really good in class. I am doing good in life and in school” (Brett, individual interviews, April 12, 2016); “I have lots of success in school and even though I say I don’t want to go to school, I really do” (John, individual interview, April 19, 2016).

The positivity of the participants was surprising to me, as many students with disabilities have lower self-esteem than those without, and I wondered what was going on to create this positive outlook and self-perspective. When looking back over the Excel spreadsheet of the individual interview transcriptions I saw a possible connection between the questions related to self-description, level of happiness, and the roles of parents, teachers, and God. The majority of the participants provided positive answers for these questions as well. Interestingly, the positivity elicited both feelings of gratefulness and those of concern. On one hand, I was very happy that the students were positive and had high expectations for themselves as a low self-esteem is or can be a weakness of students with disabilities. On the other hand, I became concerned that some of the participants either did not have realistic goals for their futures or did not have clear concepts of college requirements or what “good grades” really are. In reflection, I feel that it could be a little of both.

Another discovery was that of the strong relationship between the special education teachers and the participants at this school. In fact, when asked what role teachers play in life satisfaction and happiness, the participants described their teachers with comments such as: “They explain stuff that I don’t understand. They are there when I need them in general” (Debbie, individual interview, April 12, 2016); “They are like parents” (Zeke, individual
interview, April 19, 2016); “They teach kids how to do stuff” (Billy, individual interview, April 19, 2016); “They pressure you to get your work done and to focus…to get your grades up” (David, individual interview, April 19, 2016); “Teachers have confidence in you and motivate you to do your work” (E.J., individual interview, April 19, 2016); “They try to work with you and if you are upset, they try to help” (Mike, individual interview, April 19, 2016). One clear detail that came through from the voices of the participants was the emphasis on the relationship between them and their special education teachers. They only mentioned these teachers by name in their descriptions.

When asked what they would tell their teachers, the participants responded: “I wouldn’t be able to do anything without my teachers” (Brett, individual interview, April 12, 2016); “I couldn’t learn without my teachers”; “I am glad that I have them”; “They helped me succeed” (Austin, individual interview, April 12, 2016); “Thank them for all the help they give us to stay motivated” (Ann, individual interview, April 19, 2016). Overall, the participants described their teachers as people whom they appreciated and looked to for guidance and help. When they talked about their teachers, they spoke with voices of appreciation and a great deal of fondness.

A third discovery was that of the multi-faceted job of teachers. As I was able to watch the interactions among teachers and students, teachers and parents, and among the teachers themselves, I observed something interesting and precious. This was the blurred line that runs among this community of teachers, parents, and students. The teachers were able to connect with their students outside of the classroom as they knew their families and all about their lives outside of school. The town in which this school is located is one where many of the teachers and parents grew up together, go to church together, and share community connectedness. Whether positive or negative, relationships existed among these people and they seemed to have
a common connection. Their lives seemed to be intertwined and this was something the participants could recognize; even if they didn’t or couldn’t communicate it as such. This connection, perhaps, is the very thing that increases the level of life satisfaction as well as the amount of student engagement, motivation, and academic progress for the participants.

One final point of interest was the number of participants who claimed to not only believe in God but to also have a strong relationship with God. Many of the participants felt that it was God who helped them to be successful and who was the source of personal happiness. Out of the 18 participants, all but two described themselves as believing in God and God as someone who plays a big role in their level of personal happiness and satisfaction in life. This seemed to be a much higher percentage than what I initially thought I would find in a public school environment as opposed, perhaps, to a parochial school. This discovery added to the uniqueness of this school environment and community.

Implications

The implications of this study are numerous as it dealt with the lives of young people. However, the overarching implication is that the responsibility of a successful educational system in the United States rests on the shoulders of everyone. High stakes testing and teacher evaluation programs could be tools for maintaining standards, but these are only tools. Previous studies have indicated that students’ life satisfaction influences their subjective well-being (Shin & Johnson, 1978) and their success in relationships. Additionally, the level of life satisfaction influences their attitudes toward their teachers and school (Gilman & Huebner, 2006; Mok & Flynn, 2002) as well as their mental health, academic motivation, academic performance, and peer relationships.
The theoretical, empirical, and practical situations that were discussed throughout this study, connect the implications for all those stakeholders and those interested in the condition of the US educational system today and the impact it is having on our youth and on our society at large. The source of student academic success lies within the realm of what makes us all human; the desire for life-satisfaction and personal happiness.

Implications for Policymakers

Research has continually indicated over the past thirty years, that features of school climate have profound impact on individual experience and on the academic progress of students. Commitment to school and positive feedback from teachers, two aspects of school climate, have been shown to also affect students’ self-esteem. There has been a proven connection between school climate, student absenteeism and the rate of student suspension (Pickeral, Evans, Hughes, & Hutchison, 2009). These studies have focused solely on general education and not that of students with SLD. Policymakers need to examine the roots of student disengagement and lack of motivation before mandating frustrating and unrealistic standards both for teachers and for students; particularly, for those with SLD.

Implications for Educators

Motivation is closely linked to student’s perceptions of teacher expectations. Studies of middle and high school students have shown that students shape their own educational expectations from the perceptions of their teachers’ expectations (Muller, Katz, & Dance, 1999). Motivational theorists, such as Bandura, suggest that students are relationally aware and that the perception of their relationship with their teacher is essential in motivating students to succeed academically (Bandura, 1997).
The classroom becomes a supportive place in which students can engage in academically and socially productive ways only when there is a positive relationship between the teacher and the student (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). The students know when there is a positive teacher-student relationship when they sense the presence of closeness, warmth, and positivity (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Students who have positive relationships with their teachers have a secure base in the classroom which allows them to explore both academically and socially. They are then more apt to take on academic challenges and work on social-emotional development (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). A recent study claimed that student-perceived teacher connection was the factor most closely associated with growth in achievement from 8th to 12th grade, and an even greater growth in achievement when there was a tight connection with their special education teachers (Gregory & Weinstein, 2004).

Teachers have an enormous stake in the education and development of young people. This role of educators is a trajectory of students throughout the formal schooling experience (Baker, Grant, & Morlock, 2008). Positive teacher-student relationships, as described in the Attachment Theory (Ainsworth, 1982; Bowlby, 1969), enable students to feel safe and secure in their learning environments, providing a foundation for important social and academic skills.

**Implications for Parents**

Initially adolescents look at the reactions of vital people in their lives when building their own self-concept and esteem (Gibson & Jefferson, 2006). These interactions and experiences that come from the parent-child relationship, are those that dictate how young people will self-evaluate and relate to others. The relationship that adolescents experience with their parents foreshadows their attitudes toward themselves and the quality of relationships they will have with their peers (Gecas, 1971; Wilkinson, 2004). It is quite the responsibility of parents to
ensure that their children experience positive, loving, and healthy relationships at an early age so that they can develop the necessary personal characteristics that later lead to school motivation, engagement, and academic success.
Table 6

*Implications for Stakeholders*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Impact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Policy Makers</strong></td>
<td>1. Research the deepest root of disengagement and lack of motivation among students.</td>
<td>1. Addresses the cause; providing different outcomes and standards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Create standards or accountability programs for parents; instructional not punitive.</td>
<td>2. Addressing family and parental-child relationships and responsibilities promotes academic engagement, motivation, and progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Administrators and Teachers</strong></td>
<td>1. Create school-based parent nights, such as educational service nights and community events.</td>
<td>1. Highlight healthy parent-adolescent relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Model appropriate communication skills in student assistance teams; Individual Education Programs; and other school-based interactions with teachers, parents, and students.</td>
<td>2. Educate parents about the relationship between perceived parental involvement, levels of self-esteem at adolescence, and peer relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Create other various opportunities at traditional and non-traditional times for parents to become involved in school activities.</td>
<td>3. Parental involvement in schools can positively impact achievement in mathematics and literacy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Model appropriate communication skills, illustrate important information, and support adolescents’ growth through curriculum guidance meetings with parents and students.</td>
<td>4. Highlight healthy parent-adolescent relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Require parents to sign paperwork at school to create interactions between parents, teachers, and students.</td>
<td>5. Parental involvement in schools can positively impact achievement in mathematics, in literacy. Parental involvement in middle school can positively impact future high school graduation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Ensure a healthy and positive learning environment at all times.</td>
<td>6. Classroom environment is critical to the academic engagement and progress of students.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6 (con’t)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Impact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>1. Develop a healthy relationship with the student. Seek counseling if</td>
<td>1. The student’s basic needs (physical, mental, and emotional) have to be met before academic progress is substantial. Parental involvement and support positively impacts academic achievement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>needed.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Maintain a healthy relationship with the student. Encourage and</td>
<td>2. Healthy parental relationships directly impacts the level of life satisfaction of students which spills over into the school environment, impacting engagement and motivation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>show love and support.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Attend school meetings and functions pertaining to the child.</td>
<td>3. Participation in school events gives students a sense of personal support and a place of priority in the family. This impacts emotional well-being and self-esteem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Maintain regular communication with the child’s teacher.</td>
<td>4. Supporting the teacher and being responsive with communication gives overall support and stability to educational goals for students.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Limitations**

