

RETURNING TO CLASS: A PHENOMENOLOGY OF FORMER HIGH SCHOOL
DROPOUTS' PURSUIT OF HIGHER LEARNING

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of former high school dropouts who have completed their high school credential through an adult education program and are enrolled in a postsecondary program of study at a technical college, community college, or four-year university in a state located in the southern United States. The two guiding theories of this study were the theory of multiple intelligences as it related to learning and student engagement, and transformative learning theory as it related to the participants' changed perspective regarding their own learning. The research questions of the study were: (a) how do former high school dropouts describe the experience of reengaging with learning; (b) how do participants describe the experience of becoming disengaged from learning in a K-12 educational setting to becoming reengaged with learning in a postsecondary setting; (c) what experiences do participants describe that led them to pursue postsecondary education; (d) and what experiences do participants describe as leading them to successful reengagement with learning? The primary source of data consisted of semi-structured, open-ended interviews conducted with individuals and focus groups. After data analysis, which utilized Moustakas' (1994) approach to transcendental phenomenology, emerging themes developed. Those themes were: (a) the learner, describing the learning characteristics of the participants, (b) the system, recognizing key features of K-12 and postsecondary educational systems, (c) the perspective, highlighting the participants' changed meaning perspectives, (d) the path, emphasizing the participants' plans to continue their academic pursuits despite dropping out from high school, and (e) the lagniappe, outlining two bonus themes unassociated with the previous four themes.

Keywords: GED, high school dropout, K-12 schools, technical college, community college, theory of multiple intelligences, transformative learning theory.

Dedication

For Jade, you will travel an uncharted path. Do so in boldness and in love.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my wife, Tiffany, for the grace you have always shown throughout our marriage. Only you will truly know how challenging these last four-years have been, and the completion of this degree is as much a testimony of your persistence as it is mine. I am grateful for your unconditional friendship. You're my rock. I love you.

I also would like to thank the participants of this study for their vulnerability. Each of you welcomed a stranger as a friend and shared some of the more painful memories of your life with me. Your desire to persevere is infectious.

Thank you to my committee members, who assisted me through the peaks and valleys of this dissertation. You each have my deepest admiration and respect. It is an honor to now be considered your peer. Dr. Morgan, your consistent accountability encouraged me during moments of weariness. Dr. Wimberley, your vision for future learning systems inspires my own thoughts and continues to challenge me. Dr. Milacci, your guidance has been invaluable and a source of great comfort and support.

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List of Abbreviations

Associate of Applied Science Degree (AAS)

Associate of General Studies Degree (AGS)

Career and Technical Education (CTE)

Certificate of General Studies (CGS)

Certificate of Technical Studies (CTS)

Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA)

Council of Occupational Education (COE)

General Educational Development (GED)

High School Equivalency Test (HiSET)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

Parent-Teacher Association (PTA)

Southern Community and Technical College System (SCTCS)

Technical Competency Area (TCA)

Technical Diploma (TD)

Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

This chapter serves as an introduction to this transcendental phenomenological study. The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of former high school dropouts who have completed their high school credential through an adult education program and are reengaged with learning through a postsecondary program of study. This chapter includes a brief background of the context surrounding this topic and highlights a gap in the research literature that this study attempts to occupy. The theoretical frameworks helping explain this phenomenon are outlined, researcher motivations and biases are discussed, the problem and purpose statements of the study are declared, and the significance of the study is mentioned. Additionally, research questions guiding the study are listed and key words and phrases are defined.

Background

Recent estimates figure the status dropout rate in American high schools, or the “percentage of 16- to 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school and do not have a high school credential,” is around 6.5% of the high school student population (NCES, 2016, p. iv). The effects of this decision have consequences that extend beyond the individual (Anderson & Lochner, 2016; Bjerk, 2012; Cook & Kang, 2016; Kim, 2013, 2015; McDaniel & Kuehn, 2012; Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2011), resulting in an estimated income loss of \$680,000 over a high school dropout’s lifetime (McFarland, Stark, & Cui, 2016) and a lifetime economic loss of \$260,000 per individual for local communities (McFarland et al., 2016), which costs society approximately \$329 billion throughout high school dropouts’ lifetimes (Mattie C. Stewart Foundation, 2016). As federal programming devised to eliminate dropout increases

(McFarland et al., 2016), along with high school dropouts' dependency on such programs (Maynard, Salas-Wright, & Vaughn, 2014), society carries the weight of this decision. Efforts to eliminate dropout before it occurs have focused on restructuring the learning experience for students in hopes of growing their level of engagement in their own learning process (Aliaga, Kotamraju, & Stone, 2014; Bowers & Sprott, 2012). Though there is still much work to be done regarding the issue of dropout, indications from these attempts appear to be fruitful as the high school dropout rate has steadily declined (NCES, 2016), and conversation surrounding alternative educational routes, such as career and technical education (CTE), is beginning to have a more positive overtone (Gammill, 2015).

Historical Background

According to the latest report published by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2016), the high school status dropout rate across the United States has decreased from 12.1% in 1990 to 6.5% in 2014. The demographic and ethnic statistics of high school dropout suggest the greatest population at risk of dropping out are minority males from low-income households located in the southern region of the United States (McFarland et al., 2016; NCES, 2016). Additionally, disabled students are found to drop out more than students who are not disabled (McFarland et al., 2016). Per the NCES report, a high school dropout is defined as “any 16- to 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school credential” (NCES, 2016, p. 190). An earned high school credential includes completion of a high school diploma or a comparable certification such as the General Educational Development (GED), which is the most commonly acknowledged alternative to a high school diploma used by postsecondary institutions for student admission into degree-seeking programs (Jepsen, Mueser, & Troske, 2015).

Social Background

Although the United States has witnessed a reduction in the percentage of high school dropouts over the last 25 years (NCES, 2016), high school dropouts still place a heavy burden on society. This social cost has manifested most recently by the surge of federal programs aimed at keeping students in school (Kim, 2013; Maynard et al., 2014), the rise of federal programs designed to increase employment opportunities for high school dropouts (Kim, 2013), the increased likelihood of high school dropouts being unemployed (Maynard et al., 2014; Schwartz, 2014), the reliance on government assistance (Kim, 2013; Maynard et al., 2014), experiencing more chronic and severe medical problems (Maynard et al., 2014), living at a lower socioeconomic level (Bjerk, 2012; Kim, 2013; Maynard et al., 2014; Schwartz, 2014), participating in criminal activity (Bjerk, 2012; Maynard et al., 2014), becoming incarcerated (Schwartz, 2014), struggling with substance abuse (Maynard et al., 2014), and displaying symptoms of mental health problems (Maynard et al., 2014). Complicating life even more for high school dropouts is the disappearance of middle-class jobs that once required only a high school diploma. In the current market, some level of post-high school certification or degree is a given prerequisite for nearly all middle-class jobs (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Hanson, 2012).

Efforts to assist high school dropouts have primarily focused on dropouts returning to high school to earn a high school diploma through a credit recovery program or the GED (Rutschow & Crary-Ross, 2014). Though completion of a high school credential is a sincere objective for many, if not most dropouts, returning students who previously dropped out are more likely to succumb to dropping out again and will not finish a high school credential (Barrat, Berliner, & Fong, 2012). For returning dropouts who do persist, further research indicates that an earned high school credential after dropping out only slightly increases the potential for

postsecondary enrollment and does little for the individual regarding future employment or earning impact (Jepsen et al., 2015; McDaniel & Kuehn, 2012; Millenky, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2013). School leaders are beginning to take notice of these trends, and alternative forms and methods of education are experiencing a renaissance in secondary education (Cox, Hernández-Gantes, & Fletcher, 2015; Millenky, 2016). This rebirth is seeing the restructuring of the classroom from a teacher-centric model to a student-centric model where more attention is given to the process of learning than the practice of teaching (Wimberley, 2016).

Theoretical Background

The goal of these restructured learning environments is simple: engage the learner throughout the learning process. Studies demonstrate that a chief strategy employed against dropout by K-12 school reformers is to create engaging learning environments for students (Aliaga et al., 2014; Bowers & Sprott, 2012; Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2011). Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (MI theory) suggests that learning outcomes are maximized when instructional methods match a learner's strongest area of intelligence (Gardner, 1996). The tenets of MI theory provide justification for schools attempting to offer its students an unconventional route towards high school completion. Unfortunately, innovative learning programs face resistance as schools have been reluctant to break away from promoting students through the traditional progression of the K-12 model (Wimberley, 2016). A more thorough examination of career pathways that deviate from the typical track taken by students and the graduates who complete these educational programs is warranted.

One source for such educational programming and the students subscribed to its courses is community and technical colleges. Community and technical colleges across the country offer their graduates certificates and diplomas for an array of wide-ranging occupational needs.

Achieving these credentials provides community and technical college graduates with the opportunity of employment in a well-paid job or the possibility of admittance into a four-year college or university (Carnevale et al., 2012). America's high schools are noticing, and a resurgence of CTE programs are becoming increasingly available in secondary schools (Aliaga et al., 2014). Through modeling educational programming after community and technical colleges, high schools can extend attractive learning environments to students, which may recapture the attention of potential dropouts (Cox et al., 2015; Robinson, 2016).

This study provides a description of the lived experiences of former high school dropouts who have completed their high school credential through an adult education program and are enrolled in a postsecondary program of study at a technical college, community college, or four-year university. Their personal accounts offer valuable insight into educational programming that engages the learner through completion. There is insufficient literature giving former high school dropouts who are reengaged in learning through non-K-12 educational programs a voice. As these individuals tell their stories, Mezirow's (1978) transformative learning theory provides a framework to help comprehend the changed interpretations of their educational experiences. By understanding their stories through the lens of MI theory and transformative learning theory, effective approaches by K-12 school leaders toward eliminating high school dropout may be realized.

Situation to Self

I am a 33-year-old Caucasian male who grew up in a blue-collar community in southeast Louisiana. My father, mother, and sister all have college degrees; however, I am the only one in my immediate family with a graduate degree. Over the last decade, I have worked in K-12 education as a teacher, coach, and administrator. I have witnessed students who made the

decision to drop out of high school and never complete a high school credential. I also recognize that the traditional K-12 educational system sometimes disenchants students by its inability to create a learning experience that engages all learners. Failure is not an ill-intentioned result, but rather the product of a system that simply cannot meet the diverse learning needs of every individual.

Additionally, I believe education is the gateway to experiencing community abundantly. Each person has a specific role to play in society, and these roles, while distinct in function, are equal in value. Education equips individuals with the experience and training necessary for fulfilling their part. When an educational system does not grant people this right, society suffers as members are asked to manage tasks that may reside outside the realm of their abilities. Community thrives when each individual flourishes within his or her role.

My professional experiences paired with my own philosophical assumptions serve as my inspiration for this study. I believe opportunities exist to effectively educate every student in the K-12 setting. Inseparable to this conviction is my ontological assumption that individuals construct their own perceived reality (Creswell, 2013). The constructivism viewpoint allows individuals to ascribe multiple meaning to the same lived experience (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). By accepting individuals' constructed realities of both their failed and successful educational experiences, I am now cognizant of changes the current K-12 education system must undergo in order to meet the learning needs of all students.

Problem Statement

The problem of this study was the absence of qualitative research describing the lived experiences of former high school dropouts who have completed their high school credential through an adult education program and are enrolled in a postsecondary program of study at a

technical college, community college, or four-year university. Although predictors of high school dropout (Henry et al., 2011; NCES, 2016; Parr & Bonitz, 2015), social and market consequences of high school dropout (Jepsen et al., 2015; Maynard et al., 2014), prevention of high school dropouts (Millenky, 2016; Wilkins & Bost, 2016), and credit recovery initiatives for high school dropouts (Freeman & Simonsen, 2014; Peck et al., 2015) have all been well researched by empirical studies, research has not been conducted that lends a voice to individuals who have dropped out of a K-12 educational setting only to later complete their high school credential and enroll in postsecondary education. The participants' stories in this study contribute to the body of literature covering the topic of high school dropout.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of former high school dropouts who have reengaged with learning through a postsecondary program of study. For this study, former high school dropouts who are enrolled in postsecondary education are defined as any individual who completed a high school credential through an adult education program and are enrolled at a technical college, community college, or four-year university. Technical colleges are institutions that provide a two-year technical diploma to any student who completes the prescribed coursework as outlined by the technical college (Northshore Technical Community College, 2016). Community colleges are two-year institutions that offer student instructional programs in a career-related fields at the certificate and associate degree level (NCES, 2016). Students completing coursework at the community college level are prepared to enter a career field or transfer to a four-year university to continue their studies. Four-year universities are institutions that have a broad range of instructional programs that, upon student completion, lead to a bachelor's degree (NCES, 2016). The two

theories guiding this study are MI theory (Gardner, 1983) as it relates to learning and student engagement, and transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978) as it relates to the participants' changed perspective regarding their own learning.

Significance of the Study

The participants of this study described why they have reengaged with learning through a postsecondary program after becoming disengaged with learning in a traditional K-12 program. The findings of this study are significant because they could inform K-12 schools of strategies aimed at reducing high school dropout, an issue that has captured the attention of K-12 school leaders for decades (NCES, 2016). Furthermore, the findings could possibly help high school students considering dropping out, expand the body of literature on the issue of high school dropout, and build upon previous research of MI theory and transformative learning theory.

Practical Significance

Understanding former high school dropouts' ascribed meaning to their educational experience can potentially offer effective policy and programming insight for K-12 schools seeking to reduce high school dropout. The participants' lived stories of dropping out of high school and then reengaging with learning in a postsecondary setting can become relatable accounts that inspire potential high school dropouts to endure. This awareness of foundering in one system but persevering in another could offer both educators and students a perspective that may be valued by representatives from each side of the dropout issue.

Additionally, the documented experiences of the participants could help contest the challenges that alternative education programs such as CTE encounter. The bias towards CTE suggests a viewpoint that CTE is a lesser form of school reserved for those unfit for college (Gammill, 2015). This perspective creates a schism between academic and vocational

instruction, leading some to believe one is more accomplished than the other (Grubb, 2012). Despite an unfavorable attitude towards CTE, the government annually sends federal funds to schools across the country to resource their efforts of providing alternative forms of education (Carnevale et al., 2012). The participants' stories could assist in changing people's understanding of CTE and give valuable insight that would help the government and schools properly steward their resources.

Empirical Significance

Reading participants' descriptions of their own lived experience regarding reengagement with learning through postsecondary education may lend valuable data to educational reformers that can guide them in their decision-making. Multiple policy and program initiatives have been created and implemented with hopes of eliminating high school dropout altogether (Carnevale et al., 2012; Cox et al., 2015; Freeman & Simonsen, 2014; Millenky, 2016; Peck et al., 2015; Wilkins & Bost, 2016), and this study's findings could offer guidance for policymakers considering what types of instructional programming may or may not end high school dropout. Furthermore, this study gave a voice to former high school dropouts who have previously gone unheard (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994) as this platform provided them an unimpeded moment to tell their story.

Theoretical Significance

Each theory guiding this study has its own intended audience. Gardner's (1983) MI theory is applicable to instructional strategies for children and adolescents, while Mezirow's (1978) transformative learning theory is germane to adult education and adult learning. The study of former high school dropouts who have completed a high school credential and are enrolled in postsecondary education is unique in that it covers the developmental period of an

individual that spans the latter stages of adolescence and the early stages of adulthood. Couple this with the progressive programming of educational reform (Cox et al., 2015; Evan, Burden, Gheen, Smerdon, 2013), and the prospect of adolescent-aged students being placed in adult-focused learning environments is a reality (Edmunds et al., 2012; Muñoz, Fischetti, & Prather, 2014). These circumstances could help define the developmental limits of both MI theory and transformative learning theory in their application. Or, the revolutionary learning environments of educational reform could create a space where a hybrid of MI theory and transformative learning theory develops. Additionally, findings that suggest young adult learners do experience transformed meaning perspectives, and subsequently transformed learning, because of their participation in adult programmed GED classes (Mitchell, 2015) can be corroborated.

Research Questions

Patton (2015) suggests all theoretical perspectives are distinguished by their foundational questions. As such, the phenomenon of this study is explored through questions eliciting answers that describe the “meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience” by the participants of the study (Patton, 2015, p. 98). Those guiding questions are:

1. **RQ1.** How do former high school dropouts describe the experience of reengaging with learning?

Enthusiasm for this research topic influenced the first research question (Moustakas, 1994). It was drafted to intentionally reflect the purpose of the study (Gall et al., 2007). This question also complies with Moustakas’ (1994) outlined characteristics for human science research questions in that it attempts to uncover the “essences and meanings of human experience,” pursues the qualitative factors rather than the quantitative factors of the experience, requires complete involvement of the research participant, does not seek a causal relationship or

prediction, and can only be answered through “careful, comprehensive descriptions” (p. 105) of the experience.

2. **RQ2.** How do participants describe the experience of becoming disengaged from learning in a K-12 educational setting to becoming reengaged with learning in a postsecondary setting?

This question aligns with Moustakas’ (1994) assertion that “phenomenology is committed to descriptions of experiences” (p. 58). Through the participants’ descriptions, the design of this question helps keep the “phenomenon alive” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 59). These descriptions may also give understanding to the research that indicates high school students enrolled in CTE programs during high school demonstrate an increased likelihood of graduating from high school (Robinson, 2016). Despite the differences in postsecondary education and the traditional K-12 school setting, supportive learning environments (Zabloski & Milacci, 2012) and engaging instructional programs (Carter, 2012) are common factors linked to student success.

Comparing the experiences of two different educational journeys provides a structural description that becomes a “vivid account of the underlying dynamics of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 135). Learning how participants experienced each learning environment can help in understanding the transformed meaning perspectives they may have encountered (Mezirow, 1978, 2000) as well as comprehending the value of matching instructional methods to individual learning modes (Gardner, 1983). This question may also help substantiate previous findings that suggest young adult learners who participate in adult programmed GED classes do experience transformative learning (Mitchell, 2015).

3. **RQ3.** What experiences do participants describe that led them to pursue postsecondary education?

While many support the education provided by technical colleges (Robinson, 2016; Saddler, Tyler, Maldonado, Cleveland, & Thompson, 2011), there still exists a negative connotation associated with technical education (Gammill, 2015). It is important to understand the experiences that initiated participants' pursuit of a postsecondary diploma without completion of a high school diploma. Through this insight, others can "know what it was like to have been there" as if they were present in the participants' stories (Patton, 2015, p. 54). The decision to pursue a learning opportunity could be the result of transformed meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 2000), or it could be traced to the appeal of a learning program that engaged the participants' learning style (Gardner, 1983).

4. **RQ4.** What experiences do participants describe as leading them to successful reengagement with learning?

This question is designed to provide a textural description of the phenomenon by conveying the essence of the experience through descriptions of what the participants are experiencing (Creswell, 2013). Participants' descriptions of their experiences could identify the circumstances that resulted in their reengagement with learning. Since accomplished educational programming features student achievement that blends opportunity with student need (Carnevale et al., 2012; Wilkins & Bost, 2016), acknowledging where opportunity met need in the participants' lives could render support for MI theory and transformative learning theory.

Definitions

1. *Area Redevelopment Act of 1961* – An act approving funds aimed at improving subpar employment and perpetual unemployment in regions of economic distress (Hartman,

2014).

2. *Associate of Applied Science Degree (AAS)* – An applied/academic degree program (60-75 credit hours) primarily designed to prepare students for immediate employment or career entry (Northshore Technical Community College, 2016).
3. *Associate of General Studies Degree (AGS)* – An academic program (60 credit hours) that allows students to select a concentration to prepare them for career entry or transfer to a baccalaureate program (Northshore Technical Community College, 2016).
4. *Career and Technical Education (CTE)* – Education or training programs that prepare students for jobs that require education and training beyond high school but less than a bachelor's degree (Carnevale et al., 2012).
5. *Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins Act)* – Provides federal funding for the academic, career, and technical skills development of secondary and postsecondary students choosing to enroll in CTE programs (Simoneau, 2015).
6. *Certificate of General Studies (CGS)* – An academic program of general education courses (30 credit hours) designed to prepare students for entry into an associate or baccalaureate program (Northshore Technical Community College, 2016).
7. *Certificate of Technical Studies (CTS)* – An applied technical program (16-33 credit hours) formed by combining multiple hours of Technical Competency Area (TCA) courses (Northshore Technical Community College, 2016).
8. *Community College* – A two-year institution that offers student instructional programs in a career-related fields at the certificate and associate degree level (NCES, 2016).

9. *Educational Amendments of 1976* – A revision to the Vocational Education Act of 1963 that sanctioned a national center for research in vocational education (Lewis & Stone, 2013).
10. *Four-year University* – An institution that tends to have a broad range of instructional programs that, upon student completion, lead to a bachelor's degree. Some four-year universities also offer graduate programs of study (NCES, 2016).
11. *General Educational Development (GED)* – A comparable high school certification that is the most widely accepted alternative to a high school diploma by colleges and universities (Jepsen et al., 2015).
12. *High School Credential* – A high school diploma or comparable credential such as a GED (NCES, 2016).
13. *High School Dropout* – Any 16- to 24-year-old who is not enrolled in a K-12 school setting and has not earned a high school credential (NCES, 2016).
14. *High School Equivalency Test (HiSET)* – a high school equivalency test developed in 2014 by Educational Testing Service that can be taken in paper or computer format and is less expensive than the GED test (Brinkley-Etz Korn & Ishitani, 2016).
15. *K-12 Education/K-12 Schools* – An educational system that offers progressive instruction to students who range in age from kindergarten-level to twelfth-grade-level (Cox et al., 2015).
16. *Manpower Development and Training Act of 1962* – An act authorizing the Secretaries of Labor, Health, Education, and Welfare to finance projects that train unemployed and underemployed persons in occupational skills determined to be in demand in their geographic areas (Smith, 1968).

17. *Middle Jobs* – Jobs that secure middle-class earnings for the employee and require more education than a high school diploma but less than a bachelor's degree (Carnevale et al., 2012).
18. *Open-Admissions Policy* – A college admissions process that only requires students to have earned a high school diploma or GED (Northshore Technical Community College, 2016).
19. *Opportunity Youth* – Young adults between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither employed nor in school (Sims, 2015).
20. *Postsecondary Education* – Any two-year or four-year public or private institution offering career and academic training to students with a high school credential (NCES, 2016).
21. *Secondary Job* – A job that offers no career advancement and provides wages that do not sustain an independent lifestyle (Kim, 2015).
22. *Smith-Hughes Act of 1917* – Legislation passed that provided support for instruction in agricultural and trade occupations and for the traditional female role of homemaker (Lewis & Stone, 2013).
23. *Status Dropout Rate* – The percentage of 16- to 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school and do not have a high school credential (NCES, 2016).
24. *Technical College* – The evolution of trade schools that began as vocational schools then vocational technical schools then vocational technical institutes to its present classification as technical college (Northshore Technical Community College, 2016).

25. *Technical Competency Area* - An applied course, or series of courses (1-16 credit hours), which provides a student with a specific technical competency (Northshore Technical Community College, 2016).
26. *Technical Diploma (TD)* – An applied technical degree program formed (45-60 credit hours) by combining multiple CTS hours and TCA hours (Northshore Technical Community College, 2016).
27. *Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC)* – a high school equivalency test developed in 2014 by McGraw-Hill that can be taken in paper or computer format and is less expensive than the GED test (Brinkley-Etzkorn & Ishitani, 2016).
28. *Theory of Multiple Intelligences* – Intelligence is a pluralistic concept that helps understand how people learn and how they develop what they can and cannot do (Gardner, 1987).
29. *Transformative Learning Theory* – Explains how adult learners make sense of the world through the meaning of their experiences and how meanings of experiences become modified by dynamic life changes (Christie, Carey, Robertson, & Grainger, 2015).
30. *Vocational Education* – The previous label assigned to CTE (Lewis & Stone, 2013).
31. *Vocational Education Act of 1963* – A bill that authorized major increases in financial support of vocational education and approved funding for vocational education research (Lewis & Stone, 2013).

Summary

This chapter emphasized the social and individual burden of high school dropout. The phenomenon of former high school dropouts who have become reengaged with learning was submitted. Studying this phenomenon addresses the problem of insufficient qualitative research

describing the lived experiences of former high school dropouts who have completed their high school credential through an adult education program and are enrolled in a postsecondary program of study at a technical college, community college, or four-year university.

Investigating this problem upholds the purpose of the study, which is to describe the experiences of former high school dropouts who have completed their high school credential through an adult education program and are reengaged with learning through a postsecondary program of study.

The guiding parameters of the study such as the theoretical frameworks of MI theory and transformative learning theory and research questions were presented. Informing K-12 schools of strategies aimed at eliminating high school dropout, possibly helping high school students considering dropping out, and expanding the body of literature related to high school dropout are potential factors that add significance to this study.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This chapter includes a summary of the paradigms, applications, and implications of the theory of multiple intelligences (MI theory) and transformative learning theory as each relates to this study. Themes from the literature are constructed to provide a contextual background.

Emerging themes were: (a) descriptions of high school dropouts, (b) predictors of high school dropout, (c) problems of high school dropout, (d) social consequences of high school dropout, (e) economic consequences of high school dropout, (f) educational consequences of high school dropout, (g) solutions for high school dropout, (h) alternative high school credentials, (i) alternative educational programming, (j) potential for failure, and (k) potential for success.

Through the process of exploring the literature, significant information germane to both the theoretical framework and the context of high school dropout were examined. As major categories surfaced from the literature, this study's problem and purpose guided the synthesis of information into headings and subheadings. Additionally, the developing themes helped to define the parameters and terminology used in searches for this literature review. For example, terms used to research MI theory and transformative learning theory included: *child learning, adolescent learning, adult learning, intelligence modes, intelligence domains, linguistic intelligence, musical intelligence, logical-mathematical intelligence, spatial intelligence, bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, intrapersonal intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, naturalistic intelligence, transformative learning, perspective transformation, meaning perspectives, critical reflection in learning, individual transformation, and transformation outcomes*. Terms used to research topics related to high school dropout included: *national high school dropout statistics, high school dropout demographics, high school dropout predictors, adult relationships and high*

school dropout, school absence and high school dropout, teen pregnancy and high school dropout, academic performance and high school dropout, student behavior and high school dropout, grade retention and high school dropout, substance abuse and high school dropout, student engagement and high school dropout, crime and high school dropout, incarceration and high school dropout, debt and high school dropout, alternative high school credentials, GED, HiSET, TASC, alternative high school education, career and technical education, persistence in career and technical education, perspectives on career and technical education, vocational education, technical college, and technical college diploma.

During the time of the literature review, the date range 2011-2017 was used to narrow the scope of sources. Sources included in the literature review extending beyond this date range were retained because of their necessary value to the study. These included articles, journals, or books written by or written about phenomenologists and theorists and historical research regarding high school dropout, vocational education, the GED, and alternative education. All sources, as well as sources that were written within the 2011-2017 window, were retrieved from databases accessed via the Liberty University Online Library and primary books. The scholarly (peer reviewed) journal limiter was applied to sources involving research studies. Some sources that were not peer reviewed were incorporated into this literature review because of the contextual value they bring to the topic.

An implicative concept emanating from the literature is that high school dropouts are capable of learning and achievement. Though the learning processes, learning environments, and subsequent student success of alternative education programs may appear different than traditional student learning and achievement, it is those disparities that make alternative education effective. The emerging research gap suggests better informed decisions regarding

alternative educational programming could be made from implementing insight from the described experiences of students who have completed an alternative education program.

Theoretical Framework

Two guiding theories were used to ground this study: MI theory (Gardner, 1983) and transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978). Each theory offers perspective into the process of learning, with Gardner's MI theory addressing children and adolescent learners, and Mezirow's transformative learning describing the development of learning in adults. These theoretical lenses have inspired the composition of the research questions as each research question sought to uncover the experiences that factored into a participant's learning. The process of data collection and analysis have also been influenced by the tenets of MI theory and transformative learning theory with attention being given to the dynamics that either contributed to or detracted from a participant's learning. In conjunction with the related literature, the paradigms and applications of both theories suggest a framework for better understanding high school dropout and the catalysts that propel students toward reengagement with learning.

Theory of Multiple Intelligences

Developed by Howard Gardner in 1983, MI theory suggests that learning is maximized when instruction matches a learner's highest mode of intelligence (Gardner, 1983). Thus, a change from a poorly matched instructional method and intelligence mode to an optimally matched instructional method and intelligence mode would result in increased learning. To better comprehend the pertinence of MI theory to this study the following components of MI theory are described: paradigms, application and outcomes, and recognition of MI theory.

Paradigms. In Gardner's (1983) original work on MI theory, seven intelligence domains were identified: (a) linguistic intelligence, (b) musical intelligence, (c) logical-mathematical

intelligence, (d) spatial intelligence, (e) bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, (f) intrapersonal intelligence, and (g) interpersonal intelligence. Gardner later included naturalistic intelligence as an eighth intelligence domain (Gardner, 1999). Viewing human intelligence as a “pluralistic concept,” Gardner (1987, p. 27) was unopposed to additional intelligence domains being explored. There has been discussion of identifying a ninth intelligence, existential intelligence (Gardner & Moran, 2006), but this study will only recognize the eight intelligences acknowledged by Gardner.

Definitions and examples of each intelligence are as follows: (a) linguistic intelligence is a sensitivity to the different functions of language as demonstrated by poets and journalists; (b) musical intelligence is the ability to produce and appreciate musical forms of expression as demonstrated by composers or musicians; (c) logical-mathematical intelligence is the ability to discern and handle numerical patterns and chains of reasoning as demonstrated by scientists and mathematicians; (d) spatial intelligence is a capacity to perceive the visual-world precisely and modify one’s surroundings based on initial perceptions as demonstrated by sculptors and navigators; (e) bodily-kinetic intelligence is the ability to control physical movement and objects skillfully as demonstrated by dancers and athletes; (f) intrapersonal intelligence is a sensitivity to one’s own feelings, strengths, weaknesses, desires, and intelligences that guides his or her behavior as demonstrated by a person with accurate and detailed self-awareness; (g) interpersonal intelligence is a capacity to appropriately respond to the needs, dispositions, and impulses of other people as demonstrated by therapists and salesmen; and (h) naturalistic intelligence is the ability for a person to recognize plant and animal life for the purpose of productivity as demonstrated by farmers and hunters (Gardner, 1996; Gardner & Hatch, 1989).

Applications and outcomes. The application of MI theory is directed towards children and adolescents in school settings (Gardner, 1996). In fact, Gardner (1983) urges educators to begin looking at the intelligence modes of individuals as early as infancy. Though specific intelligences may be identified early in a child's life, Gardner (1983) resisted the temptation to declare that a child only possesses the recognized intelligences of their babyhood. Instead, as people grow and mature through childhood and adolescence, it is possible and likely that they would demonstrate the ability to perform within multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983, 1999). So much so, that individuals learn to perform functions that require a blending or grouping of the intelligence modes (Gardner & Hatch, 1989; Gardner & Moran, 2006). For example, a riverboat pilot maneuvering a large ship through a winding river is demonstrating both spatial intelligence and bodily-kinetic intelligence simultaneously.

Over time, there have been many misapplications of MI theory that have produced undesirable outcomes (Gardner, 1996). A superficial view of the literature validates this statement, but relevant to this study are Gardner's intended outcomes of MI theory: (a) cultivating intelligences that are valued by the community at large, (b) approaching a discipline of study in a multitude of ways, and (c) personalizing the practice of education (Gardner, 1996). A perfect-world scenario of an educational experience that utilized the constructs of MI theory would be a learning environment where students had the freedom to demonstrate their understanding of a community-valued concept through an expression that highlights their own intelligence modes.

Recognition of MI theory. Gardner (1996) acknowledged three indicators that signal the application of MI theory and its presence in learning. The first describes a topic that has been taught from numerous perspectives (Gardner, 1996). This is evident when a teacher creates

multiple pathways for students to arrive at the same learning outcome. Gardner (1996) likened this to a room with many windows. Each room offers a different view; however, it is still a view of the same room. Next is when the students view themselves as the experts because they have been given the opportunity to represent knowledge of a concept through pluralistic modes (Gardner, 1996). The freedom students have to personalize their demonstration of understanding a topic highlights an awareness of each individual's varied intelligence modes. Finally, students' demonstration of new understanding becomes something they are comfortable doing and makes learning accessible to others (Gardner, 1996). Students then become an example to their peers in the variety of ways knowledge is attained and exhibited.

Implications for completion. One issue that has been attributed to high school students dropping out and failing to complete a high school credential is student disengagement in the learning process (Bowers & Sprott, 2012; Bowers, Sprott, & Taff, 2013; Carter, 2012; Henry et al., 2011). A quality of MI theory is that it connects the learner to a learning outcome through matching instruction with the learner's personal intelligence modes. Teachers delivering instruction with intelligence matching as an objective can effectively reengage the learner by connecting the learner with the instructor, instructional process, and learning outcome. This is an important factor for academic persistence and high school completion, as student reengagement in the learning process results in a commitment to fulfill learning goals (Carter, 2012). Therefore, MI theory is a relevant construct to understanding the phenomenon of this study.

Transformative Learning Theory

Introduced by Jack Mezirow in 1978, the basic principle of transformative learning theory describes a process of behavior change in adults that is a "function of perspective

transformation” (Mezirow, 1978, p. 55). Mezirow (2000) depicted a method of transforming meaning perspectives, which ultimately results in guided action that has both individual and social implications. Changed meaning perspectives thus becomes an impetus for altered action and can be the genesis for persistence towards completing a goal. Understanding the paradigms, applications and outcomes, and recognition of transformative learning theory helps endorse transformative learning theory as a felicitous theoretical framework for this study.

Paradigms. Mezirow (2000) asserted that learning transformations typically followed a variation of the following 10 phases: (a) some sort of disorienting dilemma, (b) self-examination with feelings of shame, fear, guilt, or anger, (c) critical assessment of personal assumptions, (d) recognition that one’s discontent and process of transformation are shared with others, (e) exploration of options for new relationships and behavior, (f) planning a course of action, (g) acquisition of knowledge and skills to implement new plans, (h) conditionally trying of new roles, (i) building self-confidence and competence in new roles and relationships, and (j) reintegration into life on the premise of a new perspective (Christie et al., 2015; Kitchenham, 2008; Mezirow, 2000). While these 10 phases offer a description of the progression one undergoes to experience transformed meaning perspectives, they are not prescriptive, and learning is still a possibility for individuals not encountering each step of the 10 phases (Mezirow, 2000). Mezirow (2000) contended that learning occurs when an individual (a) elaborates on an existing meaning perspective, (b) learns a new meaning perspective, (c) transforms personal viewpoints, or (d) transforms habits of mind. Consequently, one’s journey through the ten phases of transformative learning would result in learning if one of Mezirow’s four learning indicators are achieved.

