

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF HIGH SCHOOL
STUDENT SPIRITUALITY ON TRANSITION DECISION MAKING

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the impact of a student's spirituality on the decisions he or she makes during transition. For this study, transition will be defined as the process of moving from high school to post-secondary education and employment. Spirituality will be defined as moments of transcendence that can often provide clarity and guidance (Maslow, 1976). The process of transition can be both stressful and exciting. While supports and preparation can make an impact, it is possible that the student's spiritual beliefs are a significant factor in the decisions that are made. The following research questions attempt to explain this phenomenon: How much of a spiritual emphasis is placed on a student's decisions regarding post-secondary education and employment? How does a student's level of spiritual development contribute to his or her feelings of academic and life success? and How does a student's level of spiritual development contribute to his or her idea of a career calling? The intended participants will be 10 students, either juniors or seniors, enrolled in a private Christian school. The research methods are based in transcendental phenomenology which chooses to collect individual stories and look at them as separate entities that create a phenomenon. The stories will be revealed through the collection and analysis of interviews, journals, and site documentation. Moustakas' seven steps for data analysis will be used to analyze each experience to create common themes and develop a textural-structural description of the essence of the phenomenon.

Key Words: spirituality, transition, motivation, self-actualization, identity formation

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background

The transition from high school to postsecondary education or employment is one that is fraught with tension and challenges. The decisions that are made at this time determine the path a student will take for the rest of his or her life. The knowledge that a student possesses regarding this transition will help him or her make informed decisions. The values and beliefs held by the student will also guide him or her.

The school context impacts the amount of information that is provided to a student. Students that attend high schools with many career resources are more confident upon entering college and have multiple career interests (Rowan, Perna, & Swan, 2011). Family and friends are also a source of support. In fact, Smith and Zhang (2009) found that a student's mother was the most dominant source of support for a student as he or she is making decisions about his or her future. Some students seek support from their spiritual beliefs. According to Duffy and Sedlack (2010), these students often believe God has a plan for each person's life. By determining this calling, they will be following God's plan for their life. To do this, they receive guidance from parents, pastors, and teachers. The physical environment of the school also plays a role in not only the availability of resources, but the secular or religious nature of the guidance provided. Private Christian schools encourage students to learn how to intelligently defend their faith and incorporate it into their lives (LeBlanc & Slaughter, 2012).

Even though some schools address spiritual and religious ideas, there is very little literature regarding how a student's personal spirituality impacts the decisions he or she

makes. This is especially true for the decisions made during the transition from high school to postsecondary education and vocation. While the area of spirituality and the area of transition may be addressed in the literature (Hardre, Sullivan, & Crowson 2009; Horny & Bonds-Raacke 2012; LeBlanc & Slaughter 2012; Rowan-Kenyon, Perna, & Swan 2011), little research has addressed the phenomenon of these two ideas together.

Situation to Self

Most of my personal and professional experience has been in the public education setting. I have had the opportunity to see people that base decisions on spiritual beliefs as well as those that do not. I have always found it interesting to observe the difference in the confidence level and acceptance of situations demonstrated by the two groups. I have personally made most decisions in my life based on prayer and attempting to determine what God has called me to do.

My personal experience of transition from high school to college involved educators that did not understand how my personal spirituality impacted the decisions that I was making. Early in my high school career, I decided to attend a small Christian college. As the brochures from the schools began to arrive in the mail, I quickly realized that this would be financially impossible. I inquired with school counselors about the possibility of scholarships and loans. All the advice that I was given was for attendance at public colleges. I was shy and found it difficult to explain my spiritual convictions to my counselors. I felt that I may have a calling but the response that I received when I mentioned this was not reassuring. I eventually attended a state university close to my home. While my education at this school was sufficient, I have since learned that there

were other options available to me. My personal religious belief is that God has a chosen path for each of us. I have come to terms with the fact that my attendance at this school could have been part of this plan. However, my experience makes me acutely aware of the fact that the environment and its active participants play an integral role in the development of a student's path in life. The availability of resources and the acceptance of spiritual beliefs as a guiding factor have great impact on what a student will choose for themselves.

As an educator, I continue to see the need for an understanding of the impact of spirituality in both public and private education. I am friends with students and educators at private Christian schools. Through my relationships with them, I have learned about some of the nuances of a Christian education. These schools have interwoven God, spirituality, and religiosity within the pedagogical framework of the school. The idea that God has a plan and a career calling are freely discussed in many of these schools. I work with student's that have special needs and focus on the process of transitioning between high school to post-secondary education and vocation. The accountability measures that are in place for us in the public education setting require us to follow certain steps to assist with a student's transition. Recently, similar measures have been put into place for students in the general education setting. Many large private schools that compete with public education provide information on their school websites purporting that they provide career and school guidance. Still, little research has been done to show how much of this guidance influences a student to use his or her own spiritual beliefs when making a transition decision.

Using a transcendental phenomenological design, I will be able to put aside my personal and professional transition experiences and look at each situation naively. My previous experience provides me with enough insight to understand the role of the school and the influence of spirituality, while the design provides me with the opportunity to look at each situation individually. If I do not do this I will miss details that are crucial to my study. The relationship that I form with each student will allow me to see the other areas that impact a student's spirituality such as friends, family, and religion. Because I am focusing on students enrolled at a private Christian school, each story may have similarities. The differences in each story will contribute to the overall essence of the phenomenon of spirituality and its impact on transition.

Problem Statement

Very little research has been done on the process of transitioning from high school to post-secondary education and vocation. Research at the college level has revealed the importance of career counseling that includes multiple facets of an individual's life. One of these facets is spirituality (Adams, 2012). Additionally, the amount of resources, usually counselors, and their availability to students has been found to impact a student's ability to make career-oriented decisions (Duffy & Dik, 2009).

The context and resources offered at a high school impact the confidence of students as they transition into post-secondary education (Rowan-Kenyon, Perna, & Swan, 2011). Regarding post-secondary education, Astin, Astin and Lindholm (2011) found that the "relative amount of attention devoted to the exterior and interior aspects of students' lives is out of balance" (p.39).

In addition to this, while much of liberal education is grounded in the concept of “know-thyself” the concept of self-awareness receives little attention (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011). As in college, counselors and educators are a critical component of these resources. However, while educators may see the need to address spirituality they are possibly unsure how to do this in the public-school setting. As Chickering (2006) stated when discussing educators in higher education settings, “They do not want to be understood to endorse anything that hints at proselytizing or indoctrination.” When further discussing these educators, he explains that they understand the importance of moral and character development, but there is almost a fear of discussing spirituality. Chickering (2006) states, “For these persons character development and moral development are legitimate concerns for higher education, but “spiritual growth” raises red flags.” Knowledge regarding how a student’s spirituality can impact his or her transition decisions provides a means to begin conversations regarding how this information could support transition. Without this knowledge the importance of spirituality, regarding transition, remains a vague idea unable to reach its full potential.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the impact of a student's spirituality on the decisions he or she makes during transition. *Transition* is the process of a student moving from high school to post-secondary education and employment. A student will have many decisions to make during this time. Several factors impact these decisions. One of these factors is *Spirituality* which can be defined using Maslow’s (1976) description of a “peak experience”. This type of experience is

very personal and often seen as transcendent, mystical, and laden with spiritual values. These experiences can also be moments of clarity and guidance. Because of the personal nature the experience will be more transcendent for some than others. This depends upon the person's openness to the experience. A person's spiritual experience may be expressed through his or her religious exercises. Maslow (1976) also provides a clear example of religion when he states that religious experiences "rest heavily on the presence of certain traditional, powerful, but intrinsically irrelevant stimuli" (pp. 30-31).

During transition, decisions are made regarding vocation and post-secondary education. A *Vocation* as defined by Dik and Duffy (2009) is an approach to a life role that is oriented toward demonstrating or deriving a sense of purpose or meaningfulness and that holds other-oriented values and goals as a primary source of motivation (p. 428). Determining a vocation impacts whether a student attends Post-Secondary education after high school to prepare for his or her future career.

Significance of the Study

While Christians may believe that God already has a plan for each person, they do not discount the opportunity to prepare for the life that they should have. In fact, many Christians believe that God has placed them in a career regardless if it is secular or religious (Duffy & Sedlack, 2010). Bott, Duffy and Douglass (2015) found a positive correlation between a person's spiritual wellness and living out a perceived calling. This suggests that an individual's spirituality has an important role in the experience of a calling. The transition from high school to college is a point in a student's life when decisions or the idea of a calling can impact the rest of his or her life. Several factors

contribute to the decisions that are made. These factors include parental involvement, school context, social relationships, and spiritual beliefs (Smith & Zhang, 2009).

This study will provide educators with information regarding the impact of spirituality. While there is evidence that people base important life decisions on their spiritual beliefs, there have not been many studies on the specific impact of these beliefs on transition. This research will be valuable to educators in both private and public education settings. Broaching the subject of spirituality can be daunting. Guidance in this area is beneficial for educators that are inclined to understand the spiritual nature of life decisions. It will also provide an opening for a discussion on the impact of spirituality for those that have not considered this in the past. This discussion could lead to the opportunity for research in specific methodology for educators to use when discussing spiritual beliefs.

Research Question

Previous research has addressed the development of a spiritual identity. This research has shown that the development continues into adulthood (Mulholland 2013; Willett 2010). This likely would impact the decisions made during transition. Additional research has found that college age students and adults often believe in a career calling (Duffy & Sedlack, 2010; Galles & Lentz 2013). However, this research does not address the presence of a career calling for high school students. Additionally, research has shown that students are given some guidance regarding career exploration and post-secondary decisions (Deemer & Ostrowski 2010; Smith & Zhang 2009). Spiritual beliefs can be a part of these socio-structural opportunities. Erikson's identity vs role

development stage explains how an individual begins to develop his or her identity and chooses which societal roles they will continue to follow. The level of spiritual development occurring currently impacts how a student views academic and life success. Bandura's social learning theory explains how an individual's decisions are impacted by both life experiences and societal rules. The impact of spirituality on transition decisions has not been addressed through research. These questions will provide beneficial information that will add to the body of research on spirituality and research on transition by uniting the two topics.

1. What spiritual emphasis do students place on decisions regarding post-secondary education and employment?
2. How does a student's level of spiritual development contribute to his or her feelings of academic and life success?
3. How does a student's level of spiritual development contribute to his or her idea of a career calling?

Summary

Qualitative research will be conducted through a transcendental phenomenological design. This design was chosen because of its emphasis on removing all previous researcher bias, looking at each story in its singularity, and providing rich descriptions that address the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Previous research has looked at transition experiences and spirituality as singular ideas. However, research has not incorporated these two ideas to study the impact of student spirituality on the decisions that are made during transition. In addition to this, the impact of

spirituality on feelings of life success or a career calling have also not been researched. Research of this impact will provide educators with knowledge that could influence how they assist students in the transition decision making process. Awareness of the impact of spirituality, and the sensitivity that may subsequently follow, can provide a more meaningful transition. Focusing on the story of everyone provides the researcher with an opportunity for the in-depth analysis needed to fully understand the combination of the topics of spirituality and transition. Interviews, student journals, and site documentation will provide data for analysis of the impact of a student's spirituality on the decision they are making during the transition from high school to post-secondary education or employment.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The decisions made during transition are impacted by a variety of factors. These factors include but are not excluded to: relationships, school environments, level of motivation, spiritual beliefs, and moral development. Each of these factors is woven together creating a blanket of a person's life. Each factor representing a different color and some colors more prominent than others. Countless theorists have addressed each of these issues separately. Each theory, just like the colors of the blanket, can be interwoven, tied together and complimentary of the others to create the total picture of a person. Bandura's (1977) theory of social learning illustrates how the society in which an adolescent develops impacts the decisions that they make. This pressure from society impacts identity formation which Erikson (1993) uses to explain how an adolescent develops his or her identity and the path that he or she will choose to take in life. The interactions with others during this identity formation are strongly tied to moral development which Kohlberg (2011) proposes develops through stages of a person's life. Finally, Maslow's (2011) hierarchy of needs explains how motivation, which could be a component of all these theories, develops into self-actualization and the path an adolescent decides to follow. All these theories have a component that provides evidence of spirituality. Because a spirit cannot be seen, it is difficult to measure. The impact of the spirit is best addressed in James Fowler's (1981) theory regarding the stages of faith development.

Theoretical Framework

Bandura's Social Learning Theory

Bandura's (1977), social learning theory provides an understanding of how a society impacts the decisions of a person. It also explains how individuals create social systems and how they react both to and within these systems. Some of these actions are based on spiritual beliefs. These beliefs are not always internal. Some of them are created by the social setting in which some individual lives. The ritualistic actions of attending church services and functions are created by society. The single act of participation does not mean that a person has internalized the spiritual beliefs. Observation of external behaviors cannot explain the motives behind a person's actions. He or she may be playing a role that society has given him or her at that time.

However, Bandura (1977) determined that there must be some internal control of behaviors. He reasoned that if a person's actions were determined only by others, he or she would be constantly shifting in different directions. The decisions that a person makes are based upon cumulative experiences and the way in which the person perceived those experiences. Some individual needs to be given freedom to determine what they will believe and how they will use these experiences. Still, Bandura (1977) warns against complete freedom with no limits because of the possibility of encroaching on the freedom of others. A person must learn that there is a fine balance between following the rules of society and respecting the freedoms of others while simultaneously choosing which beliefs and actions he or she will follow.

In *Psychology of Human Agency*, Bandura (2006) stated, “People are contributors to their activities. . . conceive of ends and work purposefully to achieve them” (p.168). As students are preparing for the transition from high school they are likely to look at the goals that they have set for themselves and work towards these. Bandura (2006) states that the student will, “anticipate the probable effects of different events and courses of action, size up socio-structural opportunities and constraints and regulate their behavior accordingly” (p.168). Spiritual beliefs can be a part of these socio-structural opportunities and constraints. If a student follows the pattern that Bandura (2006) has outlined, spirituality will impact the decisions that are made.

Moral constraints and self-efficacy also play a role in the decision-making process. Individuals refrain from behaving in ways that violate their moral standards and do things that give them a sense of purpose and self-worth (Bandura, 2006). People with high efficacy persevere in the face of obstacles. Various social factors influence the level of an individual’s efficacy. These social factors include the values and lifestyles of the environment that the individual has chosen.

The technological changes taking place in society have altered the effects of interpersonal behavior (Bandura, 2006). Using technology, students have the capability to interact with a larger peer group, are exposed to a broader range of diverse opinions and values and have access to a world of information with just a few key strokes. This increase of information often means that the spiritual beliefs taught by family and clergy are not the only beliefs the student becomes familiar with. Thus, a broad range of beliefs have the potential to impact transition decisions. The possible impact of spirituality is a

complicated subject. There are so many impacting beliefs there is not a clear-cut cause and effect between the beliefs that are taught (in school, church and home) and the beliefs that are followed. Bandura (2006) described these present-day students as “agents of their own learning, not just recipients of information” (p.176). The variety of knowledge that they acquire has the capability to impact the occupational and lifestyle decisions that are made. The student continually learns and adjusts their goals based on this learning, thus changing life-long goals as necessary (Bandura, 2006).

Erikson Social Development Theory

Erikson (1993) explained that development occurs as a series of stages. Identity development occurs in the stage Identity vs. Role Development. In this stage childhood ends and puberty begins. The individual is physically growing at a pace like early childhood. They are beginning to see themselves as others see them and are trying to reconcile who they believe they are with the views of others. They also attempt to connect roles and skills previously learned with an occupation. Career exploration is important currently. The ego formed earlier must integrate with the new circumstances which include meaning in life and a career.

Erikson (1993) goes on to explain that the process of integration is so great that most adolescents discover identity with a group and thus develop cliques. These cliques enable them to help one another through this period of development. As a group they form common goals and ideals. The adolescent learns about fidelity by adhering to the ideals established by the group. The adolescent is essentially caught “between the morality learned by the child and the ethics to be developed by the adult” (Kindle edition,

part three, chapter seven, section five, paragraph five). They must spend time searching for the social values that will develop their identity. They develop the knowledge that to succeed they must incorporate these values and become the best. Along the way they develop the understanding that community and church life are deemed acceptable. Some adolescents determine that by conforming to the beliefs held by these groups they find uniformity and security. In his description of a protestant American youth, Erikson (1993) reasoned that the youth is not comfortable being an individualist. He will prefer the role prescribed by the society that he is in. When thinking about the role of spirituality on decision making I must consider that some of the students in my study will fit this description. Many of the students may have spiritual beliefs but they are beliefs that are accepted because they are the norm. Thus, the decisions made by the student will be in favor of the role that the person believes they must fill.

History also plays a role in identity development. Historical crisis and the way in which some individual responds to the crisis can impact his or her identity formation (Erikson, 1994). Social institutions and historical development are intertwined, each one impacting the other. The opportunities afforded to an individual depend upon the time in which he or she lives. The pressures placed on him or her by society are also dependent upon the time. These factors will play a part in the decisions that an individual makes regarding transition. The individuals in this study will have different opportunities than they might have had several years ago due to historical technological inventions. They might also have some reduced opportunities because of the safety of world travel. The

availability or unavailability of opportunities because of historical and social factors provide a way for the individual to understand the career path that they are called to take.

Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development

The morals of a person are often connected to his or her level of spiritual development and the influences of society. In response to this, Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development is closely related to theories of both social and spiritual development (Van Voorhis, 2011). Kohlberg began the development of his theory in response to his questions about the reaction of the German citizens to the actions of Nazi Germany. Kohlberg also aligned a large amount of his theory with developmental theorists such as Piaget (Van Voorhis, 2011). This influence is seen through his development of moral stages. Kohlberg and similar theorists believed that the ego becomes more mature as a person ages. Therefore, development would occur through a series of stages. Kohlberg was somewhat different in that he continued his stages into adulthood (Van Voorhis, 2011).