In a qualitative study, a limitation is related to the validity and reliability of the study. “Because qualitative research occurs in the natural setting it is extremely difficult to replicate studies” (Wiersma, 2000, p. 211). When the research design and methodologies were chosen for my study, (phenomenology for example) there were automatically limitations of which I had no control. In this study, several limitations existed. First, the sample size was small. Although the number was an acceptable one for the methodology utilized, it provided a small representation of
all of the students at this school who struggled with a learning disability. Additionally, the study was limited to only those students who returned permission slips. Due to the number of participants, I was not able to hear how all of the students at the participating school, with SLD, describe life-satisfaction and how it impacts school engagement, motivation, and academic progress.

A second limitation was time. Due to the school schedule and the limited time for observations and interaction with the students, I was not able to have all of the participants in the focus groups discussions. A few of the participants were absent on the day of the focus groups or were seniors with early release schedules. Scheduling so as to not interfere with SOL reviews or remediation efforts was also challenging. The school staff was very supportive and tried to work me into the school and class schedule as much as possible. However, time certainly was a limitation in this study.

A third limitation was the age of the participants; ranging from 13-19. Due to the nature of learning disabilities and of maturity levels, it was difficult for some of the participants to understand the questions they were being asked. I had to clarify or rephrase the interview and focus group questions for many of the participants. It was an uncertainty at times, how genuine answers were and in some cases, the participants would just answer, “I don’t know” to some of the questions just to get finished with the interview. This was the case more so with the individual interviews as opposed to the focus groups, possibly due to the awkwardness of some being with the researcher and being asked personal questions that required some thought and personal reflection.

A final limitation is the location of the participating school. The school is a small town where people’s lives are intertwined and where there are lots of family relations that go back
many years. Everyone knows everyone and everyone’s personal business and family events. The culture and closeness of this group of participants played a major role in how they believed spiritually and their perspectives on education, personal happiness, and level of life-satisfaction. The results of this study may not look the same as those of participants from a large city or differing culture. This limits the validity and reliability of this if replicated in a different environment.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The purpose of this phenomenological transcendental study was to understand how high school students with specific learning disabilities describe life satisfaction and how it impacts student motivation, engagements, and academic progress. My desire was to capture this phenomenon through individual interviews and group interviews with my participants. I also wanted a different perspective so I added the written responses from the life satisfaction questionnaires and my own classroom observations. This is how I chose to capture the voices and experiences of my participants.

Based on the findings of this particular study, however, there are several areas to be considered for future research. Many schools do not have the same unique small town and small school environment and culture as this study’s participating school. One area of future research could be to determine if the culture of a large town or city and a large school impacts how high school students with SLD describe life satisfaction and how it impacts their school experience and success. The life experiences of this particular group of participants are deeply tied to the nuances of life in a small town where they go to school with other students from kindergarten through 12th grade and where many of their parents and teachers have had the same experiences.
A second area of future research could be the thread of connection between personal happiness, a belief and personal relationship with God, and life in a small southern town. The participants described their levels of life-satisfaction and their belief that God is real and cares about them and things that happen to them in daily life as fairly high and constant; directly impacting their success in school. However, the limitation of the demographics of the school may be impacting this phenomenon to a large extent. If a future study was performed in a larger setting and in a larger public school, the results may be very different. It would be interesting to see how students at a school with a different culture (large city, transient, higher socio-economic status, etc.) would describe their belief and relationships with God in relation to levels of life-satisfaction, school engagement, motivation, and academic progress.

A third area of future research could be for the researcher to ask a more specific question relating solely to engagement such as: “If classroom engagement is so important, why specifically are students not engaged? My focus was broader and dealt more with the impact of life satisfaction on academics; not engagement. From the onset, I wanted to see if the students were actually engaged in the classroom and so I went into six different classes of different content and was able to engage in 39 observations on my participants within these different classes. I wanted to observe the students in the classroom in order to “understand the world from the participant’s point of view, by listening to or observing a person in a natural environment” (Miller & Alvarado, 2005, p. 348). What I discovered was that on average, my participants were participating in activities unrelated to class 9 out of 20 times; almost half their time spent in class.

From the individual interviews and focus groups, the following information was collected regarding academic engagement. Eleven participants agreed that the more engaged they are in
class, the better they do on tests and quizzes and the better their grades are. They agreed that their academic engagement impacts their academic progress. The looming question was if 11 of the 18 participants understood the importance of engagement, why were they not engaged upon observation? This would be a worthy and critical objective for a future study on high school student with specific learning disabilities.

Finally, future research could be conducted using the perspectives of parents and teachers of high school students with SLD. This would provide a cross-reference for how students may act or behave at school as opposed to how parents see them at home or even how students see themselves. Due to the nature of the age of the participants in this study, maturity plays a large role in how the participants comprehend and answer the research questions. Teachers could give input on student achievement levels and behaviors over the course of the entire year or longer. Another interesting research would involve using more of a case-study approach as opposed to a transcendental approach. Having the perspectives from teachers and parents in addition to the student perspectives could deepen the relationships and connections made between life-satisfaction and success in school.

**Summary of Research**

This research was a phenomenological transcendental study. Many theories formed the framework of this study; with the major guide being Bruner’s constructivist theory. By using these theories as a framework, this study sought to understand how high school students with SLD describe life-satisfaction and its impact on academic engagement, motivation, and progress. Through the use of classroom observations, individual interviews, focus groups, and a student survey, an analysis of the data revealed significant findings that detailed student descriptions of life-satisfaction and how they relate to school. My desire was to provide others with the
opportunity to see how those who are impacted the most from our educational system, high school students with specific learning disabilities, describe life satisfaction and how it impacts school engagement, motivation, and progress.

What was obvious throughout the process of this study is that the participants were not easily categorized. They were all unique individuals looking at life-satisfaction and personal happiness from 18 different perspectives. Some of them lived in homes that are stable and happy. Some of them didn’t have stability or security in their daily home life at all. Some of them had greater degrees of learning disabilities that require a larger amount of teacher support than other participants. Some participants had experienced abuse and others had felt the impact of living in a low sociocultural situation. However, commonalities for the majority of the participants were the relationships with their teachers, with their parents, and with God. These relationships made the difference; more so than how they learned or in what order they learned. The importance they placed on their relationships with teachers was astounding and their knowledge of the importance of parental roles was equally moving. However, their description of the role that a belief in God and His concern for them, played in their daily level of life-satisfaction and personal happiness was shocking and unexpected.

The knowledge I gained from listening to the way the participants described their level of life-satisfaction or personal happiness and how that impacts academic success was invaluable. I grew in my own knowledge of what these students face each day and how they deal with high school life. I realized even more that the role of a teacher truly is a high calling and one to be dealt with using the greatest care; a responsibility not to be taken lightly. The role of a special education teacher, from the unified voice of my participants, held even more value and criticality for them. As one student remarked, “I need my teachers.” The role of a teacher far surpasses any
technological device or lesson plan. It is the relationship that matters most. I was also able to see through participant eyes and voices the sheer power of a stable home. Basic physical needs are a necessity but so are emotional needs. Students need strong families to be strong students and individuals.