A necessary characteristic of transformative learning theory is its emphasis of a learning process for adults. Mezirow (2000) defined an adult “as a person old enough to be held responsible for his or her acts” (p. 24). This is a noteworthy feature of transformative learning theory because of the theory’s prioritization of critical reflection (Christie et al., 2015; Kitchenham, 2008; Mezirow, 1978, 2000; Taylor, 2007) – a practice that adolescents can learn to do regarding others’ assumptions, but the practice of being critically reflective of one’s own assumptions is an ability most likely demonstrated by adults (Mezirow, 2000). Critical reflection is essential to transformative learning (Taylor, 2007), and hence, the application of transformative learning is best suited for adult education.

Application and outcomes. At the conclusion of Mezirow’s (1978) study on women’s reentry programs in community colleges, Mezirow stated, “The objective of adult education should be defined in terms of fostering movement toward a higher level of development on a maturity gradient” (p. 55). Cultivating environments that encourage transformative learning aid adult learners in finding personally engaging and deeply meaningful experiences (Taylor, 2007) resulting in changed behavior, which is a function of transformed meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1978). Improved behavior rooted in transformed meaning perspectives becomes a successful outcome of transformative learning theory.

Christie et al. (2015) offered an example encouraging transformative learning through a values-based exercise that sees learning as either helped or hindered based on the adult learner’s exposure to different social and cultural values. As objective as participants of this exercise attempt to remain, exposure to a variation of the ten phases of transformative learning and the liberty to critically reflect provide participants with the opportunity to question the validity of their own assumptions. Through this exercise, participants recognizing their own invalid

assumptions can begin taking the required steps to not only transform their meaning perspectives but also change their behavior founded on those perspectives. Such is the result of creating a learning environment that fosters transformative learning.

Recognition of transformative learning theory. An individual adopting new meaning perspectives without first reconciling his or her own assumptions as valid or invalid would be incapable of transformed learning (Kitchenham, 2008). Transformative learning theory then becomes best recognized by altered behavior in adults originating from transformed meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1978, 2000). While behavior is the most visible indicator of transformed learning, Mezirow (2000) suggested the critical reflection of one's existing assumptions can yield additional signs of transformed learning such as the expansion of one's current meaning perspectives, new meaning perspectives, transformed viewpoints, or transformed habits.

Implications for reengagement. High school dropouts are known to have lower levels of motivation, expectation, and achievement (Bjerk, 2012). Those who have dropped out of high school but have later completed their high school credential through an adult education program and enrolled in postsecondary education have demonstrated levels of transformed learning. The process of transformed meaning perspectives and the changed behavior stemming from these new meaning perspectives exemplifies transformed learning theory. Transformed learning theory befits the phenomenon of this study because it provides a rational foundation for the behaviors of former adolescent failures who are now adult achievers.

Related Literature

As MI theory and transformative learning theory provide a theoretical framework for this study, the related literature offers a contextual background that yields a space for this study to occupy. High school dropout demographics, predictors, implications, solutions, and outcomes

have been examined to establish a foundational understanding of the topic. Additionally, the review of related literature exposes a void of qualitative research being conducted on high school dropouts who fail to complete secondary school but persist in a postsecondary academic environment, which creates opportunities for additional contributions to be made in this field.

A Snapshot of High School Dropout: Who Are America's Dropouts?

Over the last 25 years, the United States has observed its high school dropout rate steadily decline from 12.1% of students dropping out in 1990 to 6.5% in 2014 (McFarland et al., 2016; NCES, 2016; Rosen, Chen, & RTI International, 2015). The NCES (2016) report defines a high school dropout as “any 16- to 24- year-olds who are not enrolled in high school and have never earned a high school credential” (p. 190). Earning a high school credential requires completion of a high school diploma or a comparable certification such as the GED. Though not a high school diploma, the GED is the most frequently accepted alternative to a high school diploma and is accepted for student admission requirements by most postsecondary institutions as a recognized high school credential (Jepsen et al., 2015).

Despite the increase of high school graduates over the last 25 years, the number of individuals not completing a high school credential continues to be a major problem. Recent estimates suggest that America has as many as 6.7 million opportunity youth (Balfanz et al., 2014), or any 16- to 24- year-old who is neither employed nor in school (Sims, 2015). Opportunity youth represent 13.8% of their age demographic (Sims, 2015) with high school dropouts accounting for 49% of the 6.7 million opportunity youth (NCES, 2016). The detrimental effects this has on social, economic, and educational efforts is significant (Bjerk, 2012; Carnevale et al., 2012; Henry et al., 2011; Kim, 2013; Maynard et al., 2014; Vaughn, Salas-Wright, & Maynard, 2014).

Though the high school dropout rate has been trending downward, the regression is not consistent across demographics. Out of the 6.5% of the student body who elected to drop out of high school in 2014, males and females represented 7.1% and 5.9% of that figure, respectively (NCES, 2016). Along racial and ethnic lines in 2014, Whites represented 5.2% of the high school dropout rate, Blacks represented 7.4% of the high school dropout rate, and Hispanics represented 10.6% of the high school dropout rate (NCES, 2016). Although Hispanics embodied the highest percentage of high school dropout rate over this time, they also represented the largest decline in high school dropout rate falling from 32.4% to 10.6% (NCES, 2016). Other racial and ethnic groups included in the high school dropout rate are Asian (3.2%), American Indian/Alaskan Native (7%), and Two or More Races (5.7%) (McFarland et al., 2016). Despite the differences across racial and ethnic demographics, each category witnessed a downward trend in the high school dropout rate from 1990 to 2014 (McFarland et al., 2016; NCES, 2016, Rosen et al., 2015).

Socioeconomic status presents another demographic category in which the high school dropout rate differs among its constituents. Low-income households had a high school dropout rate of 11.6%, middle-low-income households a high school dropout rate of 7.6%, middle-high-income households a high school dropout rate of 4.7%, and high-income households a high school dropout rate of 2.8% (NCES, 2016). Income levels were established using percentiles with the low-income designation representing households in the bottom 25th percentile of United States household income, the middle-low class representing household income between the 25th percentile and median, the middle-high class representing household income between the median and 75th percentile, and the high-income class representing household income in the upper 75th percentile (McFarland et al., 2016; NCES, 2016). Each income level saw a decline in high

school dropout rate from 1990 to 2014 with the exception of high-income households (NCES, 2016).

Other demographic categories representing high school dropout include trends among disability status, recency of immigration among Hispanics, age, and region (McFarland et al., 2016). Those who were disabled dropped out of high school at a higher rate than those who were not (14.9% to 6.4%), Hispanics born outside the United States had a higher high school dropout rate than first-generation Hispanics born inside the United States (22.8% to 8.2%), and 16- to 18-year-olds had a lower high school dropout rate than 20- to 24-year-olds (5.1% to 7.6%) (McFarland et al., 2016). Regionally across the United States, the South had the highest high school dropout (7.6%), followed by the West (7.1%), then the Midwest (6%), and finally the Northeast (5.5%) (McFarland et al., 2016).

High school dropout predictors. A study of the demographics of high school dropout helps recognize those who are more apt to drop out. For instance, a Hispanic male from a low-income household is more likely to drop out than a White female from a high-income household. Although reviewing demographic information about high school dropout is advantageous for tracking dropout trends, other studies highlight effective predictors that seem to assist in forecasting who will drop out. Notable predictors are: (a) relationships with teachers (Balfanz et al., 2014; Carter, 2012; Wilkins & Bost, 2016; Zabloski & Milacci, 2012), (b) relationships with mentors (Balfanz et al., 2014; Carter, 2012; Zabloski & Milacci, 2012), (c) absenteeism (Balfanz et al., 2014; Bowers & Sprott, 2012; Bowers et al., 2013; Carter, 2012; Parr & Bonitz, 2015; Smith & Thomson, 2014; Wilkins & Bost, 2016), (d) teen pregnancy (Bowers et al., 2013; Smith & Thomson, 2014; Wilkins & Bost, 2016), (e) academic performance (Barrat et al., 2012; Bjerk, 2012; Bowers & Sprott, 2012; Bowers et al., 2013; Carter, 2012; Parr & Bonitz, 2015; Smith &

Thomson, 2014; Wilkins & Bost, 2016), (f) family obligations (Bjerk, 2012; Bowers et al., 2013; Smith & Thomson, 2014; Wilkins & Bost, 2016), (g) work obligations (Bjerk, 2012; Bowers et al., 2013; Smith & Thomson, 2014; Wilkins & Bost, 2016), (h) student behavior (Bjerk, 2012; Bowers & Sprott, 2012; Bowers et al., 2013; Carter, 2012; Smith & Thomson, 2014), (i) grade retention, (Bowers & Sprott, 2012; Bowers et al., 2013; Smith & Thomson, 2014), (j) English language barriers (Barrat et al., 2012; Bowers et al., 2013; Smith & Thomson, 2014), (k) parents' education level (Bowers et al., 2013; Smith & Thomson, 2014), (l) student's graduation expectations (Bjerk, 2012; Bowers et al., 2013; Parr & Bonitz, 2015), (m) school credits by sophomore year (Bowers et al., 2013; Smith & Thomson, 2014), (n) motivation/work ethic (Bjerk, 2012; Bowers et al., 2013; Parr & Bonitz, 2015), (o) substance abuse (Bowers et al., 2013; Smith & Thomson, 2014), (p) growth in mathematics (Bowers et al., 2013), (q) low standardized test scores (Bowers & Sprott, 2012; Bowers et al., 2013), (r) student engagement (Bowers & Sprott, 2012; Bowers et al., 2013; Carter, 2012; Henry et al., 2011), (s) legal problems (Bowers et al., 2013; Smith & Thomson, 2014), and (t) tragic life experiences (Bjerk, 2012; Bowers & Sprott, 2012; Bowers et al., 2013).

There is a seemingly unending list of predictors that act as precursors to high school dropout. Among these early warnings are a student's "longitudinal event history" – the "dropout flags" that Bowers et al. (2013, p. 95) have identified as possessing the strongest true-positive correlations and lowest false-positive correlations of any dropout predictor. This is significant because according to Bowers et al. (2013) a student's longitudinal academic achievement, or longitudinal school engagement, proves to be the best predictor of potential high school dropout. Studying the trajectories of students' longitudinal event histories can be powerful exemplars used to focus solution efforts aimed at ridding high school dropout.

High School Dropout Problems

Three areas of society where high school dropout proves to be consequential are social, economic, and educational (Bjerk, 2012; Carnevale et al., 2012; Henry et al., 2011; Kim, 2013; Maynard et al., 2014; Vaughn et al., 2014). Each societal faction possesses its own set of unique features, but high school dropout represents a dilemma that threatens to disrupt the preferred modality of each's existence. The shared goal of solving the plight of high school dropout has become a unifying effort that has been statistically successful (McFarland et al., 2016; NCES, 2016; Rosen et al., 2015). Despite the steadily declining trajectory of high school dropout, it has not yet been eliminated; and thus, solutions are still necessary.

Social consequences. Society has incurred many negative affects because of high school dropout. These include but are not limited to public health problems, crime, substance abuse, and incarceration (Bjerk, 2012; Maynard et al., 2014; Vaughn et al., 2014). While eliminating high school dropout will not guarantee the dissolution of such social problems, existing literature indicates that those who complete a high school credential are far less likely to be contributors to society's decline.

Public health. In a study of 19,312 adults, not only did Maynard et al. (2014) see high school dropouts report consistently along demographic trends (i.e., most likely to be male and minority), but the researchers also recognized high school dropouts are more likely to be nicotine dependent, use illicit substances, and participate in binge alcohol use. In another comparable study by Vaughn et al. (2014), high school dropouts demonstrated increased odds of having severe prolonged health conditions including: asthma, diabetes, heart disease, and high blood pressure. Results of the Vaughn et al. (2014) study accounted for health influencers such as age, marital status, income, alcohol or drug addiction, and gender, but high school dropout was the

leading correlating factor to increased chronic physical health issues. Other researchers have linked an increase in sexually transmitted infections to high school dropout, especially in female dropouts (Anderson & Pörtner, 2014).

Physical health is not the only public health concern afflicted by high school dropout. Mental and behavioral health also took a detrimental plunge due to high school dropout. High school dropouts are twice as likely than high school graduates to report attempting suicide, and nearly three times more likely to be arrested for crimes such as larceny, drug possession, and assault (Maynard et al., 2014). Since high school dropout presents adverse effects on public health, Maynard et al. (2014) are strong proponents of making high school dropout a public health issue rather than solely an educational reform issue. Regardless of the nuance of declaring high school dropout as a public health or educational concern, research findings support strategies to preserve public health that involve increased educational opportunities, especially high school completion (Vaughn et al., 2014).

Crime. Another unfortunate consequence of high school dropout is an increased rate in criminal outcomes for those without a high school credential (Anderson, 2014; Anderson & Lochner, 2016; Bjerk, 2012; Cook & Kang, 2016; Machin, Marie, & Vujić, 2011). Cook and Kang (2016) found that the majority of increased criminal activity among adults correlated with high school dropout, and crimes such as larceny, assault, and drug related crimes are committed more frequently by high school dropouts (Maynard et al., 2014). Many suggest increasing the minimum age requirement for dropping out as a solution to cutting criminal activity; a conclusion grounded in research that indicates reduced crime rates for those who leave school at a later age and achieve more educational attainment (Anderson, 2014; Cook & Kang, 2016; Machin et al., 2011).

While the age of high school dropouts substantiates their level of criminal involvement, reasons for dropping out affect criminal activity as well. Bjerk (2012) categorized reasons for dropping out as either push factors or pull factors. Push factors are issues such as poor student behavior, low academic performance, and legal problems that “push” the student out of school, whereas pull factors are issues such as meager family health and inadequate financial circumstances that “pull” students away from school (Bjerk, 2012, p. 111). Students who dropped out because of push factors exhibited many of the negative behaviors associated with dropping out, including criminal activity (Bjerk, 2012). Whether it is age or push factors influencing students to drop out, it is evident that the more time spent in school corresponds with lower crime rates.

This correlation is not overlooked by researchers. Increasing student involvement in schools so students acquire more class time is pivotal in lowering crime rates (Anderson, 2014; Bjerk, 2012; Cook & Kang, 2016; Machin et al., 2011). Obviously, high school completion is the goal, but even for students who decide to drop out, those with less high school experience are more likely to be involved in criminal activity (Anderson, 2014; Cook & Kang, 2016). Likewise, Bjerk (2012) concluded that demanding students to complete even a few additional months of school prior to dropping out would assist in lowering the crime rate. Though Machin et al.’s (2011) study on high school dropout was conducted in England and Wales, their findings are consistent with analogous studies conducted in the United States. Machin et al. (2011) advocate for federal funding to be intentionally infused into educational programming aimed at developing the skill level of students because, like others, they recognize the impact that a few additional months of high school education can have on lowering crime rates.

Substance abuse. Substance abuse continues the trend of negative outcomes associated with high school dropout. Increased use of nicotine products, alcohol abuse, and illicit drug use among adults has been connected to high school dropout (Henry et al., 2011; Reingle Gonzalez et al., 2016); cigarette use and nicotine dependency are perpetuated greater by high school dropouts than their high school graduate counterparts (Maynard et al., 2014); and studies demonstrate a reciprocity between teenage smoking and high school completion (Orpinas, Lacy, Nahapetyan, Dube, & Song, 2015; Wang & Fredricks, 2014). There is often a correlating trajectory involving student engagement, teenage smoking, and high school completion that suggests substance use was prevalent in high school dropouts prior to withdrawing from school, and this habit only escalated upon dropping out (Henry et al., 2011; Orpinas et al., 2015; Reingle Gonzales et al., 2016; Wang & Fredricks, 2014). Consequently, high school dropout is not cited as the underlying cause for substance abuse, but it is recognized as an indicator for elevated levels of substance dependency among adults.

Whether the social consequence of high school dropout affects overall public health, criminal activity, or increased substance abuse, the message from researchers is clear: efforts to reverse the hefty, negative, burdensome outcomes of high school dropout on society begin in the classroom (Anderson, 2014; Bjerk, 2012; Cook & Kang, 2016; Henry et al., 2011; Machin et al., 2011; Reingle Gonzalez et al., 2016; Vaughn et al., 2014; Wang & Fredricks, 2014). The logical assumption is that students with more educational attainment have a more expansive knowledge base that assists decision making regarding personal behaviors, develops employable skills, and builds aspiration towards future accomplishments. Unfortunately, the calamitous, most probable social fallout from unsuccessfully addressing students' failure to complete high school is incarceration (Mattie C. Stewart Foundation, 2016; Orpinas et al., 2015).

Incarceration. With fewer operable labor skills, excessive idle time, and an already developed dependency on substances, prison is a seemingly inescapable conclusion for most high school dropouts. For the majority of America's inmates, incarceration corresponds with low levels of educational attainment (Ewert, Sykes, & Pettit, 2014). Currently, statistics reveal that eight out of every ten high school dropouts will end up in jail, and 75% of prison inmates are former high school dropouts (Mattie C. Stewart Foundation, 2016). Without formidable intervention aimed at addressing high school dropout, the cyclical pattern of failing to complete high school and incarceration is one that is predicted to rise (Carter, 2012). This grim prospect awaiting most high school dropouts is not only a future that is detrimental to their own lives but also to the lives of all members of society who must shoulder the cost of such shortcomings.

Economic consequences. As young men and women leave high school without earning a credential, the economic weight of that decision is felt throughout society. Estimates vary regarding the expense of high school dropout, but each perspective on the topic proves costly. From an individual standpoint, high school dropouts have a higher unemployment rate than those with a high school credential, and dropouts who are employed will earn approximately \$40,000 less per year among adults aged 18 through 67 (McFarland et al., 2016). From a public outlook, a high school dropout will cost the economy roughly \$260,000 over his or her lifetime due to an increased reliance on welfare programs, lower tax contributions resulting in lost tax revenue, and expenditures associated with higher rates of criminal activity (McFarland et al., 2016). Tally it up, and the economic burden on society of high school dropout projected over their lifetimes balloons to \$329 billion (Mattie C. Stewart Foundation, 2016).

Many of the economic shortcomings of high school dropout are affiliated with occupational opportunities. Naturally, high school dropouts have limited employable skills and

must rely on secondary job opportunities that prioritize an employee's attitude over educational background or experience (Kim, 2015). The secondary job market seldom rewards educational attainment since the work is characterized as entry-level and monotonous and can be performed without developed skills (Kim, 2015). Initially this may appear beneficial for high school dropouts because employment is accessible; however, the earning power for individuals working secondary jobs is minimal and has been declining (Saddler et al., 2011). While there is a market for laborers with nominal skills, the financial promise for secondary job employees is not optimistic.

Complicating the economic situation of high school dropouts even more has been the recent Great Recession of 2007 to 2009. High school graduates who lost their jobs began seeking employment in the secondary market, which forced out high school dropouts and reduced available employment opportunities. This unfortunate event for high school dropouts continued a decades-long pattern of declining employment rate for non-graduates (Sum et al., 2011). Furthering the difficult financial situation of high school dropouts is the salary discrepancy between dropouts and graduates. The earning gap is such that most high school dropouts cannot afford to live independently (McDaniel & Kuehn, 2012).

Acquiring a high school credential seemingly places an individual on the appropriate path towards economic self-sufficiency, but McDaniel and Kuehn (2012) revealed that the economic returns on a high school credential have waned over recent years. As an individual completes additional education credentials, he or she typically increases his or her earning potential (Matheny, Chan, & Wang, 2015). A graduate degree, for example, will position a person to earn more than someone with a bachelor's degree, which offers more earning potential than an associate degree, which renders higher wages than a high school diploma. There is an expected

income gap between each achieved education level, but the largest difference is between those without a high school credential and those with a high school credential (McDaniel & Kuehn, 2012). This disparity along with the economic impact posed by high school dropouts has stimulated educational reform efforts aimed at eliminating dropout altogether.

Educational consequences. The high school dropout dilemma in the United States has been a problem that requires its own set of unique answers. A succinct historical overview of the issue finds intervention via education extending back 100 years: (a) the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 provided instructional assistance for trade, agricultural, and homemaker occupations; (b) the Vocational Education Act of 1963, preceded by the Area Redevelopment Act of 1961 and the Manpower Development and Training Act of 1962, expanded federal funding for vocational education and ushered in growing federal involvement in developing the country's human resources; (c) the Education Amendments of 1976 resulted in the creation of the National Center for Research in Vocational Education (National Research Center); (d) the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act (Perkins Act) was passed in 1984 and continued the functions of the Education Amendments of 1976 while broadening its roles to include additional federal assistance for disadvantaged and limited English proficiency students; (e) the Perkins Act was reauthorized in 1990, 1998, and 2006 (Perkins II, Perkins III, and Perkins IV) empowering and providing resources to the National Research Center so the center could perform functions such as conducting more research in the area of vocational and technical education, implementing additional teacher training, addressing employment needs, and increasing vocational and technical education programs in secondary and postsecondary schools; and (f) in 2012, the federal government moved Perkins funding from public universities to private organizations and

contracted out future research and development to competing independent profit and nonprofit organizations (Lewis & Stone, 2013).

This selected list of federal policy resolved to support students and encourage high school completion does not nearly exhaust the legislation written concerning dropout. Yet, it does catalog the educational consequences of high school dropout as substantial resources have been invested into eliminating the social setbacks experienced at the expense of dropout. While the pursuit of a resolution to the high school dropout predicament has seen the dropout rate decline (McFarland et al., 2016; NCES, 2016; Rosen et al., 2015), increasing the nation's graduation rate will remain an endeavor until dropout is eliminated. The policies born out of this venture will be the educational consequences students, teachers, and school administrators must endure while the dropout riddle is being solved.

Solutions for High School Dropouts

Lawmakers and educators understand the stress high school dropout places on society. Attempts to boost high school graduation rates have seen developments in two prominent areas: alternative high school credentials and alternative educational programming. An alternative high school credential is a comparable certification to a high school diploma, such as the GED, and satisfies the high school credential admission requirement by most colleges and universities (Jepsen et al., 2015). Alternative educational programming are attempts by school reformers to connect students to career pathways before they become disengaged with school and drop out (Carnevale et al., 2012; Robinson, 2016; Saddler et al., 2011). Each dropout solution has experienced its share of success, but because these fixes are not mainstream, traditional educators exhibit a wariness to fully endorse them (Schwartz, 2014).

Alternative high school credentials: The GED. Despite recent changes to the 2014 GED test that have compelled a growing number of states to adopt alternative testing to assess high school completion (Zinth, 2015), the GED continues to be the most widely accepted alternative to a high school diploma by colleges and universities (Jepsen et al., 2015). Created in 1943 as an alternative high school credential for military veterans, the GED was crafted to afford returning servicemen the opportunity to continue their educational pursuits at colleges and universities (Tuck, 2012). Now celebrating its 75th anniversary, the GED has morphed into the go-to credential for high school dropouts who have opted out, voluntarily or involuntarily, of the high school diploma track (Tuck, 2012).

While the GED is comparable to a high school diploma regarding the access it grants its recipients to postsecondary education, studies show acquiring a GED is still not enough to emerge from the negative economic outcomes associated with high school dropout (Jepsen et al., 2015; Jepsen, Mueser, & Troske, 2016; Rutschow & Crary-Ross, 2014). Typically, the labor market follows this formula: the more educational credentials one acquires (i.e., high school diploma, technical certifications, technical diplomas, postsecondary degrees, etc.), the more earned income one can expect to receive (Matheny et al., 2015). Among all income levels associated with earned educational credentials, the widest wage margin is between the high school diploma and high school dropout (McDaniel & Kuehn, 2012). When considering the GED as an educational credential, one can expect projected future earnings comparable to that of high school dropouts, which prompted Jepsen et al. (2016) to deem GED holders as having “essentially equivalent” (p. 645) labor market options as high school dropouts. Furthermore, research suggests that combining work experience with a GED does little to improve a person’s occupational standing (Kim, 2015).

Considering the underwhelming financial opportunities provided by a GED, it is a bewilderment that students would pursue this option. Some high school dropouts acknowledge quitting school and completing the GED because it lends a swifter path to a high school credential (Jepsen et al., 2016). This strategy has certainly proven successful at achieving such a goal, but it still does not promise future educational longevity or economic prosperity, despite countless GED recipients having earned admittance into postsecondary institutions and having received several hours of course credit (Jepsen et al., 2016). Their efforts are noble, yet insufficient, as fewer than 5% of GED holders secure a postsecondary degree or certification (Jepsen et al., 2015). Labor trends continue to point towards technical certifications, technical diplomas, and postsecondary degrees as stable means to improving occupational standing (Kim, 2015), making the route from high school dropout to GED to unfinished postsecondary degree futile.

In order for academic efforts to yield occupational stability, postsecondary credits must be paired with a degree (Jepsen et al., 2015, 2016; Kim, 2015; Matheny et al., 2015; McDaniel & Kuehn, 2012; Rutschow & Crary-Ross, 2014). The GED may give its recipients a sense of completion, but that satisfaction still leaves most GED holders financially deficient. The original intent of the GED was to provide further educational opportunities to men who left high school to serve the country during World War II (Tuck, 2012). Though treated as a complementary credential to the high school diploma, the GED was never established as a replacement credential for the high school diploma, and therefore, expected outcomes for high school graduates with a diploma should not be projected onto GED recipients. With the futures of GED holders being more synonymous with high school dropouts than high school graduates (McDaniel & Kuehn,

2012), it would be more socially constructive to evaluate educational programming focused on high school completion rather than continuing to promote the GED.

A new wave of equivalency. In 2014, the GED underwent a revision to its format that saw two primary alterations to its test: (1) computer-only testing, and (2) an alignment with Common Core State Standards that ushered in higher order thinking questions and prioritized job readiness over high school equivalency (Brinkley-Etz Korn & Ishitani, 2016; Computer-only, 2014; Rutschow, Grossman, & Cullinan, 2014). In the wake of this change, two new high school equivalency tests were developed: the High School Equivalency Test (HiSET) and the Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC) (Brinkley-Etz Korn & Ishitani, 2016; Computer-only, 2014; Zinth, 2015). It is too early to determine if the HiSET or TASC will surpass the GED as the most widely accepted alternative to a high school diploma, but it is not too soon to compare and contrast the similarities and differences of each test.

Both the HiSET, developed by Educational Testing Service, and the TASC, developed by McGraw-Hill, offer a paper testing option (Brinkley-Etz Korn & Ishitani, 2016; Computer-only, 2014; Zinth, 2015). This was done in response to growing apprehensions over the GED's exclusive use of computer testing (Computer-only, 2014). Since high school equivalency tests are mostly taken by adults, developers of the HiSET and TASC were concerned with the level of comfort adult test takers demonstrated towards computer-only assessments (Brinkley-Etz Korn & Ishitani, 2016). Additionally, the infrastructure and staff capacity required to administer the new computer-only GED resulted in an increased price to the GED, making it the more expensive option for high school equivalency testing (Zinth, 2015). The base price for both the HiSET and TASC are around \$50 compared to \$80 for the GED (Zinth, 2015).

Accompanying the revised GED's issues of test-takers' computer literacy, the increased

need for infrastructure and staff capacity, and the elevated cost is the budding uneasiness towards the new GED's full alignment to the Common Core State Standards (Zinth, 2015). A goal of the modified GED was to assess the job readiness of its test-takers (Rutschow et al., 2014). To satisfy this goal, the GED adopted higher order thinking questions as a new test staple that mirror the inquiries rooted in the Common Core State Standards (Zinth, 2015). Both the HiSET and TASC attempt to avoid this type of questioning in their assessments by limiting the number of constructed-response items on their tests (Zinth, 2015).

Since the HiSET and TASC are in their infancy, it is difficult to assess their potential as replacements to the GED. At times, their creation appears to be an impetuous reaction to a change in high school equivalency testing. And although most states still offer the GED, there are a growing number of states adopting the HiSET and/or the TASC as alternative tests for a high school equivalency diploma (Brinkley-Etzkorn & Ishitani, 2016; Zinth, 2015). Accurately listing which states offer which tests is difficult because of the capricious nature surrounding this topic. It is this unstable landscape that has created "gaps" in high school equivalency testing and has muddled the process for those seeking to attain a high school equivalency diploma (Adams, 2014, p. 7).

Equally as challenging as attempting to determine if the HiSET and TASC will supplant the GED is predicting the attitudes of others towards the recipients of HiSET or TASC diplomas and those recipients' outcomes. An easy prognostication would be to assign the attitudes and outcomes associated with GED holders to those who have HiSET or TASC diplomas, but it is too early to make that connection due to the dearth of studies on HiSET or TASC recipients. Information regarding HiSET and TASC was included in this study to better understand the options high school dropouts have for acquiring a high school equivalency diploma.

Alternative educational programming. In a study investigating reasons high school dropouts return to high school, Barrat et al. (2012) determined that the primary motive prompting high school dropouts' return to high school was their inability to secure meaningful employment. Based on research concerning labor market opportunities for high school dropouts and GED recipients, returning to school is a practical step for dropouts recognizing their bleak financial reality. While a dropout's return to high school is good for society, he or she is still returning to the educational systems responsible for producing high school dropout. Without an adjustment to the educational programming that continues to see 6.5% of its students fail to finish high school (McFarland et al., 2016; NCES, 2016; Rosen et al., 2015), significant change will remain elusive.

Although high school dropout is unique to the individual choosing that option and to the school he or she opted to leave, there are generally accepted qualities regarding resolutions that are applicable in nearly every case. Students need a supportive environment facilitated both by teachers who understand the dominant influence they have in the lives of students (Zabloski & Milacci, 2012) and by engaging, relevant instructional programming that capture the minds of students (Carter, 2012). Recognizing that most programs targeting high school dropouts have increased GEDs but yielded unsustained employment, Millenky et al. (2013), have called for instructional opportunities that improve the skills, competencies, and credentials students need for viable future employment. Programs, led by teachers who patiently meet the individual needs of their students (Carter, 2012), that creatively fuse education, supportive services, training, and employment have proven to successfully impact educational and employment outcomes for students (Millenky, 2016).

Beyond empathetic teachers and supportive learning environments, accurately assessing the reasons high school students have dropped out is critical to resolving dropout by means of alternative educational programming. High school dropouts certainly must bear the responsibility of their actions, but the weight of their decision should not rest solely on their shoulders. Schools must accept a share of the blame as well. With regular education programs not meeting the needs of every student (Bruin & Ohna, 2013), there are a faction of students who are seemingly squeezed out of high school, hindered by the very system that is supposed to help create opportunities (Schwartz, 2014). Interventions to the current education system should then be proactive instead of reactive, and at their core, aim to increase student engagement (Wilkins & Bost, 2016). The fecundity of these strategies rests on the ability to correctly determine the cause of dropout as well as properly manage the resources available for a solution (Bowers et al., 2013).

Bowers and Sprott (2012) developed three typologies of high school dropouts, which are suitable for creating alternative education programs that effectively target dropouts. The categories are the jaded dropout, the quiet dropout, and the involved dropout (Bowers & Sprott, 2012). Each has a particular set of needs. Jaded dropouts would benefit from programming that connects them to school in positive ways to “counteract their negative views of schooling,” quiet dropouts “may need more academic tutoring and connections to school to help increase their grades and decrease their absences and course failures,” and involved dropouts could use “flexible schedules and alternative routes to graduation” (Bowers & Sprott, 2012, p. 142). Classifying high school dropouts this way and identifying their needs is valuable insight for those developing alternative education programs. The programs’ success is dependent on calculated support systems that thoughtfully consider the exceptionality of every learner and are

led by compassionate teachers willing to make adjustments that benefit each student (Bowers & Sprott, 2012; Bowers et al., 2013; Carter, 2012; Millenky, 2016; Millenky et al., 2013; Wilkins & Bost, 2016; Zabloski & Milacci, 2012).

Career and technical education. An alternative educational program that exhibits such characteristics is CTE. This alternative education program provides students with vocational training that will prepare them for middle jobs, or jobs that require education beyond a high school diploma but less than a bachelor's degree (Carnevale et al., 2012). The introduction of CTE as an educational program in secondary education occurred prior to the Perkins Act, but the passing of the Perkins Act and its subsequent reauthorizations solidified CTE as a mainstay in secondary schools (Lewis & Stone, 2013). While recent trends have seen secondary educational efforts shift towards pathways that prepares all students for a four-year college or university, the inclusion of CTE in high schools offers students who feel abandoned by this prevalent path the autonomy for their own progress (Carnevale et al., 2012).

The success of CTE can be attributed to its ability to reengage the student in his or her own learning (Carter, 2012; Wilkins & Bost, 2016) by matching instruction to learning modes (Gardner, 1983) and by providing additional pathways for students to pursue community valued skills and training (Gardner, 1996). These new learning tracks help students acquire employer-based training, industry-based certifications, apprenticeships, postsecondary certificates, and/or associate degrees that provide 29 million middle jobs paying more than \$35,000 annually (Carnevale et al., 2012). The outcomes afforded by CTE grant potential high school dropouts opportunities that can break generational cycles of poverty and dropout (Saddler et al., 2011).

Postsecondary CTE persistence. Though CTE exists in secondary education, its current mainstay is in postsecondary education. Hundreds of two-year technical and community

colleges fill the collegiate landscape in the United States (United States Department of Education, 2017). To foster both the individual and communal economic viability of a region, these “technical and community colleges must continue to enroll and graduate more students” (D’Amico, Morgan, & Robertson, 2011, p. 774). Student persistence becomes the hallmark of success for this objective.

Several factors have been recognized as promoting student persistence in postsecondary CTE. These include the relationships students have with faculty members (Ryan, 2013), types of interaction between students and teachers (Chan & Wang, 2015), student expectations upon entering postsecondary education (Wang, 2013), community and family values (Hlinka, 2017), and the format of course delivery (Davidson & Petrosko, 2014). Each of these factors has its own subtleties.

Student connectedness to faculty members (Ryan, 2013) increases student persistence in postsecondary CTE, but this relationship benefits the most when it develops through task-oriented learning experiences centered on projects rather than lecture-based academic settings (Chan & Wang, 2015). This is evidenced by decreased student persistence in postsecondary CTE programs that only offer online courses (Xu & Jaggars, 2013). The implication is that online courses deter students from graduating; however, not all online instruction in postsecondary CTE results in decreased student persistence. Davidson and Petrosko (2014) found that the best instructional delivery for student persistence in postsecondary CTE was in-person courses containing an online component. This offers students face-to-face relationships with their teachers and the additional bonus of the flexibility provided by online instruction.