Kohlberg proposed that humans ascend through three levels of moral development (Kohlberg, 1980). Each of these levels is comprised of two stages. The levels are defined as: Pre-Conventional, Conventional and Post-Conventional (Kohlberg, 1980). In the Pre-Conventional stage, the human is an infant or toddler and not able to understand morality as we would define it. Obedience in the first level of this stage is based on blind obedience and the avoidance of punishment or the receipt of a reward. In the second stage of this level the child has progressed but remains very egocentric. The child is making decisions based on what will help him or her. Other people are only

important if they are a means to an end (Kohlberg, 1980). In the Conventional stage the child begins to become aware of rules and how he or she can personally impact these rules. In the first stage of the conventional level the young child is concerned with being a good boy or girl. The Golden rule is closely followed in this stage. In the second stage of this level they begin to understand that rules provide some boundaries and are needed to maintain social systems such as family and community. Kohlberg (1980) stated that, “Right behavior consists of doing one's duty, showing respect for authority, and maintaining the given social order for its own sake” (p.92). As a person enters the last level, referred to as post conventional, autonomous, or principled, he or she begins to understand that while rules are important they are subject to change. There can be situations in which they either do not apply or are not applicable for the common good. Kohlberg (1980) suggests that, “There is a clear effort to define moral values and principles that have validity and application apart from the authority of the groups or person's holding these principles” (p. 92). During this first stage the individual is keenly aware of both the rights of individuals and of the legal point of view of these rights (VanVoorhis, 2011). Kohlberg (1980) also states, “There is a clear awareness of the relativism of personal values and opinions and a corresponding emphasis on procedural rules for reaching consensus” (p.92). In the second stage of this level, stage six, the person develops universal ethical principles. The person not only understands that people will follow other rules and will have differences, but there are times the rules need to change. The person at this stage may work for change at the detriment to his or her own life or livelihood (Van Voorhis, 2011). Kohlberg (1980) stated “At heart these are

universal principles of justice of the reciprocity of human rights, and of respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons” (p.93). A famous example of a person in this stage of moral development would be Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

It is important to note that everyone does not remain in one level. Most people will remain primarily in one area, but sometimes waiver between the final three stages. This is not to say that the person is not morally developed. Instead, it implies that humans sometimes revert to a simpler level of moral thinking of absolute right and wrong (Van Voorhis, 2011). The level of spiritual development does impact the level they are at morally. For instance, a person that is unable to transcend this world and understand that there are areas beyond our physical realm, may be unable to reach the final level of moral development. And subsequently be unable to subject him or her to a life or death situation to fight for the moral rights of others (Kohlberg, 1980).

Kohlberg theorized that moral development is heavily influenced by environment (Kohlberg, 1980). Role models, parenting practices, and educational systems all play an important role in moral development. This is very similar to social learning theory in that the individuals learn based on stimuli, rewards, and the social influences of others. It is important to note that, Gilligan (1982), a mentee of Kohlberg did not believe his theories considered the influence of gender differences in individual moral development. Gilligan compared the responses of an eleven-year old boy and girl to one of Kohlberg's dilemmas. The responses of the boy rated a full stage higher than those of the girl. The boy's responses were based heavily on logic which scores high on Kohlberg's scale. The girl's responses relied heavily on the dependence of relationships. Gilligan stated, “Her

reliance on relationships seems to reveal a continuing dependence and vulnerability, so her belief in communication as the mode through which to resolve moral dilemmas appears naive and cognitively immature” (1982, p.30). Gilligan goes on to further explain that when considering this girl's perception of the world stems from an ethic of care her views are far from naive and cognitively immature (1982). She can see the people in the dilemma as “members of a network of relationships on whose continuation they all depend” (Gilligan 1982, p.30). This impact of gender differences should be considered when applying the moral stages of development to the understanding of decisions made by an individual during transition. These decisions are influenced by moral stages of development because they guide a person to contemplate the good they will eventually be able to provide to individuals and society.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow (2011) addressed all areas of development through his hierarchy of needs. While the needs primarily consist of emotional and spiritual needs, the impact of society and morality are important factors. The hierarchy consists of basic physical needs and progresses towards emotional and spiritual needs. The depth that these needs are met determines how a student will make decisions regarding his or her future. When basic physical and emotional needs are met a person is better able to concentrate on spiritual needs. Motivation plays a role here. First the whole individual is motivated not just a part of the individual. Maslow's (2011) explanation that we view the whole person as hungry not just the person's stomach provides an example of how one desire motivates the entire being. This applies to all types of motivations. Maslow (2011) further explains:

We should never have the desire to compose music or create mathematical systems, or to adorn our homes, or to be well dressed if our stomachs were empty most of the time, or if we were continually dying of thirst, or if we were continually threatened by an always impending catastrophe, or if everyone hated us. (Maslow, 1943, Hierarchy of Needs, Preface, Section VII)

The original motivation to meet basic needs evolves into the need for self-actualization. Self-actualization is the process of growing, finding out what you are good at, and determining personal beliefs about life (Maslow, 2011). Yocum (2014) found that spiritual self-actualization occurred after both a spiritual awakening and spiritual connectedness occurred. Spiritual awakening occurs when an individual begins to ponder spiritual questions and how they relate to his or her life. Yocum (2014) compares this to Maslow's (1976) peak experiences. The individual no longer merely hears someone reading to them from a sacred text, he or she begins to apply the information to his or her own life. After this awakening, spiritual connectedness occurs. A person at this point has a desire to congregate with others who share the spiritual awakening experience (Yocum, 2014). Spiritual self-actualization (Maslow, 1976; Yocum 2014) occurs when these basic spiritual self needs are met, and a person can begin to ponder how they can become a more spiritual person. Yocum (2014) stated,

This is the point where one is confident enough in his or her spiritual identity and purpose and has fulfilling spiritual relationships with others to the extent that they now have the freedom to devote time to self-improvement. When one has had his or her basic spiritual needs met, he or she can ask "How can I be a more spiritual

person?” “How can my spirituality help me succeed in other aspects of life?” and “How can I help others to grow spiritually? (p. 86)

One decision that results from this is what a person will do with the rest of his or her life. Vocational interests and preferences are discovered. These decisions gradually encompass more of life’s questions about family, religion and life style. In *Toward a Psychology of Being*, Maslow (2011) states, “healthy people have sufficiently gratified their basic needs . . . they are motivated primarily for trends of self-actualization” (p. 23). Peak experiences both spiritual as well as non-spiritual impact self-actualization (Maslow, 1976).

Maslow (1976) explains that peak experiences are similar for all people, both male and female. While the event that began the experience can be quite different, the resulting experience is very similar. Maslow (1976) theorized that peak experiences have the following characteristics in common: they are often religious in nature, the universe is seen as a whole and reinforces the existence of God, the person is seen as unique and detached from human needs, the experience justifies living, time ceases to exist, fear and anxiety disappear, both good and evil in the world is accepted and understood, and everything is seen with clarity. A peak experience is without a doubt spiritual in nature. If a student has a peak experience as they are beginning to prepare for the transition from high school, it can be assumed that this experience would impact the decisions that are made. These decisions include the educational decisions made by the student.

When discussing religion and education, Maslow (1976) concluded that the teaching of spiritual values has a place in education. He believed the role of education is

to produce a person that can think, and act based on moral reasoning. Universal values such as kindness, loyalty, and trustworthiness can be taught in a way that a student can relate them to his or her own spiritual beliefs. Counselors and teachers can encourage students to access their spiritual beliefs when making plans for transition. This research will provide support for school personnel to understand how students base transition decisions on spiritual beliefs. This understanding will be used to guide the students to post-secondary schools and careers that complement these beliefs.

Spirituality Theory

A person's spirit cannot be seen. Evidence of a spirit may be seen in actions. Still, the true motivation for these actions is only known by the individual. When studying spirituality, we are dependent to an extent upon the information provided by the individual himself. Judeo-Christian beliefs contend that if a person is abiding in the spirit of Christ then there will be an outward expression of this spirit. The apostle John wrote, "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; (John 15:5 NKJV). Mulholland (2013), wrote that "No healthy spiritual formation in Christ is possible apart from mission with Christ" (p.15). What he meant by this is that spirituality is not just an additional aspect of a life with Christ. Instead he proposes that we are spiritual beings that have been given a physical life. If the adolescents whom we have been discussing, choose to live in this way they are going to have wholeness with God. Therefore, the decisions that they make regarding their future will be based on their spirituality and be the will that they believe God has for their life. This includes living as Christ for others. Paul said to the Galatians "It is no longer I who live but Christ who

lives in me . . .” (Galatians 2:20, NKJV). Along with believing that they are to be Christ for the world, the individual also believes that God equips them for the job that he has called them. Mulholland (2013) states, “To think of Christian spirituality and “mission” as separate and discrete aspects of the Christian life is a mistake. They are the inseparable symbiosis of breathing in (spiritual formation) and breathing out (mission)” (p.16).

The theories of Bandura, Maslow, Erikson, Kohlberg, and Fowler are inextricably linked to spiritual formation. Spirituality; how it is developed in an individual’s mind, how it is influenced by society and physical development, and how it is impacted by the beliefs of others and institutions, is a complex multi-faceted topic that is often best understood when viewed along with other theories of development.

Erikson (1993, 1994) and Bandura (1977, 2006) concluded that religious actions are often an attempt to fill a social role. Maslow also addresses this and provides us with the sharpest contrast between religion and spirituality (Yocum, 2010). Maslow compared religious experiences and peak experiences. These peak experiences can be related to spiritual experiences while the religion was viewed as an action. He commented that these practices have often over religionized a day of the week or part of a person’s life,

For most people a conventional religion, while strongly religionizing one part of life, thereby also strongly, “dereligionizes” the rest of life. The experiences of the holy, the sacred, the divine . . . if they happen at all, tend to be confined to a single day of the week . . . to rest heavily on the presence of certain traditional, powerful, but intrinsically irrelevant stimuli. (Maslow as cited by Yocum, pp. 30-31)

In contrast he saw spirituality as occurring within what he termed “peak experiences. These experiences were very personal and seen as transcendent, mystical, and laden with spiritual values. Maslow also saw these experiences as moments of clarity and guidance. He determined that there were those who suppress the peak experience to fit into a societal role. There are also those who have these experiences easily and often, using what they have learned. In fact, the experience of a prophet or other religious leader of sorts may become the foundation for an “organized religion”. In this instance instead of having their own personal experience, individuals would rely on the experience of this religious leader. The result is more intertwining of the ideas of religion and spirituality.

It needs to be said that the somewhat negative connotations drawn from Maslow regarding religion do not need to be the ideas in this research. However, his examples serve a purpose in that they provide clear characteristics of spirituality and characteristics of religion.

Fowler’s Theory on Faith Development

While all the theories previously discussed are important to the understanding of my research, a theory of faith development is needed to clearly tie everything together. James Fowler’s (1981) theory on the stages of faith development is clearly the best example. First, this theory is not based on a religious or spiritual set of views. At first this may seem contradictory to my study, but it is rather helpful.

His ideas of faith development are grounded in basic human development. They were developed through extensive interviews and cover human development from infancy to adulthood. Because the topic was faith development, topics related to

spirituality were addressed as they were important to the interviewee. For my research, I can take the stages and freely apply them to the decisions made during transition and apply spirituality, along with any of the other theorists, as needed.

Fowler determined that there are six stages of faith development. The stages are Pre-stage or Undifferentiated Faith, Intuitive-Projective, Mythic-Literal, Synthetic Conventional, Individual-Reflective, Conjunctive Faith, and Universalizing Faith. The stage of Undifferentiated faith begins at birth. The infant learns about trust through the actions of the caregiver as he or she meets the infant's needs. These needs are both physical and emotional. The strength of this stage is "the fund of basic trust and the relational experience of mutuality with the one(s) providing primary love and care" (p.121). The infant usually transitions to the next stage by the age of 2. The child in this stage uses language and symbols to identify the objects in his or her environment. This stage is Intuitive-Projective Faith. The child lacks the basis for understanding the symbols that are given to them. They make connections between fragments of stories, objects and events. These are very often religious symbols important to his or her culture.

The child transitions from this phase when he or she is ready to distinguish between real and make-believe. They are usually 10 years old and have developed adequate skills using inductive and deductive reasoning. These skills are used as they learn the narratives of their culture. They combine these lessons with what they know about relationships and reciprocity. Eventually they create a model of what they consider to be fairness. Stage 3 includes puberty and the development of Synthetic-Conventional Faith. The adolescent at this stage is beginning to experience the world outside of their

family. He or she will have views from church, friends, school, and society that will impact the views they currently hold. They will need to determine where they stand in relation to these ideas and those they have previously accepted. During this stage, they will also develop the “myth” of who they are in the world. One negative aspect of this stage is that for the first time they may become disappointed in trusted leaders and friends. This may be the first experience he or she has had with a person not measuring up to expectations. Stage four should begin in young adulthood. It should be noted that some adults remain at the stage three. In stage four the adult will need to determine how the ideals he or she has begun to accept will define him or her. The acceptance or exclusion by groups will have to be dealt with along with developing a personal identity. This stage is called Individuative-Reflective Faith.

Stages five and six are the highest levels of faith development. They are also the most complex. Not everyone reaches these levels of faith development. Simply put stage five, called Conjunctive faith is characterized by understanding that there are two sides to every argument. During this stage the adult will have to review ideas he or she has previously held. The definitive nature with which he or she was always able to approach a subject is gone. It is a rare circumstance that a person reaches stage six. A person in this stage, Universalizing Faith, understands morality that exceeds what would be considered normal. This person acts on these views with no concern for their own detriment. Fowler described them, “Their heedlessness to self-preservation and the vividness of their taste and feel for transcendent moral and religious actuality give their actions and words an

extraordinary and often unpredictable quality” (p.200). He goes on to say that this person is usually often described as a martyr for his or her beliefs.

The level of faith development in which a person is functioning at the time of transition will have an impact on the decisions that he or she makes. If they are on a level where they can view both sides of an argument they will be able to look at all options more comprehensively and make a more informed choice. Also, understanding one’s identity and the positions he or she holds will help them make these decisions. Milacci (2006) investigated issues of spirituality and faith with students enrolled in adult education. While he found that most students viewed spirituality and faith as related subjects, they were not always seen as synonymous. Milacci (2006) also found that a person’s struggles with faith impact his or her life experiences. He described this as the “dark side” of faith. These struggles or crisis of faith were seen by participants as times where their faith was tested possibly influencing the direction of his or her life.

Related Literature

Spiritual Development

Willett (2010) outlined a model for spiritual development found in 1 John 2:12-14 (New King James Version, NKJV). The apostle John wrote,

¹²I write to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name’s sake. ¹³I write to you, fathers, because you have known Him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you have overcome the wicked one.

In these verses we see the stages of development as childhood, young adulthood and parenthood. The child experiences the birth of faith. This stage includes learning about grace, forgiveness, God as Father, and growing with other brothers. The young adult experiences the ownership of faith. In this stage the young adult discovers more about truth and life. They also begin to defeat enemies to their spiritual growth. The parent empowers others in their faith by sharing experiences. This Biblical model of spiritual development can be applied to adolescents that are the young man in the verse. They are developing an understanding of life and determining how their faith will be a part of the decisions that they make. The strength of their faith will be tested. This testing has the potential to develop into the next stage of spiritual development. After they have been through a time of trial they will have an experience to share, as parents, with a younger generation.

Various scales have been created in the attempt to measure spiritual development and/or religiousness. Astin, Astin and Lindholm (2011) have used previously developed scales to compile a comprehensive set of 12 scales that measure spiritual development, religiousness and spiritual related qualities. For the development of these scales, spiritual development was defined in very broad terms. Astin et. al. (2011) defined spiritual development as, “How students make meaning of their education and their lives, how they develop a sense of purpose, the value and beliefs of dilemmas they experience as well as the role of religion, the sacred and the mystical in their lives” (p.59). Intuition, inspiration, creativity and connectedness to others were other factors that were considered. Five of the scales dealt with religion. For this reason, a definition of

religiousness was developed. Astin et. al. (2011) defined religion as “adherence to a set of faith-based beliefs concerning both the origins of the world and the nature of the entities or beings that created and/or govern the world” (p.40). These measures can be used by student affairs practitioners who work with students at the undergraduate college level. An understanding of these measures will help these practitioners develop a more holistic approach to enhancing the undergraduate experience (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011). Areas that are affected by spirituality and/or religious experiences can include academic engagement, performance, degree completion and satisfaction with college.

Christian colleges and universities have several facets designed to enhance the spiritual growth of students. These techniques, which include Bible studies, small groups and chapel, are beneficial for most of the students. Participation in these activities promotes a sense of belonging. If the campus climate excludes students from minority and diverse backgrounds then the spiritual mission of the school has not been fulfilled (Paredes-Collins, 2013). An examination of the impact of spirituality on a student’s transition will not be a thorough examination without taking into consideration the possible diverse background of a student. Being aware of the implications of exclusion is one response. The application of best practices through the establishment of infrastructure, intentional engagement and purposeful assessment are more effective responses (Paredes-Collins, 2013). An analysis of related research revealed three implications regarding the spiritual growth of students from diverse backgrounds: a sense of belonging is crucial to the faith development of students of color, positive cross-racial interactions and compositional diversity are essential to a positive climate, and religious

and societal norms established by the white majority need to be examined (Paredes-Collins, 2013).