Finally, the participants described their belief that God is real and cares about them as a major part of their satisfaction with life and personal happiness. Many of the teachers at the participating school knew this about their students as they know them and their families well. Therefore, this part of their life-satisfaction and personal happiness, at this particular school, could also be well supported. Tuning in to how students describe their life-satisfaction and how that impacts their academic engagement, motivation, and progress is not only a crucial part to their overall academic success but also to their personal well-being.
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March 18, 2016

Rebecca Lawhorne Dilling


Dear Rebecca,

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

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

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School
Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971
Appendix B: IRB Informed Consent

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 3/18/16 to 3/17/17
Protocol # 2458.031816

PARENT/CUSTODIAN CONSENT FORM

LIFE SATISFACTION: A Study of Engagement and the Academic Progress of High School Students with Specific Learning Disabilities
Rebecca Lawhorne Dilling
Liberty University School of Education

Your child/student is invited to be in a research study of how life satisfaction (happiness) is connected to school engagement and academic progress in students with specific learning disabilities. He or she was selected as a possible participant because he or she is high school age and has been identified as having a specific learning disability. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to allow him or her to be in the study.

Rebecca Lawhorne Dilling, doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is to understand how high school students with specific learning disabilities describe life satisfaction and its impact on student motivation, academic engagement, and academic progress.

Procedures:
If you agree to allow your child/student to be in this study, I would ask him or her to do the following things:

1.) Be observed by the researcher, both in general education classes and in the resource room if applicable. These observations will take place during a week’s time frame and at each grade level. The observation times will be dependent on the school schedule and planned activities.
2.) Participate in a half hour individual interview with the researcher.
3.) Participate in a 45-60 minute group discussion with other students who have been identified with a specific learning disability.
4.) Fill out a life satisfaction questionnaire which will take about fifteen minutes.

The interviews and focus groups will be recorded and/or video-taped.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:
The risks involved in this study are minimal, which is no more than the participant would encounter in everyday life while at school. However, the student will be asked to share information about personal
happiness and spiritual beliefs. Also, in the case where the researcher is privy to information involving child abuse, neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others, there is mandatory reporting. The benefits of participation are the contributions to the field of education; helping educators better understand the academic experiences of high school students with specific learning disabilities. However, the participants will not receive a direct benefit for participating in the study.

**Compensation:**
There is no compensation for taking part in this study.

**Confidentiality:**
All data collection will be completely confidential. No names will be mentioned in the study as students will be given pseudonyms to be used throughout the study. 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. Also, all collected data including the recordings will be stored in a lock box at the researcher’s home until the study has been completed. Only the researcher will have access to the information. After three years, all data will be destroyed including the recordings. While I, as the researcher, will take great precaution in maintaining confidentiality, I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus groups will maintain that same confidentiality and privacy.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**
Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to allow your child/student to participate will not affect his or her current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to allow your child/student to participate, he or she is free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**How to Withdraw from the Study:**
If your child/student chooses to withdraw from the study, you or he/she should contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should your child/student choose to withdraw, data collected from him or her, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but his or her contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if he or she chooses to withdraw.

**Contacts and Questions:**
The researcher conducting this study is Rebecca Dilling. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at rdilling@liberty.edu or at 434-907-2772. You may also contact the research’s faculty advisor, Dr. Leonard Parker at lwarker@liberty.edu. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Carter 134, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

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 allow my child/student to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record my child/student as part of his or her participation in this study

Signature of minor: ___________________________________________ Date: __________________________

Signature of parent or guardian: ___________________________________________ Date: __________________________

Signature of Investigator: ___________________________________________ Date: __________________________

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 3/18/16 to 3/17/17
Protocol # 2458.031816
Appendix C: Participant Recruitment Flyer

Research Participants Needed!

Life Satisfaction and Academic Success

- Are you in high school?
- Are you happy with life?
- Do you want to be a part of a study that helps adults become more aware of what motivates teenagers in high school?
- Do you want to be a part of something important that could help make life better for students with specific learning disabilities in the future?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you may be eligible to participate in an academic research study.

The purpose of the research study is to understand how high school students with specific learning disabilities describe life satisfaction and how it impacts motivation, academic engagement, and academic success. The source of life satisfaction (happiness) and the role it plays in academics will also be explored and described by the students.

The study is being conducted at Parry McCluer High School.

Please contact Rebecca Dilling at (434) 907-2772 or rdilling@liberty.edu for more information.
Appendix D: Classroom Observation Engagement Measure Checklist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School:</th>
<th>Date and hour:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observer’s name:</td>
<td>Class title:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor’s name:</td>
<td>Special notes:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of students:</td>
<td>Number of students with identified as having a specific learning disability as defined in IDEA:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**BEHAVIORS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INSTRUCTOR:</th>
<th>NOTES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Talking to entire class while all the students are passive receivers as in a lecture.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Telling/asking to one or a group of students, or teaching/showing an application to a student.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Starting or conducting a discussion open to whole class, or assigning some students for some learning tasks such as independent research, reading, or written assignment.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Listening/monitoring actively discussing one or a group of students.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Listening/monitoring actively discussing with the entire class.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**STUDENT OBSERVATION CHECKLIST**

(6/10 OBSERVATIONS DURING THE CLASS PERIOD)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STUDENT 1</th>
<th>STUDENT 2</th>
<th>STUDENT 3</th>
<th>STUDENT 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Engaging in activities unrelated to the class such as, but not limited to: reading books, passing notes, using social media, or whispering/talking to a friend, or using social media.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Reading or writing something related to class (including following the lecture from a published material, taking notes, etc.)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Listening to the instructor or a student talking about something pertaining to class, looking at slides or the board-staying engaged in class</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Talking to the instructor/reading something to entire class or writing something on the board, flipchart etc.</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Talking/discussing with one or a group of students on the subject matter</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Demeanor/attitude while in class</td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E: Individual Interview Questions

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

1. How would you describe yourself as a student? Why?

2. How would you describe your amount of interest in school? (grades, graduation etc)

3. How would you describe yourself when it comes to motivation? Outside of school? At school?

4. What motivates you? Where does motivation come from?

5. What is happiness and where do you think it comes from?

6. How would you describe your level of happiness as a person? Why?

7. What is life satisfaction and where do you think it comes from?

8. How would you describe your satisfaction with life? Why?

9. How do you think happiness or life satisfaction impacts student academic progress or success? To what extent?

10. What role do you think teachers play in student happiness or life satisfaction?

11. What role do you think parents play in student happiness or life satisfaction?

12. How would you describe your believe in God or spirituality?

13. What role do you think spirituality or belief in God plays in life satisfaction or happiness?

14. In your opinion, what could be done to improve your life satisfaction and/or that of others?

15. In your opinion, what could be done to improve your academic motivation and/or that of others?

16. In your opinion, what could be done to increase your academic engagement in the classroom and/or that of others?

17. How do you think academic engagement or class involvement impacts student progress?

18. What would you tell your parents about life satisfaction and success in school?

19. What would you tell your teachers about life satisfaction and success in school?

20. Do you have any comments that you would like to add?
Appendix F: Focus Group Questions

*Focus Group Conversation Starters*

Please respond to the following:

1. Define happiness. Where does it come from?

2. Describe someone who you think is a happy person.

3. Define satisfaction.

4. What does it mean to you to be “satisfied with life?”

5. How would you describe your level of happiness outside of school?

6. Are you generally satisfied with your life? Why or why not?

7. How does being “happy” or “satisfied” impact your grades at school?

8. How would you define “good grades” in school?

9. Why do you make good grades? Or why not?

10. How can you become a more satisfied or happy person if you are not already?

11. Why do you believe in God? Or why not?

12. How does spirituality or a belief in God impact overall happiness and success at school and in the future?

13. What would help you do better in school?
Appendix G: Student Life Satisfaction Questionnaire

Life Satisfaction Questionnaire

Please see the following website for this questionnaire:
Appendix H: Samples of Individual Interview Transcriptions

Individual Interview with “Ann”