Other relational components that lead to student persistence in postsecondary CTE are the relationships students have with their community and families. These relationships can often be

a driving force that inspires a student to pursue postsecondary CTE (Hlinka, 2017). Despite the honorable dynamic of these motivational relationships, the friends and family of a student often have little understanding of the necessary requirements for completion of a postsecondary credential, making the same relationships that prompted further educational pursuits the relationships that halt educational pursuits (Hlinka, 2017).

Detrimental to student persistence in postsecondary CTE is the inclusion of academic developmental courses, such as those included in the GED, as part of the postsecondary curriculum (D'Amico et al., 2011; "What Works Clearinghouse", 2016). This may seem counterintuitive, but students who struggled academically in secondary school typically struggle in academic courses offered in postsecondary CTE as well (D'Amico et al., 2011). Hlinka (2017) notes that a student's academic preparation acquired in his or her secondary educational career will have lasting results in that student's postsecondary CTE career. Postsecondary CTE programs should not avoid the inclusion of academic developmental courses in their programming, as they are necessary for further educational pursuits, but school leaders at these institutions should be aware of the struggles students may have with academic developmental courses (Rutschow, Cullinan, & Welbeck, 2012).

Since postsecondary CTE offers alternative pathways to a career, Boerner (2015) calls for an alternative metric to measure the success of such programs. Persistence rates typically track students who begin and complete a program at a single institution. When using this measure, students who transfer credits from a two-year technical or community college before graduating to a four-year college or university and graduate from that institution do not get included in the technical or community college completion rate (Boerner, 2015). Likewise, students who do not graduate but use the education received from courses taken at a two-year technical or community

college as a bridge to better economic opportunities do not get included in the persistence data (Boerner, 2015). This is causing two-year technical and community colleges to rethink the methods used to gauge student success in postsecondary CTE programs.

The persistence literature related to postsecondary CTE largely mirrors the persistence literature associated with high school dropouts and completion. Relationships with mentors, teachers, friends, and family are important (Chan & Wang, 2015; Hlinka, 2017; Ryan, 2013), prior academic performance indicates present odds of success (D’Amico et al., 2011; Hlinka, 2017; “What Works Clearinghouse”, 2016), family and work obligations may become barriers (Hlinka, 2017), students’ academic expectations can stimulate their academic motivation (Wang, 2013), and student engagement with the learning process is imperative (Davidson & Petrosko, 2014; Xu & Jaggars, 2013). As secondary CTE programs become more ubiquitous in high schools, it may be time to follow Boerner’s (2015) suggestion and rethink the metrics used to determine student success. A better definition of student persistence in CTE programming might best be described as students gaining the ability for economic independence through participation in any or all components of CTE programming. Following such a proposal could reclassify some students considered to be high school dropouts.

Potential for Failure

Although CTE has been endorsed as an educational program for its effectiveness (Robinson, 2016; Saddler et al., 2011), CTE encounters challenges that threaten its success. First, there is a perception issue; one that views CTE as a lesser form of instruction and learning reserved for students unable to complete the rigors of an all-academic track (Gammill, 2015). Secondary schools have allowed the responsibility of providing students with a core foundation of academic skills and knowledge to transform into the belief that all students must be four-year

college ready upon graduating (Brown & Schwartz, 2014). Functioning under this premise distinguishes students as the academic haves, high-performing students who possess the necessary characteristics to thrive in such an academic environment, and the academic have-nots, low-performing students who lack the essential traits to flourish in the same setting (Mulroy, 2011). A one-size-fits-all college prep curriculum has widened the gap between the academic haves and have-nots, resulting in the perception that CTE courses have become the “dumping grounds” for lower-performing students (Brown & Schwartz, 2014, p. 58) where course enrollment is believed to be the academic equivalent of waving a white flag (Mulroy, 2011). As CTE fights the idea that participation in its courses is only for the academic have-nots (Aliaga et al., 2014), there will always be the attitude by some that the CTE track is inferior to the academic track (Handy & Braley, 2012) and is only “for someone else’s children” (Fletcher, Lasonen, & Hernandez, 2014, p. 56).

Another test of CTE’s academic credibility in secondary schools is the historical pattern of segregation CTE has followed that results from an academic-vocational instructional divide (Grubb, 2012; Haag, 2015). The pervasive opinion that college is the only option after high school (Fletcher et al., 2014) has created a rift that moves beyond perception. Courses in CTE are often offered in classrooms physically separated from academic classes (Haag, 2015), which consequently separates the students from academic coursework and reinforces the stereotype that CTE is for lower-performing students (Stipanovic, Lewis, & Stringfield, 2012). The tangible disconnect between academic and vocational instruction impedes a CTE student’s ability to understand a vocational track as an opportunity for meaningful citizenship (Stipanovic et al., 2012) and relegates CTE programs as reserved for “a certain segment of the school population” (Park, Pearson, & Sawyer, 2011, p. 20).

In addition to the perception surrounding CTE and the tension between academic and vocational tracks, federal funding for CTE programs is limited (Haag, 2015). Though funding is well-intentioned, it should be more specified to reduce waste and enhance CTE efficacy (Carnevale et al., 2012). Poorly appropriating funds into secondary CTE programs has resulted in limited CTE course offerings that lack integration into academic content and cannot provide students with the proper academic credentials (Haag, 2015). Without these vital features, CTE will continue to fight the negative connotations associated with its programming.

As CTE “provides inroads to further education and college degrees; promotes career mobility as an avenue for lifelong learning; and provides retraining for workers who have seen their jobs shipped overseas or outmoded by technological advancements” (Carnevale et al., 2012, p. 39), it is worth the effort to overcome the factors threatening its growth and incorporation into secondary education. Calls for critical reflection on personal bias so students receive the instruction they need (Gammill, 2015), the blending of academic and vocational curriculum (Cox et al., 2015; Evan et al., 2013; Grubb, 2012; Robinson, 2016), and strategic investing into CTE programs (Carnevale et al., 2012) are steps that will help minimize the barriers confronting CTE.

Potential for Success

Alternative education programs such as CTE give optimism to high school dropouts who may feel the education system has failed them (Bjerk, 2012; Schwartz, 2014). Students, especially those destined for high school dropout, need change. It is time to loosen the grip of negative perception towards dropout and recognize all students as “positive resources to be developed” rather than “problems to be managed” (Millenky et al., 2013, p. 449). Sims (2015) identified dropouts as “opportunity youth” (p. 2), a reference that acknowledges changed perspectives and sees the potential value of the individual as something that needs to be

cultivated. After all, changed meaning perspectives on a topic does affect behavior towards that topic (Mezirow, 2000).

Of course, CTE is not the only educational programming fix providing a future of hope to high school dropouts, but it is an example that has demonstrated an ability to connect dropouts with opportunity (Carnevale et al., 2012). Additional alternative education programs need to be evaluated for their victories over the dropout dilemma plaguing American society. Such programs should be distinguished by their promotion of personalized learning for every student (Wimberley, 2016) that fuses intervention systems to actual student need (Wilkins & Bost, 2016). Doing so requires America's education system to move beyond "research and practice" and the "appearance of acceptance" (Wimberley, 2016, p. 49) regarding policy reform and innovative programming. With an open-mind approach that is free of prejudgments towards students and systems, America is capable of enacting solutions to end high school dropout.

Summary

This chapter detailed the theoretical frameworks guiding this study and the related literature concerning high school dropout. Social, economic, and educational consequences of high school dropout have been identified (Bjerk, 2012; Carnevale et al., 2012; Henry et al., 2011; Kim, 2013; Maynard et al., 2014; Vaughn et al., 2014). Policies have been implemented, programs have been designed, and alternative pathways have been offered in hopes of eliminating this issue (Carnevale et al., 2012; Jepsen et al., 2015; Robinson, 2016; Saddler et al., 2011; Schwartz, 2014; Zinth, 2015). While the dropout rate is trending in the right direction (McFarland et al., 2016; NCES, 2016; Rosen et al., 2015), failure to earn a high school credential is still a detrimental outcome a fraction of America's high school students will realize (Jepsen et al., 2015, 2016; Rutschow & Crary-Ross, 2014). And although ample opportunities exist to earn

high school equivalency credentials such as the GED, HiSET, and TASC (Zinth, 2015), recipients of these credentials experience consequences more similar to high school dropouts than high school graduates (Jepsen et al., 2016). School reformers would benefit from hearing and listening to the voices of individuals who chose to leave traditional K-12 education but later returned to an alternative education program to reengage in learning.

To date, the literature is missing a substantial study giving credence to the voice of former high school dropouts who have completed their high school credential through an adult education program and are enrolled in a postsecondary program of study at a technical college, community college, or four-year university. Their stories viewed through the theoretical lens of MI theory and transformative learning theory fill a research gap as it pertains to high school dropout. Furthermore, the described experiences of these individuals may reinforce some tenets of MI theory as it relates to child and young adolescent learning and transformative learning theory as it relates to adult learning.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of former high school dropouts who have completed their high school credential through an adult education program and are reengaged with learning through a postsecondary program of study. In this chapter, the design and research questions of the study are presented, the factors leading to the site and participant selection are discussed, and the researcher's role is explained. The procedures for conducting the study are outlined, and data collection and data analysis techniques, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations are detailed.

Design

This is a qualitative study that uses a transcendental phenomenological approach. A qualitative design was chosen because a comprehensive understanding of high school dropout and the pursuit of postsecondary education requires the stories of the individuals who lived that experience (Patton, 2015). Various qualitative approaches were considered for this study. Each was examined to determine the best application for this study's purpose, and though several approaches possess attractive attributes, only one accomplished this study's objective.

The grounded theory design was quickly eliminated as an option because this study does not seek to analyze data with hopes of a "formal, substantive theory" developing from the analysis (Schwandt, 2015, p. 63). The next qualitative approach to be excluded from consideration was case study research. This design was easy to dismiss because of its requirement of studying the phenomenon occurring at a specific place during a specific time (Creswell, 2013). This study was not investigating an event bound by time and location. Moreover, this study was also not attempting to explain how culture explains the behaviors and

perspectives of a group of people (Patton, 2015), which removes an ethnography as an applicable qualitative design for this research. The last qualitative approach to be rejected was narrative research. The primary reason for this decision was because this study was not telling the story of a singular individual or communicating stories that occur in a specific context (Creswell, 2013). This offers phenomenology as the remaining qualitative design befitting the study since it focuses on the “meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience” of the phenomenon for a group of people (Patton, 2015, p. 98). Therefore, the phenomenological approach complements this study well because this study explored former high school dropouts’ described experience of reengaging with learning through a postsecondary program of study.

Transcendental Phenomenology

Transcendental phenomenology falls under the umbrella of the qualitative study approach known as phenomenology. Phenomenology is a broad philosophy that is difficult to characterize because of its “complex, multifaceted” philosophical qualities (Schwandt, 2015, p. 243). Accepted attributes of phenomenology include research that helps people know the world they occupy (van Manen, 1990), careful descriptions of everyday life experiences (Schwandt, 2015), accounts of how an individual “orients to lived experience” (van Manen, 1990, p. 4), methodical construction that captures the lived experience in relation to the phenomenon (Patton, 2015), and a reduction of “individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). Specific to the transcendental branch of phenomenology is the intent focus on the described experiences of the participants to the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

It was Edmund Husserl who pioneered the ideas behind transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl contended that the constructed reality of an experience is dependent

on the person enduring the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Thus, in a transcendental phenomenological study, it is the researcher's objective to reduce that experience into a description that accurately portrays the participants' perceived reality. Doing so requires one to embrace the notion that the ascribed meanings of an experience may not be tangible, but in their abstract nature lies a realism that cannot be ignored. It becomes the researcher's job to blend the perceivable with the unperceivable to form a "unity of the real and the ideal" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 27). Fulfilling this task obligates the researcher to be intentional in every step of the research process and to become an "intuitive-thinking being" who offers accurate descriptions of what is being presented (Moustakas, 1994, p. 32).

Moustakas' Transcendental Phenomenology Methods

Since the focus of this study is a description of an experience rather than an interpretation of an experience, transcendental phenomenology was the chosen design (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Following this approach helped guide this study in its intended purpose. Moustakas (1994) outlines the procedures for conducting a transcendental phenomenological study. This study adhered to those steps.

Complying with Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach begins by practicing Epoche, or bracketing, before engaging with any of the participants. Epoche is the researcher's ability to "refrain from judgment" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). The goal was to set aside my own prejudgments or experiences with the phenomenon and to encounter every experience related to the phenomenon with a fresh perspective (Creswell, 2013). To do this, I spent time in quiet reflection both before and after I interviewed participants, paying careful attention to each thought I had related to the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Consideration was given to each thought that does not relate to the phenomenon; however, those thoughts were

dismissed (Moustakas, 1994). Keeping a research journal throughout the study helped me bracket out my own thoughts, biases, and experiences (Creswell, 2013).

The process of phenomenological reduction began after proper attention was given to practicing Epoche. A heterogeneous group of five to 25 participants (Creswell, 2013) who experienced the same phenomenon was queried so the meaning and essence of the phenomenon could be understood. Once data saturation was met, or the point when no new data, themes, or codes emerge (Fusch & Ness, 2015), interviews stopped. Each statement offered by the participants was treated with equal value, and this horizontalization helped me organize, analyze, and synthesize the data into thematic clusters. This procedure assisted me in developing textural and structural descriptions that conveyed the participants' described meaning of the experience. From here, I summarized the findings so the study's implications and outcomes could be communicated.

Research Questions

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of former high school dropouts who have completed their high school credential through an adult education program and are reengaged with learning through a postsecondary program of study. To help investigate the essence of the phenomenon, the following research questions were constructed:

1. **RQ1.** How do former high school dropouts describe the experience of reengaging with learning?
2. **RQ2.** How do participants describe the experience of becoming disengaged from learning in a K-12 educational setting to becoming reengaged with learning in a postsecondary setting?

3. **RQ3.** What experiences do participants describe that led them to pursue postsecondary education?
4. **RQ4.** What experiences do participants describe as leading them to successful reengagement with learning?

Setting

The setting for this study integrated multiple venues. Colleges that are part of the Southern Community and Technical College System (SCTCS) were primarily used; however, four-year universities in the same state or other neighboring states were used until data saturation was met (Creswell, 2013; Fusch & Ness, 2015). All participants of this study were involved in some capacity with the campuses of community colleges, technical colleges, and four-year universities of four states located in the southern United States. These settings were chosen because it grants access to participants who satisfy the delimitations for this study.

The SCTCS is comprised of 13 accredited community and technical colleges located throughout the state. The Board of Supervisors, a 17-member board that manages the operation of all schools in this southern state's community and technical college school system, is composed of 15 members appointed by the Governor of the state and two student members elected from the student bodies of the state's community and technical college school system. The Governor-appointed members come from the state's seven congressional districts, two from each district and one at-large member. Each board member serves six-year overlapping terms. Diversity is established through a board mandate that requires membership to be representative of the state's population by race and gender. Student members serve one-year terms.

All community and technical colleges associated with the SCTCS have an open-admissions policy, and all programs offer admission to students over the age of 17 who have not

completed a high school credential. There are over 100 programs of study offered through SCTCS schools that fit under 11 categories. These categories include computer science, construction crafts, electrical, engineering technology, finance and accounting, health care, industrial production, mechanic and repair tech, personal and culinary services, protective services, and welding.

While acceptance into a program does not require a high school credential, continuing through that course of study does. Students without a high school credential who are enrolled in a community and technical college program of study are not allowed to progress to upper level classes in that program until a high school credential is attained. These programs typically require more than 30 hours of coursework. Most students enrolled in an SCTCS school who need their high school credential to satisfy a program requirement fulfill this prerequisite through their institution's adult education program.

Students can choose enrollment in non-degree courses at the community and technical colleges of the SCTCS, which allow a student to complete course credit without enrolling in a program of study. Or, students can choose to earn an associate degree, technical diploma, or postsecondary certificate through qualified programs of study while maintaining an enrollment status of full-time (12 or more credit hours per semester), three-fourths time (9-11 credit hours per semester), half-time (6-8 credit hours per semester), or less than half-time (5 or less credit hours per semester). Credit requirements for completion of a program range from 1-16 hours to 60-75 hours. Students can earn the following certificates, diplomas, and degrees from the community and technical colleges of the SCTCS: Technical Competency Area (1-16 hours), Certificate of Technical Studies (16-33 hours), Certificate of General Studies (30 hours), Technical Diploma (45-60 hours), Associate of General Studies Degree (60 hours), and an

Associate of Applied Science Degree (60-75 hours). In 2016, the community and technical colleges of the SCTCS graduated 28,853 students. From that number, 15,805 students transferred and enrolled in a four-year university.

Eight out of the 10 participants in this study received their high school credential from an adult education program affiliated with the SCTCS. Five of the 10 participants were enrolled in an SCTCS affiliated community college or technical college pursuing a postsecondary certification or associate degree, and three of the 10 participants were enrolled in a four-year university completing a bachelor's degree. Two of the 10 participants received their high school credential in separate states from an adult education program affiliated with the state's respective community and technical college system. Each of those states' community and technical college system functions similarly to the SCTCS. The first of those two participants had graduated from a four-year university and holds a bachelor's degree, while the second participant was completing an associate degree from an accredited online college.

Participants

A total of 10 participants for this study were chosen using purposeful sampling in hopes of providing "information-rich" individuals who could "illuminate" the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2015, p. 264). All participation was strictly voluntary. Selected participants were any individual who completed a high school credential through an adult education program and was currently enrolled in or has completed a postsecondary certification or degree from a technical college, community college, or four-year university. This qualification was confirmed through each participant's transcript that was provided during the face-to-face individual interview. Additionally, participants signed consent to me authorizing permission to seek any further necessary verification through their institution's registrar's office. There were no

limitations placed on a participant's age, gender, ethnicity, or the field in which he or she is studying. Maximum variation was achieved by selecting participants with as many diverse characteristics as possible who had experienced the same common phenomenon (Patton, 2015). These heterogeneous personal attributes will include the age, gender, and ethnicity of the participants, the type of postsecondary institution the participant was enrolled in, and the program of study that was being pursued or has been completed.

With the approval of Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (Appendix A), and the consent of the SCTCS to contact current students via their databases (Appendix B), the recruitment process of eligible participants began. Solicitation started with the group of students who most recently completed their high school credential through an SCTCS school's adult education program. Identifying these students was accomplished with the assistance of the adult education director at the SCTCS central office. To ensure maximum variation, attempts were made to recruit participants from each of the 13 community and technical colleges of the SCTCS. A participant recruitment letter (Appendix C) was emailed by the adult education director on behalf of myself to all graduates of the adult education program at an SCTCS school. Date ranges for these adult education graduates were from 2014-2017.

Any individual interested in participating was asked to email me. I phoned those responding to verbally confirm their qualifications for the study and to arrange the individual interview. During the face-to-face individual meeting, the participant completed the written consent form (Appendix D), the self-report questionnaire (Appendix E), and the ITC Publications' (n.d.) multiple intelligences quiz (Appendix F). Participants were requested to bring a copy of their current academic transcript to the meeting for verification of their student status. This process allowed those responding to self-identify their qualifications for this study.

Responses that identified participants as former high school dropouts who had completed their high school credential through an adult education program and were enrolled in a postsecondary program of study at a technical college, community college, or four-year university were verified through the respective registrar's office. The participants who completed a postsecondary certification or a college degree were asked to bring a copy of their certification or diploma to the face-to-face meeting.

After interviewing 10 individuals, I stopped seeking additional participants because there was an adequate representation of the sample to provide a thorough description of the experience; hence, data saturation was met (Creswell, 2013). In conjunction with purposeful sampling, snowball sampling was employed to gather more information-rich participants (Patton, 2015). A referral section at the end of each self-report questionnaire allowed respondents to nominate other qualifying individuals for the study. Three of the participants in this study were solicited using this technique. Those three individuals were initially contacted by me through email, and similar to the other participants, they were asked to complete the written consent form, the self-report questionnaire, and the ITC Publications' (n.d.) multiple intelligences quiz at our face-to-face meeting. These participants also produced a copy of their academic transcript upon our first meeting. Table 1 lists the pseudonym used for each participant as well as participant demographics, former and present student status, and expected date of completion for postsecondary credential being pursued.

Table 1

Participant Demographics, Student Status, and Date of Completion

<u>Participant</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Ethnicity</u>	<u>High School Dropout</u>	<u>Completed GED/HiSET</u>	<u>Enrolled Postsecondary Credential</u>	<u>Expected Year of Completion</u>
Anna	20	Female	C	Yes	Yes	BA	2021
Brianna	20	Female	C	Yes	Yes	AD	2018
Curtis	28	Male	AA	Yes	Yes	BA	2021
Dena	39	Female	AI	Yes	Yes	AD	2020
Erin	37	Female	C	Yes	Yes	AD	2018
Farah	25	Female	C	Yes	Yes	AD	2018
Gabby	28	Female	C	Yes	Yes	AD	2018
Haley	27	Female	C	Yes	Yes	BA	2016*
Isla	50	Female	SA	Yes	Yes	AD	2018
Jalen	33	Male	AA	Yes	Yes	BA	2019

Note. AA = African American; AI = American Indian; C = Caucasian; SA = South Asian; AD = Associate Degree; BA = Bachelor's Degree. Asterisk* indicates participant has graduated with postsecondary credential. Participants included eight females and two males.

Procedures

After proper approval and consent were obtained from Liberty University and the SCTCS, an emailed participation recruitment letter was distributed by the adult education director from the SCTCS on behalf of myself to all graduates of the adult education program at an SCTCS school. Included in the participation recruitment letter was an overview of the study, a request to partake in the study, and instructions to follow if interested in participating in the study.

Those interested individuals who met the participation criteria were asked to reply to the participation recruitment letter by emailing me their expressed interest. I contacted those respondents to verbally confirm that they met the study's participation qualifications and to set up the individual interview. Face-to-face meetings were arranged with eligible participants at a time and location of their convenience so the written consent form, the self-report questionnaire,

and the multiple intelligences quiz could be distributed and completed. Official participants were those who replied to the participation recruitment letter and completed the necessary consent form, the self-report questionnaire, and the multiple intelligences quiz during our first meeting. The participants were asked to bring a copy of their current academic transcript to the meeting for verification of their student status. In signing the consent form, participants granted me authorization to verify claims of their student status through the registrar's office at the institution of their enrollment. Statements referencing academic résumés were vetted using student transcripts. This step helped provide validity to the study (Schwandt, 2015).

Prior to interviewing, a pilot study was conducted with one eligible participant to test the quality of the interview questions. As other participants were being compiled, I arranged face-to-face, semi-structured, open-ended, individual interviews at a time and location of the participants' convenience. Due to logistical challenges, four of the 10 face-to-face meetings were conducted by way of video conferencing through the internet. Completed copies of the consent form, the self-report questionnaire, and the multiple intelligences quiz, as well as a copy of their academic transcripts were scanned and emailed to me by the participant. All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. The completed transcriptions were shared with each participant to verify the accuracy of the participant's description of his or her experience with the phenomenon. Any responses that the participant felt did not correctly convey his or her experience were edited by the participant to offer a more authentic retelling of his or her lived experience. Dena was the only participant who edited her transcript.

After the targeted number of participants were reached and individual interviews conducted, I led two focus group interviews. The first focus group interview was attended by

Brianna, Curtis, and Dena at a mutually agreed upon time and location. This interview was audio recorded by me and transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. The second focus group interview was led by me and conducted via a collaborative word processing application hosted through the internet. Anna, Farah, and Haley contributed to this interview by responding to the focus group interview questions in real-time. This live-typing platform allowed myself and the three participants to interact with one another instantaneously. Once the interview was completed, the conversation was saved and converted into a written transcription by me.

As with the individual interviews, participants in the focus group interviews were given the opportunity to confirm that the final transcript accurately conveyed their lived experience with the phenomenon. No participant in the focus group chose to make any edits to his or her account. All transcriptions from both the individual interviews and the focus group interviews were analyzed for “significant statements,” and “clusters of meaning” from these significant statements were documented into emerging themes (Creswell, 2013, p. 82). While analyzing the data, the multiple intelligences quiz results and evidence of transformative learning table assisted me in viewing the phenomenon through the theoretical lenses framing this study. A template of the evidence of transformative learning table (Appendix G, Table 2) has been provided, and the results from processing the data through this tool have been woven into the findings of Chapter Four. In an effort to achieve credibility for this study (Schwandt, 2015), the emerging themes were presented to the participants with request for feedback regarding the study’s findings. All participants concurred with the emerging themes.

Table 2

Evidence of Transformative Learning

<u>*Transformative Learning Phase</u>	<u>Evidence in Research Participant</u>
1) Disorienting dilemma	
2) Self-examination with feelings of shame, fear, guilt, or anger	
3) Critical assessment of personal assumptions	
4) Recognition that one's discontent and process of transformation are shared with others	
5) Exploration of options for new relationships and behavior	
6) Planning a course of action	
7) Acquisition of knowledge and skills to implement new plans	
8) Conditionally trying of new roles	
9) Building self-confidence and competence in new roles and relationships	
10) Reintegration into life on the premise of a new perspective	

Note. *Transformative learning phases are from Mezirow (2000).

The Researcher's Role

My role as the researcher was to follow the appropriate procedures to ensure this was a reliable transcendental phenomenological study. This included securing IRB approval from Liberty University and the SCTCS, soliciting participants, obtaining necessary consent and release forms, setting aside my perspectives, detailing my bias, collecting and analyzing data, and writing a synthesis of the phenomenon with rich, thick description in order capture the essence. As the human instrument in the research process, I was responsible for the interpretation of the experience of the phenomenon (Jensen, 2002). A transparent approach documented in a research journal throughout the data collection and analysis process ensured the integrity of the findings and protected the results from any researcher bias.

My interest in the phenomenon grew as I watched my former students become

disengaged from their high school experience and ultimately make the decision to drop out. There was a developing tension between my students' increasing age and the remaining high school courses they needed to complete to become eligible for graduation. Several of these students reconciled this reality by choosing to drop out of high school to pursue a life of independence without a secondary education. Most were bright students who easily found accomplishment in opportunities not typically measured by traditional K-12 schools. Some displayed a penchant for mechanical tinkering, others demonstrated their business savvy, and a few became successful in sales because of their acuteness.

For those dropouts who achieved financial independence, they discovered avenues to leverage their abilities that produced outcomes sufficient for them. Unfortunately for these former students, their traditional K-12 educational setting had no way to measure those talents. Their previous standardized testing and final exam results repeatedly categorized these former students as failures. Their current independent lifestyles would lead most to classify these dropouts as successes.

Because of my professional position as a K-12 school administrator, I recognize there are personal biases I have regarding education and its processes. As such, I journaled (Appendix H) throughout this study to bracket out my personal judgment or intuition concerning the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). I have no former or current connection to the participants or technical and community colleges in this study.

Data Collection

Data collection in qualitative studies involves the types of data collected, the methods used to obtain them, and the process of gaining consent, developing a sampling strategy, recording and storing information, and avoiding ethical issues that the researcher follows to

assure thoroughness in the inquiry (Creswell, 2013). Thus, data collection is as well thought out and planned as the chosen design for a qualitative study (Patton, 2015). Different types of data in a qualitative study may include “in-depth interviews, focus groups, open-ended questions on surveys, postings in social media, direct observations in the field, and analysis of documents” (Patton, 2015, p. 255). Five forms of data collection were used for this study. They are as described:

Surveys/Questionnaires

The first technique utilized for data collection was a self-report questionnaire. Questionnaires can assist in collecting demographic information from the participants that are germane to the study (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2010). This was an important first step in identifying students who had completed an adult education program through the SCTCS and were enrolled in postsecondary education. A self-report questionnaire was completed with participants at our individual interview. During that interview, I also issued a multiple intelligences quiz, which helped recognize the preferred learning modes of each participant. Figure 1 displays how the results from the multiple intelligences quiz were charted. The questionnaire and quiz were collected at the conclusion of the interview with each participant.

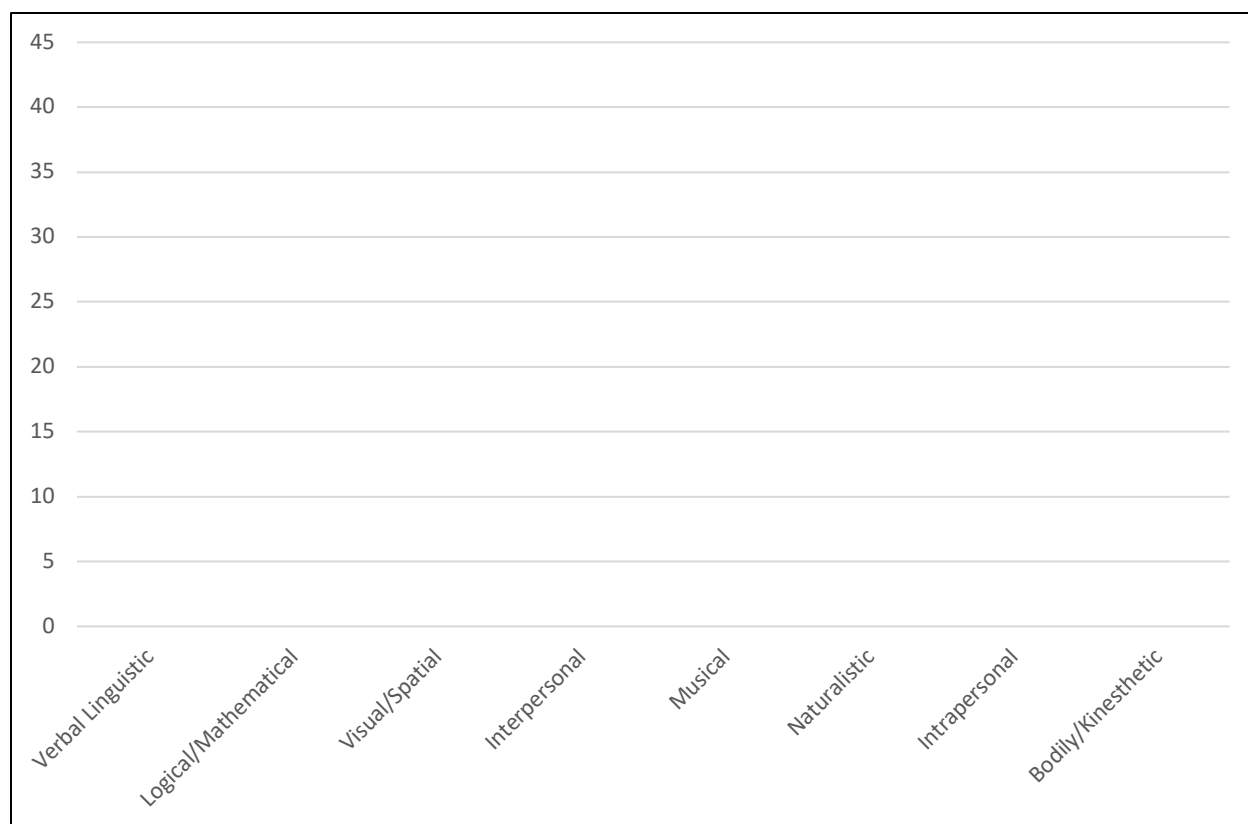


Figure 1. Multiple Intelligences Quiz result chart calculated from ITC Publications' (n.d.) multiple intelligences quiz.

Document Analysis

Once the self-report questionnaire and multiple intelligences quiz were returned, any individual's claim of dropping out of high school, completing an adult education program through the SCTCS, and enrollment in postsecondary education has to be substantiated. Transcripts from the SCTCS were used for verification. I requested these documents be provided by the participants at the individual interview. The participant's signed consent granted me permission to request further verification from the SCTCS if necessary.

Individual Interviews

Face-to-face, semi-structured, open-ended, individual interviews were conducted with each participant. Interviews were audio recorded via a digital recording device. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist. While listening to the

recordings, the evidence of transformative learning table was completed for each participant. A determined time, date, and location was established with each interviewee. The name of the researcher and a pseudonym for each interviewee were included in the transcript. The questions recorded below were used as a guideline for conducting the interview. Interviews helped answer two broad questions: (1) what has each participant experienced regarding the phenomenon, and (2) how has the context of that experience influenced his or her lived experience of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994)? Additional open-ended questions were asked that led “to a textural and structural description of the experiences” (Creswell, 2013, p. 81). Prior to conducting actual interviews for the study, I performed a pilot interview to assist me in determining the strength of the interview questions. Interview questions are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3

Individual Interview Questions

Questions

1. What is a typical day like for you?
2. What is the ideal dream job for you?
3. How would you describe yourself as a learner?
4. What instructional methods have enabled you to learn the most?
5. What factors led to your decision to disengage from high school?
6. How would you describe your experience of disengagement from learning while in high school?
7. How has the college educational experience been different than your high school educational experience?

8. What do you feel would have been the outcome of your high school career if your experience as a high school student was similar to your experience as a college student?
 9. How do you understand life differently now than when you were in high school?
 10. What circumstances influenced your decision to pursue a college diploma?
 11. What is keeping you engaged in the learning process as you work to complete your college diploma?
 12. What other circumstances can you identify that are assisting you in completing your college diploma?
 13. How would you describe your experience of reengagement with learning while in college?
 14. What will the experience of completing a college diploma mean for you?
 15. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience as a student, either in high school or in college?
-

Answers provided by these interview questions attempted to satisfy the inquiries of the research questions. Interview questions six, seven, eight, nine, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14 are significant to RQ1; interview questions three, four, five, six, seven, eight, and 11 are relevant to RQ2; interview questions nine and 10 are germane to RQ3; and interview questions four, seven, 11, 12, 13, and 14 are pertinent to RQ4. Furthermore, interview questions one and two acted as icebreakers and were an effort to begin the interview with discussion about “noncontroversial present behaviors, activities, and experiences” (Patton, 2015, p. 445). Question three was developed in response to Gardner’s (1983) MI theory that proposes learning is optimized when instructional methods match an individual’s preferred learning mode. Self-identifying a learning style offered corroborating data with the multiple intelligences quiz each participant completed. Moustakas’ (1994) suggestion to seek a textural description of the experience was followed and

led to the creation of questions four and five. Questions six and seven offered the opportunity for the participant to add structural descriptions to his or her experience (Moustakas, 1994). The response to question eight afforded the participant the chance to make meaning of his or her own experiences (Creswell, 2013). The ninth question hoped to solicit a description from the participant of a possible changed meaning perspective, which could allude to an experience of transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000). Questions 10 through 12 sought to gain a textural description of the experience surrounding the participant's reengagement with the learning process and pursuit of a postsecondary diploma (Moustakas, 1994). A structural description of reengagement in the learning process at a postsecondary school by the participant is sought in question 13 (Moustakas, 1994). The participant's response to question 14 could be another occasion where the participant makes meaning of his or her lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). The fifteenth question was constructed as an open-ended question and was designed to offer the participant space to share anything else about his or her story regarding his or her experience (Patton, 2015). Additionally, responses to questions four, five, six, and eight could offer support for Gardner's (1983) MI theory while answers to questions nine, 10, 12, 13, and 14 could provide support for Mezirow's (1978) transformative learning theory.