Spirituality

Human beings are unique in that they have the capacity for emotions. Lerner, Albert, Anderson and Dowling (2006) conclude that “spirituality and religiosity are the only mental and behavioral characteristics that are distinctly associated with human beings” (p. 60). Part of this spirituality is a belief in ideas. An individual is not born with these ideas. They are instead, developed over time. For healthy development of an adolescent, positive spiritual development is needed. This development helps them find their identity and the path that they will pursue in life. This path leads them to becoming an adult that contributes to the community and society. When looking at programs that are developed for youth these factors regarding spirituality and thriving are important to consider. The research done by Lerner et. al (2006) determined that “the role of spirituality in thriving among young people merits further attention, especially because spirituality may fuel the adaptive individual . . . context relations that enable humans to contribute in productive ways to the healthy development of self, family, community and civil society” (p.70).

Students often make decisions based on what they believe God is calling them to do (Yocum, 2010). This decision is often dependent upon the empathy he or she has developed. Love, acceptance, connecting with others, and the answers to the meaning of life were all identified as spiritual needs (Yocum, 2013). In his study, Yocum’s (2013) interviewees saw spirituality to make them moral and responsible people. These

behaviors made them successful in both school and the work place. Therefore, they attributed their success to their spirituality. While looking for a way to make a difference, opportunities were unfolding in front of them. Personal experiences, whether positive or negative, were used to impact their spiritual beliefs. These personal experiences could have been those made during the transition from high school.

Religiosity

The National Survey of Youth and Religion (2008) is comprised of survey data on the religious practices and spiritual beliefs of adolescents. The first wave of the survey took place in 2002. The second wave interviewed the same students in 2005. The data showed a slight decline in the importance of religious faith in shaping daily life. The results demonstrate the complexities of spirituality and religious beliefs. For example, some students reported that a crisis drove them to religion while others said that they were driven away from religion by a similar crisis. There appears to be division between spirituality and religion. In response to the statement that they were spiritual but not religious, 48% of the adolescents said this was true for them. In addition to this there was an increase in spiritual beliefs such as angels, demons and astrology. While the results show some decline in religious beliefs, those that have maintained them report high levels of dependence on the beliefs and others that share them. Throughout both surveys, the belief in God was 78% and the view that God is a personal God remained at 63%. Of the adolescents that had firm spiritual beliefs in God, most of them said that friends, family and church leaders influenced them toward higher levels of spirituality. Church was an

inspiration for 78% of them, 71% said it is warm and welcome and 49% said that it is a place to talk about their problems.

If religion is primarily an organized or ritualistic experience, the participation in these activities would often be enforced by members of an individual's family or community. Stokes (2008) found that a parent's participation in church strongly correlated with an adolescence attendance. The participants reported that involvement in the organized church and relationships with the members provided them with a basis for decision making. Stokes (2008) found high correlations between a parent's religiosity and high school graduation. Students that attended religious services with their parents were 40% more likely to graduate from high school. He found that this participation gave the students access to a group of adults that can serve as role models. These adults act as a community of emotional, intellectual, and financial support. They can provide knowledge regarding graduation and transitioning to post-secondary education.

The denomination of the religion has also been found to influence not only religiosity but overall spiritual health (Francis & Robbins, 2008). The researchers measured spiritual health using four domains: personal, communal, environmental and transcendental. The personal domain involved the participant's self-image. A positive self-image and statements that they feel they are of worth demonstrated a positive personal domain. Students that had positive scores in this area were likely to trust the decisions that they made. They were also more likely to believe that their life had a purpose. The communal domain includes the relationships the student has with people whom they share their life with. These people are primarily family and friends. Positive

scores in this area indicate that the student affirms the interpersonal relationships in his or her life. The student feels comfortable with his or her parents and can talk with them about life and decisions that are being made. He or she also has friends that can be trusted and supportive. This domain indicates that they are likely to approach other people and feel confident that they will be accepted. The Environmental domain involves the student's understanding of global issues. Understanding his or her relationship to global issues means that the student is likely to feel that his or her actions will make the world a better place. The fourth domain is concerned with areas that transcend the physical everyday life. Students with good spiritual health in this area are likely to believe in God and life after death. Francis and Robbins (2008) compared the weekly attendance of four denominations (Roman Catholic, Free Church, Pentecostal and Jehovah's Witness) to the Anglican denomination. They found that differences did exist between the groups and that the denominations could not be grouped homogeneously. Regarding my research, it should be noted that while I may have students from a Christian school I will need to consider the different denominations that they may belong to. Additionally, spiritual health was found to make a difference on a student's response to subjects that will have an impact on his or her transition decisions.

Holistic Education

Maslow (1970) determined that if religions did not have all control of spiritual experiences, then education could have an influence. There are more factors that impact spiritual development. A holistic education encompasses all areas of a student's life. It is a system that ties together all the pieces; home, family, church, spirit, and knowledge to

name just a few, and encourages students to use these factors as a basis for decision making. Therefore, it stands to reason that a career calling, if felt by a student, would be taken into consideration and nurtured by educators in a holistic education setting. Duffy and Sedlack (2010) found that 44% of their participants reported having a career calling and were more likely to view their life as meaningful. Students preparing for graduate schools, such as medical or law school, were more likely to believe they had a career calling. They suggested that it is important for career counselors to consider the possibility of a career calling and help a student determine if a career or post-secondary option is consistent with his or her values.

It is important to stop and define a career calling. Dik and Duffy (2009) defined a career calling as “a life role that is motivated by a form of transcendent summon.” Dik and Duffy (2009) also discussed how a career calling has transformed from a purely religious idea to a more secular notion. Duffy and Dik’s (2009) definition and thoughts on career calling have been cited by several researchers who have added to the study of a career calling (Bott and Duffy 2015; Bott Duffy and Douglass 2015; Chen, May, Schwoerer and Augelli 2018).

Career counseling could occur at both private Christian schools and public schools. However, the delivery and the actual skills taught may be somewhat different. Leblanc and Slaughter (2012) found that the environment of a Christian high school encouraged students to share their faith and defend their Christian beliefs. The public-school environment prepared students to live in a diverse world where they would need to defend their Christian faith. Interestingly, the pressures they faced in opposition to their

Christian beliefs improved their ability to intellectually defend their faith. While both public and Christian school environments had an impact on spiritual development, both groups reported that school was not the primary influence on spiritual formation. Instead the students listed family, home life, church, and youth groups as primary influences.

The education of spirituality is a topic that most public schools in the United States shy away from (Alexander & Carr, 2006). However, the idea of spirituality being taught in the school setting is not unheard of. Religious schools have supplemented the education taught in churches for hundreds of years. Additionally, they found families, congregations and communities as instrumental in teaching spiritual beliefs.

There are some curricula that address spiritual needs in the educational setting. One curriculum is the Passages Program. Kessler (as cited in Miller, Karsten, Denton, Orr, & Kates, 2005) has mapped seven integrated areas of spiritual development that are used to guide this program. These seven areas are: Search for meaning and purpose, longing for silence and solitude, urge for transcendence, hunger for joy and delight, creative drive, call for initiation, and deep connection. These areas are directly related to transition. First and foremost, the students are taught meaning and purpose through goal setting activities along with a time for asking existential questions about life. This is done in a safe place and includes the silence and solitude to have time to think through the questions they have about life. The other stage closely related to transition is the Call for Initiation. In this stage the educators are providing the students with the tools necessary to take the next step from childhood to adulthood. These tools are rites of passage passed down from both educators and parents

School resources impact the nature of career programming that is offered. The size of the school and the number of career options offered increase student confidence in future career choices. Rowan-Kenyon, Perna and Swan (2011) also found that parents and family members were key players. In the most successful situations parents worked with the school, reinforced information, and encouraged students to take advantage of career exploration opportunities. Parental involvement could also be related to a strong academic ethic. Smith and Zhang (2009) found that students that had an academic ethic in high school, impacted by values and beliefs, have an increased chance of having an academic ethic in college. If the students already had strong academics, then the transition to the rigors of a college curriculum would be somewhat easier.

It is also important to consider the physical location of school when determining the efficacy of a program. Student needs will differ between a rural and an urban setting. Hardre', Sullivan, and Crowson (2009) found that students enrolled in a rural school were more positive about a subject when the purpose was clear. They were also more likely to complete high school and enroll in post-secondary education. Perry, Liu, and Pabian (2009) found that students enrolled in urban schools were more influenced by the personal connections that were made with educators. These relationships, more than available programs, influenced the students desire to remain in high school and pursue a post-secondary education. The students in my research will be in the metro Atlanta area. The area is on the outskirts of the metro area and should be considered more rural than urban.

Spiritual wellness is being addressed in the secondary education setting. In a study by Briggs, Akos, Czyszczon, and Eldridge (2011), school counselors are the agents to address spiritual wellness. However, some counselors are unsure of how to do this within the public education setting. Spirituality is seen as a factor in protecting adolescents from adversity and other related issues during the high school years. Students are also looking for meaning in life. If the school counselor is the person that is helping direct the student to life after high school, providing college and occupational guidance, they should be aware of the role of spirituality in these decisions. Various quantitative and qualitative assessments can be used by the counselor to understand how to address the student's needs. These interventions can assist them in determining meaning in their life. Counselors can also encourage students to depend on their inner resources, participate in activities that help others and develop positive relationships with others with similar beliefs.

Relationship Factors

Students that have the parental support for transition are fortunate. Wilson (2005) found that today's society is so rushed many adolescents are not given the opportunity to receive guidance from parents or other role models. She concludes that the progress on the path to adulthood goes unnoticed, and important milestones are missed. As a result, identities, including spiritual identities, are weakly formed. "There is a huge generational gap between the younger and older generation" (Wilson, 2005, p. 169). Society looks to the school to bridge this gap. Unfortunately, schools are not set up to meet the spiritual needs of students. Wilson (2005) addresses the need for a variety of educational

alternatives that will incorporate spirituality. These programs should not merely prepare for graduation from high school but instead prepare students for future roles.

Regarding school programs, Smith and Zhang (2009) found that college admissions programs were perceived as the least effective in assisting with transition. Instead mothers were not only perceived as being more helpful, their level of involvement correlated positively with a student's GPA. Students also perceived their relationships with high school teachers, fathers, friends and high school guidance counselors as helpful. The student's GPAs did not positively correlate with these relationships. However, the relationships may have influenced areas other than GPA. These areas could have been more personal and not as measurable.

The importance of a relationship is somewhat difficult to measure. It is completely subjective and based on the participant's reported perception of the relationship. In a 15-year longitudinal study, Helwig (2008) found that 20% of the participants named the relationship with their mother as the most influential. Various family member and relatives were listed after this. High school teachers were also listed, but not as often. The fact that students would list their mothers and relatives more than educators and counselors suggests the personal quality needed in the relationship and therefore supports the idea of a spiritual element or calling involved in the transition process.

Motivation

The source of motivation can be difficult to determine. Hardre (2009) found that students living in rural areas were more engaged in work when they saw the usefulness of

what they were learning. This motivation to complete work overflowed into motivation to graduate from high school. When the teachers were sensitive to their values and culture the student's motivation increased even more. Horny and Bonds-Raacke (2012) found that the size of the school impacted motivation. Small schools had more positive characteristics that increased motivation. Student's individuality, including spiritual beliefs, could be addressed when looking at possible future careers. Students also looked at the skills that they would need for a high paying job or a job in the field that they wanted to work in.

Students are more motivated when they begin career exploration early in their high school careers (Deemer & Ostrowski, 2010). Students reported that participation in a graduation project and career interest inventories also helped them think about a future career. The students also reported that feeling comfortable and respected was very important. Comfort and respect would include acceptance of spiritual beliefs.

The level of comfort appears to impact an adolescent's motivation for spiritual or religious development. Lippman and Keith (2006) found after a review of demographic data that there is a relationship between a country's economic development and its spiritual and religious development. The more a country develops economically the less they are dependent on spirituality and religiosity and the more they are dependent on secular, educational, and economic institutions.

Decision Making and the Evidence of a Calling

In Judeo-Christian beliefs a calling is often considered as direction from God. To live the life that God has planned for you, a person must determine his or her calling.

This is difficult without the support of parents, friends, pastors and educators. However, the discussion of a “calling” has often not been addressed in counseling sessions because of the fear of becoming too religious within a secular setting (Galles & Lenz, 2013). Duffy & Dik (2009) provided this definition regarding a calling, “an external summons to approach a life role in a manner oriented toward deriving a sense of purpose or meaningfulness and that holds other oriented values and goals as primary sources of motivation (p.427). Their definition provides a broader view of a calling beyond ranging from God to other cultural and societal forces. This definition also accounts for the purpose and meaningfulness of a person’s daily activities.

Duffy and Dik (2009) go on to say that a calling is not specific to a group of people. It is also not specific to careers such as religion, education and healthcare. All career decisions, even when they are made from necessity, can be determined a calling by the individual. The difference is the attitude in which the person approaches his or her work. The students in my study will have many similarities. They may however have differences regarding economics and resources. It will be important to consider if students still view their transition plans as a calling even though they are impacted by the abundance or lack of needed resources.

It is also important to consider how students respond to negative career advice. In some cases, students may feel such a strong calling that they choose to ignore discouraging remarks from others (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2012). The outcome of this can be both positive and negative. For instance, many people in the entertainment or music field are often discouraged because of the small percentage of people that can

make a successful career in this field (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2012). This advice, while well intentioned, does not account for the small percentage that become very successful by “beating the odds”. Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas (2012) found that calling is negatively related to career advice. This is especially true if a person believes his or her calling is from God. Persistence in a career calling may be a demonstration of faith. Cardador and Caza, researched the possible negative effects of pursuing a calling. They identified characteristics such as overworked, overcommitted, and lack of taking care of personal health as possibly detrimental to a person’s relationships or livelihood. Research involving site documentation will be beneficial in the process of determining the legitimacy of negative advice students may have received. This would provide information regarding classes taken and grades received when a student discusses his or her transition plans. It will be important to note how likely a student will be able to pursue a path and compare this to how strongly they feel about a calling.

It is important to note that some research supports the idea that a vocational identity separate from a career calling, promotes life satisfaction. Hershi and Hermann (2012) found that the presence of an identity within one’s career and the knowledge that they were serving a purpose promoted what they termed life satisfaction. The presence of a calling negatively impacted life satisfaction. Additionally, they found that life satisfaction and calling are multi-faceted topics. Qualitative research that delves into the story of an individual’s life will provide the rich descriptions necessary to fully understand the impact of a calling.

Transitions from High School to Post-Secondary Education and Vocation

When looking at the transition from high school, the very act of entering a new phase of life can be frightening. Spiritual issues and religion aside, the experience of entering unknown territory is not easy. College freshman who attended a collaborative program designed to prepare them for college had a much smoother transition experience (Unger, 2003). The students were more prepared for the challenges they would face. They also reported that they were more committed to receiving a college education.

Educators can also work with colleges to become more knowledgeable about what is expected at the college level. This knowledge helps ease fears and has even been found to increase the number of students who apply to college (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcombe, 2011). This increase in the number of applications suggests that students are more confident about the transition experience and the decisions that he or she will make.

While educators at both the high school and college level can offer many things to ease the transition process, the role of the family is the largest determining factor in a smooth transition. Family and culture are both taken into consideration when students are making transition decisions. The needs of the family and expectations are often followed despite the internal desires of the student (Duffy & Dik, 2009). Despite internal desires, a student will often consider the economic and social needs of the family. These needs could be a natural by-product of his or her culture or a result of life circumstances. Examples of life circumstances could range from the death of a loved one to the break-up with a boyfriend or girlfriend. These circumstances can often influence the vocational or

post-secondary decision made by the student when the he or she decides they want to do something to change something in society. For example, a teenager affected by divorce may decide to become a child psychologist. It stands to reason that these views could also conflict with the presence of a spiritual calling.

Summary

Spirituality has the potential to be a complex factor in the process of transition decision making. Society impacts the process through relationships with family, friends and role models. These relationships in turn help the adolescent develop their identity and determine their spiritual beliefs. These beliefs help determine the amount of motivation that is put forth into realizing the transition goals. Before this spiritual motivation can develop, the adolescent's basic physical and emotional needs must be met.

CHAPER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the impact of a student's spirituality on the decisions he or she makes during transition. For this study, transition was defined as the process of moving from high school to post-secondary education and employment. Spirituality was defined as moments of transcendence which often provide clarity and guidance (Maslow, 1976).

This chapter provides details regarding the use of a transcendental phenomenological design, the questions the researcher is seeking to answer, the participants involved, and the research setting. This is followed with an explanation of procedures, types of data collections, and analysis methods using content analysis and Moustakas' seven steps for data analysis.

Design

A transcendental phenomenological design was used. Creswell (2013) concluded, “The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (Kindle edition, Chapter 4, heading 3, subheading 1, paragraph 1). He goes on to further explain that the defining features of phenomenology include: An emphasis on a phenomenon, exploration of a group of individuals, a philosophical basis, the use of bracketing to discuss researcher bias that will be set aside, data collection, data analysis, and a discussion of the essence of the experience (Creswell, 2013). Transcendental phenomenology, while containing all the basic components of a phenomenological study, relies heavily on the researcher setting aside all judgment and relying heavily on intuition, imagination and universal

structures to develop the essence. The researcher also relied on a systematic method of data analysis (Creswell, 2013). There are three essential components to this design: Epoche, transcendental-phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation. Epoche, also known as bracketing, occurs when a researcher sets aside judgment and focuses on the intrinsic motive of the conscious act (Schwandt, 2007). Moustakas (1994) described the observation of the bracketed experience as “a phenomenon to be gazed upon, to be known naively and freshly through a “purified” consciousness” (p.85). Transcendental phenomenological reduction is a process used to reduce what has been seen and heard into important thematic elements that are essential to understanding the phenomenon at hand. The process involves reflecting upon what has been seen multiple times. Each reflective process uncovers additional textural descriptions and layers of meaning. These descriptions are ultimately reduced to the common elements that are important to understanding the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

This research uses a transcendental phenomenological design. In addition to researching a phenomenon I am investigating the underlying ego of the phenomenon. To do this, I used components of a transcendental phenomenological design such as imaginative variation and intuition to develop a textural-structural description of the essence. I bracketed out my previous experiences to remove bias and judgment. I also used a systematic method for both data collection and analysis

Research Questions

1. What spiritual emphasis do students place on decisions regarding post-secondary education and employment?

2. How does a student's level of spiritual development contribute to his or her feelings of academic and life success?
3. How does a student's level of spiritual development contribute to his or her idea of a career calling?