Researcher: Alright, so the first question is: How would you describe yourself as a student?
ANN: Um, I guess I. I just aim for my goals and I guess just keep up with my grades and if I am failing something I go and ask teachers, “What can I do to take this in and bring this in to get good grades. So I really stay on my grades, I guess. A good student maybe? I don’t know.
Researcher: Sounds like it. So, that brings me to the second question which is: How would you describe your amount of interest in school?
ANN: Um like I said, I like keeping up with my grades. I like school and I think it’s okay. I mean, I don’t like being here all the time but ..
Researcher: So you are pretty interested in what is going on here (at school)?
ANN: Yeah
Researcher: Ok, How would you describe yourself when it comes to motivation? Outside of school and here at school?
ANN: Um... Like..I guess sometimes I’m not that motivated but most of the days I’m pretty motivated. Like I get up early and drink and eat breakfast, have a ...yeah..pretty... stay motivated.
Researcher: Like outside of school?
ANN: Yeah
Researcher: Ok, so you do stuff outside of school?
ANN: Yeah. Um, I play with my brothers and sisters and hopefully getting a job soon.
Researcher: Yeah? Where?
ANN: Hopefully Subway or the hotel beside there.
Researcher: Good. Ok, how about at school, are you motivated, pretty much, to do well consistently?
ANN: Yeah, I would say I was.
(Lots of noise)
Researcher: 7th graders on tour. Ok. What motivates you?
ANN: Mmmm...I guess trying to pass school and well, my grandmother died here recently and so that’s really keeping me motivated...cause she wanted me to pass school, do good in school, and yeah...I was gonna quit band but I realized my Nana really wants me to do band so I was like, “I’m gonna stay in there.”
Researcher: I’m sorry to hear that Honey.
ANN: Yeah, she has been gone 7 months today.
Researcher: I loved my grandmother. She died..I mean she has been gone for like 8-10 years and I miss her still. Even as a 47 year old.
ANN: Yeah
Researcher: It’s tough. I am a Nana now. So I am somebody’s grandmother now but it’s a special bond. I am sorry to hear that. But I am so glad that she is still motivating you even now. Ok so, that motivation that you talk about..That comes from your grandmother. Does motivation come from anywhere else?
ANN: I guess the teachers. The teachers stay on my grades. Like, “You need to get this in.” And they help me try to get workin’. They help me..they push my day to make me like..want to do good in school.
Researcher: Ok, What is happiness and where do you think it comes from?
ANN: Um ..I guess..
Researcher: It’s tough isn’t it!
ANN: Yeah. I guess just like being around people like you love and care about and who you know love and care about you…and like being around people that makes you happy I reckon?
Researcher: Mmmhmm. Ok, so as a person, and you are happy, where does that come from? Like not necessarily from an outside source, but it could be, but where do you think that comes from as far as you go?
ANN: Uh. (long pause)
Researcher: Or is it just those people in your life?
Ann: Yeah, I guess it is just like people in my life and just trying to stay motivated in school to go walk across the stage. (giggle)
Researcher: Good. Ok, how would you describe your level of happiness as a person and why? So, are you happy or are you not happy? Medium? I mean consistently?
ANN: Well, I guess the past few months I’ve been not as happy but I’d say I’m pretty happy about life. I think its..well some days I have my days like “Man, I wish my Nana was still here..but..”
Researcher: Mmmhmm, but most of the time you are pretty happy?
ANN: Yeah
Researcher: What is life satisfaction?
ANN: Uh. (giggle)
Researcher: What makes you satisfied with your life?
ANN: I guess just like doing my goals that I aim for and I guess just making people happy around me. Like if they are down, make ‘em feel up and um I guess just helping out people when they need help.
Researcher: So doing those things makes you feel satisfied or happy inside?
ANN: Yeah.
Researcher: How do you think that happiness or life satisfaction impacts student academic progress? So, how does you being happy or being satisfied with your life impact what grades you get or passing SOLs, or making your IEP goals?
ANN: I guess ‘cause like if you are happy then you’re motivated to like pass the SOLs or like to do good in school. And being happy is just like a good thing to do because you pass grades. Because like if you’re down, then you aren’t gonna want to do nothing’and you’re not gonna wanna just sit there and be like..'I don’t wanna today…just not be there.”
Researcher: Do you think (This is not on my paper actually) but do you think that mood and happiness are the same or are they different?
ANN: I think maybe the same..I’d say maybe they are the same.
Researcher: the same?
ANN: Yeah.
Researcher: Ok, back to my paper. What role do you think teachers play in student happiness or life satisfaction?
ANN: Well, I guess if you, like, do good in their class, that it..like they’ll motivate you to keep doing better, like push your grades, like help you get them up.
Researcher: Is it a big role they play or a little one?
ANN: I’d say it’s a big one.
Researcher: How about parents?
ANN: A big one cause they motivate you to get there, graduate, to get good grades, get…they just try to help you out to get through school.
Researcher: Good, alright, here’s a big one: How would you describe your belief in God or spirituality?
ANN: I’d say it’s strong. I believe in God. I believe in like ..like I believe in Him.
Researcher: Pretty strong relationship?
ANN: Yeah.
Researcher: Ok, what role do you think your belief in God plays in life satisfaction or happiness?
ANN: I think it’s just thinking that He’s basically always there for you when you need someone to talk to and I guess He plays a big role.
Researcher: In your opinion, what could be done to improve your life satisfaction and/or that of others? What would improve how satisfied you are in life?
ANN: I reckon like, to keep motivated and to try to like help even like I guess help more people out like help as many people as I can to make them happy and to make sure when they are down and stuff, to bring them back up.
Researcher: In your opinion, what could be done to improve your academic engagement in the classroom or that of others? Like how in tune you are or how much you participate in class.
ANN: I guess like, mmm, I have no clue.(giggle) Uh, I guess maybe doing like, on hands stuff like, make sure the student understands what the like, unit is about or the lesson is about.
Researcher: Ok, um, how do you think academic engagement in class involvement impacts student progress?
ANN: I guess like if you are really paying attention like, and you understand and you ask questions, it really engages it and possibly to bring your grades up and keep your grades at a good grade..like an A or B or C.
Researcher: Ok, what would you tell your parents about life satisfaction and success in school?
ANN: What I would tell them about it?
Researcher: Yes.
ANN: Um that..um that you should really..(giggle)
Researcher: It's okay, these are not easy questions.
ANN: I guess tell them, my parents that I am just going for my goals and to graduate and that I am going to do it and make them happy. And that I am going to walk across the stage for them.
Researcher: And how does your life-satisfaction come into play there?
ANN: I guess if I’m happy, it makes them happy, to see their kid happy.
Researcher: Ok, how about your teachers?
ANN: I would tell them that they ..thank them for all the things and help that they did and do for us and help us stay motivated (interrupted by another teacher) just um...and…
Researcher: So ..thanking them for helping you to be more satisfied or happy?
ANN: Yeah.
Researcher: Ok, so my very last question is, if you are going to help students in the future who have disabilities of any kind and thinking about life satisfaction and engagement and motivation, and God or anything, is there anything that you would like to say to them?
ANN: Just to keep their head up. That they can do it. That they need to stay strong and keep their head up and stay going.
Researcher: Thank you so much. You have been such a joy to have.

Interview with “E.J.”

Researcher: How would you describe yourself as a student?
E.J.: Smart and a nice person to other kids and cool.
Researcher: And why is that?
E.J.: Well, I see myself as smart for a 7th grader and I try real hard to get my work done. And even though I slack off a little, I do try my best.
Researcher: How would you describe your amount of interest in school?
E.J.: Um, it’s not, like my amount of interest in school is between the middle of not and good. Sometimes I don’t want to be here and sometimes I do so I can get work done. Other times, it’s just like I am not feeling that good about doing school.
Researcher: Why is that?
E.J.: Well like sometimes it is hard to do work and stuff and then I get stressed out.
Researcher: How would you describe yourself when it comes to motivation?
E.J.: Um, I do get motivated a lot by teachers and stuff and I feel like I can do the work. I like being motivated and stuff.
Researcher: How about outside of school?
E.J.: My mom and dad always motivate me to finish my work and stuff and focus on school.
Researcher: What motivates you?
E.J.: Um, like if my teacher tells me like… if you get your work done, then you will get a reward for doing your work and focusing and stuff. That would motivate me or like I could have a little down time or free time if I do my work.