Focus Group Interviews

After conducting all of the individual interviews, two focus group interviews were organized with the participants. This allowed individuals with similar experiences to engage in conversation that gave meaning to the phenomenon (Patton, 2015). These focus group interviews were conducted at a predetermined time, date, and location and followed the questions described below. The name of the researcher was included, and pseudonyms were used for the interviewees. Semi-structured, open-ended questions were asked, and all dialogue

was audio recorded via a digital recording device and later transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist. The focus group interviews helped validate themes from the individual interviews and ensured the interpretations made by the researcher were accurate. Focus group interview questions are recorded in Table 4.

Table 4

Focus Group Interview Questions

Questions

- 1) What role did your high school play in your decision to leave high school and not finish your high school diploma?
 - 2) What role does your college play in your decision to reenroll and continue your education?
 - 3) How did your high school support you as a learner during your enrollment in that school?
 - 4) How does your college currently support you as a learner?
 - 5) How does your understanding of life now help lead to your success?
 - 6) When did you realize you were going to go to college despite not finishing high school?
 - 7) What advice about your education would you give to the high school version of yourself?
 - 8) What has been more influential to you as a student both in high school and in college – your understanding of life at that time, or the support of the school at that time?
-

Research Journal

A research journal was kept throughout the duration of the data collection phase of this study. Memoing was an effective way to bracket out my perspectives and practice the process of Epoche (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). I took notes in a journal and revisited these notes so the experiences of the participants were captured rather than my own judgments. As I examined and reexamined my own notes, I was careful to find a quiet place that allowed me to meditate on

my own “biases and prejudgments” so I could have “authentic encounters” with each participant (Moustakas, 1994, p. 89). During this process, I wrote out my biases and prejudgments as I become aware of their existence.

Data Analysis

The data analysis procedures that were followed in this study were derived from Moustakas’ (1994) modification to van Kaam’s method of analysis. The process of phenomenological reduction and imaginative variation was executed to arrive at a textural and structural description of the phenomenon. I began by observing the first step of phenomenological reduction, which is practicing Epoche, then I moved to horizontalization. I progressed from there to determine the invariant constituents. Once the invariant constituents emerged, they were clustered into themes. These thematic clusters were validated against the data record of each research participant. Themes proving to be valid and relevant were used to create the textural and structural description of the experience for each individual participant. Each participant’s individual textural and structural description of the experience was then assimilated into a composite description of the experience that represented the whole group of participants (Moustakas, 1994).

Epoche

The process of practicing Epoche, or bracketing, allowed me to reveal my own prejudgments regarding the phenomenon of reengaging in learning, the participants, postsecondary education, and the site. Moustakas (1994) describes the pursuit of Epoche as requiring transparency with myself, taking a neutral stance in every interaction with the phenomenon so that “every quality has equal value” (p. 87), and freeing the conscious to not be in “bondage to people and things” (p. 87). This practice is a challenging endeavor as it demands

incessant “attention, concentration, and presence” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 88) to a specific situation. I developed a habit of quiet meditation both before and after my encounter with the phenomenon. During this time, attention was given to clearing my mind of anything preventing “an open consciousness” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 89). I made intentional efforts to allow thoughts or prejudgments that prevented me from authentically experiencing the phenomenon to freely pass through my mind; however, those ideas were treated with equal attention, noting their qualities of bias (Moustakas, 1994).

Listing and Preliminary Grouping

After practicing Epoche and developing a “presuppositionless state” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90), I was able to encounter expressions from the data with a fresh mind. To assist with data analysis, the transcriptions of both the individual interviews and the focus group interviews were loaded into ATLAS.ti computer software. Every expression pertinent to the phenomenon was listed and treated as equitable. This practice of “horizontalizing” helped me see all expressions as having equal value (Moustakas, 1994, p. 118). The data was then grouped together by shared qualities of relevance to the experience.

Reduction and Elimination

Since horizontalization sees all expressions with impartiality, the next step of analysis promotes reducing expressions into “clusters of meaning” (Creswell, 2013, p. 82) and eliminating expressions that are off-topic, repetitive, or overlapping (Moustakas, 1994). To assist this process, all expressions were filtered through two requirements: (a) is the expression vital to the understanding of the phenomenon, and (b) is the expression conceptual and classifiable (Moustakas, 1994)? After discarding the expressions that do not satisfy the two

criteria, the remaining expressions became the “invariant constituents of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121).

Clustering and Thematizing

The invariant constituents of the experience were evaluated for their appositeness to understanding the experience. Invariant constituents possessing common core ideas were clustered together to form “clusters of meaning” (Creswell, 2013, p. 82) that can be labeled. The aggregated and identified constituents then become essential components, or central themes, of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Validation

Moustakas (1994) suggests validating the theme accompanying each invariant constituent by either searching for an explicit reference of the theme in the participant’s transcript or assessing the compatibility of each invariant constituent not explicitly referenced in the participant’s transcript. Invariant constituents not overtly mentioned in transcripts or deemed congruent with the experience were considered invalid and were removed (Moustakas, 1994).

Textural-Structural Description

The final process of phenomenological reduction resulted in the formation of the textural description the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994), or a description of what the participants experienced (Creswell, 2013). The developed invariant constituents and themes were applied to the individual participants’ description of the phenomenon, and then consistently recurring, relevant invariant constituents were assembled to form a collaborative description of the essence of the experience that embodies the participants’ collective experience (Moustakas, 1994). Verbatim examples from the transcribed interviews were included in the construction of the textural experience (Moustakas, 1994).

The structural description of the experience, or how the phenomenon is experienced, emerged from following the process of imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994). Following the steps of imaginative variation helped me determine the “structural meanings that underlie the textural meanings” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 99), acknowledge the themes responsible for the rise of the phenomenon, contemplate the interplay of variables such as time and space in reference to the phenomenon, and detail the developing structural themes that support a structural description of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Similar to the construction of the textural description, the formation of the structural description of the phenomenon began with individual participants’ accounts of their experience and progress to a collaborative structural description of the phenomenon.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of this study was addressed by the following: member checks, audit trails, rich, thick description, and triangulation (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015; Schwandt, 2015).

Credibility

The credibility of the study was validated through member checks (Schwandt, 2015). All participants were presented with written analysis of the interpretations of the study in an effort to hear their views on the findings. Participants did not view raw data, but rather, the textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon gleaned from the initial analysis (Creswell, 2013). Participants were presented with both analyses of their individual interviews and their focus group interviews.

Dependability and Confirmability

Audit trails brought dependability and confirmability to the study (Schwandt, 2015). I thoroughly documented the steps of the study ensuring a third-party examiner would be able to follow the steps and procedures used to conduct the study, review the theoretical framework that helped shape the study, and view any data pertinent to the study to determine the accuracy of the study's findings (Creswell, 2013; Schwandt, 2015). Through auditing, a third-party examiner would be able to verify that the methods used to conduct the study were dependable and the interpretations confirmable.

Transferability

Rich, thick description occurs when thematic qualities of the phenomenon are recognized and the nature and meaning of the experience is fully uncovered (Moustakas, 1994). The use of descriptions with vivid details of the site and participants in this study provide the reader with an account of the phenomenon that can be imagined in other settings (Creswell, 2013). Rich, thick description allows readers to discover similarities from the phenomenon and transfer those to another setting, therefore providing transferability to the findings (Schwandt, 2015).

Additional efforts aimed at yielding transferability include triangulation (Schwandt, 2015). Triangulation helps guarantee the inferences made by the researcher are accurate (Patton, 2015; Schwandt, 2015). For this study, triangulation included the use of multiple data sources such as individual interviews, focus group interviews, participants' academic transcripts, and the researcher journal. Triangulation assists transferability because it addresses the issue of the researcher accurately reconstructing the experiences of the participants and, through this reconstruction, reasonably speculating such experiences could be applied to other situations with similar circumstances (Schwandt, 2015).

Ethical Considerations

Steps were followed to ensure ethical considerations were upheld throughout this study. The researcher obtained IRB approval from Liberty University before collecting data. Written consent from the site and the participants was secured. While conducting research, the researcher was careful to not disrupt the site. All data and consent forms were kept in a locked cabinet, or, if the forms were digital, they were password protected. The site and the participants were identified with pseudonyms. Finally, all identifying information were removed from the participants' names.

Summary

This chapter detailed the methods and design of this transcendental phenomenological study. Research questions guiding the study were presented. Details regarding the SCTCS were disclosed. Criteria for participation in the study and the number of participants needed were discussed. Procedures that were followed were documented and my role in those procedures was outlined. The data collection techniques and purpose behind the techniques were given. Data analysis procedures were justified. Ethical considerations and trustworthiness factors were attended to and presented.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This chapter restates the purpose of the study and reviews the study's guiding research questions. All included participants of the study are introduced through descriptive portraits of their interaction with the phenomenon. The findings were cultivated through data analysis of the multiple intelligences quiz, self-report questionnaire, academic transcripts, individual interviews, focus group interviews, and the research journal. Results are presented under two headings, each utilizing a narrative arrangement to highlight the described experiences of the participants. The first heading is presented as emergent themes in the data. The second heading offers definitive answers to the research questions. The participants' own words are used to provide rich, thick descriptions of their lived experiences in relation to the phenomenon. Chapter Four concludes with a summary of the findings.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of former high school dropouts who have reengaged with learning through a postsecondary program of study. The developed research questions assisted in providing an operational framework for this study. The restated research questions are:

1. **RQ1.** How do former high school dropouts describe the experience of reengaging with learning?
2. **RQ2.** How do participants describe the experience of becoming disengaged from learning in a K-12 educational setting to becoming reengaged with learning in a postsecondary setting?

3. **RQ3.** What experiences do participants describe that led them to pursue postsecondary education?
4. **RQ4.** What experiences do participants describe as leading them to successful reengagement with learning?

The research questions used in this study were inspired by the study's purpose and were crafted to elicit an understanding of the participants' experience with the phenomenon. Likewise, data analysis was performed under the guidance of the research questions. Answers to the research questions have been presented through thematic perspectives of the textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon.

Participants

While the individual educational journeys are unique to each participant in this study, the participants share the experience of dropping out of school before completing a high school credential, completing a GED or HiSET through an adult education program affiliated with a technical or community college, and being enrolled in a postsecondary program of study at either a technical college, community college, or four-year university. Six of the 10 participants are scheduled to graduate over the next two years with an associate degree, three of the 10 participants will complete their bachelor's degree in the next three years, and one of the 10 participants has completed her bachelor's degree. Multiple ages, varying ethnic backgrounds, and both genders are represented by the participants of this study. These diverse characteristics were outlined in Table 1 of Chapter Three.

Participants used in this study followed the participant recruitment process and completed all participant requirements detailed in Chapter Three. Interview excerpts included in this study were transcribed verbatim. Occasionally, words or phrases were inserted into the participants'

quotations by me only for clarification; however, these additions do not change the meaning of the participants' responses. To ensure anonymity, each participant is represented by a pseudonym. A descriptive profile of each participant listed alphabetically by pseudonym is written below. These vignettes offer a glimpse into the personal circumstances surrounding each participant's encounter with the phenomenon.

Anna

Anna is a 20-year-old female who is entering her third semester of classes as a part-time student at a four-year university. She is pursuing a bachelor's degree in social work. Anna excelled academically early in grade school and, by second grade, was placed on a gifted and talented track that saw her primarily enrolled in honor classes through eighth grade. Upon entering high school, her parents made the decision to remove Anna from the public-school system she grew up attending and transferred her to a local college preparatory private high school. The social dynamics of adolescent relationships were the catalyst for this decision.

Though Anna made high scores academically throughout her elementary and middle school years, she suffered from anxiety for most of that time as well. Her condition is something she developed in second grade shortly after a catastrophic hurricane devastated the region in which she and her family lived. To cope with her anxiousness, doctors placed Anna on medication as a child. She has taken this medication since childhood and continues to do so today.

Anna struggled to maintain the level of academic excellence she was accustomed to at her new college preparatory private high school. Anna described the learning environment at her new school as such:

Our head master always said, “Preparatory, to prepare for college.” We had classrooms set up like lecture rooms, and stuff like that. And, they would basically just throw the information at us, and then expected us to learn. And, I came from, even though I was in the gifted and honor's classes, it was, you know, not the information that they were teaching at [my new school]. So, I had a lot of catching up to do, and stuff like that.

Anna also explained that at “such a small school, there were also problems like socially.”

Despite her apparent popularity with her new classmates (Anna was named cheerleading captain and nominated to the homecoming court during her freshman year of high school), the academic pressures coupled with her new social difficulties resulted in Anna developing clinical depression and an eating disorder that accompanied her anxiety.

Anna’s struggle with her illnesses lasted throughout her high school career and forced her to take summer school classes between her sophomore and junior year. She entered her junior year intending to finish but soon realized that the “[college preparatory private high school] wasn't the right environment for me. It wasn't, like you know, my happiness, which was affecting my school work.” Anna, with the guidance of her parents, made the decision to drop out of high school during her junior year. Not wanting to attend a new high school for only one year, Anna registered for the HiSET through an adult education program and completed her high school credential seven months after leaving high school.

Although Anna dropped out of high school, she never planned on not going to college. She took advantage of a program that allowed her to take free college courses from the same community college where she attended classes to complete her HiSET. She initially thought of only pursuing an associate degree, but after completing several courses at the community college, Anna said she “wanted a little bit more for myself, than just a two-year degree, an

associate degree, so I set my goal to get into [a four-year university] for the spring.” Anna did just that and is now well on her way to completing her bachelor’s degree.

As I interviewed Anna, it was obvious she had a penchant for learning. The circumstances surrounding her decision to drop out of high school resulted in Anna’s “complete” disengagement from learning. During that time in her life, Anna “was not interested in learning. I was not ... It was not my main focus.” But, she did not remain disinterested in learning for long. Anna had this to say regarding the last five years of her life:

I used to, in high school, felt like hopeless, that there wasn't, um ... There wasn't any way out. That I was going to be like this forever. Now, I kind of have the mindset, and this is a saying that I say, and I say to any of my friends, or anyone that comes to me. Um, I see like, each individual, as the sun. And, like the sun shines bright, but sometimes, you know, clouds come. Sometimes it rains. Sometimes there's hurricanes and tornadoes, but eventually the sun always has to shine again. And, that's what's been getting me through it, is that, um ... If I'm in a hard place, if I'm feeling sad, depressed, anxious, I know that it isn't going to last forever. And, that is what keeps pushing me through, knowing that, you know, that the bad feelings, the anxiousness, all of that, one day, it won't be as bad. I've proven that it won't be as bad. I've proven that I can get through it, and that's what ... The sun always has to shine again.

This positive outlook on life paired with her newfound motivation has Anna on the path towards postsecondary success. She will not quit because as she said, “What I want to do with my life requires college. Requires a degree. Requires multiple degrees. And, that's what's pushed me.”

Brianna

Brianna was excited to participate in this study because she hopes her story will help high school teachers and administrators know that while some students may have personal issues that become distractions to their learning, those students can still achieve academically. This is exactly what happened to her. Now in her last semester at a technical college, at 20 years-old, Brianna will graduate with her associate degree in business office administration.

Brianna officially dropped out of high school at the age of 15 during her freshman year; though, her journey of disengagement from school began when she was in eighth grade. As an eighth-grade student, Brianna was diagnosed with a health issue that required multiple surgeries. She underwent her first surgery that year; an event that would become all too familiar as she has had seven additional surgeries over the last six years. Needing time to recover and become healthy, Brianna was forced to miss multiple days of school. Upon returning to class in January of her eighth-grade year, she was welcomed back with a failing grade in English. Integrating back into the flow of school that year became too great a challenge for Brianna, and she took a medical leave from her school.

Brianna did not return to high school until November of her freshman year. Her grades were continuing to decline, and as she explains it, she “went from honor roll to failing.” In her opinion, this was not due to her absences. She believed it was “favoritism” displayed by the school’s teachers and administration. While she was taking medical leave from school and accumulating more absences, Brianna was keeping up with her studies via online courses. She would complete the same assignments her peers were asked to complete; however, Brianna’s assignments were accomplished over the internet. Brianna said:

They [the school administration] told me, basically, I was making their school look bad by not showing up. And I took it that my education wasn't important to them, because

even though I wasn't there, I was still trying to do the work, but it still made them look bad [...] well, anyway, around that time, uh, the principal at the time basically told my mom the best thing I can do was drop out, because I was affecting their numbers.

The “numbers” Brianna referred to was the school performance score her high school received from the state. Student absences are one of the multiple variables factored into computing this score, and in Brianna’s situation, she was hurting rather than helping the school’s overall score. Feeling as if her high school was more interested in her as a dropout than as a student, Brianna signed her dropout papers in April of her freshman year.

After dropping out, Brianna’s future was unclear. She wanted to attend adult education courses and enroll in college, but she was too young to begin journeying that route. She spent her time at home away from school doing her “own schooling.” Brianna said:

I would take practice tests, I would study different maths that I could find on the internet. Um, I had, uh, [state standardized] testing books I would study out of [...] I know even though I wasn't in the school atmosphere, I still wanted to learn. Like, I still wanted to know ... I still wanted my education, even though I couldn't get it. Even if it meant for me, um, to Google math problems, I still wanted to know ... I still wanted to know, but I still wanted to be where, if I enrolled back in school, I wasn't far behind.

Overtly determined, Brianna enrolled in adult education classes as soon as her age allowed her.

As she was completing her high school credential through the adult education program, Brianna took advantage of a program that offered the students in the adult education program free college courses. Since the adult education program was located on the same campus as the college courses being offered, Brianna did not hesitate to begin completing and adding college

courses to her academic résumé. Her description of the support she felt from her college teachers and administrators stands in stark contrast to the experience she had in high school:

[The administration] will sit down and tell me, “Look, this is what I think, this is what you need to meet the requirements.” They, literally, tell me ... I tell them what I feel and they give me their opinion. They tell me if it's a good idea or if it's a bad idea. If they think it's a good idea, they'll push me. If they think it's a bad idea, they'll point me in the right direction where they think it's good.

Once a 15-year-old with an uncertain future, Brianna is now thriving in a learning environment that she feels is “like family. They're not afraid to help you if you need help. If you can't decide between classes or a degree or something, they're not afraid to help you.”

Curtis

Much like the other participants, Curtis was eager to share his story. His jovial and pleasant demeanor made interviewing him feel as if I was having a conversation with an old friend that I had not spoken to for some time. Now at 28 years-old, Curtis has his high school credential, is a certified nursing assistant (CNA), and is in his first semester at a four-year university where he is pursuing his bachelor's degree in nursing. Given his recent academic accomplishments, one would never know that Curtis dropped out of high school during his junior year.

Throughout his life, Curtis was an average student who loved attending school. Learning about new subjects had always intrigued him. He explained:

If I seen something and I liked enough and I became interested in, I'm going sit there and I'm going to touch it, I'm going to feel it, I'm going to ask questions about it. I want to know about it.

Over time, his fascination with the world has remained intact. Curtis detailed during our interview his interest in an array of subjects, explaining to me that he is perplexed by flowers, especially roses, wondered aloud why dogs go “crazy over balls,” and recounted watching a documentary about the life of John Wayne Gacy.

Curtis’ decision to drop out was more of a combination of unfortunate life circumstances and lack of support from his high school rather than his desire to quit. In January of his junior year of high school, Curtis was called down to the office to be informed that his mother had suffered a stroke. One week later, Curtis and his family were hit with a “double-whammy” as they discovered his father had also suffered a stroke. Curtis, the oldest of five children, was now forced to process his new reality as caretaker to two ailing parents and four younger siblings.

I had to stay up late. I have to do all this with my parents now. I literally have to feed them, I have to bathe them, I have to dress them. They're like children now, and, like, by the time I get ready to take care of myself, and I have to wake up for school, is like ... I'm not there. I'm there, but I'm not there. You can ask me question and I'm just looking like ... I can't do it no more. I was working at the time. I was working at Popeye's. My little brothers and sisters is in the house, so, basically, I was taking care of the whole household by myself. It was like, wow, like, this is happening and I'm not ready for it. And, like, I got to do this, I got to do that, I got to learn how to pay the bills my mom didn't even show me how to pay. I had to learn how to cook, I had to learn how to do hair, I had to learn how to cut hair. I had to learn how to do everything that I wasn't ready for.

Curtis summarized this period of his life in one word: “chaotic.”

Tasked with the incredible burden of being a teenage caretaker to two adults and four children, Curtis began to withdraw from high school. With the teachers and administration fully aware of his circumstances at home, Curtis said he felt his high school was more concerned about their school performance score than the wellbeing of the students. He said, "It wasn't about the student anymore, it was more about that grade." The "problem students" were given two options by his high school's administration: agree to transfer to an alternative school designed to teach students vocational trade skills or sign the dropout paper. Curtis was deemed a problem student because of mounting absences and declining grades, and rather than surround him with a structure of support to ensure his academic success, the three principals of his school sat him down one day, placed the dropout paper in front of him, and basically demanded he sign his withdrawal.

Curtis was visibly emotional as he told this story to me. This experience left him questioning his value as a student and as a person. He said:

So, why am I wasting my time continue coming to school? See, like, they put the seed of doubt in your head, and you start wondering ... like, "Is this really true? Is this really true? Is this the only thing I'm going to be good for?"

The next decade of Curtis' life was filled with more caregiving. He continued to assist his parents back to health while watching his siblings grow up and finish high school. Curtis worked multiple jobs during this time and became increasingly discouraged as career opportunities regularly became closed to him because he lacked the proper educational credentials.

Curtis' reintroduction to learning occurred when his boss recognized his potential and offered to pay for Curtis to go back to school. Curtis accepted his boss' proposal, returned to

adult education to earn his high school credential, finished his CNA certification, and is now enrolled in his first semester of a nursing program at a four-year university. When asked to compare his postsecondary educational experience to his high school experience, Curtis said, “They know your needs, basically. They make you focus on your needs, and they work with you on your needs.” Mindful of his past, Curtis is resolved to finish the college degree he started. As he stated:

Education is the key to the world. So, like, why not continue the education process? For me, it would be a complete waste of time to stop. It'll be just like getting pregnant and say, "I don't want the child."

Dena

Dena is a 39-year-old single mother of two who is enrolled in the office system technology program of the business department at a technical community college. This program is a two-year program that, upon completion, will lead to an associate degree. No stranger to postsecondary education, Dena earned her HiSET and CNA certification from the same technical community college. She agreed to participate in this study because she said she wants others to “notice the same things I’ve noticed” regarding inconsistent systematic support from high schools for every type of student.

Dena has struggled academically her entire life. Born two months premature, and only weighing two pounds, Dena had several diagnosed learning disabilities recognized from birth. Though her older brother of five years was carried full-term by their mother, he too was diagnosed with multiple learning disabilities as a child. Dena remembers graduating pre-kindergarten and being told that she would now be going to school with her brother. Unaware that her brother was in special education courses, and that she too would be in special education

courses, Dena was somewhat surprised to learn she would be in the same classroom as her older brother:

He was in special ed at the time. I didn't know that existed, all I knew was I was finally going to school and he was going to school. Well, it just so happened, me and him had to get put in special ed, so we was always in the same class.

Her inclusion in this special education program proved to be detrimental to her academic development.

Dena described a classroom environment that at times was unsupervised by adults. The 30-40 students in that room (various ages spread across multiple grade levels) were seemingly an afterthought to the school administration. If a teacher did not report for work, Dena said a school administrator would come to the classroom and instruct them to “just go in there. ‘If y'all don't have a teacher to teach, y'all just grab out y'all books. Just color, draw, do something.’” By third grade, Dena was diagnosed with dyslexia, reading comprehension problems, and memory problems.

She continued receiving this special education instruction until sixth grade. From sixth grade to eighth grade, Dena was transported by bus three days a week to an alternative school that specialized in offering vocational instruction to students. Dena enjoyed her time there, but she was not taught how to improve academically. Regarding academic instruction at the vocational school, Dena said, “Very little work, we did. If we didn't know it, they didn't bother teaching us.”

Dena's heritage is American Indian, and her mother, a Native American, did not go to school. Mother was illiterate, and when it came to her children's education, she trusted the school system to do what was in her children's best interest. When Dena was 15 years-old, her

father, who spent years away from home working as a fisherman, committed suicide. At this time in her life, an acquaintance of the family presented Dena's mother with an "educational opportunity" that would help Dena overcome her learning deficiencies. Dena's mother signed the paperwork to register Dena for this opportunity; however, her mother, unable to read or write, was conned into signing away Dena's guardianship and the monthly government financial assistance she received for Dena to this family acquaintance. Because of the legality of this document, Dena was required to spend the next three years living in another state with a family she despised.

As an 18-year-old senior in high school, Dena was free to return back to her mother. She did so, and upon returning, was assigned to a teacher that Dena called her "guardian angel." Dena said this teacher was "sent from above to help people with disabilities that's incapable of just about anything, but show them that you're capable, that it is possible. When people have doubt, she's there to show people." She managed to nearly complete her senior year and said she was able to learn because of this teacher's "go-to attitude. Her love, her support. Um, her patience. She would find a way."

Just weeks before high school graduation, Dena was called to the school office to discuss her transcript from the other state. She learned that none of her academic credits from her freshman to junior year of high school would transfer. Her high school said she would not be able to graduate. They offered her the opportunity to make these credits up, but she was told it would have to be in a regular classroom setting. Dena said:

I don't know what classes they put me in, but I know it was in some kind of other regular classes with other students, and I was so embarrassed always having to raise my hand, so I literally stopped raising my hand and just tried being quiet, you know?

Because I would see the teachers' faces. They would look at me like, "Not again, she's not raising her hand again. Please not again."

Devastated, and then pregnant with her first child, Dena decided to drop out rather than pursue her high school diploma.

Dena's early educational experience was rife with hardship. The years following her decision to drop out were filled with working odd jobs that provided just enough for herself and children. As she watched her oldest child struggle in high school and entertain dropping out, she became motivated to set an example of academic success for her children. Despite her own self-doubts and feelings of inadequacy as a student, Dena enrolled in an adult education program and CNA program simultaneously at a technical community college because she "wanted to be a good role model to my children. I wanted to be an inspiration to them. I wanted to show them that I can be somebody and I wanted to prove to myself that I can learn." After completing her high school credential and the CNA program, Dena enrolled in business classes at the same technical community college and is now finishing her associate degree. She described her learning experience there as this:

They actually teach you. You actually get in classes and, um, have books, you have materials, um, they go through things with you. They go through the study guides with you. They take that one-on-one time if you need it with you. They, um, this, it's all around different, because you actually sitting there in a class learning, you actually accomplishing goals. You're actually accomplishing things, and you're actually look forward to graduation, you know?

Dena has found another guardian angel in her technical community college and is well on her way to accomplishing another major goal.

Erin

Erin, a 37-year-old mother of two young children, described her adolescent self as “a typical, ungrateful teenager.” As a child, Erin rebelled against authority and had an apathetic attitude towards life. Although she was making A’s and B’s as a middle school student at her local public school, her mother, for social reasons, enrolled her in a private school for her sixth-grade year. Erin hated the new school and failed her classes intentionally, hoping her mother would bring her back to the public school she left. Her deceitful plan worked, and after deliberately failing her sixth-grade year at the private school, her parents placed her back in the public school she previously attended. Erin spent two more years there as a successful student before her family relocated during the summer to a new house in a new school district. The following school year Erin was a freshman at a new high school with new friends and new teachers.

Erin said she had a difficult time making new friends and described her new set of peers as being “extremely cliquey.” Her mother, who was heavily involved in the parent-teacher association (PTA) at her former school, had to work more hours to sustain the higher cost of living dictated by their new community. With few friends and less involved parents, Erin found it difficult to apply herself to learning about anything, even things that interested her. Regarding that time in her life, she said, “I didn’t care if I failed, and it was a freaking miracle whenever I got a C on a test. Sometimes I didn’t know how I did that, but when it happened, I was always like, ‘cool.’” Nonetheless, during her freshman and sophomore years, though her grades were mostly D’s, Erin was able to pass all of her courses except Algebra I. In total, Erin said she took Algebra I five times before dropping out.

As she entered her junior year, Erin said she began using drugs with some friends. She also felt acceptance and a sense of connection with this group of people. She detailed a typical day in her life during that time:

Instead of coming home after school and like doing homework, I would come home and take a nap and then leave at like 10:30pm or 11:00pm and we'd just go out to [the city] and go out all night and, uh, come home and get dressed for school and then repeat.

This lifestyle quickly caught up to Erin. Soon after, she made the decision to drop out of high school during her junior year.

Two decades later, Erin will not say she regrets her decision to drop out, but it is clearly a choice she is attempting to rectify. Her thoughts about her education now center more around the message she is sending to her children. Erin said:

Everything I do is for my kids, so it's like, if I can provide a-, you know, be a good role model for them, then I'm going to do that. Um, I wanted to be able to answer my kids truthfully if they ask me if I went to college. I could tell them, "Yes, and I graduated," and you know, "mom's able to get a good job and now we can do this and this and this."

Erin completed her GED through an adult education program affiliated with a community college. She is now a few semesters away from graduating with her associate degree in general studies and possibly plans on transferring to a four-year university after completing her two-year degree.

Erin credits her postsecondary success to the freedom of choice regarding her education. She believed that if this same freedom were given to her in high school then her outcome may have been different. She had this to say regarding freedom of choice in high school:

Well, freedom I think to choose the classes that you want to take and like the times you want to take them. It was like, in high school, you have ... you have to have PE and you have to have art and you have to have music. I prefer to just cut all that crap out. And like, can we just do what like I, honest to God, need to freaking learn? Like I don't need to know how to play tennis. I don't need to know how to play golf. Or you can just cut that shit out right now and save me some freaking time.

Erin recognized her current perspective on life is another factor that has aided her recent academic success. When asked what high schools can do to help teenage students understand life as adults do, Erin said:

The problem is that I don't think that the school could do it. They're too restrained. Like they're not allowed ... Okay, say like, you have a student like me, right? You know the student can do what they should be doing but they're just too hard-headed. And sometimes it just takes a slap on the back of the freaking head. Like wake the eff up, come on. And you can't do that because I know, oh, my God, you know, you touched my baby and now I'm going to have to sue you. So, they ... Like, they're 16 years-old. I know that they're not adults but they're also not little kids, and you don't really have to treat them like little kids. You can be like, "Look, you need to get this shit done. Like, let's go."

Erin revealed that if she were able to understand life as a 17-year-old like she does as a 37-year-old then she would have graduated with her high school diploma.

Farah

Stability during Farah's childhood was provided by her grandmother. Her mother and father, "dealing with their own stuff," were not part of Farah's upbringing and, at a young age,

left her to be raised by her grandparents. Soon after, Farah and her grandparents moved across several states and resettled into a new home. Farah was forced to switch schools and meet new friends.

Farah excelled in her new school because it was “so far behind” academically than her previous school. She was forced by her teachers to “slow down [her] work” in order to remain on the same pace as her new classmates. Nonetheless, Farah, rather than become bored with her schoolwork, performed well as a student and maintained honor roll status throughout elementary and middle school. Despite a divorce between her grandparents when she was 10 years-old, Farah’s grandmother ensured Farah had a consistent home life to support her success.

Things began to change for Farah as she entered high school. Fed by six middle schools, Farah’s high school became somewhat of a repository of students from assorted backgrounds and different parts of town. The high school did a poor job of unifying this diverse group of individuals, which led to students starting “up a bunch of mess just to do it.” Farah said:

We was in a shit school, like, it was bad. The teachers couldn't control the students. The principal couldn't do nothing. Everybody kind of just did what they wanted. If you wanted to walk out of class, you could. There was fighting in the classrooms. It was, like, over the top [...] it was a mix of people, and the, you could tell which school come from where, because that's where they gravitated to, and it would be this group from this middle school versus this group from this middle school, and it was, like, ridiculous.

As the distractions and pressures mounted from the surrounding social dynamics, Farah’s grades began to slip slightly in her freshman year, dropping from A’s and B’s to mostly C’s.

The ensuing year, Farah, now a sophomore, made the choice to drop out of high school. After getting into a few verbal altercations and a couple of “physical fights” with other students,

Farah began to intentionally skip school to avoid the “drama” with her peers. Farah described her grandmother as being a “pushover” who is not the “confrontational type,” so she did not force Farah to attend her classes when she found out Farah was purposefully absent. Farah’s avoidance of school lasted two consecutive weeks. Farah’s attendance record was enough time away to gain the school’s attention, but apparently not sufficient to warrant a phone call home inquiring of her wellbeing.

On the day Farah dropped out, she had decided to attend school that morning. After leaving her house and walking halfway to school, she turned around returning home to retrieve a jacket. The school resource officer saw her walking back home and stopped her on the side of the street. Although school had not yet started that day, he accused her of trying to skip school. He brought her to the school office where her grandmother was called in for a meeting. Worried that Farah’s absences indicated an intent to drop out, the school administration made a comment that the school would lose a point towards their school performance score if Farah did decide to drop out. This infuriated Farah’s grandmother because she felt as if the school only began to care about Farah when she was deemed a potential liability. Her grandmother promptly asked for the dropout papers, and she and Farah signed them that day. Farah was 16 years-old.

Only a few months after dropping out, Farah had already earned her GED through an adult education program affiliated with the community and technical college school system of her state. She had to wait until she was 17 years-old before she could enroll in college courses. When eligible, Farah began taking courses in a pharmacy technician program, but after two semesters, Farah quit the program. She said she “was so young, it didn't even matter to me. So, I didn't really even care if I finished or not.” Shortly after, Farah enrolled in an online program

at a four-year university to pursue a degree in business. “Still just too young,” she stopped that program after two semesters as well.