Participants

I used purposeful sampling to select 10 students. All students were seniors and enrolled in the same private Christian school for high school. Purposeful sampling is the process of selecting a small sample of information-rich cases that allows for in depth inquiry of a phenomenon (Patton, 2002). Patton defines information-rich cases as “those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term purposeful sampling.” (p. 46.) The cases of individual students who are transitioning from a private Christian school, will provide me with rich information regarding the phenomenon of the impact of spirituality on transition decisions.

Setting

The study took place at a private Christian school in the Atlanta Metropolitan area. The campus currently has 860 students in grade K-12, 29.4% of these students are in grades 9-12. The student population for the 2013-14 school year was 56% male and 46% female. The ethnicity is 77% white and 22% African American (School website, URL withheld to protect anonymity). It is competitive with local public schools in the number of sports teams and extra-curricular activities. The graduation rate is 99%. Most

of the graduates enroll in universities throughout the country. The school website offers information for college guidance and planning.

Procedures

I have received approval from both the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the school. I worked with the faculty to select students. I provided one consent form for both the parent and the student and answered any questions regarding the study. Once the student agreed, I sent each student three electronic journal prompts. These prompts included directions for the student to write about each prompt and return them to me via email. I worked with the school to gain access to the student's records and reviewed them for information. These records included but were not limited to: Scholastic Achievement Test/American College Testing scores, transcripts, and other career interest inventories. The journal entries were collected and read prior to the interview. I conducted a one-on-one interview with each student based on standardized interview questions and conversation from journal entries and record review. The interview transcripts were analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) steps for data analysis. Record reviews and journal entries were analyzed using Moustakas' steps for analyzing texts.

The Researcher's Role

My personal experience of transition from high school to college was not well supported by my school. The guidance counselors did not appear to understand, or were indifferent to, my desires to attend a private Christian college. After finishing school at a public college, I began working in the public-school system. Currently I work with students in transition from high school. These combined experiences provide me with the

insight needed to understand the impact student spirituality can have on transition decisions, as well as how beneficial this knowledge will be for educators.

Using the transcendental phenomenological design, I will be able to put aside any previous transition experience and look at each situation naively. While each story may have similarities, they will each have differences that will contribute to the overall essence of the phenomenon of spirituality and its impact on transition.

Data Collection

Triangulation was used as the process to check the integrity of the inferences made by the researcher (Schwandt, 2007). This can be achieved using multiple methods of data collection. I achieved triangulation using interviews, journal analysis, and site documentation analysis. One of the first pieces of data that I collected was participant journals. These journals provided insight that I may not have received through one interview. This was followed up with a document review in which I looked at student transcripts and results of career exploration inventories. The interviews concluded my data collection process. I began collection with participant journals to become familiar with each participant prior to the interview. The information acquired through the journals had the possibility to impact the questions that I would ask. The second step of document review provided me with a realistic view of a participant's abilities. Information such as grades and test scores can impact post-secondary school choice. Obtaining this information prior to an interview could assist me in maintaining a beneficial line of questioning. Culminating data collection with interviews tied together

all pieces of data collection and provided me with an opportunity to clarify any data that is unclear.

Journal Prompts

The journal entries were completed privately in a location selected by the student. They were submitted to me electronically. The student had the opportunity to write in the journal wherever they felt comfortable. It was important for the student to relax and write openly for me to receive rich information that is useful for the study of the phenomenon. Each student was given the following three journal prompts: “I believe/do not believe that God has a specific plan for the life of every Christian because . . .”, “One person/event that has impacted my spiritual life is . . .”, and “My current plans for the future include . . .” The journal prompts provided the opportunity for the student to incorporate a broad range of topics within his or her response. These responses provided information that will answer the research question: “What spiritual emphasis do students place on decisions regarding post-secondary education and employment?” The introduction of these ideas prior to the interview will provide the participant with the opportunity to begin thinking more in depth about his or her transition. My hope was that by providing this preparation the information gathered during the interview would be even richer. The use of privately written journals provided the students with the opportunity to write whenever and wherever they felt comfortable. They were encouraged to answer honestly and thoughtfully. According to Creswell (2013), a written response gives a participant time to reflect on the questions and the answer that he or she provides. The use of journal prompts also allows students to express themselves in a way

other than a verbal interview. Many students are better able to convey their feelings through writing than in an interview with someone they have only met briefly. The journals were submitted to me electronically by a given date prior to the scheduled interviews.

Site Documentation

Documents were reviewed at the school in which the participants were enrolled. The records were not removed from the building. Pieces that are important such as transcripts and results of career interest inventories were copied by the school registrar. I received a copy of the records with the last name and any identifying number redacted. Student records were reviewed prior to student interviews. The records included, but were not limited to: Transcripts, SAT/ACT scores, and vocational experience. These records provided insight into the activities of the student throughout his or her high school career. Bandura's social learning theory explains how some individual sets a goal and makes plans to achieve it. School records will show these goals. The transcripts provided me with accurate information regarding the classes that students have taken as well as the grades they have made. This information was used to guide the interview process. My intention was to use this information to keep our interview focused on a realistic track. As Hodder (1994) stated the review of documents allows the researcher to, "... explore multiple and conflicting voices, differing and interacting interpretations" (p.393). The idea was that students may tell me plans that do not appear to be possible based on the classes they have taken. I planned to not become confrontational, but instead guide the interview to make sure we remained focused on realistic possibilities. The

documentation that I reviewed pertained to academic success and career development. Having this knowledge about the students helped assist me in answering the research question “How does a student's level of spiritual development contribute to his or her idea of a career calling?” Knowledge of a student's academic success, career interests and aptitude, provided me with a basis for understanding the student's response to interview questions.

Interviews

The interviews took place in a conference room located within the school. Students at this age are easily influenced by their surroundings. I ensured that they were comfortable in this setting, so they could be completely honest with me. Making observations regarding the setting such as size, comfort, and other people present provided valuable information that helped me better understand the information gathered during the interview (Patton, 2002).

The interview questions were piloted in advance using a young adult volunteer who was currently enrolled in college courses. The use of a young adult who has already transitioned from high school provided me with the perspective of someone who has already transitioned from high school and thought through the questions that I will be asking. The pilot session took place on the campus of a local church. The volunteer was a boy between the ages of 19 and 22. I piloted the questions in individual sessions and recorded each session using a mini-cassette recorder and an iPad as a back-up recording device. I took notes regarding the wording and structure of the questions and possible changes that will need to be made.

I used an interview process that consisted of a combination of standardized open-ended questions and an interview guide. Using both methods provided me with consistency between interviews and the opportunity to elaborate on topics specific to the participant. Standardized open-ended interview questions were fully worded prior to the interview. The questions were asked to each participant in the same order and using the same wording (Patton, 2002). I was the only person conducting interviews. I met with students on two separate days; five students on each day. Having the standardized list insured consistency between interviews. An interview guide is a list of topics that are discussed with participants as needed. Using a guide provided both a consistent list of topics and the opportunity to discuss them in as much detail as needed (Patton, 2002). These details provided me with rich information to fully explain the essence of the spirituality and transition phenomenon. A combination of these two interview styles provided me with the flexibility to probe and delve more deeply into areas when it was appropriate (Patton, 2002).

Note-taking during the interview provided me with a way to record information such as the student's demeanor, physical appearance, and the setting in which the interview takes place. My notes kept me focused on the interview and the questions that were asked. In addition to taking notes, each interview was recorded using a micro-cassette recorder. A recording application on my phone was used as a back-up recording device in case there were technical difficulties with the cassette recorder.

Table A

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

Spiritual Impacts of Transition	Career Exploration and Influencing Factors
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are your ideas regarding God having a plan for your future? 2. If you do believe God has a plan, how does he reveal this plan to you? 3. What kinds of things have others said to you about where they believe God can use you? 4. How do you feel about someone else telling you their ideas from God regarding your future? Does this make you feel pressured or supported? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. As you entered 9th grade, what kind of career aspirations did you have? 2. How are your current career aspirations different or the same than your earlier aspirations? What has caused this change or allowed them to stay the same? 3. Please describe the career aspirations that you believe your parents have for you. How are these like or different than your aspirations? 4. How has a teacher, pastor, or counselor impacted the decisions that you have made about your future? 5. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your career or college exploration experience and factors that have influenced it?

The questions regarding career exploration provided a foundation for the interview. They are straight forward and practical. The questions concerning spirituality occurred during the latter part of the interview after I established rapport and trust. These questions were related to the journal prompts so I had some idea of the individualization and direction for the interview. It was my responsibility as the interviewer to make the students feel relaxed and comfortable. The order of the questions can greatly impact this (Patton, 2002).

Interview Guide

1. Church involvement
2. Extra-Curricular activities
3. Job experience
4. Relationships

The interview guide provided me with the opportunity to ask about specific topics that are appropriate for individual students. The journal topics and site documentation provided me with this information.

The interview questions provided me with the most extensive amount of information. I planned to address each of the following research questions: “What spiritual emphasis do students place on decisions regarding post-secondary education and employment?” How does a student's level of spiritual development contribute to his or her feelings of academic and life success? and “How does a student's level of spiritual development contribute to his or her idea of a career calling?”

Data Analysis

I began my data analysis by bracketing my previous experiences. I set aside my personal transition experience as well as my views as an educator along with bias and judgment. This process is called epoche or bracketing. Moustakas (1994) believed it was an important process because each experience is given the opportunity to be observed without prior judgments. I was aware that I must approach each situation exactly as it appears and allow the participant’s story to unfold. If I failed to do this I could miss important information that I was unaware I should be looking for.

I then followed each of Moustakas' (1994) seven steps for data analysis. There are three main areas of this process. These include: establishing the epoche in which the researcher's previous knowledge and bias is set aside, transcendental phenomenological reduction in which each event is seen in singularity and textural descriptions are developed, and imaginative variation in which the structural essence of the experience is established. There are five steps within phenomenological reduction. These steps are: each statement is looked at individually; statements are looked at to determine if they have invariant qualities related to the research; statements are clustered into themes; individual textural descriptions are created for individual themes; and composite textural descriptions are created which integrate the individual textural descriptions. These steps provided a systematic way to break down the information from each interview and determine common themes. The first step is to list every expression that is relevant to the experience being studied. The expressions are then reduced in number by eliminating those that do not meet the following two criteria: it contains a moment that is needed to understand the experience, and it is possible to label it. In addition to this, experiences that are repetitive or vague are also eliminated. The remaining statements become the invariant constituents which are then clustered into groups and labeled. Examples of groups for my research will possibly include: school support, parental support, view of God's role in an individual's life, and current transition plans. These groups are the core themes of the experience. In the fourth step the themes must be validated to continue. To establish this validity, the invariant constituent must be expressed explicitly in the transcription. If it is not expressed it must be compatible. If it does not meet either of

these criteria it is not relevant and must be deleted. In the fifth step an individual textural description is developed for each experience. Examples used in the definition must be written verbatim. I used phenomenological reduction to create this. Moustakas (1994) stated that phenomenological reduction is used to “derive a textural description of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon . . . from the vantage point of an open self” (p. 34). I achieved this by reflecting on each participant’s interview transcription along with all notes taken regarding each participant multiple times. Each time I not only uncovered additional insight, but I reduced what was said to the most important aspects for understanding the phenomena of spirituality. I then looked at the statements I had from each of the participants and discarded those that were repetitive or not needed. These remaining statements were reduced into textural descriptions that I ultimately used to write about the essence of the phenomenon of spirituality and transition decision making.

After developing textural descriptions, I developed structural descriptions using Imaginative Variation. Structural descriptions, according to Moustakas (1994), are “the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced.” (p.135). Creswell (2013) found that the use of imaginative variation will present a picture of conditions that precipitate and connect with an experience. The process of Imaginative Variation involves systematically determining structural meanings, recognizing underlying themes, determining universal structures that cause these to occur, and looking for examples that illustrate these structures and aid in what will be the final step in this process. The structural and textural descriptions were integrated to develop a statement that best addressed the essence of the phenomenon as I saw it at the time of my

research. Moustakas stated “The essences of an experience are never totally exhausted” (p.100). Therefore, they could change over time.

Using this textural description and imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994) a structural definition was created. I used this tool as I looked at each participant’s interview and notes. I determined possible universal constructs that are common between the stories such as schooling, family life, and church affiliation. I found and used examples of these structures as I wrote my structural definition that aided in the final step of writing the essence of the phenomenon of spirituality and transition decisions. Finally, a textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of each individual interview experience was created along with a composite textural-structural description of the essences of the experiences of the group.

The data collected through the journals and site documentation was analyzed using the same procedures. Because of the bulk of information, some content analysis needed to take place to organize the data into manageable pieces. This process involved identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying, and labeling the primary patterns (Patton, 2002). I read all information one time. The second time I read the information I assigned each piece a code based on a pre-determined list. The coded information was categorized into common groups, classified based on level of importance and then labeled based on patterns that I saw appearing. I used Atlas TI software as a location for manually organizing the coded information. Some of this information was used to guide me through the individual interviews. I then analyzed information using Moustakas’ seven steps to incorporate it with the data gathered through the interview process.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of data is defined by Schwandt (2007) as “the quality of an investigation that makes it noteworthy to audiences” (Kindle edition, trustworthiness definition, paragraph one). The four criteria used to measure the trustworthiness of research are, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I established each of these in my research.

Credibility

Schwandt (2007) described credibility as “the inquirer providing assurances of the fit between respondents' views of their life ways and the inquirer's reconstruction and representation of the same” (Kindle edition, heading trustworthiness criteria first paragraph). The credibility of the data was established by triangulating the data from journal entries, records review, and interviews. Triangulating data strengthens the confidence of the research results and provides multiple ways of gathering these results (Patton, 2002). Inferences are drawn based on the data that is collected. Schwandt (2007) stated, “Triangulation is a means of checking the integrity of the inferences one draws.” (Kindle edition heading triangulation).

Transferability

Transferability is based upon the researcher’s ability to provide the reader with enough information about the case that the reader could determine some similarity between the data collected and another case in which the data could be transferred (Schwandt, 2007). The thick descriptions in my research primarily developed through interviews and journal prompts, supported transferability of the data. Thick descriptions

are used to characterize an event. They are created by interpreting the meanings and intentions behind the events that have been recorded (Schwandt, 2007).

Dependability

The dependability of qualitative research is defined as the degree to which the procedures used in the research can be replicated (Schwandt, 2007). The dependability of the data in this study was established using an audit trail. An audit trail is formed when an independent third party systematically reviews the procedures used to gather research and renders a judgment regarding the dependability of the procedures and the extent to which it can be confirmed (Schwandt, 2007). The use of an audit trail allows for future researchers to replicate my study and creates dependability prior to publishing.

Confirmability

The process of determining that interpretations are linked to data is confirmability (Schwandt, 2007). In addition to this, direct quotes and member checks were used to establish authenticity (Patton, 2002). Member checks provided the participants with the opportunity to read the information I gathered from them and provide the opportunity to corroborate the information (Schwandt, 2007).

Ethical Considerations

Since private Christian schools typically have small enrollments and the topic can be very personal, I used a school 20+ miles away from my home. This reduced the likelihood that I was already an acquaintance of the student and/or his or her parents. I was able to maintain confidentiality by not having inquiries made outside of the research setting. The sites should not have a vested interest in my study (Creswell, 2013). I made

sure that the school will be okay with the results whether positive or negative. I also ensured that they will not discuss the results with students and the results will not impact the student's grades or relationship with the school. The intent of the study was disclosed to both participants and parents. Following disclosure of information regarding the voluntary nature of the study and the participant's right to withdraw from the study at any time, I obtained a joint permission/consent form from both the participants and their parents. Pseudonyms were used in the place of student names and all data was kept locked and secured

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This transcendental phenomenological study's purpose was to identify the impact of a student's spirituality on transition decision making. The data collection methods used were interviews, journal responses and student transcripts. After data analysis, four themes regarding transition decision making emerged from the data. These themes were: school programs, influence from other people; secular and spiritual, working with other people and God's direction. The theme of influence from other people developed into two sub-themes which were secular and spiritual. This chapter begins with a rich description of each participant and includes the findings from interviews, journals and student transcripts. Any grammatical inaccuracies in participant quotes are retained to more truly represent their voices.

Participants

The participants consisted of ten students enrolled in a private Christian school. Each participant was Caucasian, 18 years old and a senior in high school preparing for graduation.

Chrissy

Chrissy is a pleasant 18 years old young lady. She was a little nervous during the interview and had difficulty talking because of jaw pain. She had a very caring attitude and aspirations to become a nurse. Her outlook was strongly influenced by her experience with jaw surgery and the faith she demonstrated to overcome the pain. During her interview she told a story of how one of the nurses worked late to make her a milkshake

after hours. This compassion made her realize that one day she would like to be the person who helped another child. She has committed to attend a small state college where she will major in nursing. In her journal writing, she indicated that she believed God has a plan for every Christian. Consideration of this plan would impact the decisions she made concerning her future. Recent articles and class discussions have helped confirm her beliefs. She discussed the belief that some people hold of God watching people from afar and allowing them to make their own decisions, with no plan for them. She stated “I started thinking, but that is not the nature of God. God is a loving God. God is a caring God he would not do that” (Data collected from participant interview, 2015). She indicated that her parents support her in all her aspirations. An overseas mission trip is scheduled for the summer after high school graduation.