Researcher: Where does motivation come from?
E.J.: Um, to me it comes from like the heart because if I get motivated, I feel like I can do it and then my brain says you can do and my heart keeps me motivated.

Researcher: What is happiness?
E.J.: Happiness to me is when I hang out with friends and my family.
Researcher: Where does it come from?
E.J.: It comes from joy I guess. That would be the heart?

Researcher: How would you describe your level of happiness as a person? How happy are you?
E.J.: Like, it depends on the day for me. I’ll be happy if I am not that tired. But if I am still tired, I will still be happy because I am a happy person. It takes a lot to make me not happy.

Researcher: Why is that?
E.J.: Because I’m not uh…it takes a lot to make me mad because I am an easy person. Well, I am a hard person to get mad actually so I don’t get mad at every person for no reason. I’m not that person. Everybody says I am a nice person and all the teachers call me a nice person so…

Researcher: What is life satisfaction and where do you think it comes from?
E.J.: Life satisfaction?
Researcher: Uh-huh.
E.J.: My life...um, what do you mean by that?
Researcher: Like how happy you are with life. If you have what you need or..
E.J.: I have what I want a good family and good friends.
Researcher: So you are pretty satisfied with your life?

Researcher: How do you think happiness or life satisfaction impacts your school work?
E.J.: Can you explain that one more time?
Researcher: Yeah. Like how does you being happy or not happy, satisfied or not satisfied…how does that make you do well in school or not?
E.J.: Um, like there is some work that I am happy to do. It’s not easy and it’s not hard. It’s right there in the middle. I am not happy when the work is really hard and I can’t do it and stuff because I want the work to be between easy and hard so…it won’t be too easy or too hard.

Researcher: What role do you think teachers play in student happiness or life satisfaction?
E.J.: Teachers have confidence in you and motivate you a lot with your work. They want what’s best for you and stuff.

Researcher: What role do you think parents play in student happiness or life satisfaction?
E.J.: They have a good role in my life. They tell me what to do and not to do in my life. They don’t want to see me growing up living with them my whole entire life. They want to see me out there going to college and getting a good job and a house of my own.

Researcher: How would you describe your belief in God or spirituality?
E.J.: Well, my mom is a pastor so I do believe in God. He helps me through hard times and stuff.

Researcher: What role do you think your belief in God plays in life satisfaction or happiness?
E.J.: Like if I have a bad day and stuff, He will turn my bad day upside down into a happy day. And He will make me more happy. I will pray to him sometimes and I love Him so much. And I do go to church every Sunday and pray.

Researcher: In your opinion, what could be done to improve your life satisfaction and/or that of others?
E.J.: I don’t want to see others, my friends doing bad stuff. If my friends are doing really good stuff, it makes me happy that they are doing good stuff but when they do bad stuff, it doesn’t seem right to me and they want me to fall into that and I’m like….no, I’m not going to do that.
Researcher: In your opinion, what could be done to improve your academic motivation and/or that of others?
E.J.: I don’t know.
Researcher: In your opinion, what could be done to increase your academic engagement in the classroom and/or that of others?
E.J.: Like, sometimes I think we should have a bit of free time so you have a chance to socialize with your friends…Not just at lunch or P.E. but you have class do it if you finish all your work and the class plays a class game together on the Smartboard or an activity that the teacher has for the whole entire class to do together. You can do partner work, you could do it with a group…not just by yourself. I think that would be a better choice to do in class.
Researcher: What would you tell your parents about life satisfaction and success in school?
E.J.: I would tell them that I have a lot of success in school. I have a lot of chances and even though I say I don’t want to go to school, I actually do want to go to school and do all of my work.
Researcher: What would you tell your teachers?
E.J.: I would tell my teachers that I would love if they would like give me more choices and explain it more to me instead of saying it once because I don’t understand a lot of stuff.
Researcher: Ok, and do you have anything else or more comments about life satisfaction or God, or school or how to be more successful?
E.J.: Being more successful…focus and do all of your work. And for school, um…stay in school.
Researcher: Thank you so very much. I appreciate you taking the time to talk with me today.
Appendix I: Focus Group Transcriptions

Focus Group #1

Researcher: The first question I want ya’ll to talk about today is: Define happiness and discuss where it comes from.
ANN: I guess happiness is being around people that you love and care about like family and friends.
BRIAN: Same thing she said, being around friends.
JIMMY: Being around people who love you and you are happy around them. It comes from your heart.
CHRIS: Yep.
AUSTIN: Are we all allowed to say something?
Researcher: Yes! You can!
AUSTIN: Happiness is an emotion that you get when you get people on your side who care about you.
Researcher: Don’t forget to speak real loud so I can pick you up. That is a very important thing. BRIAN: Why don’t you just hold the mic up to people’s mouths and be like, TALK!
Researcher: That would be a good idea!
BRIAN: Can I do that?
Researcher: (laughing) No! It probably won’t work but you can slide it down a little bit when you talk.
(laughing)
Researcher: Alright. Describe someone who you think is a happy person.
(Murmuring and giggling)
CHRIS: My Mom.
Researcher: Don’t forget to describe the person.
CHRIS: Um, my mom because she is nice. She buys me stuff.
ROBERT: My step-dad because he loves racing. His car is almost finished.
AUSTIN: ANN because she is always there for me. She is always happy.
JIMMY: Not always. She will knock your head off if you make her mad! Like she done that kid last year!
ANN: Oh my God, shut up!
JIMMY: About four days before Homecoming, she knocked that boy up side his head!
ANN: He called me a name.
JIMMY: He called her a whore!
(laughing from the group)
JIMMY: I would have hit him too!
Researcher: So we have step-dad because he likes racing. We have mom….
(Boys start talking about how their dogs make them happy...silliness, laughing..)
Researcher: Alright. Now, we are going to define life satisfaction.
ANN: Helping other people out and always being there for them when you know they need you and when they need someone, I’ll be there for them.
(Boys cutting up)
Researcher: So what are you describing as life satisfaction over here?
BRIAN: Listening to music with friends.
Researcher: What does it mean to be satisfied with life?
ROBERT: Means to be happy and not want to kill yourself.
AUSTIN: When you are just satisfied with your life.
Researcher: Ok, next question: How would you describe your level of happiness outside of school?
BRIAN: Horrible.
ANN: I would say pretty good I have a boyfriend and he cares about me. He does stuff for me, even though I don’t like it, but…He’ll want to buy me something and I’ll say, “Nope, can’t do it.” So I’m pretty happy. I have my mom who is always there for me like when I am feeling down, she is always there for me.
CHRIS: My life is good too.
AUSTIN: I have to say in the middle cause when I go home, there are usually arguments with my mom and dad. I am stuck in the middle of it. I go home with like bullying and all...all the stress from school. It just tears me down. It’s rough when I go home.
Researcher: Ok. Yeah, that is rough. Do you hear that? Did you hear what he said? (directed to a few boys who were cutting up) Make sure you listen to each other. Anyone else want to comment on that?
JIMMY: I have a good life. My daddy cares for me.
Researcher: Are you generally satisfied with your life? Why or why not?
CHRIS: Yes!
Researcher: Why?
CHRIS: Because my dad...he does stuff with me.
Researcher: Like what?
CHRIS: Fishing, hunting...
BRIAN: My grandpa lets me drive the truck. He lets me shoot my guns whenever I want to. He lets me go places...where he doesn’t want to go but I do, that require a four-wheel drive. He takes me places where I can ride my dirt bike and shoot my gun. He takes me fishing. We have fun. We watch TV together.
Researcher: So spending time together.
ANN: I guess because I just like being there for people and that makes me happy. I guess just having a loving family and a caring boyfriend.
AUSTIN: I’d have to say that, no, I’m not. Because I’ve screwed up in the past. I’ve attempted suicide. I’ve cut myself. I just wish I could go back and change that.
Researcher: What would you do differently?
AUSTIN: Like, instead of hiding what goes on...stuff that tears me down and all, I would talk. I would actually go back and talk to somebody.
BRIAN: I’m sorry AUSTIN.
Researcher: How about you Mr. Artist, (boy drawing on a sketch pad)
CHRIS: I am pretty much satisfied with my life because I have everything that I need. I have everything that I want.
Researcher: Ok, next question. How does being happy or satisfied impact you here at school? In particular with your disabilities, how does being satisfied impact you here at school?
BRIAN: If you are happy... (Ann starts to talk and Brian tells her to “go ahead”)
ANN: If you are happy and you are wanting to make good grades, then that will impact it. Being happy also can make your peers feel better about themselves if you are joyful and just being happy can help a lot of things.
Researcher: So, being happy, you think, does impact how you do things here at school. But what happens if you are not happy? Does that impact grades?
BRIAN: Yes! It impacts you because if you are happy, it kind of encourages you to do your work but if you are not happy, then you really don’t care about school and you kind of give up on it. You just get Fs here and there. Like me at the beginning of the year.
AUSTIN: Like when I was depressed one day, I didn’t want to do nothing. I just wanted to go home and cry. And that brought all of my grades down. But thanks to friends, they brought me back up and my grades are kind of better.
Researcher: Ok!
JIMMY: Why did you cut yourself? (speaking to Austin)
ANN: Oh my God. Don’t ask that!
Researcher: It’s ok.
AUSTIN: Cause (well, I am pretty sure everyone knows) when I came out the closet...
JIMMY: You went in a closet?
CHRIS: Shut up JIMMY.
CHRIS: Let him talk.
Appendix J: Life Satisfaction Questionnaire Results