Farah’s life has changed significantly since those two attempts at postsecondary education. Now 25 years-old, living in another state, and married with three young children, Farah is one semester away from graduating with her associate degree in business at an online four-year university. She said the difference between this stint with college and her previous two schools is her children. Discovering she was pregnant with her first child was her motivation to “go to school to provide for him.”

Farah’s desire to provide for her children is relentless. One year ago, Farah was in the hospital ready to deliver her third child. While there, the region was flooded by unyielding rain, and Farah’s house was inundated with water. Forced to relocate and live in a hotel, the hospital would not allow Farah to bring her newborn baby home because she did not have a residence deemed habitable. Technically classified as homeless, Farah’s children were taken from her and her husband by Child Protective Services and placed into foster care for three months. During that time, Farah worked two jobs to fund the rebuilding of her home while simultaneously staying enrolled in college and completing that semester’s coursework. Farah has no doubts about finishing her degree after this semester and said she will “have the stress lifted off of me” and will “feel like a new person.”

Gabby

Gabby was clearly upset during her interview as she recalled the circumstances surrounding her decision to drop out. She described herself as a “great” student who “loved” school until she entered sixth grade. Years of physical abuse from an alcoholic father intensified to a new level that year. Additionally, Gabby started getting bullied at school nearly every day.

She said her “school kind of got put on the back burner when that type of stuff happened.” As a 12-year-old, Gabby began experimenting with drugs in an effort to numb her pain.

Her lifestyle wreaked havoc on her education. She failed sixth grade in her first year of middle school. She was expelled for drugs during her second attempt at sixth grade and was sent to the school system’s alternative school. She would spend the remainder of her second sixth-grade year at the alternative school, failing once again. After her third time in sixth grade, and yet another year in the alternative school, Gabby was socially promoted, a decision schools sometimes make when a student is too old to be in his or her current grade level. Gabby entered her seventh-grade year as a 15-year-old who had not academically passed sixth grade.

Gabby’s seventh-grade year brought another disruptive challenge into her life. Gabby’s hometown was flooded by more than 15 feet of water from a once-in-a-lifetime hurricane. Her family relocated to another part of the state and spent the next three months living in a shelter. Though Gabby had never completed seventh grade, the new school system she enrolled in placed her in eighth grade due to her age. They had an accelerated program that offered her an opportunity to recover her missing academic credits. Upon completion, she would be fully caught up and allowed to enter high school as an on-level freshman.

Gabby was doing well in this program, but her family moved out of the shelter and into a new home in a different region of the state. This new school system, her third that school year, never had a credit recovery program, and Gabby was placed back in seventh grade. She struggled academically that year but managed to earn enough credit to be promoted to eighth grade. Despite that achievement, her life’s misfortunes were too great. Gabby said, “I wasn’t in the right frame of mind to work harder to try to get where I needed to be. And I didn’t want to

be, you know, 21, graduating high school.” As a 16-year-old eighth-grade student, Gabby made the decision to drop out from school.

When asked how the school responded to the bullying she encountered from other students and the abuse she received from her father, Gabby said:

I mean, they knew that I was getting bullied and they did nothing to help me or protect me or anything. And soon after the stuff that had happened with my dad happened, I got involved with drugs and that's when I got expelled, and they were like, no help ... you know, with any of it. And, um ... I just, like I said, I just kind of like slipped through cracks. And, you know, they just ... It really ... I feel like I might have did a little bit better if I had more help from the school system.

Without any high school experience, a 16-year-old Gabby began a new life of working minimum wage jobs while trying to discern a path for her academic future.

In the midst of the turmoil and emotions Gabby felt when she dropped out, she remained committed to the idea of one day completing college. Gabby said this about college:

Since the day I dropped out, I knew that it was something that I was going to have to do. And I just didn't have the, uh, confidence in myself to pursue, uh ... uh, commit to it, I guess. But as soon as I dropped out, I knew that that's what I wanted to do, you know, eventually go to school and college.

Gabby had a difficult time shifting her intentions into tangible outcomes. She started and failed to complete the GED nine times over the next nine years of her life. Steadfastly committed to her dream of completing college, Gabby passed the GED on her tenth attempt. She credits the support of an instructor she had for her success. Gabby said, “The instructor really kind of knew

what I needed and like he seen me through, like completely, all the way, uh ... but I really believed that if it wasn't for him, I probably would have dropped out again.”

When Gabby completed her GED in 2015 at an adult education center affiliated with a technical college, she was also simultaneously taking college courses through a special program. While the desire to complete a lifelong dream and the need for a better job were the initial factors driving Gabby to pursue further education, she said the source of her perseverance was the suddenly tragic death of her older brother. Throughout her life he acted as her de facto father when her real father was abusive or not around. Any time Gabby felt overwhelmed and considered quitting, the thought of her late brother helped her endure.

Gabby also noted the difference in support she felt from her college compared to her middle school. She said, “When my brother passed away, um, I was out of school for two weeks and, you know, my instructors were completely understanding and helpful and I didn't have that when I was a teenager.” Feeling motivated and supported, Gabby is on pace to graduate with her associate degree in business administration in 2018. When asked to describe what completing a college degree would mean to her, Gabby said:

Graduation is going to mean the world to me because, you know, I never thought that I'd even make it to college after everything I've been through. So, it ... It's going to mean a lot to me, but I try to avoid thinking of the future.

At 28 years-old, Gabby's confidence is scarred by her past. She is leaning towards pursuing her bachelor's degree but is hesitant because she does not want to bear the weight of possible failure.

Haley

“Well, I mean, I wanted to go to school. Even then, I knew even if I didn't graduate, I wanted to go to college. That's always been my goal. I've always wanted to go to college.” Not

only did Haley fulfill her ambition, but ten years after signing the dropout paperwork finalizing the end of her high school career, she exceeded her dream and graduated with a bachelor's degree in forensics. Haley summed up her resolve demonstrated in completing her college degree: "When I want something, I swear I will, I'll go for it. So, you know, I wanted to get it done, and nothing was going to stop me."

Haley was an exceptional student in elementary and middle school, making straight A's often during her early academic career. A self-described "hard worker," Haley's accomplishments were not something that came natural to her, and she had to study tirelessly during her ninth-grade year to continue experiencing similar levels of academic success. A few weeks after her sophomore year began, a devastating hurricane flooded her home and high school. With her home and school hopelessly damaged, Haley's family was forced to evacuate the region and relocate in a neighboring state.

Haley did not keep a large circle of friends in high school, but that was deliberate. She labelled herself as a "loner-type" who preferred to have only a few close relationships. Haley found it difficult to form friendships at her new high school, efforts that were complicated by anxiety she began experiencing following the trauma of the hurricane. Furthermore, stability at home was nonexistent. Extended family members, all affected by the hurricane, were living intermittently with Haley and her immediate family. In a few months' time, Haley was forced to relocate from the community and home she had lived her entire life, live with extended relatives, start a new school, leave that new school and attend classes at another school, and unenroll from the latter school only to return to the former new school. All of this chaos in Haley's life resulted with her repeating her sophomore year of high school.

At 16 years-old, Haley was entering her sophomore year of high school for the second consecutive year. She was returning to the high school she first enrolled in after relocating from the hurricane. She described her academic struggles at this new school as such:

I had a lot of anxiety about being in a school where I didn't know anybody. And the classes were a lot different [...] Um, they were also on a different curriculum. Like, they were very behind, I found. And it was hard for me to keep up, because I've never been actually diagnosed with ADHD or anything like that. But I always have trouble whenever I'm ahead on something. I can't go back [...] I just got fidgety, and distracted, and I didn't feel like going; because I'm like, "I already know this. Why do I have to go?"

Haley's levels of academic engagement began to wane. She tried visiting the school counselors to discuss her anxiety and decreased motivation, but the school was only equipped with personnel capable of addressing academic problems, not emotional or mental issues.

Shortly into her second sophomore campaign, Haley, with her mother alongside her, requested the dropout paperwork from the school administrators. She felt "encouraged" by the school administration to quit high school and said this regarding the school administration:

I've always found that kind of like, "Why didn't you try to convince me to stay." They didn't even try to talk you out of it. They were just like, "Here's the paperwork." Like, if they would have said, "Alright, well, why don't you stay?" Instead of just giving me the paperwork automatically or, like, you know, asking why or something like that. I might have considered staying. I might have tried to work, a little longer.

Still 16 years-old, and only a few months after dropping out from high school, a determined Haley completed her GED through an adult education program affiliated with the state's technical and community college system.

Haley attempted to enroll in community college upon completing her GED but was denied enrollment because she did not meet the 17-year-old minimum age requirement. With her family still struggling through the recovery of losing everything in the hurricane, Haley began working to assist with bills at home. She would not begin taking college courses until she was 20-years-old. During the four-year stretch between earning her GED and her first college course, Haley did not stop attempting to learn. She said, “when I wasn't in school; after my GED, I'd still pick up books here and there, um, on different subjects and try to learn. Anything new I could find, I picked up books on it and read it.”

Haley loved the “freedom” she felt at community college. She enjoyed the opportunity to schedule the classes she wanted to take at times that were optimal for her. The community college was also equipped with counselors who helped Haley work through her anxiety problems. As her anxiety is now “well under control,” Haley credited the personnel at that community college with helping her cope with the demands of her post-hurricane reality. Two-and-a-half years after taking her first college course, Haley graduated with an associate degree. She immediately transferred into a four-year university and completed her bachelor's degree two-and-a-half years later. After attending college classes for five consecutive years, Haley became the first person in her family to graduate with a bachelor's degree.

Isla

Isla is a 50-year-old mother of four who is one semester away from graduating with her associate degree in general science. She is attending a community college and intends to transfer to a four-year university soon after to complete her bachelor's degree. Learning is something Isla has always prioritized, and her inclination to do so has been passed down to her children. Isla's college-aged children are all pursuing their own postsecondary credential, with her oldest

about to complete a doctorate. She laughed as she told me that her kids “check on my courses and my grades, and I don't check theirs, so they keep tabs. And, they tell me what my grades are.”

Isla's family moved to the United States when she was four years-old. She had learned English by age five and was an excellent student throughout elementary and middle school. Unfamiliar with American culture, Isla's family held firmly to the principle that schoolwork was to be done only at school. When Isla was at home, she was forbidden to study or do homework. Her family made sure that her time at home was spent helping her mother maintain the home. Isla's typical day would have her attending school and returning home, but instead of coming home to do homework and study, she was responsible for caring for her five younger siblings.

Remarkably, Isla was able to maintain honor-roll-level grades as a student despite never opening a textbook or completing a school assignment at home. It was customary in Isla's culture that women would stop attending school upon entering high school. A woman's job as overseer of her home was considered more significant than her role as a student, so the expectation Isla's parents had of her was that she would quit school after eighth grade. Isla enjoyed school, and she pleaded with her parents to allow her to continue her studies. Her parents conceded, and Isla was granted permission to attend high school.

Although Isla received the approval she wanted, things at home were not very stable. Isla's family was facing a financial hardship, and both of her parents had to work long hours. Isla was required to come home each day, prepare dinner for her five siblings, and put them to bed. This daily routine quickly became exhausting, and Isla began to accept the reality of her life. She described this time as:

Now I'm in high school, I'm enjoying high school, I'm enjoying my friends, um, my time away from home was a whole different environment, so although I did okay and you know, and grade-wise I wasn't putting any effort either there. So, academics was not important to me because I knew that it was going to be the end, this is my last year.

Despite her desires, Isla understood that she would not return to high school after completing her ninth-grade year. Her parents valued her at home more than her as a student.

Isla did not return to high school after finishing her ninth-grade year. After declining to enroll for tenth grade, the school Isla attended did not call home to ask of her whereabouts or check on her wellbeing. She dismissed the school's lack of concern by acknowledging its size: "I was in a high school, with I mean probably ... I don't know, I can't even go to the number, but it was a huge it looked like an apartment complex." Although, as she compared the educational experiences of her children to her own, she said:

I don't ever recall being counseled over my grades, or asked why my grades, you know, are not, you know, what am I doing? I don't recall any of that, which in the case of my children if, you know, if they got an F on the test, I would get a conference call you know, and they would then get called in and, you know, they would want to know what's going on, and why, you know, and also help.

As a parent, Isla realizes her high school could have done more to keep her engaged. She said she believes that had her school fought for her more, she may have been able to persuade her parents to allow her to continue.

Shortly after dropping out, Isla was sent to another state to help run her uncle's family business. She spent nearly a decade managing this venture. She got married during that time and started having children. Isla's days were then spent operating a business with her husband

and caring for their four children. She satisfied her desire to learn by solving the dilemmas that come with the “life experience” of marriage, owning a business, and parenting four children. There was little time to pursue formal education, though it was something Isla always thought about:

My goal was always to get that high school diploma that I feel I was deprived of, you know, and it was a missing piece of me. So, I went back for that, and then passing the HiSET, I kind of felt you know, a sense of accomplishment, I accomplished what my goal was, to get my high school diploma, and that satisfied me. That was a big satisfaction, and then I said, “Well, if I got this far [...] let me try to get into college.”

At age 47, after completing her HiSET through an adult education program, Isla enrolled in college and is well on her way to fulfilling her lifelong goal of a college degree.

Jalen

Jalen was recommended for this study by Farah, his wife and fellow participant in this study. Jalen described himself as a student who throughout elementary and middle school couldn’t “sit still and pay attention like they wanted me to, you know. So, I always had to be doing something.” His fidgety nature resulted in him behaving “horrible” in class, even when he was given the option one year to select his teacher. His best year in school was fifth grade when he had “this little-bitty-sweet-old lady” for a teacher. Jalen said they had the “best relationship,” and she “made me want to stay in school and do stuff.”

Jalen’s enjoyment of school was limited to his fifth-grade year. He continued to misbehave in middle school, receiving disciplinary consequences from his teachers. Though his behavior was disruptive, it never escalated to a level where intervention by school administrators became necessary. Jalen was also medicated with drugs in an effort to calm him down and help

him maintain his focus, but instead of taking the prescribed dosage, he would often discretely throw his medicine away once it was given to him.

As a high school student, Jalen's mischievous tendencies ultimately derailed his pursuit of a high school diploma. By now, his behavior was such that the smallest infractions would often result in a suspension. Jalen got suspended frequently his ninth-grade year and was sent to an alternative school in March to finish the school year. Jalen failed ninth grade but was able to return to the mainstream classroom as a repeat freshman that following August. Being on the honor roll most of his life, Jalen made sure his grades were up to par that second freshman year. Yet, his behavior, once again, earned him a second trip to the alternative school, but this time, he was sent only after a couple of months into the school year. He completed his second ninth-grade year at the alternative school, continued his good grades, and earned a promotion to tenth grade.

Jalen's tenth-grade year followed the pattern of his previous two high school years. Again, he was sent to the alternative school because of too many suspensions. In the three years of high school that Jalen had been in the mainstream classroom, he never made it past the month of March before being sent to the alternative school. This last trip, for a variety of reasons, would be his last.

Jalen's mother worked multiple shifts and long hours his entire life. From the age of seven, Jalen was responsible for getting his younger brother of two years dressed and ready for school, picking him up from the bus stop, and watching him at home until mother got back from work. Jalen's mother got ill and was hospitalized around the same time he was sent to the alternative school during his tenth-grade year. While suffering through her illness, Jalen's mother had made the decision to move the family across town to a different house and

neighborhood. The responsibility of his brother, the health of his mother, the transition of moving, and the difficult path back into the mainstream classroom made for an easy decision; Jalen, then a 17-year-old, requested and was granted, without any resistance from the school, his dropout paperwork. He spent the next several years working to help support himself, mother, and brother.

When Jalen dropped out, he said he always knew he was going to get a GED and go to college. Although he finished an adult education program and received his high school credential as a 21-year-old, Jalen did not immediately enroll in a postsecondary program of study that would lead to a college degree. Instead, he audited courses as needed from technical colleges to assist him in advancing his career. His list of completed coursework from technical colleges includes classes in welding, construction, hazardous waste management, psychology, and sheet metal work. When asked about the psychology course, Jalen said he took that class because he “likes to learn” and still enjoys reading the textbook.

It was obvious while interviewing Jalen that he did not view his educational path negatively. His sagacious approach to his education demonstrated a desire to be a lifelong learner. He recognized what was not working for him and made the best from his available options. Jalen expressed his sanguine outlook of himself as a learner when he said:

I always been good with my hands like fixing stuff, doing stuff as a kid growing up. I used to take loose my Nintendo, put it back together and stuff. Kind of like God-given gift, working with these hands is, is gifts [...] I can build my own house. You can put me in the woods and get me in a year or two and you'll have a full house [...] I'm going to tell it like this, learning isn't as hard as they make it out to be.

Currently, 33-year-old Jalen is taking online courses at a four-year university. He will graduate with a bachelor's degree in digital cinema in the summer of 2019.

Results

The results from data analysis are presented under two headings: theme development and research question responses. The content under the first heading is organized into thematic categories and subcategories as each relates to the phenomenon. The information included under the second heading offers conclusive answers to the research questions that guided this study. Participants' own words have been used to illustrate their lived experience with the phenomenon.

Theme Development

The findings from this study are arranged under five themes: (a) the learner, (b) the system, (c) the perspective, (d) the path, and (e) the lagniappe. As themes emerged, subthemes developed and were provided for a greater understanding of the participants' experience with the phenomenon. Appendix I provides an outline of the themes in this section.

The Learner

The theme of *the learner* was the first theme recognized through data analysis. Although each participant owned the grim distinction of being a high school dropout, nearly everyone mentioned a time in their elementary or middle school years when they achieved above average grades. In elementary school, Anna was placed in a program for gifted students. Curtis, Erin, Farah, Gabby, Isla, and Jalen claimed to consistently earn C's or higher across all subjects. Brianna was on the honor roll. Until she switched high schools due to the hurricane, Haley made straight A's her entire student career and was enrolled in honor classes her freshman year of high school. The only exception to this was Dena, who never identified herself as an honor roll student or claimed to have above average grades.

With prior educational success in their K-12 education, each participant eloquently expressed thoughts affirming his or her own identification as a learner. The statements below offer a glimpse into the participants' attitude towards their learning:

- “There were a lot of students who weren't looking to further their education, you know. And, then there were some people [like me] that wanted to further their education.”
(Anna)
- “I know even though I wasn't in the school atmosphere, I still wanted to learn. Like, I still wanted to know ... I still wanted my education.” (Brianna)
- “I like to venture into all subjects, when it comes down to learning.” (Curtis)
- “It's amazing, but it's also, like, you know, when you put a firecracker on and you light it and it goes and has just beautiful colors. That's the best feeling in the world. To know that you can learn, you know?” (Dena)
- “I catch on to things pretty fast.” (Erin)
- “I was so excited when I got to go back to school.” (Farah)
- “I loved school [...] I love to learn things and, uh, it's always kind of been part of who I am.” (Gabby)
- “I really do enjoy learning. Even when I wasn't in school; after my GED, I'd still pick up books here and there, um, on different subjects and try and learn about it.” (Haley)
- “[I am] wanting to know more and to understand life, and what might be, what could be done to better situations that we're currently, you know, seeing.” (Isla)
- “I'm going to tell it like this, learning isn't as hard as they make it out to be.” (Jalen)

Despite the participants' status as former high school dropouts, their perception of themselves as learners and their pursuit of learning was unhindered by any negative connotation

generally associated with students who choose to disengage from the secondary school system. The subthemes in this section highlight the participants' own outlook on their learning. Under the *learning mode* heading, the participants' results from the multiple intelligences quiz are corroborated with their description of their self-identified learning mode. The *learning interest* subtheme compares and contrasts the instructional strategies of the participants' K-12 and postsecondary schools and documents the effects of those strategies on the participants. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivators to the participants' engagement with learning are discussed in the *motivation to learn* section.

Learning mode. Each participant completed the multiple intelligences quiz found in Appendix F as a requirement of their involvement in this study. Responses collected during the participant interviews regarding learning mode typically supported the results of each multiple intelligences quiz. For example, Anna described herself as a learner in saying:

I'm definitely a hands-on learner. Learn by doing [...] that's what helped me, and that's what I still do in college. Like, for me lecture classes, even if I have like, 10 pages of notes, I'll go through and I'll rewrite 10 pages. And, then by math, um ... I learn by doing the programs over and over. Like, we have online math homework, and each problem they give you, you can do like a guided problem. So, I'll do like, two or three of the guided problems, before I go and do the actual one.

Illustrated by her learn-by-doing note-taking approach, Anna demonstrated a preference for visual and kinesthetic learning, which was reflected in her scores on the multiple intelligences quiz (Appendix J).

Brianna (Appendix K), Erin (Appendix L), and Gabby (Appendix M) each demonstrated a preference towards intrapersonal learning. Brianna's engagement with learning was closely

associated with her own self-awareness, which was largely influenced by the teachers and school administrators she had at each level of schooling. Gabby discussed how her learning was stalled by instructional methods that employed group work. She said, “When I was doing my GED classes, uh, I had trouble learning as a group [...] it was a little hard for me to learn as a group.” Erin’s pragmatic approach to learning left her disengaged during high school as she found little value in her secondary school experience. Erin’s postsecondary experience was different, however, as she had been afforded the space both personally and academically that intrapersonal learners need in order to be captivated. The intrapersonal learners in this study had different educational experiences, but the common traits of individual learning environments, introspection, and academic functionality became tenets of their reengagement with learning.

“Looking, hearing, and touching,” was the way Curtis concisely summed up his learning preferences. This appears accurate as Curtis’ highest three scores on the multiple intelligences quiz were the categories of visual/spatial learner, musical learner, and bodily/kinesthetic learner (Appendix N). Curtis often referenced his learning preferences of looking, hearing, and touching throughout the interview as his “big three.” He said college has been his most engaging learning experience and had this to say regarding his postsecondary learning environment:

Yes, like, the whole entire structure of college. Like, you have a teacher who's qualified in that particular subject, no more, no less. You have one big classroom, everybody can hear, everybody can see. You're giving us work. So, I have my big three. You may be far away where I can't see you, but I can see that board and I can see everything on that projection screen. That's all that matters to me. Keep me entertained, keep me interested. Keep me interested like a pastor will keep his congregation interested. Keep me like that. So, if we had that in high school, oh, yes. Oh, yes. That'd have been perfect.

Dena's troubled educational background provided her with limited opportunities to engage in a learning environment that was beneficial for her; yet, she was able to describe a few positive learning experiences that aligned with her multiple intelligences quiz results (Appendix O). Her first school memory included a preschool graduation ceremony in which her brother danced across the stage to Michael Jackson's "Beat It." In middle school, Dena was sent to an alternative school that she described as "a lot better than sitting just in a class with not learning nothing." She recalled participating in ceramics, woodworking, plumbing, and kickball at this school. With a family that was "full-blooded" Native American and a father who earned a living as a fisherman, Dena remembered spending much of her childhood outdoors.

When Farah was asked to describe which instructional methods helped her learn the most, she replied, "Writing it. Like, you know how they say, 'Write your words.'" She further explained:

Anything [teachers] write on the board is on my paper. Anything they say I need to remember, I write it down. It don't matter what it ... It could be something that doesn't even have to do with that, but it's something I know I need to remember, I write it down. The practice of writing everything down is something Farah has done her entire student career and corresponded with her second highest mode of learning from the multiple intelligences quiz results (Appendix P). Writing even assisted her in nonverbal subject areas. She talked about difficulties she had learning to use spreadsheets and attempting to calculate answers in her head. Farah said, "I was always calculating it up myself thinking that it was wrong." She recounted how she was finally able to understand once a teacher demonstrated how to write the information under the proper rows and columns. Farah said it was the writing process that helped her better comprehend numbers.

Haley's disengagement from high school stemmed from multiple factors. One of those factors was boredom. She said the new high school that she transferred to after the hurricane was "very behind" with curriculum and "were doing stuff that I already been through." She explained, "I couldn't sit still and learn the same stuff I learned. I got bored, and then I didn't want to go to school." Haley was not being lazy or disrespectful; she was simply not being engaged as a learner in that environment.

Haley described times when she was most engaged as a learner:

I like hands on instruction. I think that's why I liked science classes, ever since I was younger. And that's why I went into some science, because you can do a lot of hands on stuff. You're not just reading a book and learning. Even though I like reading. When it comes to actual, like, science and mathematics or anything like that, I like to work through it.

Haley credited her pursuit and successful completion of a forensics degree to a bodily/kinesthetic learning style (Appendix Q). She recalled:

So, we'd go through our book, we'd do basic stuff; and then eventually, we'd go do an actual crime scene. Well, a mock actual crime scene. And I thought that helped a lot because then I really learned about just different methods of searching and everything like that [...] I think that's why I did so well, is because it was ... The way I learn best is if I do it.

Due to cultural differences, Isla's decision to leave high school was not a choice she had the autonomy to make. Isla said she would have completed high school if given the opportunity to do so. At the time of dropping out, Isla was making passing grades and was "enjoying high school" and "enjoying [her] friends." She said, "I was just enjoying, you know, being in high

school.” As an interpersonal learner (Appendix R), Isla’s connectedness to her school and peers resulted in her academic engagement. She said now she wished she would have “fought a lot more” with her parents to allow her to finish high school.

Other areas of Isla’s life highlight her preference for interpersonal learning. She has displayed throughout her professional career a business acumen and instinctive ability to connect with customers, which have led to successful business ventures. She also said the feature of college she appreciated most was the “support from the instructors.” Her own children even provide academic support and relational connectedness that engaged Isla as an interpersonal learner. Isla said:

It's fun with my children. I have college students that, you know, they're not in the science field with me, and then ... but we do have same classes, and we do talk about, you know, the instructors and tests [...] and they do check on my courses and my grades (laughing). I am the one that's getting yelled at, “You need to do this, ... mom, when you have this, you have to do this.” This is every day, every day (laughing), you know, so yeah, I'm being instructed.

The one participant whose description of himself as a learner did not fully correspond with the multiple intelligences quiz results (Appendix S) was Jalen. Oddly, Jalen’s lowest learning style according to his results was bodily/kinesthetic. Yet, Jalen said he has ADHD and cannot sit still in a traditional learning setting. He claimed he learned “exceptionally well” in environments that were hands-on and required his participation. This is demonstrated by the numerous postsecondary learning experiences Jalen has been involved in ranging from welding to construction to hazardous waste management to sheet metal work. Jalen also made the claim in his interview that he could build a house from scratch given enough time and the proper

resources. He said working with his hands was “a God-given gift.”

Although the bodily/kinesthetic learning mode score from the quiz does not align with his experiences, Jalen’s current academic endeavor does reflect his two highest preferred learning styles according to the quiz. His pursuit of a digital cinema degree is a natural fit for someone identifying as a visual/spatial learner and a musical learner. Jalen’s engagement in the learning process was emphasized further by his goals after college. He wants to open a “media studio where you can come in, sit down, and do a lot of different things on the computer.”

Viewing the participants in this study through the lens of a learner allows them to be understood as individuals both capable of and desiring to learn. Their acknowledgement of their own learning preferences and the ensuing engagement that occurs when those preferences are matched to instruction is significant. Likewise, participants in this study were also aware of how the degree of learning interest towards a subject affected their level of engagement with the learning process.

Learning interest. When participants discussed their level of interest in the curriculum presented to them at their secondary schools, it was often with negative connotations. Regarding his interest in certain subjects in high school, Curtis, for example, said, “I would say I wish it was more interesting. You could be up there teaching about, let's see, the Indian Trail of Tears. I would be open- my ears would be open, but I'd be, like, asleep.” Erin said her level of engagement was determined by “whether or not [she’s] actually interested in the subject.” She said she would “quit, essentially,” and “just didn’t even care anymore” if the subject was not interesting. Jalen explained teachers could only gain his attention depending “on what they’re talking about.” Haley said, “[My school was] doing stuff that I've already been through, so I got kind of bored with it.”

Participants also described how particular instructional strategies employed by their secondary schools to teach the curriculum often resulted in them losing their interest in learning. Anna said, “We had classrooms set up like lecture rooms, and stuff like that. And, they would basically just throw the information at us, and then expected us to learn.” When Brianna returned to high school during her freshman year after missing several weeks due to health issues, she said:

They had me doing an online class, which, basically, I would go to school every day for three months and do an online class, before I was able to go to regular class. Um, I remember I was failing, like, C’s, D’s, and F’s.

Curtis recounted situations that involved teachers administering instruction in areas outside of their expertise:

You can't have a math teacher teaching English. You can't have a gym teacher teaching science or biology. It doesn't mix. Comparing apples to oranges, here. Give me somebody who knows what they're doing versus someone who has to open the book and write the answers off the board and can't explain how things go.

Jalen recognized his interest in learning declined drastically if he was required to sit still and read from a book. He said:

The sitting environment wasn't for me. I don't like to sit down too much and read out of book for the learning part. They got other ways of showing you how to learn without always having to read out of a book.

Just as the participants’ learning interest waned when they were exposed to curriculum they were indifferent towards or forced to endure inharmonious instructional strategies, their learning interest, and thus engagement, was enhanced when they were given the opportunity of

choice in their learning. Brianna and Haley expressed that their high school careers may have ended differently had they had more learning opportunities available for them to choose from.

Haley said:

I like the freedom of [college]. You have freedom to move in and out as you wanted.

You chose your schedule. I really liked that because I didn't have to ... Like, I could go from class to class as I wanted. I could schedule, like, you know, "Oh, I want to get this done in the morning. And this done, I want to wait later. Or, I can take the easier classes along with one hard class instead of taking a few hard classes." I kind of liked how I can- it was all me that did it.

Curtis attributed his engagement in postsecondary school to “the whole thrill of learning things.

Uh, actually, focusing on one area that you're interested in with like-minded people like you.”

Erin was more abrupt, but offered the same sentiments regarding engagement and the freedom of choice in college:

Well, freedom I think to choose the classes that you want to take and like the times you want to take them. It was like, in high school, you have ... you have to have PE and you have to have art and you have to have music. I prefer to just cut all that crap out. And like, can we just do what like I, honest to God, need to freaking learn? Like I don't need to know how to play tennis. I don't need to know how to play golf. Or you can just cut that shit out right now and save me some freaking time.

Freedom to choose the classes one wants to take and when to take those classes was a factor in Jalen's increased learning interest. He described enjoying the flexibility to take classes “mostly at nighttime for my reading part when I'm not easily distracted. I can you know sit down in peace and read and hurry up and get through it.” Jalen continued to explain that he

preferred working in three- to four-hour chunks of time on his online classes and benefited greatly from being able to be on “my own schedule.” Without this degree of flexibility in learning, Farah would have been another participant losing interest in postsecondary pursuits.

She declared she would have most likely quit college:

I wouldn't have been able to finish college. There's no way, because I went into labor in the middle of a semester each term, so I would've had to quit in the middle of my semester. But, with online classes, I could just still be in the hospital, doing my schoolwork.

Farah described this freedom and class structure as “peaceful:”

I don't really have nobody bothering me, because I can either choose per semester if I want to go online or in class, and I normally go online. So, I really don't have nobody to bother me, stop me from doing what I'm doing. I can work at my own pace, as long as it's turned in on time.

The freedom to choose class subjects, class times, and class environments was a prevalent theme in the data that contributed to the participants' peaked interest in their learning.

Motivation to learn. Each participant displayed a high capacity of motivation to finish their postsecondary degree. While the source of their inspiration varied, being motivated to learn was an emergent theme in the data that was proving to keep participants engaged in their learning and driven to accomplish the goals they were pursuing. Some participants succinctly described their level of motivation to finish their postsecondary degree. Farah said she is “highly motivated” to finish. Gabby said on a scale of 1-10 she would rank her level of motivation as a “nine.” As he discussed completing his postsecondary degree, Jalen said, “I get to a point where I look at it, and if I want it, I'm going to do it.”

Others exhibited a motivation to continue learning even when they were not enrolled in secondary or postsecondary school. Brianna explained:

I know even though I wasn't in the school atmosphere, I still wanted to learn. Like, I still wanted to know ... I still wanted my education, even though I couldn't get it. Even if it meant for me, um, to Google math problems, I still wanted to know ... I still wanted to know, but I still wanted to be where, if I enrolled back in school, I wasn't far behind. I had books from when I was in school, like, um, math packets that I started and never finished, or assignments I was given and didn't have to turn in because I dropped out. I used a lot of the stuff, resources I had, um, like, uh, the [standardized test] books, [my high school] give me practice books, I did a lot of that. Um, I had ACT books and stuff like that that I used.

Haley was another participant who took an initiative to keep learning while not enrolled in school. During her time out of school, she would “pick up books here and there, um, on different subjects and try and learn about it.”

Not everyone's motivation was intrinsic, and most participants found extrinsic motivation through factors that promote a higher quality of life. The most common of these factors was the opportunity of a better job. In making the decision to engage in postsecondary learning, Anna asked herself, “Is there anything that I want to do, that would not require going to college? Like, would beauty school interest me? Would, you know, being an aesthetician, or anything, would that interest me?” She concluded that “what I want to do with my life requires college; requires a degree; requires multiple degrees.” Regarding her future, Brianna said the thought of low-wage work “gives me the motivation to go to school every day to get my education, so I'm not

flipping burgers at McDonald's.” Curtis explained in greater detail the reality of gaining employment without a postsecondary credential:

What really started it, uh, is, like, I would get these jobs, like, some of the job applications I was filling out, like, the positions required that piece of paper right there. I'll fill it out, I'll take the test, I'll go on the interviews. “I want to hire you, I want to hire you so bad, but you don't have that paper.” That was part of my motivation.

The paper Curtis was referring to was his CNA certification. Farah is diligently working towards completion of her postsecondary credential for “more opportunities.” Gabby declared her reason for enrolling in college was “really just so I could get a better job, I guess.” Jalen was pursuing additional postsecondary credentials because he wanted to work in a different field. He said, “I really didn't like the fact that when I'm dealing with welding, like, I could electrocute myself or set myself on fire.”

Another catalyst serving as a motivator for learning was the example the participants were setting for their friends and family, especially their children. Dena described how her high school aged son was flirting with the decision of dropping out. Her return to adult education and then college was so she could:

See the smiles on my children's faces and be able to show them that we all are capable because I'm capable. If I'm capable of learning, I know they are because they're a lot smarter than me. And so, um, it's just to see the smiles on people's faces, to see that I am, that I am capable of learning, and I am doing stuff, and to reach out to others and tell them, “You can do it.” You know? If I can do it, you can do it.

Similarly, Erin explained:

[My daughter] asked me something about high school and I told her the truth. I told her, “Well, I dropped out of high school, you know? I didn't graduate.” And I didn't want her to think that that was okay. I want her to finish high school. I want her to go to college and get a great job and have a great life. And so, if I went to college to start trying to do something with my life, then I can be a better role model for her.