Milly

Milly is an upbeat 18-year-old young lady with long red hair. She is the captain of her cheerleading squad and active in student government. She described herself as having a mathematical brain. She plans to major in accounting. She has already committed to attend a large state university. Her parents have a very active role in her life. She is beginning to make her own decisions and is excited about the recent decision she has made regarding her roommate. During both her interviews and her journal writings, Milly expressed a belief in God’s plan for all Christians. During her interview she talked about a recent class discussion in which she liked her teacher’s belief that when you are in a relationship with God your desire will be to line up with his desires. Milly stated,

I think he knows which way you're going to take. I think he knows which way everybody is going to take. I think Christian's have a greater sense of what they're supposed to do so they go after God's heart and that's their heart too.

Her plans are supported by her friends and family.

She does not feel pressured by anyone but instead believes they are trying to help her find God's will for her life. (Data collected from participant interview, 2015)

Codi

Codi is a very personable 18-year-old young lady. She has a natural look and spoke easily about her aspirations. She is on the basketball team, in National Honor Society, and active in student government. She has taken several mission trips to an orphanage in Haiti. The work she has done, as well as the relationships she has developed, greatly impacted her decisions regarding the future. A physical injury and opportunities that arose because of this, created an opportunity that showcased her ability as a coach. During the interview she talked about sitting on the sidelines during a basketball game and commenting to the coach about plays. Codi stated,

One of our really great coaches said to me, "Have you ever considered being a coach? You'd make a really good one." That was something hitting me right in the face saying, "Hey, you should consider that." I had never considered it before. All my basketball coaches have had such a positive influence on my life. My goal is to have an influence on people's lives in that way. I just immediately saw myself being able to do that and being able to impact people while doing what I love at the same time. That's pretty much how I figured out that's what God was calling me to do." (Data collected from participant interview, 2015)

She went on to explain that she would like to coach during the school year and spend summers on mission in Haiti. When discussing her summer mission trips to Haiti she stated, “It has honestly been the best time I’ve ever had in one place. I feel like Haiti is my home” (Data collected from participant, 2015).

She has committed to attend a small private Christian college where she will pursue these paths that have already been placed before her. One obstacle that she has already seen God work in has been financing college and continued trips to Haiti.

Sammy

Sammy is a very serious 18-year-old young man. He is active in student leadership as well as several honor societies and service organizations. He also ran cross country, track and was on the swimming team. He has participated in several overseas mission trips. He has seen firsthand the needs that exist around the world. He plans to return to the mission field and help people in a medical capacity.

He stated, I’ve been on the Nicaragua trip three times and it has kind of opened my eyes to the different cultures that we do not see every day. When I went through physical therapy, I decided that is what I was going to do. (Data collected from participant interview, 2015)

He has committed to attend a large Baptist College and has received some scholarship money. When discussing his choice for college, he expressed the belief that God may not tell you a specific place, but you should seek a place where you will be able to glorify God. During the interview he provided evidence of not only a strong faith, but a mature understanding of his faith. He stated:

I don't have complete blind faith. I do have faith that is required to be a Christian, but my faith isn't completely blind. I'm going to investigate something and get evidence and I get the fact and stuff and support why I believe it. . . . I want it to be my own, and I don't want to just take my pastor's word for it or a teacher's word for it. I want to make it my own and know what I believe and make sure that it's my belief and not someone else's. Just from what I've seen, the experience that we go through in life, maybe they don't all look so good or feel so good at the time, but after you overcome them it's not only part of the experiences that you've been through, but it's also a way to relate to others and to give your story. Your testimony is a really powerful thing. More people than we think go through the same struggles that we do, and I don't think we realize it until we talk about it.

(Data collected from participant interview, 2015)

Ian

Ian is a great conversationalist. He was down to earth and had several interesting things to talk about. He is an 18-year-old senior who has been at the school since the 3rd grade. He is not only active in many of the fine arts activities, but his entire life revolves around the school and the people who attend and work there. His mother is also on staff at the school. Prior to the interview, he had recently made a tough decision regarding attending a military academy. While this decision was based on his faith in God, it was not a popular decision with other people in his life. When discussing this important decision, he stated:

I had gone to the summer intensives and everything. But while I was at Passion (conference), I just felt Him really saying, "Give that to Me." I fought with it for probably

the first day of the conference, and the second day that night I just remember saying, "All right God, what do you want, I'm giving this to You." I felt Him say, "I don't want you to go to an academy." I was like, Wow, okay, because at that point I had put all my eggs in that basket. I felt Him say, ". . . your heart's not in the right place." I thought a lot about that. I told my parents and we prayed through it. The next 2 months I kind of wrestled with did God really say that? It was a stressful time, it created a lot of tension between me and my parents because applications were closing fast . . . and then even just this past month it kind of reached a climax. . . We prayed that if I wasn't supposed to go to an academy God would shut the door. Probably 3 weeks ago I found out that I didn't get in the Navy. I was honestly relieved. (Data collected from participant interview, 2015)

He has continued with other plans and continues to have the support of his parents and family. He is currently committed to attend a small state college. This semester has been a period of enormous growth both spiritually and emotionally. After self-evaluation, he has developed his idea of how God has a plan for each person. He stated:

For the longest time I just thought that God's plan was sovereign, and so you couldn't mess it up. That whatever you did He had already determined your steps. But I believe now, I would say it's more of the choices you make. He is always working those towards His glory. So, I would say His plan is not necessarily, this is how your life is going to be, but to overall bring Himself glory. So, the actions that you take, if you are willing to submit to Him, they will ultimately bring Him glory. (Data collected from participant interview, 2015)

Aiden

Aiden is a strong athletic young man. He is 18 years old, captain of the football team, and a leader in the school. He has clear plans for college and has already signed a

full scholarship to play football. He mentioned that he had several interviews with college football programs, which explains why he appeared well versed in the interview process. He was confident and easily discussed the many ways he used his leadership positions as well as his struggles with a learning disability to help students in school and on the football field. He discussed how he has been taught that you will reap what you sow, whether it is on the football field or in life. He told me how his life came full circle this year when he was able to work with two young boys through the same experiences he had with bullying. The bullying incident occurred when he was in the 6th grade and had a profound impact on his life. He was able to use this struggle and how he has learned to overcome it to help these boys. He went on to explain how in the last few years God has placed him in a role as a leader. He has been made aware through both circumstances and others speaking with him that his actions are being watched and they influence others. He has accepted a football scholarship to a school that also has an exemplary business school. He plans to major in business. Several members of his family work in the business field. Aiden believes that God opened the door for him to attend this school to not only play football but pursue his career aspirations.

Darren

Darren is a pleasant, nice looking young man with a large athletic build. He is 18 years old and very direct in his conversation. He has been involved in football, wrestling and track & field for several years. He explained very simply how friendships, finances and the desire to play a sport have impacted his plans to attend a state university. As the interview progressed he explained more about how he understands God's plan. He stated:

I'm trying to think. I definitely believe God has a plan for our lives because . . . we think, we have this idea of our own purpose and then we pursue it and we think, oh, it's going to be great but then we get to the end it's like, nope. It wasn't as great as I thought., it just kind of lead to destruction. Then if we can follow God's plan, maybe it seems hard at the time, but then it leads to greatness, but we don't really realize it until we get there. (Data collected from participant interview, 2015)

Darren was not sure of a career path. He thinks something in sales is very likely. He enjoys talking to people and working with others. He likes to see people happy in whatever he does. His family and friends have encouraged him to use the social attributes that he has to determine what he should do.

Scotty

Scotty presented himself as a quiet young man during the interview. As he began to talk the realization occurred that while he was quiet for the interview he is much more outgoing socially. He has played several sports including track, wrestling and football. He expressed his plans to go to an out of state college, where he has a full scholarship, and will be involved in fraternity life. Several of his friends plan to attend the same college. He was confident in his plans to return home after college and work in the home building industry. He explained that this is a family business and he wants to work in it despite his father's warnings that it can be an unpredictable industry. He was accepted into an honor college at another out of state university, but the full academic scholarship helped him make his decision. Scotty explained that many of the decisions he is currently making are based upon the circumstances that have happened to him regarding school. His parents have encouraged him to not pursue the family business of land development

and to instead use his skills to become a doctor. While he has not ruled this out, the commitment to medical school is a long time and he wants to make his own decisions. These decisions are influenced by the Godly people he has in his life. He gave several examples of coaches and pastors who have given him guidance. His church has also impacted where he has decided to attend school. He attends a small Church of Christ that is very traditional. His pastor has connected him with people who attend a similar church near the school. In regard to his beliefs about God's will in the lives of people, he leans heavily on the belief that Godly people have been placed in our lives.

Gil

Gil is an 18-year-old young man who is active in sports and several service organizations. While his summer job at a country club was fun, it reinforced his plan to attend college. He does not plan to participate in college sports but confirmed that he will always play golf. He was confident that while he could pursue any career that he desired the family mortgage company will always be an option. His father has encouraged him to be open to any career but assured him that he will help him if he wants to work in business. Earlier in high school he had decided to attend an out of state college before realizing that an in-state university has a very well-respected business college. He has decided to go to a smaller college nearby and transfer into the university if he gets into the business college. When discussing how God reveals his plans to us, he states, "I think through other people, and searching obviously. If you aren't reaching out to Him, I feel like it would be harder for Him to show Himself" (Data collected from participant, 2015). Friends and other people in his life have guided him to pray about his decisions. When asked about how he feels about following the directions that other people have given him, he responded:

Everyone, when they get told something, you're always stubborn on the inside, even if you're trying to work with God's plan. You're always a little stubborn. It's just human nature. But definitely if it was something I'd been thinking about or praying about, if someone says that (confirms it), it has a huge impact. (Data collected from participant interview, 2015)

Matthew

Matthew was very engaging. Like the other participants he is 18 years old and a senior. He welcomed me to the school and provided me with information about the senior activities that were taking place that day. This welcome was not planned. There was a fire drill during his interview. Matthew and I had the opportunity to walk outside with the rest of the campus. Continuing with the interview would have been inappropriate so we discussed the school. It was an enjoyable conversation. Matthew demonstrated that he was a well-spoken young man. Since the day of the interview was career day, he was dressed in scrubs and had a stethoscope around his neck. He plans to pursue a career in medicine. His premature birth has influenced his faith in God and his parent's desire for him to fulfill God's plan for his life. At one point in time he considered working in the church. He explained that because he is Methodist he would have to move around a lot and that does not appeal to him. He is currently leaning towards medicine which will provide him with both the opportunity to help others and work in the church. He currently plays football and a full football scholarship to a private out of state college has helped him make his decision about which college to attend. The fact that they have a very good school of medicine helps him see that this was also part of God's plan. In discussing God's will he stated,

That's a great feeling, to know God's saying, "Pay attention here" . . . also, prayer, I'm very adamant in praying all the time. If you ever feel like something's going on that you want to pray about, be happy to do it. It can't hurt. It could help. So, you've got nothing to lose" (Data collected from participant interview, 2015).

He went on to explain how he is confident that God has a purpose for him. He stated, I remind myself when I was little I was born so premature that I should have died, but I didn't. I was in the hospital for three months after I was born. . . I said God put this breath in my lungs, as the song says. It's breath in our lungs, and it's here for a purpose and the least I can do is give him back some credit for that. That's how I try to remind myself to pray and focus. (Data collected from participant interview, 2015).

Results

Theme Development

Moustakas' (1994) steps for data analysis were followed to determine themes present in the data. All interviews were professionally transcribed and checked for accuracy by both the interviewer and interviewee. The interviews were read one time to familiarize myself with the overall feelings and beliefs of each participant. The interviews were read a second time and common ideas were jotted down while extraneous information was also noted. The interviews were then downloaded into ATLAS TI software. Codes were developed based on the notes taken during the second reading. The interviews were then read, and statements were coded. These codes were then grouped into code families that encompassed the major themes that had emerged. Once these code families and subsequent themes were determined, I was able to

synthesize, reflect and construct descriptions of each theme (Moustakas, 1994). This process was repeated for the journal responses.

Table B Enumeration of Open Codes

Open-Codes	Enumeration of open-code appearance across data sets	Themes
Credential Preparation	1	School Programs and Scholarships
School Program Reputation	42	
Finances	4	
Teacher Influence – secular	13	Influence from other people
Family Support – secular	4	
Community Person – secular	3	
Parental Influence – secular	17	
Pressure from others – secular	5	
Parental Influence – spiritual	7	
Family Support – spiritual	3	
Teacher Influence – spiritual	13	
Community Person – spiritual	21	
Pressure from Others – spiritual	9	
Peer Influence – spiritual	3	
Job Interest	11	
Leadership Roles	14	
Challenges	6	
Intrinsic Motivation to Help Others	4	
Mission Trip Experience	4	
God’s Bigger Plan	94	God’s Direction
Defending Faith	12	

Theme one: School programs and scholarships.

Interviews: School Programs and scholarships

In regard to school programs, Aiden responded by stating that the school he had chosen awarded him the best athletic scholarship. In addition to this, the head coach of the football team is very famous in the business world. Knowing this individual could help him as he is planning to work in the business world. Aiden stated, “He plays golf

with Warren Buffet on the weekend and everything so, he's a really good resource to have on my resume" (Data collected from participant interview, 2015).

He is currently considering International management. Since the business school at his chosen college has the same accreditation as an Ivy League school he feels he will be well prepared. Matthew also decided on his school based upon the best athletic scholarship and the physical therapy program that he wants to major in. He considered the college where his girlfriend plans to attend. He decided on his current college because of the football program and a stronger likelihood that he will be able to play during a game. The college he has chosen also has a good program track for the degree that he is pursuing as well as a large medical program. He stated that 90% of their graduates are accepted into medical school. Darren was influenced by sports because he felt that he could possibly walk onto a team at a small college. Gil was accepted into a large university. He has decided to attend a smaller college and transfer into the larger university that is nearby. He explained that attending the smaller school first will help him get used to his first year of college while maintaining a high GPA. The university that he will transfer into has one of the best business schools in the south east and attending this school will be a tremendous accomplishment. Scotty's school of choice was determined based on his academic scholarship and the location of the school to a church that he can be involved in. Chrissy chose a college because of the good nursing program and the fact that it is not a small Christian college, much like the school that she currently attends. Codi has chosen a small private school that has awarded her scholarship money and has a strong focus on missions. Sammy has chosen to attend a

large Baptist college that has both a strong medical program and missions program. The size of the college, smaller than a large university, is also more comfortable for him.

Journals: School programs and scholarships

The participant's journal responses supported most of the comments that were made during the interviews. Aiden stated again that he intended to take advantage of the great business school and its connections at his university. He wrote, "But in all, I plan to look into the world of business as I have extremely great business minds at my school next year like Joe Moglia" (Data collected from participant interview, 2015). Gil also supported his interview statements by talking once again about working in the home building industry like his dad and granddad. Milly specified through her journal writing that she would pursue a master's degree in Business Administration. She is choosing to attend a large in-state university with one of the best business schools in the southeast. Matthew wrote about becoming a physical therapist and rehabilitation specialist. He plans to attend a college that will offer these programs. Chrissy wrote that she will pursue a master's degree in nursing in hopes of becoming a post-op pediatric nurse. Sammy also wrote about attending a college that has a good medical program that will prepare him to be a physical therapist and provide him with opportunities to grow his faith and become more sound in his theology. He plans to take his medical career to the mission field. He has chosen to attend a large Baptist college.

Data Review: School programs and scholarships

Milly's overall GPA of 3.92 supports her decision that she can attend a large university and major in business. She has also had dual enrollment for two courses which

automatically provides her with college credit. In addition to this she has taken seven advanced placement courses. Her SAT score of 1500 and her placement in the 98th percentile on the ACT also support her career ambitions. Chrissy's transcripts show that her highest ACT score is in the 68th percentile. Her test scores are not very high, but her transcript indicates that she has taken three dual enrollment courses and one AP course. This supports comments made by her teachers that she is a hard worker. Codi has taken four AP classes, has a 3.93 GPA and has an ACT score in the 95th percentile. Codi is attending a small private college. Sammy has taken five AP courses and two dual enrollment courses. This along with a 3.85 GPA and ACT score in the 95th percentile, support his enrollment at a large Baptist college with a strong medical program. Ian has taken five AP courses and two Dual enrollment courses. His 3.9 GPA and placement in the 95th percentile on the ACT support his claims of potential acceptance at a military academy. Aiden has only taken two AP courses and has taken advantage of the opportunity to take three dual enrollment courses. Given his history of a learning disability and the demands of a difficult football program, having credit for three courses upon entering college will be an enormous benefit. He has a 3.67 GPA and scored in the 74th percentile on the ACT. Darren has taken four dual enrollment classes and has not taken AP courses. He has a 3.58 GPA and scored in the 79th percentile on the ACT. This supports a solid foundation of entering a local college. Scotty's six AP courses, three dual enrollment courses, 3.42 GPA and placement in the 93rd percentile on the ACT support his claims of a full academic scholarship to a large university. Gil's four dual enrollment courses which will count as core classes, 3.52 GPA and placement in the 79th percentile

on the ACT support his plan to attend a small university and transfer to a larger school when he has completed his core classes. Matthew has taken two AP classes, two dual enrollment classes, has a 3.25 GPA and placed in the 79th percentile on the ACT. This supports his plan to attend a small private college while he is working towards a medical degree.