Participant Life Satisfaction Questionnaire Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>% Slightly agree</th>
<th>% Slightly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My life is close to being how I would like it to be.</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The conditions of my life are excellent.</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am satisfied or happy with my life.</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have gotten the important things that I want out of life so far.</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wouldn’t change anything in my life, even if I could.</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Appendix K: Epoche: My Personal Experiences

Describing my own personal experiences with the phenomenon is a strategy suggested by Moustakas (1994). The journaling process *epoche* (Moustakas, 1994) allowed me as the researcher to set aside my own experiences, thoughts and beliefs in order to focus on those of the participants. I am a parent of a daughter who struggled with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) throughout school and I watched her struggle with academics, self-esteem, and social relationships. I have also been a teacher for 22 years; most of those years were spent with students with disabilities. Most importantly, I am also a Christian with strong beliefs about God and family and how both impact a child’s life. More related to this study, I have strong beliefs about how God and family impact a child’s happiness and ultimately, how that impacts academic engagement, motivation, and success.

Throughout my research, I kept a journal where I recorded any thoughts or ideas that would come to mind as I interacted with students and staff at my participating school or as I reflected on the experiences at home or in the car. Using this journal, I was able to keep myself focused solely on the thoughts of my participants and on their stories alone.

I was careful not to put words into the mouths of the participants during the individual interviews. I was also careful not to join in the discussion during the student focus group sessions. This was how I captured the students’ experiences and not my own. Below is a sample of my journal.

April 7, 2016

The day has finally come! I am going to start my research at my participating school in the morning. I can't believe it. Graduation seems almost real now. I try to ground myself and remember that I still have quite a bit of work to do before I can send my paper back to Dr. Parker and the committee. However, being able to start the research is quite exciting and is like a breath of fresh air. I am ready!

I am including my diary in my research data, as directed by my first Research Consultant. I hadn't thought of this prior to his direction because early on, my study was simply phenomenological. And as I learned, the phenomenological approach is the most optimal method through hearing from participants concerning their personal life experience (Creswell, 2013). I even struggled with the idea of my study being hermeneutical. Neither of which I would include my own perspective in form of a diary. With some great advice and wise council, I realised that my study was actually transcendental. The transcendental approach allows me to look at the phenomenon with a fresh eye and open mind (Moustakas, 1994). This particular phenomenological method of research establishes new knowledge; stemming from the essence of actual lived experiences of the participants. In order to fully grasp the experiences of research participants, and to maintain the integrity of a transcendental-phenomenological study, I need to forego all personal biases. To do this, I will describe my own experiences, through journaling, as a way of staying alert to my underlying feelings about my topic. This is referred to as *epoche* (Moustakas, 1994). Today, I am starting my journal and I will continue journaling throughout the research process. To be honest, I was not at all excited about keeping a journal as I felt like it would be a little cumbersome... or difficult to keep up with on top of everything else. And interestingly enough, I had been through quite a bit throughout the dissertation journey, and felt a little resentful for having been “made” to keep a journal. However, in my personal life, I journal quite often and have even written a book containing my journals over the years for my two daughters. And so, after praying for a positive and grateful attitude and a changed heart, I am feeling much more excited about including my journal throughout my research experience. I am sure several years from now, I will enjoying reading it. What an amazing time in my life!

So tomorrow morning, I will show up at the high school where I am doing my research and collect permission slips. I am hoping to have gotten all 20 that I need but I have to remind myself that
these are teenagers and it may take a little longer than I might think. I find myself being a little nervous along with being very excited. I can't wait!

April 11, 2016

In a little while, I will be headed to the school. It will take me about an hour to drive there. The drive is beautiful and I am looking forward to seeing the mountain at this time of year. So I was thinking about my topic this morning and before I truly get started, I need to state my own perceptions when thinking about how life satisfaction impacts high school students and their academic engagement, motivation, and progress.

Bruner’s social constructivism theory determines that learning is an active process and that students naturally construct new ideas or concepts based on their current or past knowledge (Bruner, 1966). Vygotsky emphasized the importance of individual, interpersonal, and cultural historical factors, as they all affect learning (Vygotsky, 1978). I totally do agree with both of these theories. Past knowledge begins at birth or even before. Our parents start the process for the good or bad. Families create the first structure that we know and that is where the acquisition of knowledge first takes place... again, for the good or bad. Along with that, comes the individual and interpersonal relationships that also impact learning. Students needs positive relationships with families first... then friends or other social circles, and then teachers and school staff. But here is where my bias could impact my research if left unattended. I believe that God is the very source of love and of everything good in this world as we know it. By good, I mean people loving their kids, encouraging them, and setting certain standards for their lives. This would include academic standards. I have to separate how I feel about God and the role that He plays in everyone’s life, whether they know it or not, from my subjects and their own perceptions and beliefs.

I wanted to keep my research questions in the forefront of my mind throughout every step of my research; keeping focused on what it is that I am trying to describe or explain and NOT what I hope to find as a “problem in educational methodologies” these days in public school. So, my questions are:

1. How do high school students with specific learning disabilities describe life satisfaction?
2. What past or present personal or social factors do high school students with specific learning disabilities describe as impacting life satisfaction, motivation, school engagement and academic progress?
3. What past or present spiritual factors do high school students with specific learning disabilities describe as impacting life satisfaction, motivation, school engagement and academic progress?

Here I go....

I only received 16 permission slips back but all of the students seemed very excited to be a part of my study. I was able to meet with them after I got the permission slips. A few were just a little stand-offish but I think it will be fine once we get going.

I actually observed in one room today...a remedial reading class. The kids were 8th and 9th graders. The kids were pretty well behaved and from talking briefly to the teacher, they are a pretty good bunch in general. The girl that I was watching was in ninth grade and seemed really sweet and agreeable. Her reading level was obviously low but she gave good effort. The two boys were a little more off the wall. In fact, one of them got into a little tiff with another girl and he had to leave the room for about 15 minutes while the students completed review work. He later came back in and then he did what was asked of him the rest of the class period. Having worked with students with learning disabilities for 20 plus years, I knew that by their body language, the students were self-conscious because they were in remedial reading and seemed to come and go into class pretty quickly. By body language alone, I felt...
like the students really struggled to maintain attention and interest in class, although they were reading "My Side of the Mountain."

I also was able to complete 2 individual interviews. One was with a boy in 11th grade and the other was with a senior girl. The boy was really trying to answer my questions but he repeated the same thing for several of the questions. He seemed like a happy student but maybe tried hard to cover up some deeper issues. He did mention a few times that he had no friends and he would like to have some people to hang out with.