Farah said that her daughter “just don't need to grow up like I did. So, I figure if I want her to understand what she deserves in life, I got to give it to her.” Though her children are all adults now, Isla said she told herself that “when my kids go to school, I'm going to go to school too.”

While Gabby does not have children, familial relationships provided her with motivation to continue learning. With the emotions still raw from this event, Gabby shared that her brother tragically passed away during her first semester of college. She said about that time:

I wasn't sure if I was going to continue or if I was going to drop out. And it was kind of this thing that I wanted to make him proud because he was more of a father to me than my father was.

Whatever the inspirational source, a reading of the data revealed each participant as someone motivated to learn. Their motivation has provided each participant with the ambition to initiate his or her postsecondary academic ventures. And with all participants, their motivation has proven to be a sustainable force driving them towards completion of their learning goals.

The System

As participants conveyed their interactions with their secondary schools and postsecondary schools, the theme of *the system* surfaced from the data. The discussion of this theme spans both the experiences participants had with their high schools and the experiences they have had with their colleges at the time of this study. The term “the system” refers to all

components of the secondary and postsecondary institutions that the participants belonged to and encompasses any characteristic of those institutions that affected the participants' experience with the phenomenon.

Through analyzing the participants' learning experiences with their secondary and postsecondary schools, three subthemes developed. *The good* subtheme highlights the positive relationship the participants had with their postsecondary institutions. Under *the bad* section, the unfavorable experiences the participants had with their secondary schools are detailed. The final subtheme, *the ugly*, is an unfortunate account of some participants' secondary schools encouraging them to drop out from high school.

The good. Each participant made favorable remarks regarding his or her experience with his or her postsecondary institution. These comments ranged from the care of the professors and administrators towards all students, to the support provided by structure of college, to the connection participants felt with their college peers, to the flexibility and freedom of the class schedule. There was not one negative idea or attitude purported in the data from the participants towards their postsecondary institution.

The words of the participants give credence to their postsecondary institutions bearing the identity of a good system. Gabby said:

You know [support] from my professors and instructors. They, you know, they understand that people have a life outside of school and, you know, things happen. Like when my brother passed away, um, I was out of school for two weeks and, you know, my instructors were completely understanding and helpful and I didn't have that when I was a teenager.

Isla recalled a time in college when she was having difficulty writing an essay. She went to her English professor and the professor asked her to articulate her thoughts on the essay topic. Isla shared:

And I told her, and she asked me a few more questions, and then she said, “Well, you just gave me an essay right here, a verbal essay right here, you could do this, you’re not doing any worse than anybody else in the class.” So, that right there kept me in that English class. It boiled down to support, you know, from that instructor.

Dena described college as a “wonderful experience” with “caring instructors” who “teach and help out.”

Haley acknowledged how the structure of college assisted her in her efforts to overcome her anxiety. Speaking to this, she said:

So, it was really nice to be able to, like, if I needed a moment I could step out. It’s not like high school where, you know, you’re a child still and you’re like, “Oh, can I have permission to go in the hallway for a minute.” Or, go to the bathroom just to calm down for a second. You have freedom to move in and out as you wanted.

Financial assistance was another structural element of the participants’ postsecondary education that offered support. Anna talked about a program that “waived your tuition” for people who “were in the process of getting their GED” and elected to take college courses simultaneously. Brianna took advantage of this same program and said, “Even though I didn’t have an education, they still offered to pay my classes to go into college.”

Erin and Curtis both recognized the peer support they had in their college courses. Erin said, “The only way that I passed in math is because I have a friend of mine, and she would tutor me. And she, honest to God, got me through all of my college math classes.” Curtis described

his learning environments in college as “group efforts” by him and his friends. Concerning the effect his friends had on him as a student, he said, “It’s almost like they give you a boost of confidence.”

Farah depicted her college experience as “peaceful” because “I can work at my own pace, as long as [the work] is turned in on time.” She also credited more classroom options, either “on campus for hands-on learners or online,” as sources of support she receives from her college. It is those same traits of freedom and flexibility that provide support for Jalen. He enjoyed the flexibility of online classes and the freedom to complete his assignments at a time that was beneficial for him. As he explained:

If I want to get up at seven o'clock in the morning, I can go hop straight to it. Then I want to stop at 7:30, then I want to start back at 8:00. I can do it. I might knock out seven, eight assignments at one time. And I might leave the written part left for the rest of the week.

In various ways, all participants felt supported as a student by their postsecondary institution. Thus, Brianna’s summary of her feelings towards college accurately reflect the attitudes of the other participants regarding their postsecondary experience. She said:

My college is a lot better [than high school] because they want, they want to see me and other people be successful in an education. Um, the way I see it if my college mentors and instructors were at my high school, I would have finished high school. That's the only way I can explain this type of situation.

The bad. As much as participants talked complimentary of their postsecondary schools, they had less than stellar things to say about their secondary schools. Anna, remembering a time

she was hospitalized a week before her final exams, said her high school was not “willing to help me through my hard time.” She recalled:

When I got out, I was doing horribly in geometry, and I went to my geometry teacher. I explained my situation. I was like, “I'm trying. I'm here.” I literally just got out of the behavioral health unit, but I'm here. Like, “What do I need to get on my final, to pass the class?” She told me, “Study my butt off.” I failed my final by a half a point. And, that's what sent me to summer school. Like, there was just no understanding of anyone's problems, of anyone's situations, at all.

Curtis said he felt his high school teachers were not too focused on their students or their wellbeing. He said his teachers were always preoccupied, ““When can I go on break? When can I go to my car? When can I run these papers off?” It was more about themselves than the students. It wasn't about the students anymore.” After repeatedly failing an Algebra I class, Erin said:

I, honest to God, I do not remember [my high school] ever trying to get me, in like, a remedial class or anything like that, or even with, like, the special-ed kids or something like that to get me, to get caught up. I don't remember anything like that.

While comparing the high school experience of her children to her own, Isla said, “I don't ever recall being counseled over my grades, or asked why my grades, you know, are declining. I don't recall any of that.”

The social aspect of high school evoked negative memories from some participants. Haley struggled with changing schools and adjusting to her new classmates. She said, “I was more upset about losing my friends. Like, you know, we weren't at the same school, um, and I didn't know anybody at other schools; and it was hard to make new friends.” Gabby

remembered getting “teased and bullied and stuff” as soon as she started middle school. Erin described the challenge of breaking into a “cliquey” friend group as the new person. She recalled, “They had 13 years to be friends before I came along. So, like, they already had all their circles and stuff like that, and then there's me.”

Jalen confessed that his behavior in school was “horrible,” but as he recounted situations from his past, he felt he was not treated fairly by his high school administration. Towards the end of his eighth-grade year Jalen began getting frequently suspended as a result of his actions. Jalen claimed, “Half of [the suspensions] were ridiculous.” Nonetheless, Jalen believed his high school targeted him. He said, “The other teachers all knew my name. Teachers I didn’t attend or go to their class knew my name.”

Every participant had an unfavorable anecdote to share regarding their high school experience. This was present throughout the data; however, some participants offered compelling stories worthy of their own subtheme. Those stories comprise *the ugly* heading of *the system* theme.

The ugly. Though each participant felt unsupported as a learner in some fashion by his or her high school, there were a several participants who shared experiences that seemingly forced them into disengagement from learning. For Gabby and Dena, those incidents began before high school. Gabby recalled the details of being bullied in middle school and physically abused by her alcoholic father at home. She said the school was well aware of the bullying and the abuse but did nothing to intervene. She remembered disengaging from middle school as:

Kind of heartbreaking, but it was a relief at the same time because I didn't have to deal with, you know, all the bullshit from, you know, instructors or teachers and, you know,

students bullying me and, you know, what not. It was ... I ... I wish somebody would have fought for me. You know what I'm saying?

Dena remembered being placed in a special education classroom in elementary school with students of all ages and grade levels. She said her school:

Put me in this different class with all these other students, younger, a lot older, a lot younger, just different, and I was like, "What are y'all in here for," they said, "Oh, we in special ed." I asked, "What do we do in here?" Most of the time they had the intercom. They didn't have a teacher to teach us, so they put the intercom on from the office and said, "Y'all just grab out y'all books. Just color, draw, do something," believe it or not, and they just let us be in the class, and let us do whatever we want.

Dena said she was always confused because "every year [my school] would pass me. Whether I learned anything or not."

Brianna recounted being called "stupid" and was told she "would never become nothing" by one of her high school teachers. When she was struggling with health issues and school attendance, she said she felt the school "encouraged" her to quit coming. While describing how she felt about dropping out, she said:

I was actually more angry, because I thought that my principal and my teachers were there to help me get an education, not say, "Oh, the best thing you can do is drop out, because you're making my school look bad."

Curtis was another participant who felt encouraged to drop out from high school. After a month where he witnessed both parents suffer a stroke, and the responsibility of becoming the primary caretaker of his entire household, including his four younger siblings, was becoming his

new normal, Curtis found himself sitting across the desk from his high school principals being asked to sign a dropout paper. He said:

I understand there are problem children. You just don't kick them out. I turned into a problem for, like, two weeks and they wanted to give me an expulsion. You don't put a child out, especially when they trying to learn something. So, my principal, she told me I would be a good for nothing. That I would be just like the average black man that she knows who has a part-time job frying chicken. And she, with the other two principals, put the paper in front of me and said, "You want to sign it now? Do you want to just drop?"

Other details from participants reveal an apathetic attitude from secondary schools concerning the decision to drop out. Haley said her high school asked "no questions" when she requested the dropout paperwork. When asked if his high school attempted to persuade him to stay enrolled, Jalen replied, "They don't care if you stay. They don't care." Isla finished ninth grade but did not enroll for tenth grade. She was not able to remember a time the school called her family to check on her whereabouts. Farah did recall being asked to stay in high school by her administration, but only because her decision to drop out would have reflected poorly on the school's performance score. After missing several consecutive days due to skipping school and not hearing from the high school, Farah said the attitude of the high school was "well, we don't really care if she comes, but we just don't want to lose the point against the school."

There were no participants who shared an experience where they felt their secondary school advocated for their wellbeing. Asking participants to describe their interactions with the teachers and administration from their high schools usually conjured up adverse emotions that were visibly apparent. This quote from Dena best summarized *the ugly side of the system*:

The system let me down. Knowing that the school system that's supposed to help children to get an education, to be able to have things in life. To be able to go on to get their college education and to get a good job. Um, the system completely let me down, and I was like, "Well, how many other people did they let down," you know?

The Perspective

While analyzing the data, the participants' accounts were examined using the evidence of transformative learning table found in Appendix G. This tool uses Mezirow's (2000) described transformative learning phases as a guide for processing participants' responses. In addition to each participant experiencing the disorienting dilemma of high school dropout, three other phases from Mezirow's (2000) transformative learning phases were encountered by each participant. Those three shared phases, planning a course of action, acquisition of knowledge and skills to implement new plans, and reintegration into life on the premise of a new perspective, represent the subthemes *planned action*, *new knowledge*, and *new perspective, new life*, respectively.

Planned action. As the participants talked through their reengagement with learning, they each described a moment where they became dedicated to the beginning of a new life rhythm. Brianna offered these thoughts regarding her pursuit of postsecondary education:

So, my thing is, if I get a good job and a degree where, no matter where I would go in the world, I would always have a job. Kind of like the medical field. There will always be sick people in this world, so you'd always have a job.

Curtis described the frustration of being bypassed for jobs as being the impetus for his newly planned course of action. He said, "I got tired of people telling me I'm qualified, but I'm not

qualified, because I don't have that piece of paper.” Likewise, Dena equated a fresh start in learning as the gateway to a more secure future:

I want to be able to be independent. I started a couple of businesses before, but they all failed because I didn't have the knowledge behind it. This time, I want to be able to take these goals and these achievements, set these goals, accomplish the achievements that I want to have, and be on that path of success when it comes to having a business.

Erin’s changed perspective was practical and closely tied to her then present life circumstances. She explained:

By the time I got to college, I already had a kid. I've had jobs, you know, and I've had to live in the real world. It was like, “Okay. Well, shit, I'm paying for this now, so now I'm going to learn this shit, I'm going to pass it, and you know, I'm not wasting all this freaking money just to throw it all and bail.”

Similarly, Farah recalled the situations surrounding her life during the moment she decided to make a change:

Now, I really didn't open my eyes until I had my first child, though. It really wasn't until I had my first child that I grew up. When I found out I was pregnant is when I enrolled in school.

Other participants credited their desire to be a learner with the opportunity to learn as a factor that initiated their reengagement with learning. When remembering how she felt as she began her adult education classes, Anna shared:

I was ready. I realized that I was being given another opportunity, and I didn't want to throw it away. I'm not going to lie, I was a little bit disappointed in myself, that I wasn't going to be like, a high school graduate.

Haley never considered not attending postsecondary school as an option. She was always determined to make that her reality, so she said, “Getting my GED felt like my only choice really because high school just wasn’t working out for me.” As a young adult, Isla attempted to earn her high school credential through an adult education class, but said:

I knew it wasn't going to work because of my schedule, because I was dropping the kids off, going to work, from work, between work, and after school hours, I was going to the learning center and then come home and have the kids and, you know, prepare for dinner the next day, it wasn't doable, I wasn't putting my 100%, this is not how I wanted to go back to school.

Now, with all of her children grown and adult aged, Isla had the time to complete her “goal.” She said, “my goal was always to get that high school diploma that I feel I was deprived of you know, and it was a missing piece of me.”

For Gabby and Jalen, the sense of the increased responsibility associated with adulthood sparked their renewed commitment to learning. Gabby compared adulthood to adolescence as having “more responsibility but less stress.” She said, “There's a whole bunch of stuff that, you know, I don't have to worry about now that I did back then, I guess. And more things that I do have to worry about now that I didn't back then.” The “stuff” she referred to during her teenage years were the teasing and bullying from other students, and the “things” she referenced during her adulthood were primarily centered around financial commitments. Jalen’s comment helps expound this thought. He said, “I’m an adult now. I know what I need to do. I know I can laugh and kick it and have fun, but at the end of the day, I’ve got to get down to business.”

Though their experiences varied, each participant verbalized details that brought him or her to a place of embracing a new planned course of action. This was a vital step for arriving at a

changed meaning perspective. As participants explored new plans of action for their education, they each learned new sets of knowledge and skills to aid their plans.

New knowledge. For the participants in this study, the process of gaining new knowledge to assist them in implementing their new planned course of action regarding their learning intricately occurred over a period of time spanning the completion of their high school credential and continued to their enrollment in a postsecondary school. Brianna, Curtis, Dena, and Farah reflected on the confidence and skills they had after earning their high school credential. Brianna said:

The day I got my HiSET testing scores back I was told that if [passed] I would get enrolled [in college]. If I didn't make it, it would be okay because I could try again in the spring. That morning, I got my results that I passed. By noon I was already a full-time college student. So, it was kind of a shock for me because I didn't think I would get it that quick, but I'm thankful I did it.

Curtis described passing the reading component of the HiSET and what that accomplishment meant to him. He said, "I actually sat at the classroom table. I took the first half of my HiSET, which was my reading test. When it came back, I passed with 100%. I said, 'Okay, so this is a reality!'" After completing her HiSET, Dena too experienced a burst of confidence. She recalled, "That moment when [the teacher] said you are qualified to go to [college] and I'm like, 'Wow!'

An accomplishment that I'd been waiting on since I have been in middle school." Likewise, Farah said, "I was so excited when I got my GED because it meant I could go back to school."

Acquiring new knowledge served as a source of continued motivation for participants. While discussing her progress as a student, Anna mentioned, "I've made it this far, I want to keep

taking steps forward. I don't want to take any steps back.” Gabby said, “Getting the GED really helped me fight for my education. It lit a fire in me. I made the Dean's List every semester since I started college.” Isla explained that getting her high school credential was “a lot easier than I thought.” She continued, “Had I known it was going to be that easy I would have probably squeezed it between work and family. So, I said, ‘Let me try to get into college.’”

Other participants enjoyed the perks that their new knowledge delivered in relation to their goals. Erin had said, “Everything I do is for my kids.” Earning her GED and completing college courses became a set of accomplishments that meant her “kids will know that mom finished, as opposed to mom dropped out or mom quit, and that's what mom does.” Jalen described completing his GED and former college courses as “another notch on my belt” that would help him “climb the ladder a little more, let’s go!”

Haley leveraged her acquisition of new knowledge for the greater good. Upon entering college, Haley was directed to Student Support Services where she received tutoring. But, confident in her abilities and aware of the benefit of such as service, Haley decided to tutor others. She described that experience:

I worked at that Student Support Services. And before I worked for them, I actually was a member. Since I was out of school so long, I went and joined there. And they offered tutoring for subjects I wasn't good in, like math. So, I took advantage of that. And eventually I tutored in English, since I was good at that. So, I figured it was kind of a win, win situation. I get to help out with something I was good at but also receive help for something I was not good at.

At the time of this study, every participant except Haley was attempting to finish his or her college coursework and complete a postsecondary credential. Armed with new knowledge

and skill attained through this transformative learning phase, the participants were confident, motivated, and committed to achieving their learning goals. In many ways, the culmination of the participants' life experiences as learners have resulted in them approaching life from a new perspective.

New perspective, new life. Every participant was asked to explain how they understand life differently now than when they were in high school. Their responses accentuated a changed perspective on life that demonstrated a more sensible outlook. A list of the participants' responses to this question are below:

- “I used to, in high school, felt like hopeless, that there wasn't, um ... There wasn't any way out. That I was going to be like this forever [...] Now, I kind of have the mindset [...] that the bad feelings, the anxiousness, all of that, one day, it won't be as bad. I've proven that it won't be as bad. I've proven that I can get through it.” (Anna)
- “In high school, you really ... basically, all you had to worry about was getting good grades. You got good grades, you got good report cards. It was good. In college, I feel like you have to do good academically, but, also, you have to figure out how to take what you learned and apply it in the real world.” (Brianna)
- “In high school, I come to the realization that life isn't fair. Life isn't fair. But, now, I've come to the conclusion, life is what you make it. If you want to make your life hard, it's going to be hard. You make your life easy, it's going to be easy.” (Curtis)
- “Back then I thought it was just, ‘Oh, you going to school and you learning and having fun.’ But you didn't see all the political stuff. Some schools received more money than others, which provided better programs and teachers all at one school. I realize now my school was shortchanged.” (Dena)

- “It's hard to say because when you're a high school student, you haven't lived life yet. You're still sort of depending on your parents [...] College is a lot more real [...] If I have lived life then I probably would've straightened my ass out a lot sooner than when I did.” (Erin)
- “In high school I didn't have an understanding on life. All I had is what I thought I wanted at that second. I didn't understand what I did then affects me now.” (Farah)
- “Not everything is as serious as I thought it was. And some things are more serious than I thought they were [...] You know, not everything ... the heartbreak or, you know, people bullying me. People's opinion of me. You know, it wasn't going to kill me, even though it felt like it back then. And, you know, now there's more serious things happening.” (Gabby)
- “I understand things now. I understand my anxiety now. I understand how to deal with things. I'm not a scared kid anymore, you know. I'm not the scared kid who dropped out of high school because I couldn't deal with people.” (Haley)
- “Wow. Um, oh a whole different world, it's like, uh, I didn't know what life is when I was in high school, all I knew is my family, my environment, which I knew somehow at first, deep down inside, was not right. I knew there was a life out there that I have no idea what it was, that was better than this.” (Isla)
- “Now I know it's time to calm down just a little bit, I got to get it, even though I don't want to do it, but I know to get this degree or what not, or get this certification, or you know get your driver's license, you got to sit down and do this.” (Jalen)

As the participants are continuing to interpret life as they understand it to be, their changed meaning perspectives regarding their academic experience have influenced their present

approach to their learning. Though educational challenges still abound, the participants have exhibited a maturity that will help them manage the difficulties that lie ahead. They have successfully reintegrated their new perspective into their life.

The Path

Despite the opinion that dropping out from high school is not an ideal path to take towards postsecondary success, the participants in this study, with the exception of Erin, who by her own admission said she “didn’t care about anything” when she dropped out, all made some reference regarding their undeterred pursuit of postsecondary achievement. Some participants recognized shortly after dropping out that their futures would not be determined by their decision to withdraw from high school. Farah, for example, said, “Immediately after dropping out, I took my GED, as soon as I received it, I enrolled in college at 17.” Jalen alluded to dropping out as a necessary step in his path towards college enrollment. He said, “I knew I was going to get my GED and go to college after I dropped out. I had all of that in focus.” Haley and Isla also discussed their desire to pursue postsecondary education. Haley said, “I always knew I wanted to go to college, but high school just was not working for me.” Similarly, Isla stated, “I’ve always known I was going to return [to school] someday when I was on my own ... when I was on my own.”

Other participants, though they did not describe a time of always knowing they would return to school, suggested a revitalized confidence towards their learning after receiving their high school credential. Anna said:

I realized that even though I did get my HiSET, that I was still able to go on, and get a good education, and stuff. That I had worked my butt off so hard, that I went from a high

school dropout, to now being in an actual university. That's when I felt the sense of accomplishment, that it all paid off.

Gabby sustained several failed attempts at earning her high school credential, but after finally passing the GED, she found a new spark. She said, “Getting the GED really helped me fight for, you know, uh, ... I started fighting for my education. And it's ... You know, it's really changed me, I guess.” The day Brianna earned her high school credential satisfied years of longing and also marked her first day as a college student. She recalled, “I did my own schooling until I enrolled into adult ed. Here I am, almost three years after dropping out, and I got my HiSET and started college the same day.”

While some participants always knew they would pursue postsecondary education and others had a restored drive to return to school after receiving their high school credential, Curtis and Dena referenced their childhood dreams as primary factors aiding their academic journeys. Curtis excitedly said:

[My high school credential] was something I always wanted. It was something I had in the back of my mind since I was a kid. I wanted that piece of paper. I had to have it. The longer I was out of school, like, the more the urge came back. It was, like, clawing at the back of my throat like a strep throat. Like, “When you going to put your hands on me? When are you going to touch me? When are you going to embrace me? When are you going to come back to your senses?”

Likewise, Dena’s first thoughts of college began when she was very young. She remembered:

I've been trying to go to college since I was in Head Start. I remember looking at my mom and saying to her that I was wanting to be a doctor or a nurse, and I was going to go to college because I thought college was a big thing, you know? I wanted to do the dorm

room, I wanted to do all that stuff when I started finding out about college. Um, I remember my mom asking me, she's like, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" And I was like, "I want to be a nurse."

The participants' drive to get involved in postsecondary education demonstrated that they are learners who possessed the potential of being engaged. Though their routes would be considered unconventional, the participants' collective past and present experience with education highlights their attempts to make sense of an educational landscape that has been difficult to navigate. Their continued pursuit of academic accomplishments exhibits an acceptance of who they are as individuals and their perceived value of postsecondary education.

Even with this favorable outlook of their educational paths, it would be imprudent to imply participants did not feel regret over their decision to drop out. However, this regret was mostly directed at social experiences rather than academic shortcomings. Haley, Isla, Erin, Brianna, Curtis, and Anna expressed a sense of remorse because they did not experience typical high school activities such as prom and graduation. Farah remembered "wishing" she was still in school after dropping out because she "was bored sitting at home." Aside from Dena, not one participant made reference to missing his or her secondary school teachers or administration after dropping out.

The Lagniappe

As an additional theme to the themes already presented, the *lagniappe* theme is composed of two subthemes that do not necessarily belong under any of the other emergent themes from the data analysis but are germane to understanding the participants' lived experience with the phenomenon. The first subtheme, *family academic achievement*, highlights the level of school success, both secondary and postsecondary, by various family members of the participants. The

second subtheme, “*chaotic*,” recognizes the tumultuous experiences each participant endured preceding his or her decision to drop out from high school.

Family academic achievement. As the backgrounds of each participant were explored, it was uncovered that a majority of the participants had someone in their family who did not finish high school due to dropout. Brianna had an older brother who dropped out of high school a few years before she made the decision to quit high school. Gabby’s brother and sister dropped out of high school. They did not continue with their education and neither received a high school credential or postsecondary credential. Gabby’s mother and father were also high school dropouts, but both went on to earn their GED. Gabby’s mother even completed some college coursework. Haley had a difficult time recalling anyone in her family who finished high school. She said her sister, parents, grandparents on her mother’s side, and her entire father’s side of the family dropped out before earning a high school credential. Farah was unsure about her father’s level of academic achievement, but she said her mother did not finish high school. Jalen’s younger brother dropped out of high school and did not return to earn his high school credential.

Isla and Dena’s family academic achievement was influenced by cultural backgrounds. Isla’s mother did not attend high school because that was not something females did in her culture. She did not indicate if her father completed high school. Neither Dena’s mother nor father attended high school. Both were Native American, and high school credentials were not considered a goal worthy of their pursuit.

Erin, Anna, and Curtis were the only participants who did not have an immediate family member drop out from high school. After high school, Erin’s mother graduated college with a degree in business and has been employed in that field ever since attaining her degree. Anna’s mother finished high school and graduated from college with a degree in nursing and, after

working several years in that career, has since retired. Curtis' parents and all of his siblings graduated high school, but no one pursued further educational opportunities.

It would be irresponsible to suggest a correlation between family members' academic achievement and the participants' decision to drop out from high school. Yet, it is a thread woven throughout the data that was worth noting. None of the participants acknowledged their family members' academic background as an influential factor to their own decision to disengage and withdraw from high school.

“Chaotic.” Curtis described the moment in his life when he learned that both of his parents suffered a stroke in the same week as “chaotic.” Every participant in this study had a “chaotic” event happen in their life prior to dropping out from high school. That is, they each experienced a significant, life-altering event that disrupted their normal life routines. Successfully navigating these new, unusual circumstances required supportive environments both at home and at school; a luxury that was void in the participants' lives.

For example, Anna switched from a public middle school to a private school high school, had to learn new peer relationships, and was hospitalized because of an anxiety issue. Brianna underwent multiple surgeries for health issues and missed 53 days of school during her ninth-grade year. Curtis had to become the man of the house and was suddenly the sole caretaker of four younger siblings and two bedridden parents. Dena was essentially legally kidnapped and spent three years of high school away from her home and family. Erin moved to a new city and had a difficult time adjusting to the new school system and making friends. Farah had to adapt to a high school that was ill-equipped to manage the assimilation of students from six different middle schools. She regularly encountered social situations that resulted in verbal and physical alterations. Gabby suffered through an abusive relationship with her father as well as being

displaced because of a catastrophic hurricane. Haley's family was affected by that same hurricane, and they were forced to live a nomadic lifestyle for several months following the storm. Regarding her education, Isla was constantly engaged in a battle with her parents due to cultural differences. Jalen's mother was sick and had to spend several weeks in the hospital leaving Jalen to be the caretaker of his younger brother.

The events above chronicle dramatic life experiences withstood by the participants. Each incident had a lasting effect on the participants that was unique to them. In every situation, support from their secondary schools was virtually nonexistent.

Research Question Responses

Four research questions were developed to guide the purpose of this study. The themes that surfaced in the previous section during data analysis informed the responses to each research question in the next section. These answers impart the essence of the experience through textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon.

Research Question One

The first research question was, *How do former high school dropouts describe the experience of reengaging with learning?* This question reflects the purpose of the study, and the answer to this question portrays a structural description of the phenomenon. As disclosed in the previous section of this chapter, the participants in this study never associated their status as high school dropouts with being incapable of learning. This is noteworthy because the participants' descriptions of being reengaged with learning refers to their experience of being reconnected with an academic institution, which in many ways validated their status to others and reignited their own passion for learning. Therefore, each participant exuberantly discussed his or her

reengagement with learning with an undeniable zeal. For them, it was a reminder of the brighter future that lies ahead rather than the dim memories of the past.

Curtis' description of an encounter with a college professor encapsulated well the general sentiment of the participants regarding their reengagement with learning. He said:

And from that day forward how [the professor] just put her fingernails into my forehead and squeezed my brain. I'm like, "I like this." Like, she's giving me the feel of a real college campus. Okay, "You have this to do, you have that to do, you have that to do. I need you to get this done in a timely fashion and be back in my classroom." You're not here just to be a number and fail.

Through his enrollment in college, Curtis's status as a reengaged learner was legitimized, his life was given new structure and direction, and he assumed the identity of being successful as opposed to being a failure. Other participants, as they experienced their own path to learning reengagement, shared similar feelings of renewed self-discovery.

Research Question Two

The second research question, *How do participants describe the experience of becoming disengaged from learning in a K-12 educational setting to becoming reengaged with learning in a postsecondary setting*, seeks to preserve the phenomenon by invoking an interplay between the participants' differing educational experiences. The response to this question offers a structural description of the phenomenon. The participants' feelings towards their respective K-12 educational settings, specifically secondary schools, were overwhelmingly negative. At best, everyone felt unsupported as a learner, and at worst, some participants actually felt encouraged to drop out. Gabby wished her K-12 educational setting would have "fought for me"; a desire shared by all participants. Since all participants were battling unfortunate life circumstances, and

in dire need of stability, the inability of their secondary schools to provide structure only watered the seeds of disengagement. Brianna said this of her K-12 educational setting:

The school didn't want you to make them look bad. That's all that mattered to them. I came to get an education. But then again, you're telling me to drop out because I make you look bad, I make your teachers look bad, I make your requirements for a grade, um, from the school board look bad, then I'll just drop out and can find somebody else or find another school that would help me with my education. That's what made me decide to drop out.

Brianna's quote emphasized an important idea. Despite feeling unsupported and pushed out by their secondary schools, every participant dropped out thinking of other avenues he or she could take to pursue an education. They did not correlate their standing as a dropout with being disengaged from learning. While school enrollment would seemingly be a basic metric used to measure one's engagement in learning, the participants in this study have demonstrated the ability to be disconnected from an academic institution yet still maintain, in their own mind, the status of a learner. Their reengagement with learning in a postsecondary setting is less about convincing themselves they are learners and more about affirming what they always believed to be true – “that I am capable of learning (Dena).” As they continue on their postsecondary educational paths, engaged as learners, Dena's comment, “That's the best feeling in the world. To know that you can learn,” described perfectly the sense of confirmation felt by the other participants.

Research Question Three

The third research question, *What experiences do participants describe that led them to pursue postsecondary education*, was written to uncover a textural description of the

phenomenon. This question explored an understanding of the circumstances that initiated the participants' pursuit of postsecondary education after failing to complete the traditional path of secondary education. Answering this question requires viewing the phenomenon through the theoretical lenses of MI theory (Gardner, 1983) and transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978).

The participants were able to accurately self-identify their preferred learning mode and often enrolled in postsecondary academic programs that aligned with their learning preferences and interests. Some of the unsupportive characteristics attributed to secondary schools by the participants were actually mismatched instructional strategies and learning modes. For instance, Anna, an interpersonal learner who learns better in group settings, denounced her high school learning environment when she said, "We had classrooms set up like lecture rooms, and stuff like that. And, they would basically just throw the information at us, and then expected us to learn." She spoke more highly of her college when she said:

My English class. We sit at tables. It's like writer's workshops type things, and our teacher will actually come. And, she'll come and sit down at our table with us for 25 minutes. She'll look over rough draft papers, and stuff. She's very engaged.

Recognizing Anna's praise for her postsecondary educational experience through the lens of MI theory (Gardner, 1983) gives meaning to the connection and support she feels from her college and builds understanding of her continued pursuit of postsecondary education.

Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978) grants an additional view of the participants' experience of pursuing postsecondary education. The first phase of transformative learning is experiencing a disorienting dilemma. For all participants, dropping out of high school was their disorienting dilemma. The process of transformative learning culminates when an

individual is able to move from experiencing a disorienting dilemma to developing a new perspective on life and then reintegrating into life on the premise of that new perspective (Mezirow, 2000).

Farah provided an example of this process lived out. She said, “In high school I didn't have an understanding on life. All I had is, what I thought I wanted at that second. I didn't understand what I did then affects me now.” Later in her interview after describing a hectic scenario of being displaced by a flood and temporarily losing her children to Child Protective Services, Farah, exhibiting a newfound fortitude that was absent during her high school years, said about that time, “I was working two jobs and doing my schoolwork, so, yeah, that was stressful.” The participants’ continued pursuit of their postsecondary education could be understood by the changed meaning perspectives they were now implementing in their lives.

Research Question Four

As participants wrestled with the process of adopting new meaning perspectives and integrating those into their lives, a common characteristic surfaced. Research question four asks, *What experiences do participants describe as leading them to successful reengagement with learning?* The answer to this question is found in this emerging trait and affords an additional textural description of the phenomenon. All participants identified a source of motivation that was keeping them successfully reengaged with learning.

The motivators were both intrinsic and extrinsic in nature, with both possessing the power to keep the participants focused on their education. One was not exclusive of the other, as most participants described internal and external influences simultaneously present in their lives. Sources of intrinsic motivation centered on the value that completing a postsecondary credential would have for another individual in the participants’ lives, mostly another family member.

While discussing finishing her college degree, Erin said, “I think it'd mean more to me that my kids will know that mom finished, as opposed to mom dropped out or mom quit and that's what mom does.” Farah, Dena, and Haley each echoed similar sentiments regarding the message finishing a postsecondary credential would send to their children.

Another major influence pushing the participants to reengage in their learning was the extrinsic motivation of an improved quality of life. For most, this meant attaining the necessary qualifications for a better, higher paying job. As Curtis explained:

I didn't want to be that worker who was just doing, like, the manual labor. I wanted to be the worker who ran the place. Every job I went to, they'd get me close to training, to the management position, “You got to go back to school.” Like, really? Like, “Just train me right here to do the job, like, could we overlook this?” “No,” like, “no. If regional come down, if state come down, and they pull your record and see you running this here, we can get in trouble, because you're not certified with your education.” Ugh!

His obvious frustration, shared by other participants in similar situations, is an example of the type of experiences responsible for the extrinsic motivation that fueled the participants’ commitment to reengage with learning.

Summary

This chapter detailed the findings of the research after data analysis was completed. Findings were shared under two sections: theme development and research question responses. Additionally, the participants of this study were introduced through profiles that included brief anecdotal backgrounds. There were five emergent themes from the data analysis: (a) *the learner* (b) *the system*, (c) *the perspective*, (d) *the path*, and (e) *the lagniappe*. Narrative responses from the data provided described lived experiences of the participants’ interaction with the

phenomenon. Answers to the research questions offered an understanding of the essence of the experience through textural and structural descriptions.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of former high school dropouts who have reengaged with learning through a postsecondary program of study. This chapter (a) summarizes the findings of the research in relation to the study's purpose, (b) discusses the findings of the research in their theoretical and empirical contexts, (c) outlines the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of the findings, (d) notes the study's delimitations and limitations, and (e) recommends related areas for future research. The chapter concludes with a chapter summary.