Theme two: Influence from other people, secular and spiritual.

Interviews: Influence from other people secular

Aiden reported the secular advice he has been given is to do what you like to do. Specifically, he was told, “If you enjoy what you are doing you won’t work a day in your life” (Data collected from participant interview, 2015). He was also encouraged to look for scholarships, look for a good business school, visit campuses, and talk to coaches. Now that he has committed to a college and has begun discussing business, he has leaned heavily on his mother and grandfather for advice. Aiden stated, “I thought, my entire family has kind of done really well in business. My grandfather did extremely well, and my mom owns her own clothing line store” (Data collected from participant interview, 2015). Chrissy reported that her mother has had her complete career inventories. She has also mentioned to her that nursing seems like a good possible career. Her friends have pointed out her caring attributes and have encouraged her to look at those as she considers what she should do. Chrissy stated, “My friends say I’m like their mom, like a caring kind of person. I’m easy to talk to and responsible. Definitely like a counselor type of mom, certainly with kids for sure. I love kids. They bring me a lot of joy” (Data collected from participant interview, 2015). Chrissy’s teacher has also encouraged her to

go to nursing school because of her work ethic and academic ability. Codi's father is career and goal oriented and encourages her to look at things from this perspective. She stated,

My dad he's very goal oriented he does not agree that I should go into coaching. Most likely I would have to pursue a teaching degree and get my teaching degree to go into coaching. As everybody knows teachers do not have a good salary. My dad, he's president of a business in Detroit. He's very successful. He's constantly trying to lead me down that path. My mom, she knows my heart is in basketball. She's very supportive of that desire. . . . My dad, he understands that I will probably end up doing that, but he still is relentless in trying to get me down that path. (Data collected from participant interview, 2015).

She also had a lot of people point out her personal attributes, such as working well with children. During a recent injury she was unable to play basketball. During her time on the bench she began talking to the coach about the plays that were being made during the game. Her coach remarked that this was insightful and that she would make a good coach. The coach then went so far as to begin asking her what she thought of certain plays and other aspects of the game. This encouragement gave Codi the idea that she could work as a coach during the school year and continue to serve on the mission field during school breaks. Darren also stated that people around him pointed out his attributes. He stated, "They say one of my best attributes is I am a people person. I want to see people happy all the time. It bothers me when they are not. I just try to help others. That's one of my attributes" (Data collected from participant interview, 2015). Gil reported that

his brother gave him practical advice to keep his GPA up early in high school to have the opportunity to get into any college program. When asked about his decision to major in business he stated, “That’s my dad’s doing and my brother’s doing” (Data collected from participant interview, 2015). His father has told him that he will help him if he wants to work in the family mortgage business. However, he is not forcing him to take over the business. He will be supportive of him no matter what he decides to do. Gil reported that one of his coaches has supported him by talking to him and encouraging him to not rush decisions and enjoy life. Ian reported some issues with his parents trying to narrow down his choices and how he does not like to be told what he should do. Overall, his mother is very traditional in the sense that she wants him to be happy. His father is a little more practical and likes the idea of him working in a math or science area. Ian felt like he disappointed several people with his decision to not pursue a military academy position. The prestige of such a position influenced him heavily. Ian mentioned that one teacher has encouraged him to pursue his passions. He has given him the advice to do something that he enjoys.

Milly has a thought process that is like her parent’s. She is very methodical in her choices and weighs several options. She stated, “They have given me their opinions and I take them into consideration to see how they line up with mine. A lot of the time they line up with mine” (Data collected from participant interview, 2015). She went on to further explain that had her parents not liked her choice of college she would have reconsidered. Overall her parents just want her to be happy.

Matthew had input from teachers that he was good at forensic anthropology and other sciences. Others have pointed out his intellectual attributes and have pushed him to develop better work and study habits. This has helped him decide upon medical school and a career in medicine. He told me that he was born premature and weighed 2 ½ pounds at birth. Because of this, they have a saying in their family “Happy, Healthy and Strong”. If he meets this his parents are happy with whatever he chooses to do.

Scotty wants to be with friends and follow in the footsteps of other family members by working in the home building business. His father has not been very encouraging of this. He warns him that this business is very shaky. He also stated that friends of his parents are successful in business. He has always watched them to see what they do. His mother has always wanted him to be a pediatric oncologist. His sister had childhood cancer and his mother would like to see him go to medical school. She has also told him that he can talk to people easily and is very sociable. His choice of college was impacted by the fact that he had two friends going to the same school. He stated, “I have two good friends who are going with me down there. That was a big part of it too. I didn’t want to go anywhere where I was alone just off the bat” (Data collected from participant interview, 2015).

Journals: Influence from other people, secular

During the journal writing very few students made comments regarding how other people influenced them in more of a secular way. Gil mentioned that he would like to start his own business like his father and his grandfather.

Interviews: Influence from other people, spiritual

A large amount of the comments made during interviews were spiritual in nature. Aiden reported that his campus pastor has talked with him quite a bit and his girlfriend also helped him stay grounded in his faith while he was making his decisions. Chrissy had a discipleship group whom she met with all year. This group focused on knowing God's will for your life and making decisions. The discipleship group has read two books: *All the Places to Go How Will You Know* and *If*. They are currently reading *If*, which is based on Romans chapter 8. The book challenges readers to consider what they will do with all the possibilities that they have been given in life. She mentioned that the comments made by people have directed her to look towards God. She stated, "Everybody is pointing towards God. You start to listen to it. The quiet whisper" (Data collected from participant interview, 2015). When asked what she has specifically learned from this book and time with the group, she stated,

I think the biggest thing I have learned is that you influence people all the time. And what you do matters. You can make a big impact on somebody and you can easily go through life without caring about that . . . but if you really take time and go out of your way to help people . . . you can really make an influence. Getting out of yourself. (Data collected from participant interview, 2015)

Codi stated that her mother has pointed out God's possible plan for her life. She also has had doors open that have revealed some of God's plans for her. She has an opportunity to return to the mission field every summer. She stated,

My missions pastor at church, he's been a huge impact in my life. He has two different non-profits that he runs to bring stuff down to Haiti and to provide them with water filters and diapers for the little kids who run around with nothing else on. He's helped me a lot with that decision-making process. He's encouraged me with the fact that he is always in need of people to deliver that stuff. He just has it in my head that as long as I want to go, he'll have something for me to do. (Data collected from participant interview, 2015)

She explained that if she chooses a career such as teaching or coaching she will have time during summer break to pursue this opportunity.

Darren said that friends and family have pointed out his ability to help others and use this gift to show God's light. His coach also told him to always keep God at the forefront of what he plans to do in life. Gil has found support in seeing how others in his life have dealt with changes and decisions that had to be made. He has seen both his mother and brother handle circumstances with the strength and wisdom they have been given by God.

Sammy was encouraged by his pastor, youth pastor and discipleship leader who each see missions as important. They have provided a positive outlook on the subject. Sammy stated, "Once I told them I wanted to go that route they kind of guided me and told me what different things I needed to do to prepare me. I've been majorly encouraged" (Data collected from participant interview, 2015). After mentioning mission work as a potential career other people in his life have commented to him that they can see him in this field. However, Sammy is unsure if this is specifically God's plan being

revealed. He stated, “I think they might be able to see into it a little bit when they look into me, I hope” (Data collected from participant interview, 2015). His Bible teacher and a men’s Bible study group have encouraged him to stay focused and learn more about what he believes. His pastor is teaching a series on how God reveals himself through the little things such as a person saying something encouraging to you or a verse that suddenly comes to mind. Sammy’s mother has accompanied him on three mission trips to Nicaragua. She has supported him in following the path that he believes God has for him. She has remarked that she has seen how God can use him. When others have remarked that they do not want him to go overseas because they feel that it is too dangerous, she has supported him by saying that they believe this is his calling.

Ian has been in a men’s Bible study group this year. A teacher and two coaches are also in this group. They have been reading a book titled *Soul Keeping*. Discussion of this book and other spiritual matters has greatly influenced his decision making. It has adjusted his mindset to think about things in a more spiritual light. Milly has been influenced by her Sunday school group and helping her friends find God’s calling.

Matthew had a teacher encourage him to focus on how God made him and gave him the drive to pursue the medical field. He also had a youth counselor at church that provided a lot of wisdom and encouragement. He also mentioned how his father relied on God to determine what he would do for a career. He ultimately did not end up working in a field where he had a degree. In addition to this, his father has been going through treatments for prostate cancer. While this has been difficult at times, his father has kept his faith strong in the Lord. He has shown how you maintain your faith and use the

support of family and friends. He particularly learned from his parent's example of how they both had faith in God and were there to support one another. These difficult situations have shown him how amazing God is. Matthew has had several people tell him that he is a leader and may be a great leader in the church. He does not feel pressured by this. Instead he finds this advice encouraging. Matthew stated,

They've all been encouraging to hear, things about yourself. I think it all comes down to, they're all kind of puzzle pieces that fit to find that big picture of the purpose that you meant to have. I think that all of these things kind of play into that. It doesn't specifically mean that I am supposed to be a pastor or a forensic anthropologist. Maybe it means I work in the church as a youth counselor and I am a physical therapist, but I part time with the GBR or something . . . any number of combinations and things. (Data collected from participant interview, 2015).

One coach has advised Matthew to look at life like a tapestry. He explained that decisions we make lead us down one thread and onto another, weaving a tapestry. As humans we like to think of things linearly and God does not see it this way. He sees the total picture. Sammy reported that his parents want him to be happy but to always seek God's will. His desire to work in missions has been encouraged by teachers and others at his school who are very supportive of mission work. His pastor has specifically talked with him about how we hear God's voice. He feels a genuine call to mission work. Scotty said that his minister has directed him to a church near his college that is the same denomination of the church that he already attends. When he is given advice from others

he is receptive only if it is someone like a friend or family member who really knows him.

Journal: Influence from other people spiritual

Gil wrote in his journal that his school has opened many opportunities and views on religion that he might not have seen otherwise. This has allowed him to grow and develop his faith. Ian wrote in his journal response about a moment that changed his entire life, not just post-secondary decisions. He wrote about his coach challenging him to think about the time he accepted Christ. After thinking about this, he realized he had never accepted Christ. The coach talked with him and prayed with him to accept Christ.

Darren wrote about a specific coach. He wrote,

He has taught me about being a man and a father. He gets what it is supposed to be like to live like a Christian. You cannot go a full conversation with him not bringing up God or scripture. He really exemplifies the life of a servant and disciple. (Data collected from participant journal, 2015)

Sammy also wrote about a specific individual. This person is someone who he knows from church. “The amount of time, energy and effort that Ian has invested in me has definitely been effective in my spiritual growth, most influential people in addition to my dad and former youth pastor” (Data collected from participant journal, 2015). Sammy went on to explain that this person taught him in church and provided him with experiences where he had to develop his own opinions regarding God and faith. Through these lessons he was required to research, read the Bible, and defend his faith. He commented that during this time he exercised and strengthened his “spiritual muscles”.

Scotty wrote about a coach at the school who has also been his Bible teacher. He explained that this person has known him for six years, has seen him at his best and worst moments, and has continued to teach him about living the life of a Christian. Scotty wrote, “He has always shown me the importance of being a Christian man and what God expects of me as a man. His countless lessons both in the classroom and on the mat, have played a huge role in making me the person I am today” (Data collected from participant journal, 2015). Aiden wrote very simply that he has learned through experiences that you will need family to support you, but more importantly you will always need God.

Theme three: Working with others.

Interview: Working with others

In a similar vein many of the participants were influenced by the work they were able to do with others. Aiden has discovered through leading Bible study groups and being the captain of his football team that he is a leader who likes to rally everyone to achieve a goal. He commented that, like his father, he likes to help people, especially helping them get to where they need to be. He recently had the opportunity to work with younger male students at his school. Aiden has faced challenges with ADHD and Dyslexia. These young men have faced similar challenges. Through this he has seen how what he has gone through has put him in a place to help others.

Chrissy had a recent hospital stay for jaw surgery. During this time, she was deeply impacted by how much one of the nurses went out of her way to help her. It was during this time that she realized the impact you can make when you help other people.

She enjoys working with the younger children during a community field day. Her school works with a neighboring public elementary school to host a field day for the students. Many of the students are from low socio-economic backgrounds and this day is very special for them. Time spent on this day has impacted her decision to work with children.

Codi has been to Haiti several times for mission work. She has developed relationships with the people in the orphanage as well as the people in a village near the orphanage. She stated, “It has honestly been the best time I have had at any place. I feel like Haiti is my home” (Data collected from participant interview, 2015). Through her different experiences she has learned how much she enjoys working with children. Darren’s desire to talk to other people has influenced his desire to work with others in sales or marketing. He stated,

I am focused more on sales or marketing. I enjoy talking to people, I enjoy being around people. It is something where I can go to social events . . . and be able to talk to people about a certain product. . . That is something I would love to do. (Data collected from participant interview, 2015).

Gil also liked working with other students at the neighboring elementary school during the yearly field day the school hosts for the students. He credits the move to a Christian school for opening this door. He has found that he enjoys working with people and can talk easily to people. Ian has worked with a group of younger students in a Bible study. He has enjoyed interacting with them and has learned to be sensitive to the concerns of other people. He enjoys talking to people and believes he will need to interact with others daily. He has a lot of ideas and wants to implement them through business,

but he also can see where he will want to work with others in that setting. Milly has lead several groups and knows that she likes to be hands on with people. She will not be happy working behind a desk.

Matthew can clearly see how he will be able to pursue his passion in medicine and help people daily. He will still have a role in his church and on mission trips through his job in the medical field. After a church retreat, he initially thought of becoming a pastor. However, he does not like the instability of being a pastor in the Methodist church. At one time he was considering three options: lawyer, physical therapist, and pastor. He determined that a physical therapist will allow him to help people and provide him with time to work in his church and in missions.

Sammy was also impacted by the people that he met on a mission trip. Before attending mission trips in Nicaragua, he had a closed view of the world. Working on these trips opened his eyes to the needs in the world. He saw both the physical and spiritual needs of people. This led him to realize that everyone in the world has these needs. He stated, “That trip definitely opened my eyes to how much the world itself, regardless if it is my hometown of Fayetteville or Nicaragua, needed Christ, and so that’s been a major catalyst in new things in my relationship with God” (Data collected from participant interview, 2015).

Journals: Working with other people

Participants were able to express their opportunity to work with people through their journal entries. Sammy wrote,

Since my sophomore year I have been to Nicaragua on a mission trip each year. These trips have majorly impacted my view on the world because I loved the trip so much and love the idea of being a missionary in a foreign country. (Data collected from participant journal, 2015).

Sammy believes he has a specific calling to help other people. Following his mission trips, he had the idea of working on the mission field. After an injury kept him from sports for a while, he began to see how a career in the medical field as a physical therapist, would be a good plan to start with. He will pray to see what God shows him for further direction. He wrote,

I enjoy helping people however possible. I feel like I have been called to be a missionary. Furthermore, in terms of serving, I think that the best way to serve is to meet physical needs first and then spiritual needs. As in serving those who Jesus refers to as the least of these and then that opens the door for people to serve on a spiritual level. . . I want to take my career back to Nicaragua and be a missionary doctor. (Data collected from participant journal, 2015).

Darren wrote about his desire to coach and give back the skills he has learned. Ian wrote “I want to pursue a job that allows me to love people because that is what I love to do. I believe it is the best way to show Christ is to love others and care for them no matter what” (Data collected from participant journal, 2015). He went on to explain that while his plans include serving and blessing others, he does not know the specifics of how he will do this. He does believe that God will reveal this to him.

Codi wrote about her experience in an orphanage in Haiti. As she ministered to the children, she began to understand more about the love God has for her. Because of this lesson, she wants to share God's love with these children even more. She is planning to have a job that will enable her to return to Haiti many more times in the future.

Theme four: God's direction.

Interviews: God's direction

Seeking God's direction for their lives was evident in many of the interviews. Aiden clearly believes that God has a plan and that he reveals it through circumstances and people. He believes that life is too complex for things to just happen. He stated, "You know I thoroughly do believe He is in my life, there are too many times the circumstances where it is just, it just cannot be a coincidence" (Data collected from participant interview, 2015). Aiden sees everything in life as having consequences. He has learned through his coaches on the football field that he will reap whatever he sows. He sees this reaping as God's plan. When he entered school, he had goals for his life, but some things were not what he expected. He did not expect to be bullied in the 6th grade. At the time he did not see a purpose for that. Now that things have gone full circle and he is able to mentor other young men who have faced similar circumstances, he is able to see that God can use everything to accomplish his plans. He stated,

Until the time comes I don't think we will always know for sure what lies ahead.

We can hope and dream for stuff, sometimes that will happen, but sometimes

God's like you know I know you really want that but there is something else.

(Data collected from participant interview, 2015).

Chrissy expressed that she had a general revelation that God wanted her to become a nurse. This happened over a long period of time and involved her many hospital stays for her jaw surgery. As she experienced life in the hospital and interactions with nursing staff she became more comfortable in the hospital. She did not understand how God could use the horrible pain she was having, but through this pain she had experiences and conversations with others that revealed this plan to her. She also had some comments regarding the belief that God has a plan for you. She elaborated on an article she had recently read. The author of this article stated that God did not really have a plan for the lives of individuals. She thought that was interesting, but it directly contradicted everything she had been taught all her life. She explained that she had always been taught that God has a plan, and everything happens for a reason. As she thought more about this she came to the realization that it is not in God's nature to not have a plan. She elaborated, "God is a loving God. God is a caring God . . . God cares it is in His nature to (Data collected from participant interview, 2015). Chrissy also explained that she is comfortable not knowing the entire plan. She explained that if she pursues nursing, but then does not get a job in nursing, she may initially question God. But unlike some people who may think God never had a plan to begin with, she believes that it is just the all-knowing plan that we do not understand. Her senior year has been stressful as she has come to this conclusion. She firmly believes that there are many things in life that will keep you from hearing God. She recently read *The Screwtape Letters*. This novel, along with her mother's encouragement regarding attacks from the enemy during this time in her life, has firmly shown her that you really do hear those

voices and lies. Being surrounded by people who have been encouraging to her has helped her deal with this stress and enabled her to listen to God.