The girl was much more reluctant to answer my questions with any sincerity. She said "I don't know" for a lot of my questions. I found out later that this day was the five-year anniversary of her dad’s death and she was a little sad about that. Maybe I will get to listen to more from her in the focus group. I think she would have some interesting things to say as a senior.

The morning was great! I just wish I could have stayed a little longer. I had to return to Lynchburg for work, however. Looking forward to the next time.

Tuesday, April 12, 2016

Yesterday was exciting and I really enjoyed getting to talk to the students. My plan was to observe first and then do the interviews. However, as it is right now in the high school, SOLs are coming up in a few weeks and the teachers are going to be hitting review sessions pretty much daily and all day. So, I decided to complete my individual interviews and the focus groups as soon as I could before all of that happens. I found that the teachers were all very flexible and allowed me to pull the students out of class but I could tell that there were some who didn't love the idea of the student missing class. Honestly, I can't blame them. Spring is such a hard time to be pulling students from class...especially if they are already struggling. In fact, many of my participants are involved in remediation sessions already. So I have felt a little bad about pulling the kids but I don't have a choice. I try to get the kids in and out without wasting time; getting them back to class quicker. But, kids will be kids and some used the interview situation to get out of class longer! I saw it coming! The participants were really good today. I interviewed 6. Some talked freely and it was great. Others were very reluctant to talk and gave very vague answers.

I have to be very careful with my interactions with the participants; not to express any of my own thoughts and beliefs regarding the questions that I ask them. However, one student had turned to leave the interview room, stopped, turned around, and asked me if I believed in God. He asked so at that point I shared with him what I believed and why. It was a very intense conversation as he was only 13 years old and in 8th grade. He was telling me that even though he believed in God, the school was teaching about evolution and so he gets confused sometimes about what is "truth." I shared with him what a "buckler" meant in Psalms 18 and how it was a little shield that men in ages past used on their fists for hand to hand combat or to "buckle" their other weapons on themselves in wartime. It "protected" them in battle. I encouraged him to keep reading the Word and trusting in the truths within because those are the inspired words of God. My initial thought was that I shouldn’t be sharing my views or beliefs with this young man but he was so intent on hearing what my beliefs were so I answered him. I am not sure, still, if for the sake of this study, I should have but in the scope of all things important in life, I feel like I needed to share with him...and we were already finished with his interview. I was very careful, however, not to share my beliefs or views with any of the students and I was also careful not to let any pre-conceived ideas come into my mind regarding students with specific learning disabilities. Having been a teacher of special education for over 20 years, I didn't want to look threw that particular lens while completing my research. I am trying very hard to remain mindfully neutral; acting only as a data gatherer and observer.

I interviewed 6 participants today and was pretty amazed at their responses. Many of their answers, I felt, were surface only and they were quick to answer "I don't know." I wondered if "I don't know" meant that they really just didn't know how to respond exactly to my questions, or if they really just were not comfortable answering. Even so, their answers (and lack of answers) were still telling.

I also was able to get in an observation today in a US/VA History class. It was a great class and the teacher was wonderful. The class was good and those participating in my study were interesting to
watch. There was a lot of information covered about Vietnam, Kennedy, and the Cold War at home. My participants appeared to “do” what the teacher asked them to do but when it came to answering questions for review, they were not able to do so. I thought to myself that one of the hardest things about teaching students with disabilities is recognizing when a student seems engaged but is really not grasping the concepts of what is being taught. The teacher was fabulous, though, and I am sure that she was on top of them. This was a great day at school. I even really started to miss teaching K-12 again.

(I got a few more permission slips back today.)

April 19, 2016

Last week, a few of the students who hadn’t brought back their permission slips on the 8th, brought them in and so I was able to reach my goal of 20 participants! Then, I realized that a few of my participants had primary disabilities other than a specific learning disability such as Autism and an Intellectual Disability. That brought my number to 18 instead of 20. I am not sure if that will cause a problem in the process so I am going to do some research to find out.

Today, I finished up my individual interviews. The participants seemed to enjoying the interviews. I am not sure if they thought it was different and so they enjoyed the experience or if they really just liked getting out of class. I think maybe both...but more so the latter. Other than the one young boy who asked me after his interview was over if I believed in God, I found that I was able to stay completely neutral or in other words...I didn’t have any problem keeping my own thoughts or views to myself at this point in the research process. However, I did find myself concluding a few things about these students. 1) They didn’t seem to know what happiness really is or can be. They confused happiness with mood. 2) They didn’t seem have the ability yet to know what would give them true satisfaction in life deep within. All that they seemed to know were those external entities such as money, a good job, and material possessions. 3) And for all but one student, the participants only knew God as someone who was there for them in bad times or when they needed help. All believed in God but seemed to see Him as someone far off who was just watching them and stepping in when something bad was happening in their lives. Interesting bunch of students to talk to one on one...very sweet. I am looking forward to the focus group interviews next time!

April 22, 2016

I have about an hour to get my mind focused in the mornings on the way to the participating school. The drive is beautiful though and I have been enjoying it so much these past few weeks. Today, I will be holding the focus group sessions and I am a little nervous about how these will go. When you have a one on one interview with a teenager, there is only so much that could go wrong because there are no other peers to show off for or to goof off with. But in the focus groups, a lot could happen. So we will see...I have been asking the Lord to give me wisdom and “know how” these past several weeks so I hope that I will be able to conduct these groups with that balance of knowing when to let the kids just talk, and when to keep control over the situation. That is tough with teenagers; especially in a situation like a focus group. And I am also afraid that I won’t pick up everyone’s voice on the recorder!

I arrived at the school this morning and went straight to the conference room, which the school staff allowed me to sign up for earlier this week! It is so nice. I also sent out a mass e-mail to teachers with a list of who would be coming to participate in the focus group so that I wouldn’t need to interrupt class to get the students. But, I still had to go round up the students and interrupt class. I felt bad about that because I have been on the other side of the fence for many years and when someone interrupts class, sometimes it takes a while to regain focus and attention. But I managed to get them all but a few. It is difficult to get everyone when you are studying high schoolers because the class schedules are all so different and conflicting. Some of the students even ride a bus downtown during the first block or two to take “shop” classes and then some of the older students leave during the last block to go to work so a few of the students could not participate in the focus groups simply because I couldn’t catch them at a good time. But the focus groups went so well.

I started with the younger students (8th and 9th graders). The group had 9 students, whereas the second group (10th-12th graders) had 6 students. One thing that I had to do that was not originally part of the plan was to have an “ice-breaker” activity. This was because I felt some uneasiness and
awkwardness when the students first arrived. I didn't think they would engage in active communication within the focus group. So I asked the students to tell me about themselves. They remained quiet and reluctant and therefore, I had to give the students some “ideas” of what they could talk about. Once the group started talking, they immediately seemed comfortable sharing.

The students were respectful, for the most part, to each other and took turns talking. In the younger group, there was a boy who had past issues with depression and cutting...even an attempt at suicide. He shared openly and honestly about his experiences and the other students offered kind words and support. This student also talked openly about being a homosexual, which was interesting as some of the students hadn't known this prior to the group meeting. The younger students shared their stories more openly than the older students. However, both groups were well behaved and the exercise accomplished what it needed to accomplish. This was a time during my research that will always stay with me as I remember those students and their stories.

*Just to note, I also have finished collecting the Life Satisfaction surveys that the participants filled out. I have been collecting these over the past few weeks at different times. Some completed them after their interviews were done. Others received them in their Resource class and their teacher collected them. I collected 18 of the surveys.

April 26, 2016

This will be my last week of research at my participating school. I have mixed feelings about that. One thing that I wish had been a little different is the amount of time spent with my participants. I think for some of my student participants, a closer relationship between us might have allowed them to be a little more open and honest about things such as happiness and life satisfaction. I also think that more time would have helped me see more consistently how truly motivated and engaged these kids were in school. I feel like I just needed more time to observe and to interact with them. Having been a teacher of special education for twenty years or more, I understand that due to the nature of disabilities and the problems that they can cause for students, some students are a little less likely to talk personally to someone whom they don't know and trust to have their best interests at heart. So more time could have helped with this. I also have mixed feelings about being at the end of this part of my study because I enjoyed being back in the K-12 environment and enjoyed seeing the teachers working with the kids and also the partnerships and friendships that they have together as professionals.