Summary of Findings

This study investigated the participants' experience with the phenomenon using transcendental phenomenological qualitative methodology as outlined by Moustakas (1994). Data analysis resulted in a rich, thick description of the experience crafted through the narrative accounts of the participants. As discussed in the previous chapter, the emergent themes and research question responses of the study were documented. A brief summary of those themes and responses are shared.

Themes

There were five major themes that emerged after analyzing the data. These included: (a) the learner, (b) the system, (c) the perspective, (d) the path, and (e) the lagniappe. Each theme represented a significant component of the participants' described experience with the phenomenon and became an essential element in capturing the essence of the phenomenon.

The first theme to emerge from the data was the learner. Participants never allowed their status as high school dropouts to interfere with their belief that they were learners. As learners,

they possessed and demonstrated the desire to learn, the ability to learn, and the motivation to learn. Participants were also self-aware of their preferences towards particular learning modes. Their expressed learning styles identified in their interviews aligned with their multiple intelligences quiz results. Additionally, the participants displayed specific learning interests that were unique to them and, when presented with those subjects, increased their level of motivation and persistence. The participants' recognition of themselves as learners was foundational to their engagement with the learning process.

The next theme to develop was the system. The system referred to the formal learning environments the participants were in, including both their K-12 schools and their postsecondary schools. The level of engagement the participants had with learning was largely affected by their schools' capacity to accommodate them as learners. All participants described unfortunate interactions with their K-12 schools that culminated with their withdrawal from that system. In some instances, participants actually felt pushed out of those learning environments by their teachers and administrators. Participants had more favorable interactions with their postsecondary schools and spoke positively about their learning experience at those institutions. As a result, participants were more engaged in the learning process and reflected an enthusiasm for their recent academic accomplishments and future learning goals.

All participants exhibited changed meaning perspectives, which were highlighted in the third theme, the perspective. The participants each encountered multiple stages of the ten transformative learning phases (Mezirow, 2000), with everyone experiencing a disorienting dilemma, planning a course of action, acquiring knowledge and skills to implement new plans, and reintegrating into life on the premise of a new perspective. This progression of life experiences illustrated the participants' journey through transformative learning.

The fourth theme to surface was the path. While most would understand the decision to drop out from high school as a major deterrent to postsecondary achievement, the participants in this study never wavered from their dreams of completing a college degree. They may have taken unconventional routes to arrive at their present educational situation, but the participants always believed that one day they would possess the distinction of being a college graduate. This conviction continues to advance their efforts towards learning and has been a factor in their reengagement with learning. More importantly, the participants recognized there is an achievable path leading them towards their ambitions.

The fifth and final theme acknowledged in this study was the lagniappe. This theme was comprised of two subthemes that did not necessarily correspond with any of the other themes of the study but were believed to be pertinent in describing the participants' lived experience with the phenomenon. The first subtheme was the academic achievement of the participant's family members. Most participants had one or more family members drop out from high school. Only two participants had a family member who graduated from postsecondary school with a college degree. The other subtheme recognized the chaotic circumstances endured by each participant prior to dropping out from high school. In every participant account, there was a personal hardship that disrupted the participant's typical life routine. Both of these subthemes, though not existing under another main theme, offer an additional glimpse into the lives of the participants.

Research Questions

Data analysis also led to definitive answers to each research question asked in this study. The first research question posed was, *How do former high school dropouts describe the experience of reengaging with learning?* It is important to recall that the participants in this study, despite their former status as high school dropouts, always considered themselves to be

learners. Unfortunately for them, the primary criterion used to evaluate the learning aptitude of secondary students, the high school diploma, does not account for the plethora of circumstances that can force an individual out of a K-12 learning system. As a result, the participants carried the negative stigma of failure commonly associated with high school dropout. However, being involved in a postsecondary learning environment and experiencing academic success became a source of validation for the participants as the label *postsecondary student* has a better connotation than *high school dropout*. Thus, their experience of reengagement, defined by their enrollment in a postsecondary learning institution, affirmed their proclivity towards learning and offered them a renewed sense of value and self-worth.

The next research question was, *How do participants describe the experience of becoming disengaged from learning in a K-12 educational setting to becoming reengaged with learning in a postsecondary setting?* One of the more disheartening themes to emerge from the data was the irresponsibility and insensitivity demonstrated by the K-12 learning institutions of the participants. None of the participants felt supported by the K-12 school they withdrew from, and some participants even felt their school encouraged them to drop out. The participants' frustration and anger were palpable while they recalled those experiences. Contrarily, participants felt an overwhelming sense of support from their postsecondary schools and held those institutions in high regard. When describing their reengagement with learning through a postsecondary school, the participants expressed the belief that had their secondary school experiences been similar to their postsecondary school experiences then they would have completed their high school diploma. This sentiment emphasized the significance of the learning environment and its role in engaging the participants in their learning.

The third research question was, *What experiences do participants describe that led them to pursue postsecondary education?* An underlying factor to the participants' pursuit of postsecondary education was their persistent recognition of themselves as learners. This, coupled with the unique life experiences of each participant such as unemployment, low-wage jobs, family dynamics, and personal goals, served as the catalytic force behind the participants' decision to attempt a postsecondary credential. As the participants became further removed from their decision to drop out, the consequences of that choice along with their then present life circumstances moved them to consider further education. Unbeknownst to them, the participants were progressing through phases of transformative learning, which concluded with each participant adopting changed meaning perspectives. Integrating these new perspectives into their lives stimulated the participants' desire for postsecondary academic achievement.

The final research question of this study was, *What experiences do participants describe as leading them to successful reengagement with learning?* The participants identified both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators that spurred their reengagement with learning in a postsecondary school. The most common intrinsic motivator was the example that successfully completing a postsecondary credential would be for friends and family, most notably the participants' own children; while better careers and financial opportunities were the hallmarks of the participants' described extrinsic motivators. Additionally, the freedom to choose which classes to schedule and when to take those courses, the care and thoughtfulness displayed by the administrators and instructors, the provision of different student services designed to assist struggling learners, and the availability of financial aid were just a few encouraging interactions the participants had with their postsecondary institutions. These experiences not only kept the

participants immersed in the learning process, but they were also cited as motivators that energized the participants' commitment to finish their postsecondary credential.

Discussion

The literature review in Chapter Two can be divided into four major sections. The first section included an overview of MI theory and transformative learning theory. The next segment introduced statistical information and predictors of high school dropout in America. The third section highlighted social, economic, and educational problems associated with high school dropout. The final component discussed solutions for eliminating high school dropout and the potential for success or failure of those solutions. The relationship between the findings of this study and the theoretical and empirical literature outlined in Chapter Two are considered in this section.

Theoretical Literature

Participants in this study demonstrated an awareness of their own learning preferences towards both learning mode and instructional methods. Each participant also experienced changed meaning perspectives as he or she encountered different phases of transformative learning. As such, the participants primarily substantiated existing theoretical literature in relation to their experience.

MI theory. Gardner (1983) suggested that as an individual matures from childhood to adolescence and ultimately adulthood, he or she may exhibit an ability to function within multiple intelligence modes. In fact, blending or grouping intelligence modes (Gardner & Hatch, 1989; Gardner & Moran, 2006) to perform a task would not be an uncommon characteristic of an adult. The participants in this study embodied this capability. Every participant identified two

or more areas of intelligence he or she was predisposed to and was able to recognize learning environments that assisted with his or her learning.

Furthermore, Gardner's (1996) intended outcomes of MI theory – developing community valued intelligences, multifaceted instructional approaches of a subject, and personalized learning – were experienced by the participants in their postsecondary learning environment. The participants were completing coursework in programs created by their postsecondary schools for the preparation of future careers in their community. Their enrollment in these programs brought exposure to online courses, learning cohorts, teacher accessibility, and academic support services all designed to increase student engagement, learning, and success. The participants also discussed feeling empowered by the freedom of choice offered to them by their postsecondary schools and acknowledged this as a factor in their reengagement with learning. As participants encountered the intended outcomes of Gardner's (1996) MI theory, they became more captivated with learning and took more ownership of their academic pursuits.

While MI theory provides a framework for understanding conducive learning environments, it does not account for other factors that could derail an individual's engagement with learning. It is possible that some life circumstances may prove too great a distraction, and even the most perfectly designed learning environment would fail to engage all learners. For example, when Curtis received the news that both of his parents had suffered a stroke, he had to accept the reality that, as a junior in high school, he was now responsible for the wellbeing of his bedridden parents and his four younger siblings. In that moment, there was little MI theory could do to keep Curtis engaged in learning, and the lived experience of the participant diverged from the prescribed outcomes of MI theory.

As the participants' stories are considered, these experiences suggest learning engagement is more prevalent when MI theory is considered in instruction, but the presence of matched instructional methods to learning modes is not the exclusive factor that determines if learning occurs. Thus, MI theory can serve as a trellis for other learning theories to latch onto so that learning is optimized. This study contributes to the theoretical literature by endorsing a *both-and approach* of both MI theory and another learning theory working together to promote learning engagement.

Transformative learning theory. Changed meaning perspectives, an outcome of transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000), stimulate new approaches to life that result in new actions. Every participant in this study underwent a transformative process that saw his or her outlook change. This new perspective, as Mezirow (2000) contended, became a catalyst that resulted in changed behavior.

As the participants experienced the disorienting dilemma of dropping out of high school, the process of transformative learning began for each of them. They started to contemplate the existing meaning perspective of their own learning and reconciled this to their new circumstance as a high school dropout. The participants formed new thoughts about school and learning environments while reinforcing their conviction that they were learners. Postsecondary schools afforded the participants the opportunity to test their long-held view of themselves as learners with a new understanding of what school could be. These new learning environments provided the participants the time and space to transform their personal positions and engage in new habits of action. The result, which corroborated the theoretical literature, was the participants' acceptance of changed meaning perspectives and the practice of subsequent new behavior.

The participants experienced the disorienting dilemma of dropping out from high school during a similar period of time in their lives, but the progression towards embracing changed meaning perspectives identified by enrollment in a postsecondary institution varied. Some participants such as Anna, Brianna, and Haley were enrolled in a postsecondary school just a few years after dropping out from high school, while other participants such as Dena and Isla waited decades after dropping out from high school before taking postsecondary courses. Changed meaning perspectives that bring about new actions is the culmination of transformative learning, and this study demonstrated that this process can occur quicker in some individuals than others.

Mezirow (2000) stated that adults were only capable of experiencing transformative learning. While the participants in this study did not adopt a changed meaning perspective until adulthood, they began the process of transformative learning by experiencing a disorienting dilemma during adolescence. This opens the door to the possibility of changed meaning perspectives being embraced to some degree by adolescents. And though the line separating adolescence and adulthood is culturally ambiguous, considerations should be made regarding transformative learning occurring in adolescence.

Empirical Literature

As displayed in Table 5, the participants of this study exemplified characteristics of the related literature surrounding the topic of high school dropout. Typically, their lived experience was synonymous with extant empirical research. The following subheadings offer further details regarding the relationship between the literature and the experience of the participants.

Table 5

Dropout Predictors Experienced by the Participants

<u>Predictors</u>	<u>Participants</u>									
	<u>A</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>C</u>	<u>D</u>	<u>E</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>G</u>	<u>H</u>	<u>I</u>	<u>J</u>
1. Relationships with teachers	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
2. Relationships with mentors	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
3. Absenteeism	*	*				*	*	*		*
4. Academic performance	*	*		*	*	*	*	*		*
5. Family obligations			*					*	*	*
6. Work obligations			*						*	
7. Student behavior					*	*	*			*
8. Grade retention							*	*		*
9. Parents' education level			*	*		*	*	*	*	
10. Student's graduation expectations					*				*	*
11. School credits by sophomore year					*		*	*		*
12. Motivation/work ethic					*	*	*	*		*
13. Substance abuse					*		*			
14. Student engagement		*			*	*	*	*		*
15. Tragic life experiences	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
16. Teen Pregnancy				*						

Note. Asterisk* indicates the predictor was present in the participant's experience. 1. (Balfanz et al., 2014; Carter, 2012; Wilkins & Bost, 2016; Zabloski & Milacci, 2012), 2. (Balfanz et al., 2014; Carter, 2012; Zabloski & Milacci, 2012), 3. (Balfanz et al., 2014; Bowers & Sprott, 2012; Bowers et al., 2013; Carter, 2012; Parr & Bonitz, 2015; Smith & Thomson, 2014; Wilkins & Bost, 2016), 4. (Barrat et al., 2012; Bjerk, 2012; Bowers & Sprott, 2012; Bowers et al., 2013; Carter, 2012; Parr & Bonitz, 2015; Wilkins & Bost, 2016; Smith & Thomson, 2014), 5. (Bjerk, 2012; Bowers et al., 2013; Smith & Thomson, 2014; Wilkins & Bost, 2016), 6. (Bjerk, 2012; Bowers et al., 2013; Smith & Thomson, 2014; Wilkins & Bost, 2016), 7. (Bjerk, 2012; Bowers & Sprott, 2012; Bowers et al., 2013; Carter, 2012; Smith & Thomson, 2014), 8. (Bowers & Sprott, 2012; Bowers et al., 2013; Smith & Thomson, 2014), 9. (Bowers et al., 2013; Smith & Thomson, 2014), 10. (Bjerk, 2012; Bowers et al., 2013; Parr & Bonitz, 2015), 11. (Bowers et al., 2013; Smith & Thomson, 2014), 12. (Bjerk, 2012; Bowers et al., 2013; Parr & Bonitz, 2015), 13. (Bowers et al., 2013; Smith & Thomson, 2014), 14. (Bowers & Sprott, 2012; Bowers et al., 2013; Carter, 2012; Henry et al., 2011), 15. (Bjerk, 2012; Bowers & Sprott, 2012; Bowers et al., 2013), 16. (Bowers et al., 2013; Smith & Thomson, 2014; Wilkins & Bost, 2016).

Statistics and predictors. The sample size of this study was too small to suggest any parallel between the participants' demographical information and the statistical data regarding high school dropout. Yet, the experiences of the participants were voluminous and many of the predictors of dropout in the literature were lived by them. Specifically, the predictors cited in Chapter Two referencing relationships with teachers, relationships with mentors, absenteeism,

academic performance, family obligations, work obligations, student behavior, grade retention, parents' education level, student's graduation expectations, school credits by sophomore year, motivation/work ethic, substance abuse, student engagement, tragic life experiences, and teen pregnancy were all encountered to some degree in the participants' stories.

A developed theme from the participants' stories was the negative influence their K-12 schools had in their decision to drop out. While the research surrounding high school dropout focuses mainly on the student, the findings in this study also emphasized the learning system's failure to engage every student. A growing conversation must be had that discusses the antiquated learning systems commissioned to teach all students. By highlighting the failed attempts of these participants' K-12 institutions, this study contributes to that dialog.

Social, economic, and educational problems. Because of the absence of a high school diploma, the participants in this study had to discover alternative means of completing a high school credential and pursuing their educational goals. And despite reengaging with learning in a postsecondary environment, these participants must still confront the increased likelihood, as suggested by the research, that they will become problematic members of society (Bjerk, 2012; Carnevale et al., 2012; Henry et al., 2011; Kim, 2013; Maynard et al., 2014; Vaughn et al., 2014). Key among the social consequences of dropping out are public health problems, crime, substance abuse, and incarceration (Bjerk, 2012; Maynard et al., 2014; Vaughn et al., 2014). None of the participants in this study disclosed any involvement with criminal activity, had been incarcerated, or were battling a substance addiction.

This could be attributed to the reasons guiding the decision to drop out. Bjerk (2012) found that when a student dropped out of school due to push factors (i.e., poor student behavior, low academic performance, legal problems, etc.) he or she was more likely to participate in the

negative behaviors associated with dropping out. While some of the participants did exhibit push factors such as poor student behavior and low academic performance, they were also experiencing pull factors (i.e., devastating hurricanes, family health issues, culturally different educational views, etc.) that removed them from their K-12 schools. The findings of this study implied that pull factors contributed greater to the participants' decision to drop out than push factors, which may indicate why the participants were not involved in any negative social behavior.

Although participants in this study did not represent the social consequences related to high school dropout, the economic realities described by them do align with the literature (Jepsen et al., 2016; Matheny et al., 2015; McDaniel & Kuehn, 2012; McFarland et al., 2016; Sum et al., 2011). Copious amounts of research highlight the financial shortcomings the participants of this study will encounter without proper educational credentials (Kim, 2015; Matheny et al., 2015; McDaniel & Kuehn, 2012; McFarland et al., 2016; Saddler et al., 2011; Sum et al., 2011). Some participants alluded to already experiencing monetary frustrations as a result of not being qualified for higher paying jobs. Others recognized that their insufficient educational credentials are barriers to the careers they yearn for and the paychecks that would follow.

Another area of congruence between the participants' experience and the literature is the educational consequences of high school dropout (Lewis & Stone, 2013). The participants in this study have taken advantage of the alternative high school certification programs and the vocational and technical education programs implemented because of high school dropout. They are leveraging the benefits of a changed educational landscape that, though largely passive, have established pathways for high school dropouts to achieve postsecondary success. The participants' reengagement with learning through alternative postsecondary systems, developed

in response to high school dropout, accentuates the necessity of nascent K-12 educational settings that engage disenchanted learners. As the conversation progresses, new K-12 academic designs are imperative so future students can discover these alternative pathways prior to becoming disengaged and withdrawn.

Solutions and possible success or failure. Through their experiences, the participants in this study have interacted with two efforts aimed at ridding high school dropout: alternative high school credentials and alternative educational programming (Carnevale et al., 2012; Jepsen et al., 2015; Robinson, 2016; Saddler et al., 2011; Schwartz, 2014). As the programs' names imply, these are not yet considered mainstream, and the participants' experience with both confirms the alternative status of each as they only subscribed to this type of programming after no longer being enrolled in high school. The participants' engagement with alternative educational pathways and programs reflects the literature's claim that creative programming capable of fusing education, supportive student services, professional training, and employment has proven to successfully impact educational and employment outcomes for students (Jepsen et al., 2015, 2016; Kim, 2015; Matheny et al., 2015; McDaniel & Kuehn, 2012; Rutschow & Crary-Ross, 2014). Though the participants' outcome from their involvement has so far been positive, if they do not complete their postsecondary credential then they would fail to reap the full benefits of these programs. Haley, the one participant to complete her bachelor's degree, is the lone example from this study of someone fulfilling the objectives of the alternative pathways and programs focused on restoring educational success to former high school failures.

When a student enrolled in an alternative postsecondary program does not complete the coursework in its entirety, but instead, completes only the components needed for employment opportunities, then that student does not get included in the postsecondary persistence literature

(Boerner, 2015; D'Amico et al., 2011; United States Department of Education, 2017). For example, Jalen completed postsecondary classes in welding, construction, hazardous waste management, psychology, and sheet metal work through various postsecondary programs. But, because he never fully finished those programs, he is not considered a postsecondary graduate; yet, the training from those classes has prepared him for job opportunities that were previously inaccessible. By some measure, his story is one of success for alternative postsecondary programs because those programs provided a former high school dropout with the prerequisite training for financial independence. As new educational systems replace their predecessors, finding new standards for success will be imperative.

The literature recognizes that, at times, students are squeezed out of the educational systems that were designed to create opportunities for them (Bjerk, 2012; Schwartz, 2014). As a result, interventions directed to assist high school dropouts usually manifest in reaction. There is a pressing need for these interventions to be proactively implemented with thoughtfulness so their success can be experienced by students prior to disengaging from school. Too often, students can only find access to these creative interventions after they make the decision to drop out (Bjerk, 2012; Schwartz, 2014).

An area where the findings of this study deviate from the literature involves the notion that including academic coursework in postsecondary technical education is detrimental to a former high school dropout's persistence in postsecondary coursework (D'Amico et al., 2011; "What Works Clearinghouse", 2016). All participants in this study completed academic coursework as part of attaining their high school credential, have completed additional academic coursework as part of their postsecondary programs, and are persisting with no indications of stopping. The findings of this study revealed that the participants' successful reengagement with

learning was a product of the alternative programming developed to assist high school dropouts, including the academic coursework integrated into those programs. It adds to the growing volume of literature calling for newly created K-12 learning systems that step away from archaic past models and move towards innovative future designs (Boerner, 2015; Wilkins & Bost, 2016; Wimberley, 2016).

Implications

The theoretical, empirical, and practical significance of the findings from this study leave behind implications that warrant further consideration. Regarding theory, the participants' recognition of their own learning styles and their adoption of changed meaning perspectives speaks to the guiding theories of this study. From an empirical standpoint, there is an abundance of literature diagnosing the high school dropout problem from the perspective of the dropout, but the research is deficient when it attempts to explain the problem through the lens of K-12 educational systems. This study can inform the empirical arena, but its practical application underperforms if tangible changes to the educational landscape do not transition from philosophy to practice.

Theoretical Implications

The participants in this study identified their own preferential learning styles and, through their described experience, affirmed that they were most engaged with learning when instructional methods aligned with their learning mode. The symbiotic relationship between instructional method and learning mode is the crux of MI theory, and its manifestation in the lives of the participants as early as childhood, corroborates Gardner's (1983) supposition that learning styles are recognizable in youth. As the participants became disengaged from high school, many reported learning environments that did not pair well with their preferred learning

mode. Since the participants also experienced a chaotic life circumstance prior to dropping out, it is impossible to determine if their decision to withdraw from high school was solely the repercussion of poorly matched instructional strategies to learning styles. An adequate assumption would be that the participants' disinterest in high school stemmed from ineffectively constructed learning environments, but, with school losing its allure, their resolution to drop out was finalized due to the turmoil in their lives.

This implies that practicing the tenets of MI theory alone may not be enough to keep all students engaged throughout the learning process. Further understanding, guided by other theoretical inputs, becomes necessary to grasping the multitude of factors involved in student engagement. The additional theory framing this study, transformative learning theory, performs a sufficient job of providing supplementary meaning to student engagement in the learning process.

Mezirow (2000) explained changed meaning perspectives to be the foundation of new action. In transformative learning theory, the transformative process that an individual journeys through concludes with a new outlook on life but begins with a life-changing disorienting dilemma. All of the participants in this study experienced the same disorienting dilemma of dropping out of high school during their teenage years. Interestingly, Mezirow (2000) suggested that only adults were capable of accepting changed meaning perspectives. While the participants did not demonstrate new changed meaning perspectives until adulthood, their process of reengagement with learning could be traced back to their disorienting dilemma experienced during adolescence. This suggests that if the process of transformative learning could start prior to adulthood then the finale of this process could also be arrived at prior to adulthood.

When MI theory and transformative learning theory are considered together, they afford a powerful lens to view the topic of student engagement. No longer would a student's engagement in learning be isolated to the learning environment, but circumstantial life experiences outside of the classroom would be factored in as well. Administrators and teachers would be wise to develop K-12 educational systems that not only match instructional strategies to learning modes but also provide the space and support for students to arrive at changed meaning perspectives. Creatively facilitating this element of human development would only enhance the objectives of K-12 institutions.

Empirical Implications

Much of the literature on high school dropout is reflected in the experiences of the participants in this study (Table 5). Similar to the literature, the participants' lives exhibited some of the same predictors of high school dropout and shared in some of the same consequences of high school dropout. However, an area where the participants' stories began to deviate from the research is their devout view of themselves as learners, even while being unenrolled in a formal academic institution. Whether it was through Google searches, independent reading, studying old textbooks, or watching documentaries, several participants shared examples of how they pursued learning during the period of time between dropping out from high school and enrolling in a postsecondary school.

The participants of this study did not need an affiliation with a school to validate their identity as a learner. This fascinating revelation implies that a student's engagement with learning is neither dependent on his or her status as a student nor contingent on his or her enrollment in a recognized K-12 school. Thus, the traditional measures of student engagement – graduation rates, standardized test scores, college admittance, etc. – are inapplicable as a

universal standard. While those benchmarks are important, this study's findings seemingly call for student engagement to be evaluated through criteria that shifts emphasis from the educational system to the student. Simply put, student engagement needs a new metric.

As new criteria for student engagement are considered, it would be negligent to not also assess the current state of K-12 schools. In resounding agreement, the participants of this study expressed their belief that their K-12 schools had failed them. More research should be conducted on the topic of poorly performing K-12 schools, and assumptions should not be made regarding those schools' perceived levels of success. After all, high school graduates between the ages of 16 and 24 who are not attending college and do not have a job are considered opportunity youth (Sims, 2015), and their alma maters should be scrutinized for the schools' inability to connect those graduates with a meaningful pathway that leads to employment or postsecondary success. Since research informs practice, additional exploration into the topic of K-12 school performance is imperative as long as the academic and career outcomes of students beyond graduation is a primary emphasis.

Practical Implications

As previously disclosed, the participants in this study described how their K-12 educational systems failed them in ways their postsecondary systems have not. Unfortunately for them, they became the collateral damage of a system that is efficient at processing large quantities of students through a daily schedule but inept at adapting to the wide-ranging individualized needs of students. Lacking the design to be innovative, the mechanized structure of K-12 institutions limit those schools' capacity to adapt to changing circumstances because they are constructed to achieve pre-determined objectives. Mechanistic approaches to organizations restrict them in their adaptability, result in gratuitous management, bring unwanted

consequences when the needs of an individual are prioritized over the objectives of the organization, and lead to “dehumanizing effects” (Morgan, 2006, p. 28). Regrettably, the metaphor of mechanization offers the best explanation for the participants’ disengagement from a system that did little to entice them to stay.

If the dehumanizing effects that K-12 schools have on their students are to be addressed, a broader interpretation of dehumanization is required. Exploring the ancient practice of excarnation provides additional context in comprehending dehumanization. Historically performed to honor the dead, excarnation is a naturally or purposefully occurring process of removing flesh and organs from the dead (Frost, 2014). While dehumanization from mechanization automates individuals’ actions, dehumanization from excarnation leaves them incapable of expression, thought, or feeling. Frost (2014) gave a more harrowing description of the effects of excarnation: “Practicing excarnation on the dead gives meaning to life; practicing excarnation among the living is destructive, violent, death-bringing” (p. 11). As mechanized learning systems automatize students, *excarnational learning systems* abolish the intimacy of learning and extinguish students’ engagement in the learning process.

The practical response to the participants’ experience with their K-12 schools and their withdrawal from those systems would be to endorse an educational framework that is contrarian to the existing model. The participants in this study found such a design in their postsecondary schools, which suggests moving characteristics of those postsecondary environments into K-12 schools. However, existing K-12 schools provide insufficient space to amply integrate the qualities of postsecondary schools so that the excarnate effects of K-12 learning systems can be overcome. Instead, policymakers, school officials, and community leaders need to strongly consider a new prototype of K-12 learning systems. One that promotes *incarnational learning*,

or, learning that connects students as holistic beings to the world around them. Doing so would foster student engagement through deeply meaningful interactions.

Delimitations and Limitations

The delimitations of this study included the participants' former educational status as well as their educational status at the time of this study. All participants in this study dropped out of high school and did not complete a high school diploma. As time passed, each participant earned his or her high school credential, either a GED or HiSET, through an adult education program affiliated with a technical or community college. After completing a high school credential, every participant enrolled into a postsecondary program of study. Therefore, eligible participants for this study were those individuals who dropped out of high school, completed their high school credential through an adult education program affiliated with a technical or community college, and were enrolled in a postsecondary school at the time of this study. Haley, though she experienced each of the delimiting criteria, was the only exception since she had recently graduated from a four-year university and was not currently enrolled in a postsecondary institution. There were no delimitations placed on age, gender, ethnicity, social class, or geographical location. The delimitations were chosen to ensure the participants experienced the phenomenon.

Due to the nature of qualitative phenomenological research, this study has limitations innate to its design. One limitation was the role of the researcher. Though I followed Moustakas' (1994) process of practicing *Epoche* and attempted to rid myself of any bias, as the primary instrument of data analysis, I brought prejudgments into this study in relation to the phenomenon. The emergent themes were formed based on my attempted unbiased perception and understanding of the participants' experience with the phenomenon.

An additional limitation connected to this study's design is transferability. Efforts were taken to triangulate data so the reconstruction of the experience would be as accurate as possible. Still, without conducting a separate study with another group of participants from different regions of the country, it would be impossible to apply with absolute certainty the results of this study to similar experiences with the phenomenon in other contexts.

Other limitations to this study were associated with the geographical location of the study and participant demographics. Several participants were affected by the same natural disaster that impacted, among other things, the school systems of that region. Another regional limitation was access to different school systems. Though enrolled during different years, three of the participants were students of the same high school and three others attended schools in the same district. The neighborhoods the participants resided in at the time of dropping out from high school and their enrollment in a postsecondary institution were in lower- to middle-class communities. Not one participant grew up in an upper-class household. Lastly, only two males participated in this study. Any inference made regarding gender and its relationship to the phenomenon is unsubstantiated.

Recommendations for Future Research

Though this study filled a void in the research, it is limited in its transferability to the larger population. Replicating this study could help determine if the findings are transferable. In an effort to uphold the purpose of the study, any attempts at repeating this research should follow the delimitations of the study as those were established to ensure a sample size that experienced the phenomenon. However, it is recommended that future duplications of this study be conducted in a region other than the southern United States. Expanding the sample population to

include individuals from outside this region would help determine if this study's findings are unique to a specific location.

The phenomenon of former high school dropouts reengaging with learning was explored in this study from the perspective of the individuals who dropped out from high school and later enrolled in a postsecondary program of study. Other people who interacted with this phenomenon were mentioned in the participants' descriptions of their experience. These include family members, school administrators, teachers, and school officials. Additional meaning of the phenomenon should be explored by seeking the lived experiences of others involved with the phenomenon. This would offer a different outlook and could provide a more comprehensive picture of former high school dropouts who reengaged with learning.

Lastly, the findings of this study suggest a major system failure by the participants' K-12 schools that manifested itself in their decision to drop out. Studies that examine other exhibitions of K-12 school failure would enhance the argument that a complete overhaul to the K-12 educational system is essential and overdue. These studies could be either qualitative or quantitative in nature but should investigate other indicators of K-12 school failure such as the negative attitude of teachers towards their profession or the number of opportunity youth who have graduated high school with a high school diploma but have foregone postsecondary school enrollment.

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of former high school dropouts who have reengaged with learning through a postsecondary program of study. The participants' stories granted others access to the experience and, in doing so, provided an acute understanding of the phenomenon. If the

implications of this study manifest into practice, then its contributions will extend beyond filling a gap in the literature. Chief among these suggestions are the need for new measures of student engagement and new models of K-12 schools.

The findings of this study have demonstrated that the participants' engagement with learning was not synonymous with their enrollment in an educational system. Traditional methods of measuring student engagement with learning rely on quantifiable benchmarks such as standardized test scores, high school graduation rates, and college admittance percentages. This impersonal practice of assessment is calculated and fails to intimately know the learner. It also prioritizes the institution over the individual. The implication then becomes that learning is a manufactured experience and can only transpire within the confines of the educational system responsible for its production.

In order to move the pendulum of empowerment from the educational system to the learner, new metrics for determining student engagement with learning must be implemented. These new metrics should consider, among other things, evaluating the relationship between curriculum and community needs, assessing the likely career trajectory of students, and gauging student ability through nonstandard means of assessment. Obtaining this information is slow and complex and requires personal connectedness with each learner. As the metrics are reconsidered, the behavior of educational systems will be altered, and the door will open wide to creating new K-12 school models.

These new models must have a quality to them that breathes life into the learner. Incarnation, or the process of putting on flesh, brings inanimateness into a tangible existence. Thus, the proposed model of incarnational learning puts skin on the instructional process, making learning something that can be known and felt and engaged with personally.

Incarnational learning systems are not restricted by time or location and are enhanced through flexible experiences that closely connect students with the world around them. They inspire contact between the student and learning. As Curtis explained his longing to earn his high school credential, he described the affection that can occur between a student and learning when he said, “When you going to put your hands on me? When are you going to touch me? When are you going to embrace me? When are you going to come back to your senses?” For Curtis, learning was deeply personal and highly interactive, two characteristics future K-12 educational systems must strive to achieve.

It is audacious to subscribe to any instructional model as being the exclusive, preeminent solution that will fix the broken features of the current K-12 educational system. Ideas such as the suggested incarnational learning model must continue to be developed if instructional systems aspire to be effective. The findings of this study endorse a new direction for K-12 schools and encourage creative thinking that will guide an overhauled educational system into a better future.

EPILOGUE: THE SYSTEM LET THEM DOWN

Engage, Educate, and Empower Every Student, Every Day

So read the words of one K-12 school district's mission statement. At first glance, there is not anything uniquely special about that objective. In fact, those ideals are common to the ethos of K-12 school systems across America. However, the mission statement above is noteworthy because it belongs to the school district that included the high school attended by Brianna, Curtis, and Dena.

Brianna, who missed 53 days of school due to a medical issue, was told by her high school that the best thing she could do was drop out because she was negatively affecting the school's performance score. The administration from that same high school cornered Curtis in an office and demanded he sign a dropout paper because his grades were severely declining and absences quickly mounting after both of his parents experienced a stroke within the same week. He suddenly became responsible for the wellbeing of his entire household overnight. Dena, a lifelong special education student, was informed by this same high school that a clerical error with her transcripts meant she did not have enough credits to graduate. The solution was to place Dena in mainstream classrooms with the hope she could keep up. This was an impossible task, and she dropped out just weeks before her expected graduation date. *Engage, Educate, and Empower Every Student, Every Day.*

As the other participants in this study shared similar anecdotes of unsupportive high schools and discouraging administrations, it became evident that what many consider to be disengagement was actually disenfranchisement. Individuals are accountable for their disengagement. The participants in this study remained engaged as learners even during the time they spent disconnected from a formal school system. Systems are responsible for

disenfranchisement. The participants' marginalization as learners happened because of a system failure. *Engage, Educate, and Empower Every Student, Every Day.*

It is this same K-12 education system that millions of Americans entrust their children's future to every day. And every day, hundreds of thousands of students stand on a precipice awaiting the final push of injustice that has become the byproduct of a system that cannot meet the changing demands of society with the antiquated educational models of yesterday. A systematic overhaul of K-12 education is past due. Until that happens, more stories similar to the ones of the participants in this study will be the collateral damage of a system that let them down. *Engage, Educate, and Empower Every Student, Every Day.*

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APPENDICES**Appendix A****IRB Approval****LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.**
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

June 8, 2017

Sean Englert IRB Approval 2897.060817: Returning to Class: A Phenomenology of Former High School Dropouts' Pursuit of Higher Learning

Dear Sean Englert,

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

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

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

The Graduate School

Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971

Appendix B

Permission Request Letter

Dear _____:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The title of my research project is *Returning to Class: A Phenomenology of Former High School Dropouts' Pursuit of Higher Learning*, and the purpose of my research is to describe the lived experiences of former high school dropouts who have completed their high school credential through an adult education program and are enrolled in a postsecondary program of study at a technical college, community college, or four-year university.