Codi believes that instances in life point you in the right direction, that there isn't a flashing arrow. She stated, "You know God's voice when you hear it" (Data collected from participant interview, 2015). She is confident that she does not need to feel pressured by others in her life to choose a specific career. She knows that whatever she does she will do it for the glory of God. Her faith in God's plan for her life has been confirmed this year through her college plans. Codi explained,

Through-out the whole college decision-making process, I've just had to completely rely on God and his plans, just trust that he is going to come through. When I first went to Samford in February of last year, I knew that was where God was calling me to go. It's very expensive. The whole time has been all about, 'Can we raise enough money?' Can we get enough scholarships for me to go there?' That whole process is seeing how God is slowly but surely opening that door. As we've been faithful just trusting that he is going to provide through all that, just admitting that is his plan for my life and trusting that it's really shown me that he does have a greater plan. I may not see it. I may think that it's impossible. (Data collected from participant interview, 2015)

In addition to her testimony of how God has provided a way for her to go to college, Codi explained how doors have also been opened for her to continue with her mission work. One of her biggest fears was that if she attended this school, every dollar that she raised would be used for tuition. This would leave her little money to continue

her mission work in Haiti. Her mother has met someone who runs a non-profit in Haiti. This person funds the entire trip for those who work for her. An international missionary who works for her will be coming to the US soon and Codi is planning to meet with this person. She is very hopeful that she will be able to begin working with this group. She stated, “When my Mom told me about this lady, immediately I was in tears. Seeing how God was like, ‘Hey, I have something better. I have all of this planned out for you. Just trust me.’ I’ve definitely seen how God has had a plan” (Data collected from participant interview, 2015).

Darren believes that there will always be a purpose that God has for you. When we pursue our own plans, they are often disappointing. When we pursue God’s plan, it may be hard at times, but it can lead to greatness. He stated, “We do not realize it until we get there” (Data collected from participant interview, 2015). In regard to hearing God’s plans for our lives, he believes more of it is revealed through people than hearing his voice.

Gil believes that while God has a plan we must look for it by praying and remaining close to God. He described an instance when this occurred for him while he was praying with a friend regarding the college that he should attend. In other instances, he has seen how God has revealed plans to others and helped them through these circumstances. He has given his mother strength and guidance as she has helped her mother with Alzheimer’s. He also has seen how his brother’s change in college plans has benefited him.

Ian described going through a very personal moment with God. He had to step out on faith and decide that his parents and teachers were not completely pleased with. He felt God strongly telling him to not pursue a military academy. This became a very stressful time for him and those who support him. There was a lot of tension as everyone expressed their opinions on the decision. Ultimately, they prayed that if he was not supposed to attend a military academy then God would clearly close a door. Three weeks prior to the interview, he found out that he did not get into the academy that he was well qualified to attend. He admitted to me that he was relieved and felt that he could now pursue other college plans. Others in his life were stressed about his plans because this meant he now did not have a college to attend. Ian remained faithful and a door was opened at another college. He does not know which degree he will pursue at this college. He, along with his parents, has prayed about this. They have reached an agreement that he will be a part of the military core on campus for one year. After that year, they will re-evaluate and determine what he should do from that point. He has a peace about this plan that he had not experienced when planning to attend a military academy. He believes this is because he was constantly praying that if God did not want him to go to a military academy then he would not be accepted. The unsettled feelings and the stress that surrounded this decision are gone now that he is planning to attend a college. Ian went on to explain that as he has gone through this process he has had the opportunity to self-evaluate. He realized that his once held belief that God's plan is sovereign, and you cannot 'mess it up' may not be what he now believes. Ian stated, "I would say that it is more of the choices you make, He is always working those toward His glory, so the

actions you take, if you are willing to submit to him, they will ultimately bring him glory” (Data collected from participant interview, 2015).

Milly has recently discussed pre-destination in one of her classes. She liked the thoughts of her teacher, explaining that when you are in a relationship with God your desire will be to line-up with his desires. She believes that God knows the path that everyone will take. She stated, “Christians have a greater sense of what they are supposed to do and so they just go after God’s heart and that’s their heart too” (Data collected from participant interview, 2015). She also firmly believes that worship and prayer draw us closer to God. She further explained that she has chosen her college roommate. When asked about God’s role in this she went on to explain that both girls had made plans to attend other schools, but circumstances brought them both to the same university. Because of this, she feels confident in her decision even though she would normally not make such a decision without first consulting with her parents. When asked what she would do if God changed her career plans, she admitted that she would not like it but believed he would reveal the plans to her.

Matthew has grown up in a home where he has been taught to seek God’s will for his life. He described his home as being very religious and a source for teaching him how to live a Christian life as a young man. His parents have encouraged him to remain involved in the church. During a church retreat he had a very personal experience where he sought God’s will. He strongly felt God telling him to lead people to his kingdom. As he has continued in prayer regarding this, a path has been revealed to him through hearing God’s voice, circumstances, and the encouragement of other people. This has not

been a simple task. The decision has many factors including, sports, a girlfriend and determining a livelihood that will enable him to provide for a family. Through a great deal of prayer, he has determined that a job as a physical therapist would open the door to a career that would enable him to work both in the church and on the mission field. He stated that he will always remain open to God's guidance in ways that he can serve in the church. Matthew went on to explain that we do have free will and that our choices lead us down paths that lead us down other paths and so on. God uses us on these paths and how our free will works with his plan is something we may not be able to understand. Men see things linearly, a past present and future whereas God is a total being that we want to understand. Matthew stated that he prides himself on being a good listener. If God changes his plans he will be open to this even though it may be difficult to understand. He went on to relate a story about a man who followed what he thought to be God's leading and found him in a series of different jobs. Each job involved learning a new trade. Ultimately the man found himself being lead into the mission field. It was on this field that his need for learning all of those trades became realized and the man could see God's ultimate plan. When asked how he thinks God reveals his plans Matthew stated,

I think a lot of times it comes in that feeling. Kind of like that bone chilling hair on the back of your neck feeling something in a message or worship or something like that. I feel like that's a great feeling to know God is saying pay attention here or that kind of thing, also prayer. I'm very adamant in praying all the time. If you ever feel like something is going on that you want to pray about, be happy to do it

because it can't hurt. It could help so you've got nothing to lose. (Data collected from participant interview, 2015).

On an even more personal note, Matthew mentioned that he was born prematurely and could have died. He strongly believes that if God put breath into his lungs then he is here for a purpose and needs to serve that purpose. Sammy believes that God does have a plan for a person and that when you are living in God's will it is the happiest that you will be. However, he also believes that all plans are not specific. He believes that there may be times where God is leading you to a specific place or experience. However, there are choices that you will make that God will use. For example, God may not tell him to go to a specific college but choose a place where he can glorify God wherever. He further explained, "Maybe there are specific moments that God pushes you towards it. Maybe one of the specific things for me is becoming a missionary, but I also like to think there is an element of choice in there" (Data collected from participant interview, 2015).

Sammy also discussed a series of lessons that his youth pastor is covering. In these lessons he has learned that often God reveals his plans through the encouragement of others. He also believes that the Bible is God's most powerful tool that he uses to teach and show his will. Specific verses will be recalled that guide you in your decisions. Whatever you do, he believes a person's testimony is incredibly important to share with others to help guide them. He had a medical emergency last year in which his lung collapsed. During his healing from this he was not able to play sports. It was during this time that God gave him the opportunity to slow down and focus. God revealed many things during that time and gave him an opportunity to share this testimony with others.

Scotty believes that God's plan will be revealed to you through circumstances. He explained how his choice of college was influenced by his friends and circumstances. He believes plans will reveal themselves and will be evident when you are ready for it

Journals: God's direction

Aiden wrote in his journal that God has been the guiding hand throughout his life. He bases this on experiences when he has been lost and confused. He has felt God guide him and ultimately, he has ended up with what he loves. He equates God's guidance to a parent guiding a child. He wrote, "Just as a parent guides their kids God is able to put us in the right places where we are happy and can serve him" (Data collected from participant journal, 2015).

Chrissy quoted Jeremiah 29:11 and discussed the nature of God. She believes that God is a loving God. Chrissy wrote, "God is a loving God and if he were to create us in his image and lead us to live purposeless lives I believe that would be out of his character" (Data collected from participant journal, 2015). She went on to further explain that some doubt God's plan because they do not have faith or the understanding that we will not see everything at one time. She ended her journal with the affirmative statement, "But as life goes on, whether it is a difficult journey or a joyous one, God has every step of the way planned for our benefit" (Data collected from participant journal, 2015). In an additional journal entry Chrissy discussed her battles with jaw surgery and provided an example of how the journey in life can be difficult. She was not looking forward to surgery, but prayerfully consented. God gave her amazing peace during the surgery, but the recovery was very difficult. She had moments when she was intensely unsure of

God's plan. After a great deal of evaluation and prayer she was able to conclude that God's plan was the best for her. She has even begun planning to attend nursing school after realizing the impact her experience with nurses has had on her life. The pain did not go away, but as of that writing she was continuing to trust God.

Darren was very direct and brief in his writing about God's plan. He stated that God has a plan simply because he has created us to glorify him as we use our gifts and talents to point people towards him. Gil has seen God's plans for his own life as he moved from public school to private school. Through this move he has been offered more opportunities than he could have imagined. He wrote about the seriousness of God's plan for every Christian. He wrote,

Finding God's plan is the commitment to a Christian life and will be revealed when your life is given to Christ. God speaks about his plan in the Bible which is not to be taken lightly and not twisted which shows he has a plan for every Christian (Data collected from participant journal, 2015).

Ian stated in his writing that God's plan is for us to bring glory to him. He wrote, I believe that as Christians we will mess up and do stupid things and therefore God does not base his plans on our specific actions, but his plan is based on the fact that he will be honored in the end. (Data collected from participant journal, 2015)

In regard to his future he knows that he will love people and use his talents or God. He does not know what he will do specifically but he is trusting God to guide him.

Milly focused on the free will that God has given to us. She explained that while God has given us a choice he knows the path we will choose before we take it. She bases this belief on Jeremiah 1:9 which tells us that God knew us before we were even born. She continues with Proverbs 19:21 which tells us that man has many plans, but the Lord's plans will stand. She went on to explain that many people begin to doubt these plans because of the trials and temptations that they face. She wrote, "The other side of this is that God gives us those trials to either give us the opportunity to influence others or grow in our trust and relationship with God" (Data collected from participant journal, 2015). She went on to further explain that God provides a way out of temptations and that as Christians our hearts should be aligned with God's heart. She had to learn this through a difficult circumstance. She was in a bad accident and her car was totaled. This along with other factors changed the plans she had for the summer. This greatly impacted her mood. She only had God to rely on and this ultimately strengthened her faith. She concluded with the statement. "In the end, we have choices, but God's purpose is fulfilled in the end" (Data collected form participant journal, 2015).

Matthew quoted Jeremiah 29:11 as his basis for deciding that God does have a plan for us. He went on to emphasize that this was a plan for hope and a future. He also used the analogy of our lives being like a tapestry with so many paths to take that we will never see the complete picture. He believes that his future is bright, and that God has wonderful plans for him. While he can dream of being a kicker in the NFL, he is happy if God's plans center around him earning a medical degree. Matthew explained this best as he wrote about a very personal and profound experience when God spoke to him. He was

at a retreat. The lecture was on God's plan for our lives. As he listened he realized that he had never asked God about a plan for his life. In the end he went forward and knelt in front of a big wooden alter with a hand carved wooden cross. At the alter God spoke to him. Matthew wrote,

God spoke to me directly and told me clear as day that he wanted me to minister to people in need spiritually. It was an incredible moment in my life. I use it as a reminder when I am going through adversity because I know God has a plan for me. (Data collected from participant journal, 2015)

Sammy not only believes that God has a plan for every Christian. He believes that God has called him to be a missionary. However, he does believe that some of our path is determined by the choices that we make. As Christians we should make choices that honor God. He quoted Ephesians 5:1-2, "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" (Data collected from participant journal, 2015). He further explained that he believes there are times that god's plan is only as specific as we are to act solely as Christ demonstrated for us. He explains that he understands that when we became Christians we gave up some of our free will as we deny ourselves and follow Christ. He exemplifies this belief in that while his current plan is to work on the mission field he is trusting that God will lead him in the right direction.

Scotty believes that the fact God has a plan for each of us is demonstrated in the unique interests he has given each of us. He also quoted Jeremiah 29:11 but went on to

further quote verses 22 and 23. “You will call upon me and pray and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all of your heart.”

Codi believes that God has a purpose for everyone, not just believers. She wrote, “I believe God does have a plan for each of the non-believers as well, for without darkness there would be no light. God made us, He knows us, He loves us, and He has a plan for us” (Data collected from participant journal, 2015).

Summary

A total of 10 participants were interviewed. All of the participants were in their senior year of high school. Data were collected through journal prompts, site documentation and individual interviews. Four common themes emerged from the data that was collected. These themes were: school programs and scholarships, influence from other people: spiritual and secular, working with others, and God’s direction. The theme of God’s direction was overwhelmingly the most widely represented theme. This theme along with spiritual influence from others contributed to the answer of each of the research questions. The themes secular influence from others and working with others provided a lot of information for the answer to the research question regarding student spiritual development and feelings of academic and life success. The theme school programs and scholarships provided information regarding the sometimes-non-spiritual aspect of student decision making and feeling of academic and life success.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The transition from high school to postsecondary education or employment is a time period that involves many decisions. Many factors influence these decisions; one of these factors may be a student's spiritual beliefs. A person's spirituality is both personal and multi-faceted and could bear a great deal of weight on the decisions that are made. The participants in this study responded to a series of journal prompts and interview questions surrounding the topic of transition and the possible impact of spiritual beliefs on the decisions that are made. Little research has been done to provide information on the impact of spirituality on transition decision making. This information will be useful for educators as they guide students through the transition process.

This chapter will review the findings of the research. A discussion of these findings will be included as well as the implications of these findings in regard to the current literature. The implications of the methodology and practical components of the study in addition to the delimitations and limitations of the study will also be discussed. Suggestions for future research will also be given.

Summary of Findings

Four themes were identified from the research. These themes were: school programs and scholarships, spiritual influence from others, secular influence from others, working with others, and God's direction. Each of the themes provided answers to the research questions. The themes school programs/scholarships and God's direction provided answers to the question "How much spiritual emphasis is placed on a student's

decisions regarding postsecondary education and employment?” The themes influence from other people both secular and spiritual influence helped answer the question “How does a student’s spiritual development contribute to his or her feelings of academic and/or life success?” The theme God’s direction also provided important answers for this question. Three themes: influence from other people (secular and spiritual), working with others and God’s direction, provided an abundance of information pertaining to the idea of a spiritual calling in life. The information from these themes helped to answer the question “How does a student’s spiritual development contribute to his or her ideas of a career calling?”

Discussion

Not surprisingly, the reputation of a school as well as the degree programs offered, were influential in transition decisions that were made. Participants specifically commented on the stellar reputations of business schools and medical programs. One student went so far as to name a football coach who is also prominent in the business world. Scholarship opportunities also played a role in the decision process. Monetary offerings of a school were considered by several students. Data gathered regarding student grade point average, college entrance exams, advanced placement courses, and dual enrollment courses supported the student’s ambitions of attending schools with prestigious programs. The small size of the private Christian school may also influence student motivation. Horny, Bonds and Raacke (2012) found that students enrolled in small schools were influenced more by teachers and were more motivated than students

in larger schools. All of the students in this study had plans and were motivated to attend a school to accomplish these plans.

Degree programs and scholarships were often considered in conjunction with the spiritual desires of the student. For example, several students pointed out how a school had a strong missions program. Others identified things such as a good medical program that would give them the skills to serve in a capacity on a mission field. This information provided insight into how a spiritual emphasis was placed on the postsecondary decisions. Duffy and Sedlack (2010) found that many students who believed in a career calling were often planning for graduate programs such as medical and law school. The reputation of the program coupled with the spiritual desires would influence the student's decision.

In regard to influence from others, participants reported more spiritual influence than secular influence. Fowler's (1981) theory on faith development provides an explanation regarding how a person's individual faith influences how they view circumstances. In his theory Fowler (1981) explains that the more developed a person's faith is the more they will be able to see multiple sides of an issue. This aids them in seeing both the secular and the spiritual views of a circumstance. Secular influences in this study included earning a good salary, athletic and coaching abilities, and working in the family business. None of these options were viewed by the participant as inherently negative. The options were merely viewed as other influences that presented viable options. Based on Fowler's (1981) theory many of the students in the current study had well developed faith. In most cases it was noted that these options were given to the

participant in a supportive manner and that the family and friends wanted them to be happy and successful. Smith and Zhang (2009) found that a mother was the most positively influential agent in a person's decision-making process. One participant explained how she weighed the opinion of her parents alongside her own opinions. She remarked that her parent's opinions often lined up with her own. The participants went on to provide examples of spiritual influence from others. These two influences intertwined to explain how the student viewed life success and how individual spirituality impacted it. Francis and Robbins (2008) found that a communal influence such as the parents comfort in a student's decision was very influential in post-secondary decisions. Rowan, Kenyon, Perna and Swan (2011) found that families play a key role in decision making. They often work along with and reinforce the opinions of the school.