Today and Thursday, I will only be observing in classrooms. I started this research with observations and now I will finish by doing the same. I learned long ago that in a school setting, everyone has to be flexible as things change daily, as special events come up, or as people's schedule's change. And even though how I thought my research would be done was not exactly how it went, my time at this school was informative and invaluable to my study and personal growth as an educator.

Today, I observed in an 8th grade English class and in an Algebra I class. This school operates on a block schedule so the classes run about ninety minutes. English was interesting. The teacher was welcoming and friendly to me and in conversation, she let me know that at the beginning of the year, the class had 29 kids in it and many of those had IEPs. So what they decided to do is to have whole group instruction at the beginning of class and then after about half an hour or so, the class splits into 3 small groups. I thought that was a wonderful idea and truly differentiated instruction. There were almost as many kids with IEPs than without in this English class.

The Algebra I class had 19 students and 9 of them had IEPs. The class had a co-teacher and therefore, the students had lots of instruction and correction if needed. I did see more kids not engaged in this class. One was playing on his I-PAD, and a few talked non-stop. One girl copied off a neighbor throughout the entire class. Those students who are a part of my research, were unengaged more than engaged but math is not an easy subject for them.

When I looked around at the students today, I wondered how many of them come from broken homes, low SES environments, or abusive situations. When I started this process, I wanted to know this information. I wanted to have that information as data in my study. So my mind goes back to “connecting the dots” between these issues, the lack of engagement and motivation, the lack of life
satisfaction in life, and a belief in God. I am still trying to connect those things in my mind. However, I constantly having to remind myself that my study is TRANSCENDENTAL...I am describing the experience of a certain group of people. I am not trying to draw conclusions or to connect a consequence with a certain action. I have had to keep that in my mind a lot over these past several weeks.

April 28, 2016

I can't believe today is my last day of going to school and interacting with the student participants. These students have been great. They worked with me so well and gave me a good look at what they face each day. They told me stories of things that happen to them. They talked about bullying and friendships, fights and relationships with their teachers. They told me a little bit about their families and how they do in school. This experience has been amazing and I am thankful to have gotten to cross paths with these students and to hear their stories of what it is like to go to school each day; dealing with the stress of having a specific learning disability.

Today, I observed in a Biology class. This is a tough subject for a lot of high school students for those who have certain learning disabilities, it can be academically brutal. The students had to complete a journal and then they watched a short video and then finally, they completed a study packet with a partner of choice. The teacher was really good and knew her stuff! She is actually going to medical school next year to be a doctor. Those participating in my study worked with a special education assistant when it came to packet work, with the exception of one. He chose to work alone. He was not engaged with the teacher or anyone else in the room but he did do his work. I am not sure if his lack of engagement was a common thing or specific to this day. I have a feeling that he is always disengaged and likes to be alone but he did do his packet and stayed on task with that. He looked very sad today as he has over the past few weeks when I have been around him. I think he has been through a lot to be so young.

The second class I observed today was called Odyssey. It is a class of students who do some of their classes online during the second block of the day. I watched 12 students, 9 with IEPs or 504 plans...but only one that is participating in my study. I am not sure how I feel about online education on any level...but after talking to the teacher, I think for some kids, it is a saving grace. My student has been able to catch up a bit after coming into this class halfway through the year. The students seemed enthusiastic about the course and so did the teacher. I have to say, though, that my student was not as engaged as I thought he should be as he liked talking to the girl next to him more than working. (typical for his age) His record showed progress though and about a “C” average so I think he does manage to get some work done in this program. I would like to visit that class again for a while to see how it really is...day in and day out. The teacher was great though and the students seemed happy. The mood and atmosphere of the class was very positive.

I was sad to go today. I will miss seeing the kids and the staff at my participating school. It was interesting to watch the kids and then to talk to them both alone and with other students. Building relationships is so important with students at this age...well, at all ages I guess. But, I heard them...I was amazed and touched by them, and now I hope to pass on their stories in my paper for others to read and perhaps for the opportunity to improve the life satisfaction and academic progress for other students with specific learning disabilities at different times and in different places. What a joy this experience has been.

May 8, 2016

I am compiling the data from the student interviews and focus groups today. Transcribing them was an overwhelming experience. I didn’t think I would ever finish and it was not something that I enjoyed except that it was interesting to go back and listen to the conversations, and to remember those moments with the kids. It is amazing really to think about how similar many of their answers were. It is so fascinating to actually put this information together. I was expecting something (results) totally different. Many of them talked about God and their relationships with Him. They spoke of how God helped them in life and made them happy. I wasn’t expecting a majority of students from a public school to give
answers that involved God or religion as much as these kids did. And then I have to stop and think about what I am thinking. This is a strange endeavor. I think, even as much as I tried to keep any pre-conceived notions out of my mind, I thought that I would find a connection between how “happy kids described themselves to be” and a belief system or relationship they had with God.” And I think because it was a public school versus a Christian school (as much as I tried to keep any of my own thoughts out of the process) I did not expect the students to be happy because of a lack of belief in God or a lack of a spiritual relationship. I have come to truly realize how important it is to keep track of my own thoughts so as to not unintentionally fabricate any part of my participants’ stories and experiences. What an experience! I want to finish this degree but I am sad that my research is over. I would like to go back and study this group of students, their school experiences, and their culture more in-depth. There is something going on in this small town...in this culture...that added a religious realm or spiritual dynamic in the lives of my participants which seemed to play a part in their level of life satisfaction. In turn, this phenomenon plays a direct role in their academic engagement, motivation, and progress. Interesting!
Appendix L: Research Tool Validation

Rebecca,

With the changes the rest of the committee has made, I believe that content and face validity are met on your final edits without any additional recommendations from me.

Leonard W. Parker  
Professor of Graduate Education 
School of Education 

(434) 582-7709
Appendix M: Permission to Use Information

Re: permission to use
Pantana, John Joseph (School of Education)
Wed 9/21, 7:22 PM

Dilling, Rebecca Lawhorne (School of Education)

Rebecca,

You are most certainly welcome to use the information on *Brain-based Learning Theory: An online Course Design Model in your dissertation*. I hope all goes well for you in this endeavor. Blessings.

Good Morning Dr. Pantana. I hope you are doing well. I was wondering if I may have permission to use your information on *Brain-based Learning Theory: An online Course Design Model*. I would like to include it (in chart form) in my dissertation. Would it be ok? Thanks either way. Have a great day and I will see you soon.

Rebecca

**Rebecca L. Dilling**  
Adjunct Faculty  
School of Education  

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**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY**  
*Training Champions for Christ since 1971*
Appendix N: Audit Trail

Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 319-310) describe what information should be included in an audit trail. The following is the list of activities or steps taken to maintain trustworthiness (dependability) within my research study:

1) **Collecting raw data.** I began my study by collecting notes from my own experiences in my journal. My raw data included verbatim transcriptions from individual interviews and focus groups. It also included the information I collected from classroom observations regarding student engagement and results from a life satisfaction questionnaire from the participants.

2) **Data reduction and analysis.** From the individual and focus group interviews, I determined significant statement and themes. Also, I determined how many of the participants were engaged in class by using a spreadsheet or chart to determine how many of the participants were involved in activities related or unrelated to class. As a part of data reduction and analysis, I calculated a life satisfaction survey from the participants, documenting how many of the 18 claimed to be satisfied with life.

3) **Data reconstruction and synthesis products.** I included a structure of categories including themes, definitions, and relationships on things discovered in the data. I included my findings and conclusions. Chapter five then connected literature and then integrated concepts, relationships, and interpretations of the research data.

4) **Process notes.** I included my procedures, design, strategies, rationales, trustworthiness notes (relating to credibility, dependability and confirmability) and audit trail notes.

5) **Materials relating to intentions and dispositions** – After themes were established and conclusions made, I included implications and recommendations for future research.

6) **Instrument development information** – I used premade questions for both the individual and focus group interviews as well as a premade checklist for the observations. The life satisfaction survey was also predetermined before the study began.