The spiritual influence from others came from many sources. These included: family, friends, teachers, church teachers and leaders, Bible study groups, personal Bible study, and experiences. Abilities such as teaching, listening, having compassion, and understanding the positions of others were noted. One student provided a great deal of discussion regarding a Bible study group that focused on knowing God's will for your life. She discussed two Biblically based books that the group had studied. While this student had many factors influencing her transition decisions, it was apparent that the information learned during these studies took precedence over the other influences. Albert, Anderson and Dowling (2006) determined that positive spiritual development is influential in finding one's identity and path for life. The information learned during Bible studies would aid in spiritual development.

Pastors and teachers were also influential. Oftentimes these individuals accompanied the students on mission trips. These trips were extremely influential in providing some students with the idea of a career calling. Careers on the mission field were mentioned by a few. The idea of using their abilities on the field while having a career at home was more prevalent. Several students saw the opportunity to have a traditional career and opportunities to take their abilities to the mission field for specific time periods or trips. One student has decided that she would like to be a coach during the school year and use vacation time to serve on the mission field. Another saw the opportunity to serve others locally in a medical practice but to also take these skills to the mission field for specific time periods. Each of these students felt a strong urge to share the love of Christ with others and saw how this could be accomplished both at home and on a foreign mission field. In both situations the students were shown how their desires to pursue these careers were desires given by God and able to be used by him to bring others to him. Research by Duffy and Dik (2009) supports the idea that a career calling does not have to be specific to religious careers. This reinforced the idea that a person can be called by God to work in a variety of fields.

One student, upon feeling a specific call towards a career in missions, mentioned this calling to his youth pastor and discipleship leader. This calling was affirmed by these people. The student explained how each of these people supported his idea of a calling by stating that they could see this as a potential career option for him. This spiritual influence from others impacted his ideas of a career calling. The support of others was in a religious setting. Research from the 2008 National Survey of Youth and Religion

found that there was a slight decrease in religious faith and that 48% of the youth surveyed reported being spiritual but not religious. However, youth reporting a high level of religious dependence on family, friends and church leaders also had high levels of spiritual development. Of these individuals 78% believed in God, 63% believed in a personal God and 78% were inspired by church. This illustrates the connection between a spiritual calling and support of others in a religious setting.

Several students learned more about the possibilities of a career calling while working with others in the community and on the mission field. A few of the students commented about working with a nearby public elementary school. Each year the private school hosts a field day for the students at this elementary school. Working with the elementary school students has provided them with the opportunity to experience the joy of helping others. This was even more prevalent on the mission field. Many of the students participating in the study have attended mission trips to foreign countries. During these trips they have witnessed poverty and needs that they have not seen in their own country. This has opened their eyes to the needs around the world and given them a broader view of the need for Christ throughout the world. Francis and Robbins (2008) determined that when students understand global issues they also understand how this relates to them and how they can make a difference. The students in the current study shared feelings of accomplishment when they have worked with others in the field, as well as the relationships that have developed, have impacted transition decisions. Students commented that they intend to return to the mission field for trips or full-time ministry. Through the journal entries, a few students implied that working with others

was equated to life success. This was also true for individuals in Yocum's (2013) study. It was determined that participants in his study equated spirituality with being moral and responsible people and ultimately with life success. The intertwining of spirituality and life success was demonstrated by a participant in the current study who has determined that he will pursue a career where he can love others and show the love of Christ to others. He did not know the specifics, but this was his goal.

While most of the students believed God has a plan for the life of each believer, they had differing views on how these plans manifest. Many of the students quoted scripture that states God has a plan for those who believe in him and a purpose for his or her life. The idea that God loves and has a plan for them appeared to be comforting for many of the students. They also were assured by others in their lives that this plan would be revealed to them. Comments such as "you know God's voice when you hear it" were prevalent in the responses. A student's understanding of a calling was believed to be personal. Dobros and Toste-Kharos (2012) found that many students will even ignore discouraging remarks from others regarding a career calling. This was especially true if they felt the calling was from God. Some felt that God would use the decisions that they made to his glory and that this included all decisions. The predominant idea in the current study was that God reveals plans through Biblical scripture, input from others, circumstances, and divine guidance received during moments of deep prayer. Lerner (2006) suggested that research on the connections between spirituality and thriving merited attention because of the impact of spirituality on the healthy development of an

individual. This development impacts an individual's relationship with self, family and community.

Implications

Implications of the Current Research

Information gained from this study will help school practitioners as they provide guidance for students making post-secondary decisions. Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) have researched the use of a set of scales which measure spiritual development. They found that these scales would be useful for guiding students at the undergraduate college level. The number of students in the study who relied on guidance from school practitioners supports the idea that looking at spiritual development could be beneficial at the high school level as well. The diverse levels of spiritual development among the 10 participants further supports the idea that spiritual development is individual and should likewise be viewed on an individual basis.

The data showed confidence in student responses based on personal knowledge that God had a plan and direction for each life. Their spiritual beliefs gave them the confidence needed to make life decisions that would be productive and successful. This supports Lerner's (2006) research that spirituality may be an important aspect in thriving for individuals. This ability to thrive enables an individual to make productive decisions and contributes to the healthy development of self and community. Yocum's (2013) research also supports the idea that people often see spirituality as a contributing factor of personal success. Experiences that occur affirm this link between spirituality and success.

The students in our study attributed many decisions and ideas to experiences on mission trips and through receiving an education at a private Christian school.

Participants responded that influence from family, friends, teachers and church leaders impacted their spiritual beliefs. This was supported in the 2008 National Survey of Youth and Religion. The survey found that while participants said that all these parties impacted them, 78% said that church was an inspiration for them. Interview responses in this study support this statistic.

The importance of relationships was prevalent in this research. The participant's ability to talk openly with parents, teachers, and clergy was evident. This ability lends itself to the development of a positive view of oneself and the decisions that are subsequently made. Francis and Robbins (2008) research supports this notion. In their research they found that students who have a positive self-image are more likely to trust the decisions that they have made. Likewise, opportunities to talk openly with family and friends develop interpersonal relationships that support student decision making. Francis and Robbins (2008) also looked at the student's ability to see themselves as having an impact on global issues and the world. Most of the students, in my study, who attended global mission trips, saw themselves as having the ability to impact the world for Christ.

The idea that a holistic approach to education could include spiritual development was supported both in the literature and in the study. Duffy and Sedlack (2010) reported that 44% of their participants had the idea of a career calling and career counselors could assist with this calling. Briggs, Akos, Cyszezson, and Eldridge (2011) determined that school counselors are the agents needed to address spiritual needs. Leblanc and Slaughter

(2012) found that the environment of a Christian high school encouraged students to share their faith and defend their beliefs. The diverse beliefs in a public-school setting forced students to develop the ability to intellectually defend their faith. Many of the students in my study confirmed the idea that they relied heavily on the advice of counselors and teachers. Further, the transcripts of the students revealed that most of them had taken a course in apologetics. This course, offered at a Christian school, helps a student defend his or her beliefs. This supports Leblanc and Slaughter (2012) in the idea that the private school setting directly encourages the development of spiritual beliefs and ideas. The interview response of one student further supports Leblanc and Slaughter (2012). This student recounted how his experiences in the public-school setting did not directly teach him how to defend his beliefs. However, education in the Christian school setting provided him with direct instruction in this area.

Additionally, the physical make-up of the school impacts student decision making. Horny and Bonds-Raacke (2012) found that the size of a school impacts a student's motivation and achievement. Students in small schools were found to have more motivation and opportunity to develop individuality and spiritual beliefs. The small size of the school in my study along with the individuality and developed spiritual beliefs represented in the responses support this research.

Research involving a career calling was comparable to what was found in the study. Duffy and Dik (2009) found that a calling is not linked to a specific career or a group of people. The attitude with which the person approaches his or her work is often the difference between a calling and a career. One student in my study relayed how a

series of events guided her towards a college. These events included monetary needs and a calling towards missions in a foreign country. Her attitude of acceptance of these events and giving credit to God for orchestrating them solidified her beliefs in a specific God-given calling. Duffy and Dik (2009) further found that while students may have an internal calling they will consider the economic and social needs of the family. This idea was supported in my research by two students. Both students had options to work in the family business and had varying levels of support from family members, both for and against pursuing this work. The student responses indicated that the input from family would impact the decision that they would make. Likewise, life decisions such as previous jobs held, car accidents, and personal and family illness, also played a role in many of the decisions of the students in my research.

Finally, Hershi and Herman (2012) found that an identity with a career and the knowledge that they are serving a purpose promoted life satisfaction. When students were discussing the ability to know they were helping others, particularly those in the medical field, their assurance supported the idea of satisfaction. This was found both within their decision and life.

Implications of the Chosen Methodology

The methodology of phenomenological research was appropriate for the study due to the phenomenon of spirituality and how it relates to life decisions. The use of journal entries followed by individual interviews provided the opportunity to gather rich descriptions of this phenomenon. Both journal entries and interviews provided the opportunity for students to answer questions thoughtfully and privately. Transcript data

provided support that justified student plans. The steps used for data analysis were effective in removing extraneous information and defining the heart of the phenomenon.

Delimitations and Limitations

The students were chosen from a private Christian school to set the boundary of looking at the influence of one religion. While the students had differing personal beliefs, and worshipped in different Christian denominations, the prevailing belief system was Judeo-Christian. All the participants were seniors who were close to graduation. The ideas surrounding transition were very timely for them.

All students being Caucasian was a delimitation of the study. The number of students from other races is small at the school. As a result, only Caucasian students volunteered. This limited the findings to one racial group. With seven males and only three females, failure to have gender generalizability was a limitation of the study. The study was also limited to a private school setting. This setting supports the idea that while income was a factor mentioned by several students, poverty was not an issue. As a result, the study presented results from middle to high socioeconomic groups.

These commonalities helped in determining that data saturation had been met. According to Fusch and Ness (2015), "Data saturation is met when there is enough information to replicate the study, the ability to obtain new additional information has been attained and when further coding is no longer feasible." The triangulated data collected is enough for replication of the study. The information is also rich enough to fully answer the research questions. The answers were common among the participants and all possible codes were exhausted. The group had many characteristics in common

and that resulted in similarities within the data. However, it also resulted in a rich description of a phenomenon for a specific population.

Recommendations for Future Research

It is a logical assumption that individuals in this study will change over time. Exposure to different ideas and life circumstances will alter the plans that they developed as high school seniors. Each one of these circumstances and ideas will be impacted in some way by the spiritual views held by each individual. Moustakes stated, “The essences of an experience are never totally exhausted.” A longitudinal study of the same individual 5 or 10 years from the date of the first interviews would provide an interesting look into the sustainability of the spiritual beliefs that were held as high school seniors.

Research in the areas of service learning and mission trips indicate a possible connection between these two areas and career calling. Probasco (2013) found that students who volunteered for international or domestic mission trips had a higher rate of volunteering and monetary giving to missions as an adult. Ocal and Altmok (2016) found that student participation in service learning had a positive impact on sensitivity to social problems. Praskova and Creed (2015) found positive correlations between a person’s career calling and life satisfaction and perceived employability. The individuals were also more likely to exhibit self-regulatory behaviors such as high work effort, greater use of career strategies, and higher emotional regulation. Further research is needed to determine the extent of the connection between mission trips and service learning to career calling.

Future research should also focus on individuals in a different school setting and possibly a larger sample size. The ability to afford a private school placed this group into a specific socioeconomic level. Students in different levels, possibly in public school, may have different opinions based on possible options. Students from different religious groups could also be studied. The importance of religion in a person's life as well as the belief in a higher power varies tremendously among different religious groups. Students affiliated with other religious groups may have different ideas concerning a higher power's influence on individual life decisions.

Finally, the group studied was all Caucasian and predominately male. Students from other racial and ethnic backgrounds could have tremendously different perspectives on spirituality and decisions made during transition. Likewise, females also have different perspectives and experiences than males. All these groups; other socioeconomic groups, religious groups, genders, racial and ethnic groups would provide meaningful information for counselors, teachers and other school personnel as they work to help students make transition decisions. Information from further studies could be applied to a variety of educational settings.

Summary

The decisions made during the transition from high school are influenced by a combination of spirituality, personal experiences, and the support of others. The role of the educator is to understand how all of these parts will play a role in guiding a student. It is of utmost importance that the role of spirituality in transition decision making is not

forgotten. This research has shown that while other factors play a role in decision making, the role of spirituality cannot be denied.

An individual's spirituality permeates the way in which he or she views the world and his or her relationship to this view. Personal experiences such as mission trips, retreats, and Bible studies, create moments of profound reflection and guidance. It is during these times that a person will begin to formulate an idea of how he or she fits into the world. The depth of understanding of spiritual matters will impact this idea. An educator needs to understand this in order to meet the student on the developmental level he or she is at spiritually. While some students may give little thought to spiritual matters, for a student who is well-developed spiritually, recognizing the impact of his or her spirituality will be a tremendous assistance.

Participants in this study experienced hearing God's call during prayer and made radical decisions that changed the course of their lives. One student went against the plans that everyone in his life had for him. Another went against the secular plans that she knew her father wanted for her. Two other students found paths that will immediately lead them back to the mission field. There is one common thread woven throughout all of these decisions and that is the personal spiritual beliefs of the individual making the decision.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Letter

Date: January 5, 2016
Parent of Prospective Study Participant
Parent
***** Christian School
Address
Address

Dear Parent:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for an Educational Doctorate. The purpose of my research is to understand the impact of a student's spirituality on transition decision making, and I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If your child is a junior or senior who is currently enrolled in ***** Christian school and has been enrolled in a private Christian school since the 8th grade, and is willing to participate, he or she will be asked to respond in writing to three electronic journal prompts and participate in an individual face to face interview. It should take approximately one hour a week for three weeks for completion of the journal prompts and 30-45 minutes to complete the interview. School records such as transcripts and test scores will be reviewed. These records will be stripped of identifiable information with the exception of the student's first name and initial of his or her last name which will be coded to correspond with the interview and journal prompts. Your child's participation in the study and personal information obtained will remain confidential.

To participate, complete and return the consent document attached to this letter to your child's school or to the principal researcher during the informational meeting. The consent document contains additional information regarding the research, including how to withdraw from the study.

If your child chooses to participate, he or she will receive a \$10 Amazon gift card.

Sincerely,
Sandy Brady
Graduate Student, Liberty University

Appendix B

PARENT/STUDENT CONSENT FORM

A Phenomenological Study of the Impact of High School Student Spirituality on
Transition Decision Making

Sandra Brady
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of student spirituality and decisions made as you leave high school. You were selected as a possible participant because of your enrollment as a junior or senior at Landmark Christian School. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Sandra Brady, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to determine the impact of an individual student's spirituality on the decisions he or she makes while transitioning from high school to post-secondary education and/or employment. The research will answer the following questions: What spiritual emphasis do students place on decisions regarding post-secondary education and employment? How does a student's level of spiritual development contribute to his or her feelings of academic and life success? and How does a student's level of spiritual development contribute to his or her idea of a career calling?

Procedures:

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

- 1.) Respond to three electronic journal prompts. One prompt will be given per week for a total of three weeks. Each response should take approximately one hour each week to complete.
- 2.) Consent to a review of academic school records (minus identifiable information with the exception of the participant's first name and initial of his or her last name). The researcher will review these records alone, in preparation for the interview.
- 3.) Participate in an individual student interview lasting approximately 30-45 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded.

The data will remain confidential. The principle researcher will know what data belongs to whom but will not disclose identities.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

The risks involved in this study are minimal. Identities could potentially be discovered if the data is lost or stolen. If the principal researcher is made privy to information that triggers the mandatory reporting of child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others a report will be made.

There are no direct benefits to participation in the study.

Compensation:

You will receive a \$10 Amazon gift card for taking part in this study. These will be disbursed following the interview.

Confidentiality:

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

School records will be stripped of identifiable information, such as social security number, date of birth, address, parent name and occupation, address and phone number. Paper data will be stored in a locked file cabinet for three years following the completion of the study. After this time the data will be disposed of through shredding. The audio recordings will be kept in a locked file cabinet for three years following the completion of the study. After this time the recordings will be erased.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

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

How to Withdraw from the Study:

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Sandra Brady. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at sbrady5@liberty.edu. You may also contact the research's faculty advisor, Russell Yocum, at ryocum@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 participate in the study.

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

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

Signature: _____ Date: _____

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

Signature of parent or guardian: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

Appendix C

Proposed Interview Questions

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

Spiritual Impacts of Transition	Career Exploration and Influencing Factors
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are your ideas regarding God having a plan for your future? 2. If you do believe God has a plan, how does he reveal this plan to you? 3. What kinds of things have others said to you about where they believe God can use you? 4. How do you feel about someone else telling you their ideas from God regarding your future? Does this make you feel pressured or supported? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. As you entered 9th grade, what kind of career aspirations did you have? 2. How are your current career aspirations different or the same than your earlier aspirations? What has caused this change or allowed them to stay the same? 3. Please describe the career aspirations that you believe your parents have for you. How are these similar to or different than your aspirations? 4. How has a teacher, pastor, or counselor impacted the decisions that you have made about your future? 5. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your career or college exploration experience and factors that have influenced it?

Appendix D

Journal Prompts

Prompt #1

“I believe/do not believe that God has a specific plan for the life of every Christian because . . .”

Prompt #2

“One person/event that has impacted my spiritual life is . . .”

Prompt #3

“My plans for the future include . . .”