I am writing to request your permission to utilize your student contact lists to recruit participants for my research and to access needed student records.

Participants will be asked to contact me to schedule an interview. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please respond by email to.

Sincerely,

Sean Englert
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix C

Participant Recruitment Letter

Dear Student,

My name is Sean Englert, and I am doctoral student at Liberty University. I am conducting a study that describes the educational experiences of former high school dropouts who are now enrolled in college. You are receiving this email because your educational background may qualify you as a participant for my research. Please continue reading if:

1) You completed your GED or HiSET at a technical or community college.

2) You are currently enrolled as a student in a technical or community college.

If both qualifiers above accurately describe you then you are an eligible participant for this research. By choosing to participate in the entire process, you will receive a \$50 Amazon gift card. **If you are an eligible research participant and would like to participate in this project then please see the following requirements for participation:**

1. Complete a self-report questionnaire and multiple intelligences quiz that should take approximately 30 minutes.
2. Sit down for a private, audio-recorded interview at an agreed upon time and place that will last between 30 minutes and an hour.
3. Roughly one month later, be involved in an audio-recorded focus group interview with other participants in the study at an agreed upon time and place that will last between 30 minutes and 90 minutes.
4. After both interviews are transcribed, read the transcripts so you can verify the interpretation of your words. You can comment or alter your interview by marking changes on the transcript.

Though the monetary incentive is small, the descriptions of your experience will make significant contributions to the progressive topic of education reform, which could change the lives of thousands. Thank you for your consideration and time. Please email me at to receive further instructions about participation. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Sean Englert
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix D

CONSENT FORM

RETURNING TO CLASS: A PHENOMENOLOGY OF FORMER HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS' PURSUIT OF HIGHER LEARNING

Sean Englert
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of former high school dropouts who have completed their high school credential through an adult education program and are enrolled in a postsecondary program of study at a technical college, community college, or four-year university. You were selected as a possible participant because your educational background identifies you as a former high school dropout who is enrolled in postsecondary education. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

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

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to describe the lived experience former high school dropouts give to reengaging in learning through postsecondary program of study.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things: Complete a self-report questionnaire and multiple intelligences quiz that should take approximately 30 minutes.

Sit down for a private, audio-recorded interview at an agreed upon time and place that will last between 30 minutes and an hour.

Roughly one month later, be involved in an audio-recorded focus group interview with other participants in the study at an agreed upon time and place that will last between 30 minutes and 90 minutes.

After both interviews are transcribed, read the transcripts so you can verify the interpretation of your words. You can comment or alter your interview by marking changes on the transcript.

All participation by you will be confidential. I will know your name for the purpose of the study but it will not be disclosed to anyone else. A pseudonym will be used to protect your identity.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study: The risks involved in this study are minimal, no more than you would encounter in everyday life.

You will not receive direct benefits for your participation, but your participation will be a benefit to society. Your story could make high school graduation a reality for students who were on the path to dropping out.

Compensation: Participants who commit to the entirety of the study will receive a \$50 Amazon gift card.

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 participant. Pseudonyms will be used in place of identifying information. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. Physical records will be locked away in a safe, and digital records will be kept on a password protected computer. All data must be retained for three years upon completion of the study per federal regulations. I may share the data I collect from you for use in future research studies or with other researchers; if I share the data that I collect about you, I will remove any information that could identify you before I share it. While I can take proper steps to ensure confidentiality, I cannot assure you that other members in the focus group will maintain your privacy.

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

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

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Sean Englert. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at (504) 343-8938 or senglert1@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. Fred Milacci, at fmillaci@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, Green Hall 1887, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

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

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

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

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

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

Appendix E

Self-Report Questionnaire

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION:

Name of Participant	Date
Current Degree Earned or Current Degree Being Pursued	Date of Completion
Institution Name	

QUESTIONNAIRE GUIDELINES: Please complete each question truthfully. Circle the answer that accurately describes your history, or provide the answer in the blank.

QUESTIONS:

1) Did you drop out of high school before completing a high school credential such as a high school diploma, GED, or HiSET?

Yes No

2) Have you earned your GED or HiSET through an adult education program affiliated with a community and technical college system?

Yes No

*If no, please explain: _____

3) What is your age?

4) What is your gender?

5) What is your ethnicity?

PARTICIPANT REFERRAL: Please complete this portion of the questionnaire if you know of any individual(s) who meet the qualifications of this study.

Name

Address

Phone

Email

Name

Address

Phone

Email

PERMISSION: By signing below, I acknowledge that my answers to the questions above are correct. My signature also grants Sean Englert, the principal investigator of this study, permission to seek official transcripts from my current institution as verification for the information I provided.

Signature of Participant

Date

Appendix F

Multiple Intelligences Quiz

Participant's Name: _____

Directions: For each of the statements below, choose a number between 1 and 5 to rate how the statement describes you.

No, the statement is not like me

The statement is a little like me

The statement is somewhat like me

The statement is a lot like me

Yes, the statement is definitely me

Verbal Linguistic

I can use lots of different words to express myself. _____

I feel comfortable working with language and words. _____

I enjoy crosswords and other word games like Scrabble. _____

I tend to remember things exactly as they are said to me. _____

I enjoy participating in debates and/or discussions. _____

I find it easy to explain things to others. _____

I enjoy keeping a written journal and/or writing stories and articles. _____

I like to read a lot. _____

Total _____

Logical/Mathematical

I work best in an organized work area. _____

I enjoy math and using numbers. _____

I keep a 'things to do' list. _____

I enjoy playing brainteasers and logic puzzles. _____

I like to ask 'why' questions. _____

I work best when I have a day planner or timetable. _____

I quickly grasp cause and effect relationships. _____

I always do things one step at a time. _____

Total _____

Visual/Spatial

I understand color combinations and what colors work well together. _____

I enjoy solving jigsaw, maze, and/or other visual puzzles. _____

I read charts and maps easily. _____

I have a good sense of direction. _____

I like to watch the scenes and activities in movies. _____

I am observant. I often see things that others miss. _____

I can anticipate the moves and consequences in a game plan. (e.g., chess) _____

I can picture scenes in my head when I remember things. _____

Total _____

Interpersonal

I can sense the moods and feelings of others. _____

I work best when interacting with people. _____

I enjoy team sports rather than individual sports. _____

I can sort out arguments between friends. _____

I prefer group activities rather than ones I do alone. _____

I enjoy learning about different cultures. _____

I enjoy social events like parties. _____

I enjoy sharing my ideas and feelings with others. _____

Total _____

Musical

I often play music in my mind. _____

My mood changes when I listen to music. _____

It is easy for me to follow the beat of music. _____

I can pick out different instruments when I listen to a piece of music. _____

I keep time when music is playing. _____

I can hear an off-key note. _____

I find it easy to engage in musical activities. _____

I can remember pieces of music easily. _____

Total _____

Naturalistic

Pollution makes me angry. _____

I notice similarities and differences in trees, flowers, and other things in nature. _____

I feel very strongly about protecting the environment. _____

I enjoy watching nature programs on television. _____

I engage in 'clean-up days'. _____

I like planting and caring for a garden. _____

I enjoy fishing, bushwalking, and bird-watching. _____

I want to work with plants and animals. _____

Total _____

Intrapersonal

I know myself well. _____

I have a few close friends. _____

I have strong opinions about controversial issues. _____

I work best when the activity is self-paced. _____

I am not easily influenced by other people. _____

I have a good understanding of my feelings and how I will react to situations. _____

I often raise questions concerning values and beliefs. _____

I enjoy working on my own.

Total _____

Body/Kinesthetic

I like to move, tap, or fidget when sitting.

I enjoy participating in active sports.

I am curious as to how things feel and I tend to touch objects and examine their texture.

I am well coordinated.

I like working with my hands.

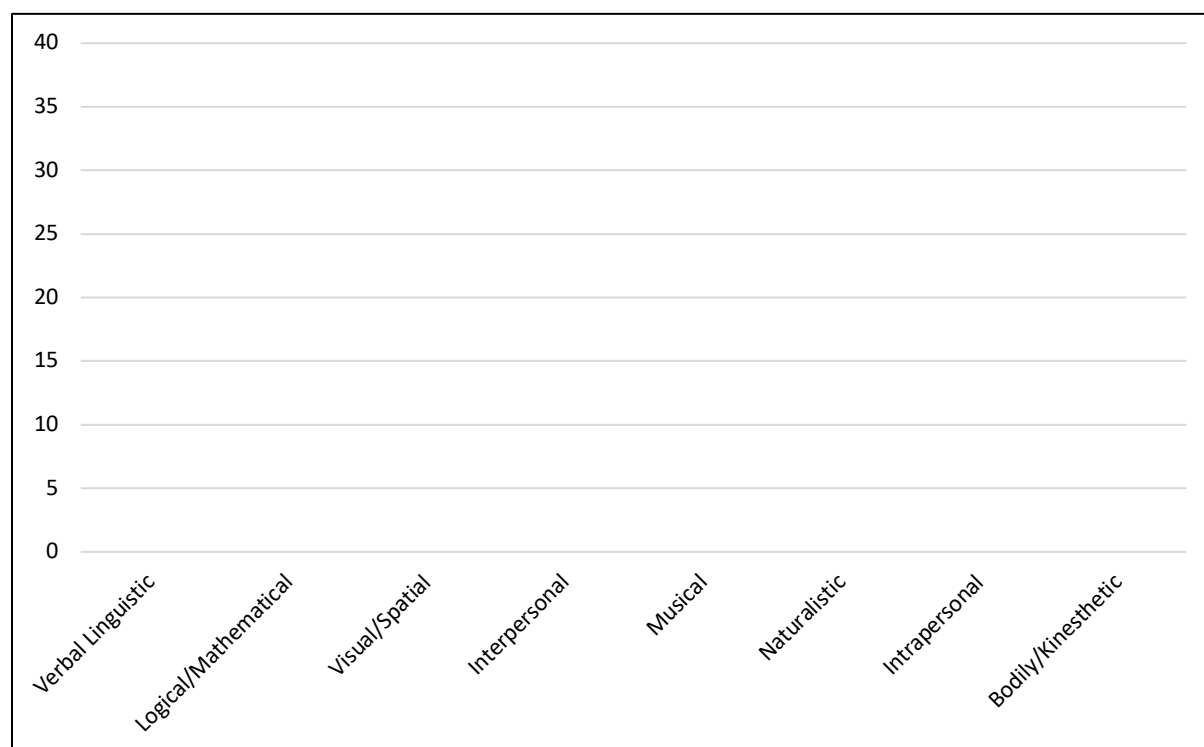
I prefer to be physically involved rather than sitting and watching.

I understand best by doing (e.g., touching, moving, and interacting).

I like to think through problems while I walk or run.

Total _____

Multiple Intelligences Graph



Appendix G

Evidence of Transformative Learning

Participant's Name: _____

Note. *Transformative learning phases are from Mezirow (2000).

*Transformative Learning Phase	Evidence in Research Participant
1) Disorienting dilemma	
2) Self-examination with feelings of shame, fear, guilt, or anger	
3) Critical assessment of personal assumptions	
4) Recognition that one's discontent and process of transformation are shared with others	
5) Exploration of options for new relationships and behavior	
6) Planning a course of action	
7) Acquisition of knowledge and skills to implement new plans	
8) Conditionally trying of new roles	
9) Building self-confidence and competence in new roles and relationships	
10) Reintegration into life on the premise of a new perspective	

Appendix H

Excerpt from Researcher's Journal

November 17, 2017:

Just leaving the interview with Curtis. He is a hard worker and has achieved tasks that he had set out to do. He will finish his degree. He demonstrated characteristics and shared experiences that I would not have associated with someone who dropped out from high school. He is high functioning and communicates well. I found myself becoming angry as I listened to the way his high school handled his situation during the time his parents both suffered strokes. This is another participant who was let down by their K-12 school.

November 20, 2017:

I'm about to sit with Dena for our interview. I'm reminding myself to eliminate any prejudgments I carry with me into this interview. Right now, these include the ideas that the K-12 school system has let the participants down, and that these participants could all be successful academically. I want her to describe her experience without any biased influence from my questioning.

November 20, 2017:

Dena also described the shortcomings of her K-12 school. This appears to be a trend among the participants. I am noting this, but I am also noting that I need to stay emotionally unattached. It is disheartening to hear how these participants' K-12 schools have handled their situations, and I am angered by it.

Appendix I

Outline of Emergent Themes and Subthemes

1. The Learner

A. Learning Modes

B. Learning Interest

C. Motivation to Learn

2. The System

A. The Good

B. The Bad

C. The Ugly

3. The Perspective

A. Planned Action

B. New Knowledge

C. New Perspective, New Life

4. The Path

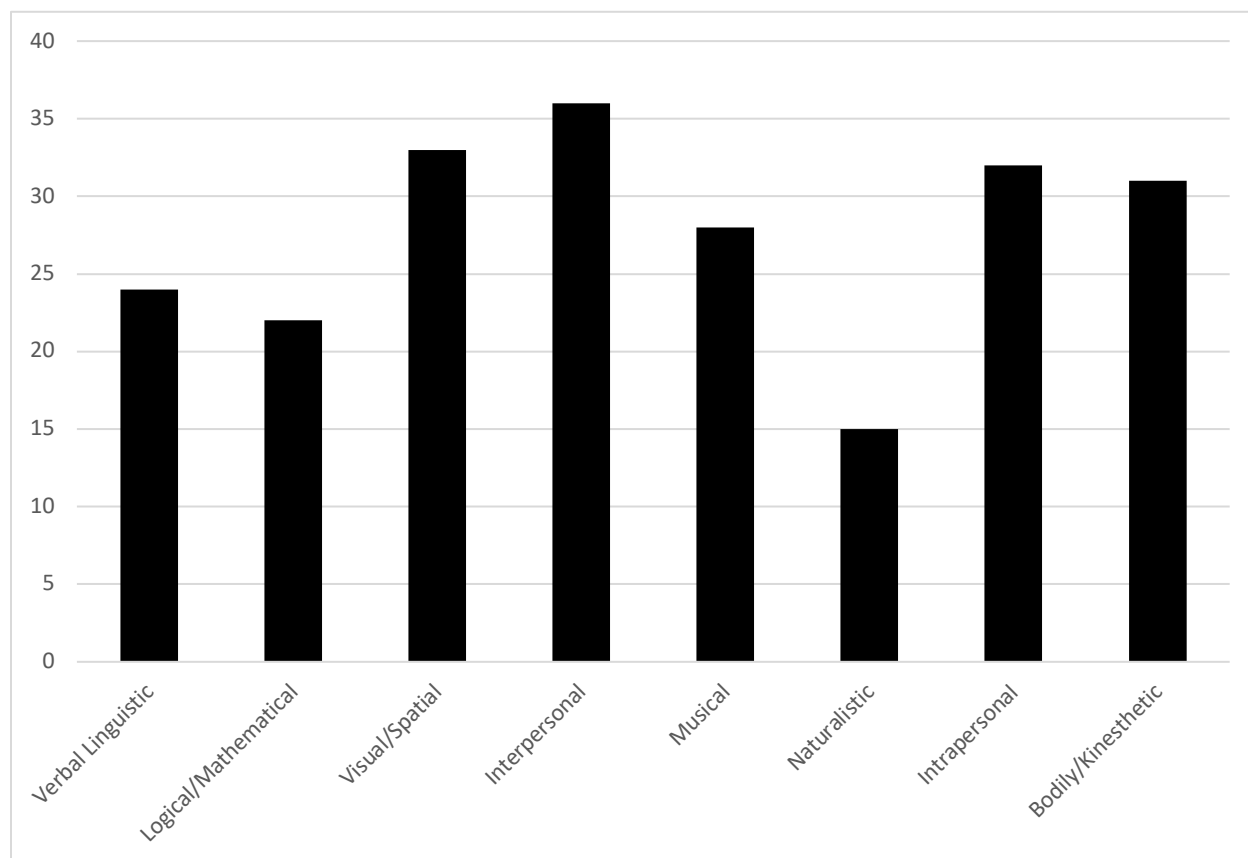
5. The Lagniappe

A. Family Academic Achievement

B. “Chaotic”

Appendix J

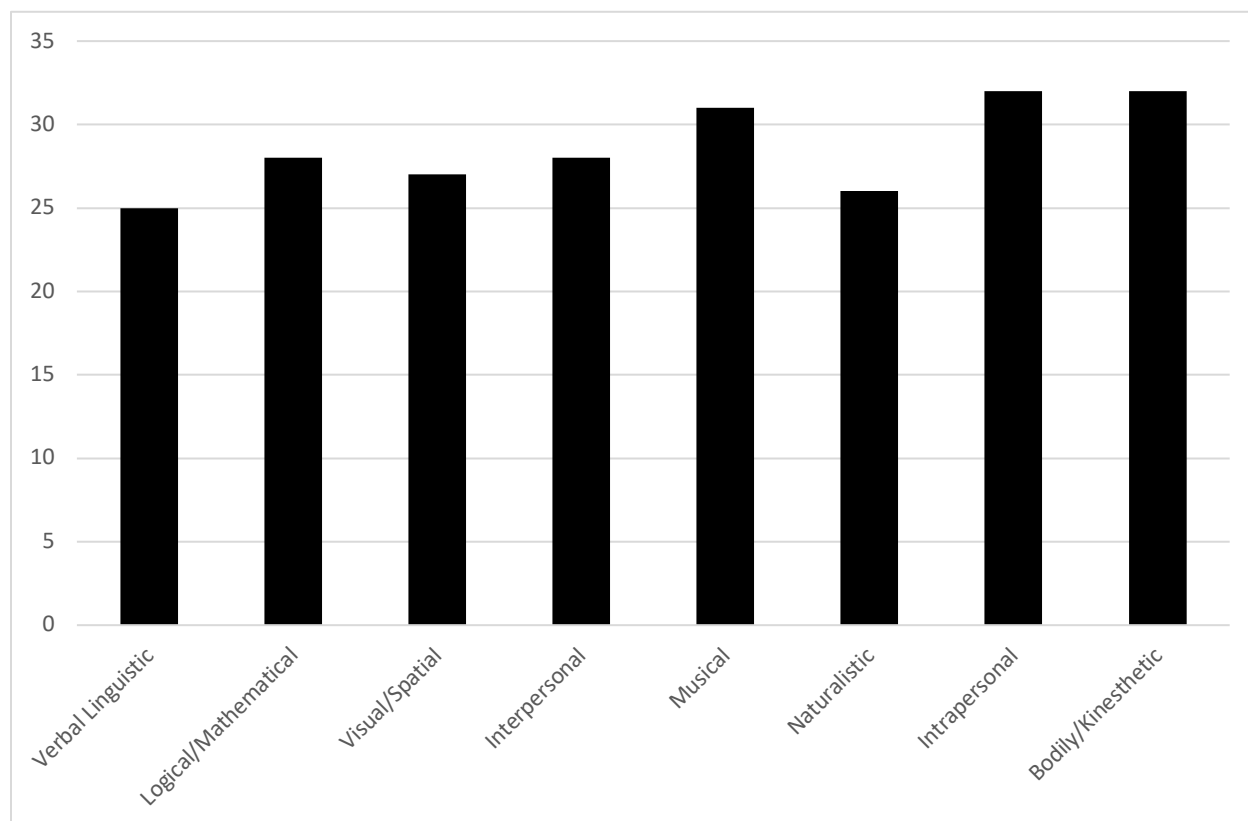
Anna's Multiple Intelligences Quiz Results.



Learning Mode	Score
Verbal Linguistic	24
Logical/Mathematical	22
Visual/Spatial	33
Interpersonal	36
Musical	28
Naturalistic	15
Intrapersonal	32
Bodily/Kinesthetic	31

Appendix K

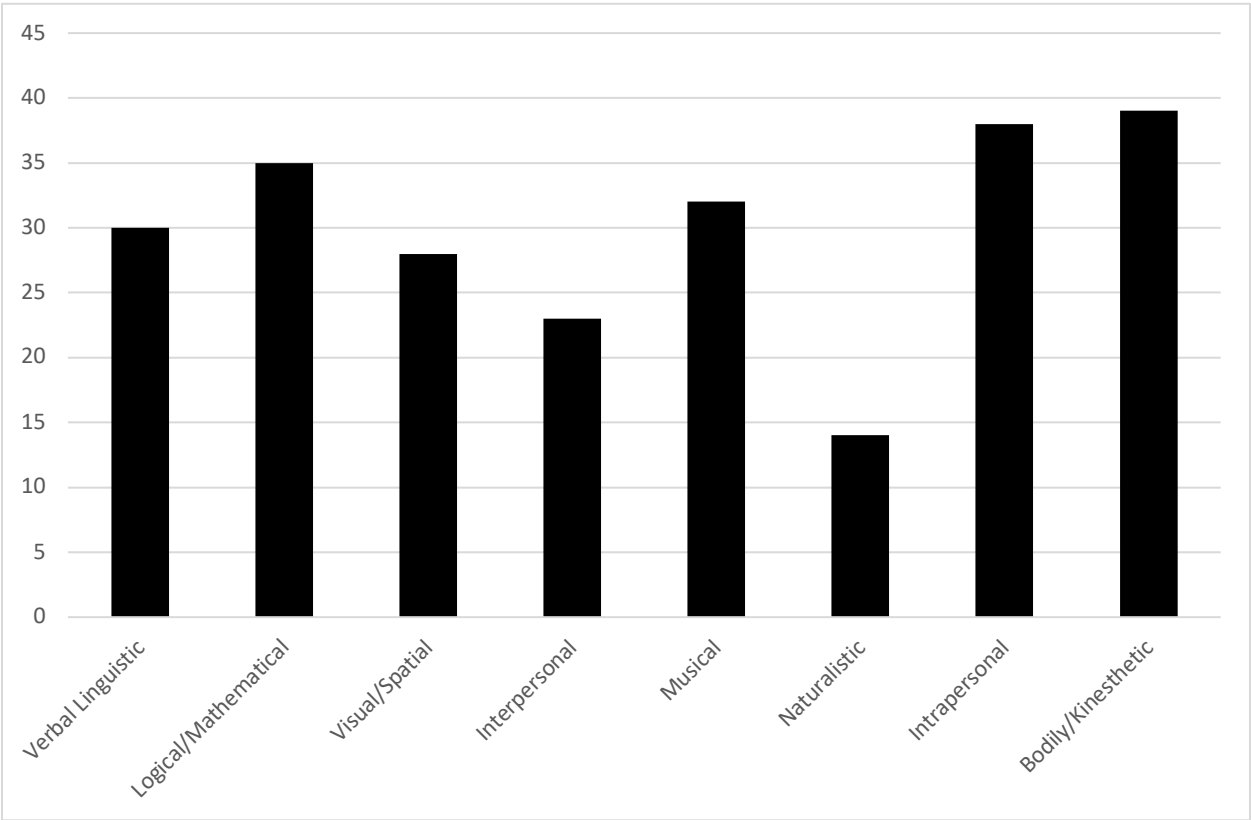
Brianna's Multiple Intelligences Quiz Results.



Learning Mode	Score
Verbal Linguistic	25
Logical/Mathematical	28
Visual/Spatial	27
Interpersonal	28
Musical	31
Naturalistic	26
Intrapersonal	32
Bodily/Kinesthetic	32

Appendix L

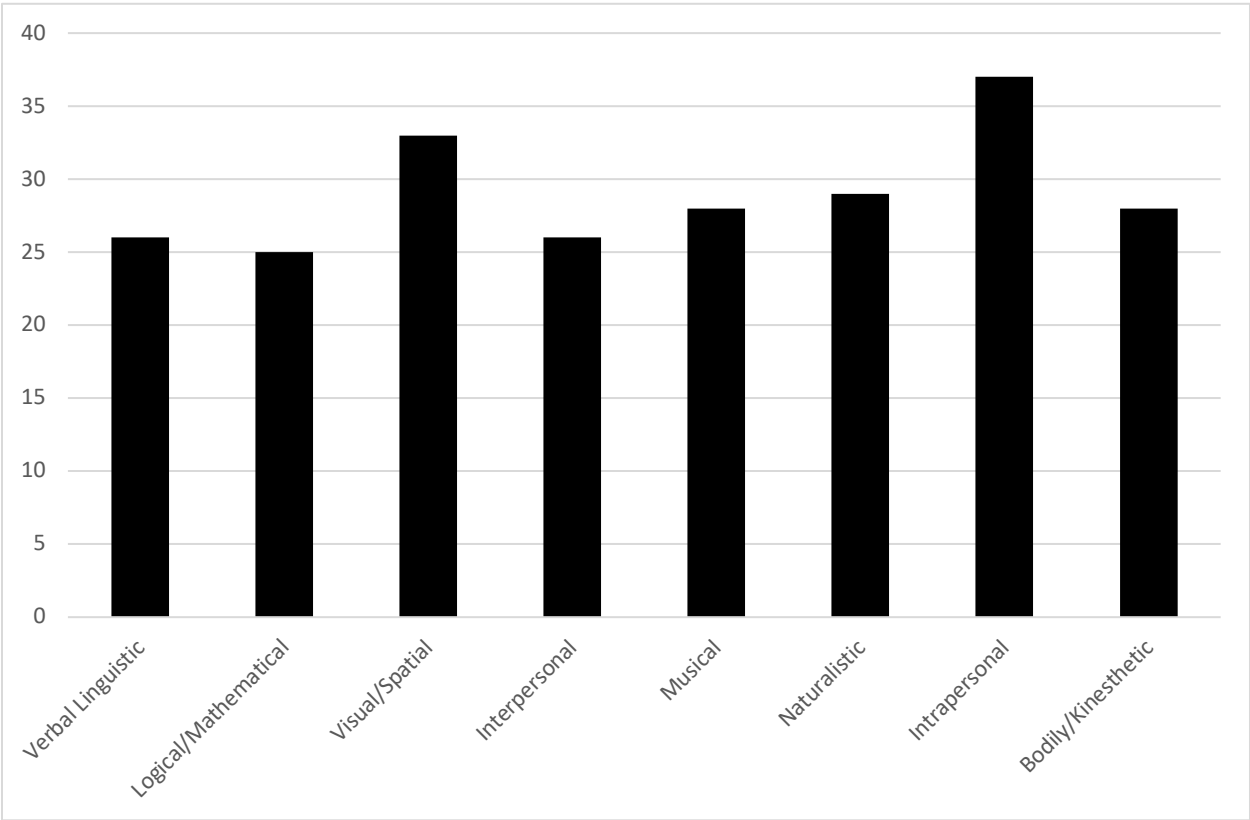
Erin’s Multiple Intelligences Quiz Results.



Learning Mode	Score
Verbal Linguistic	30
Logical/Mathematical	35
Visual/Spatial	28
Interpersonal	23
Musical	32
Naturalistic	14
Intrapersonal	38
Bodily/Kinesthetic	39

Appendix M

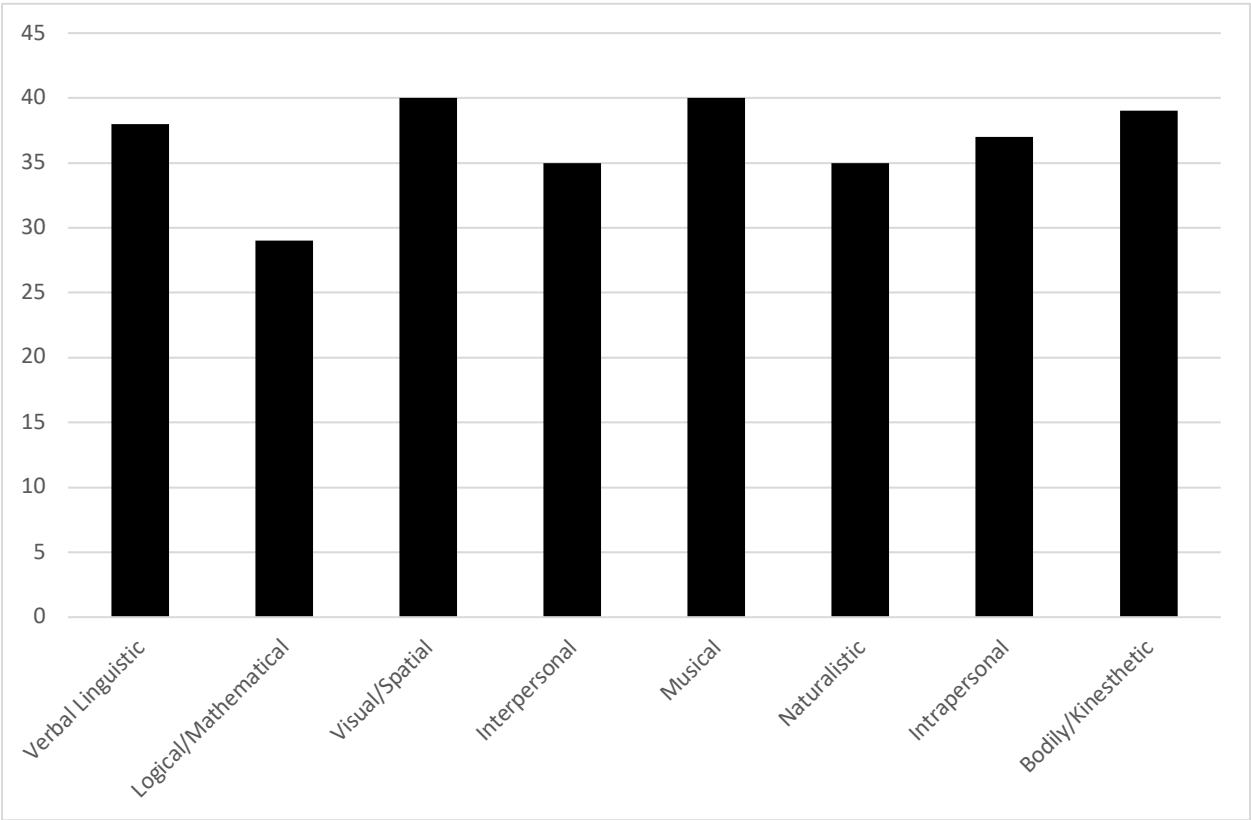
Gabby’s Multiple Intelligences Quiz Results.



Learning Mode	Score
Verbal Linguistic	26
Logical/Mathematical	25
Visual/Spatial	33
Interpersonal	26
Musical	28
Naturalistic	29
Intrapersonal	37
Bodily/Kinesthetic	28

Appendix N

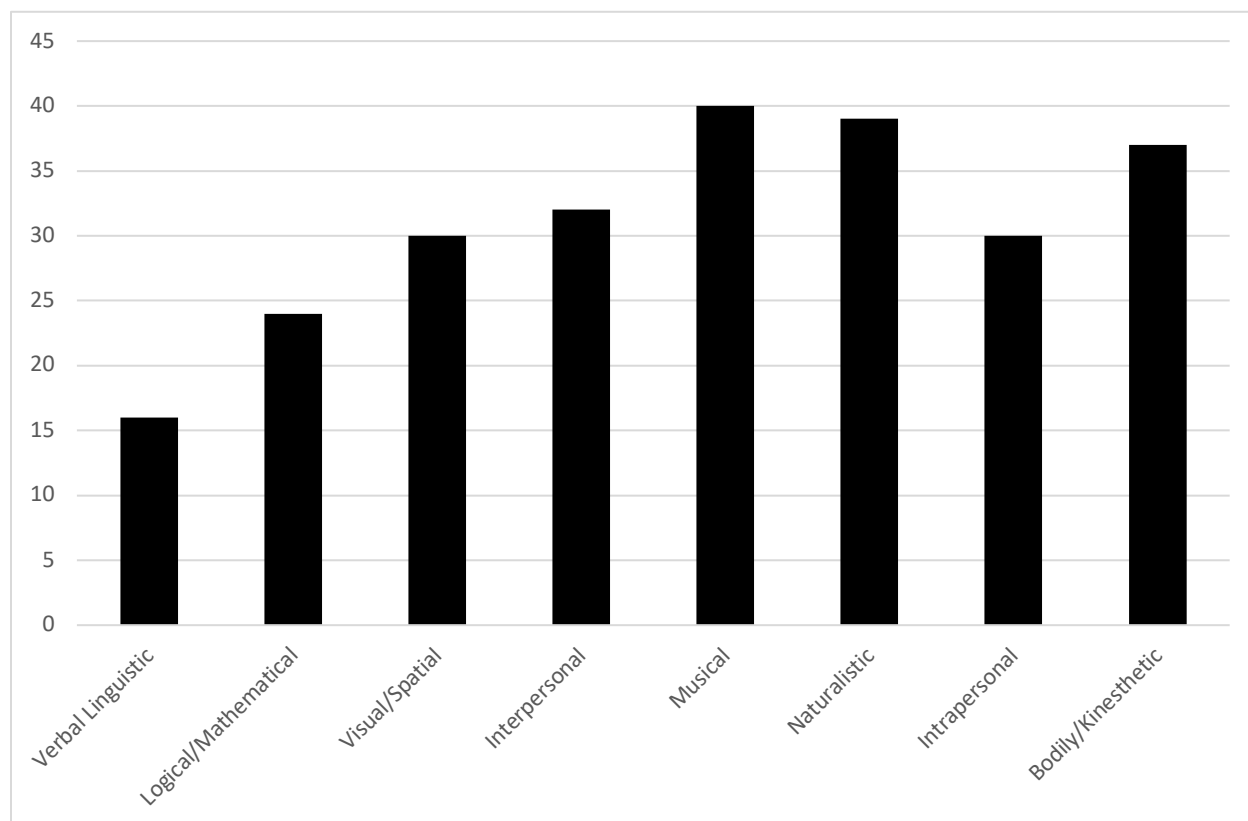
Curtis’ Multiple Intelligences Quiz Results.



Learning Mode	Score
Verbal Linguistic	38
Logical/Mathematical	29
Visual/Spatial	40
Interpersonal	35
Musical	40
Naturalistic	35
Intrapersonal	37
Bodily/Kinesthetic	39

Appendix O

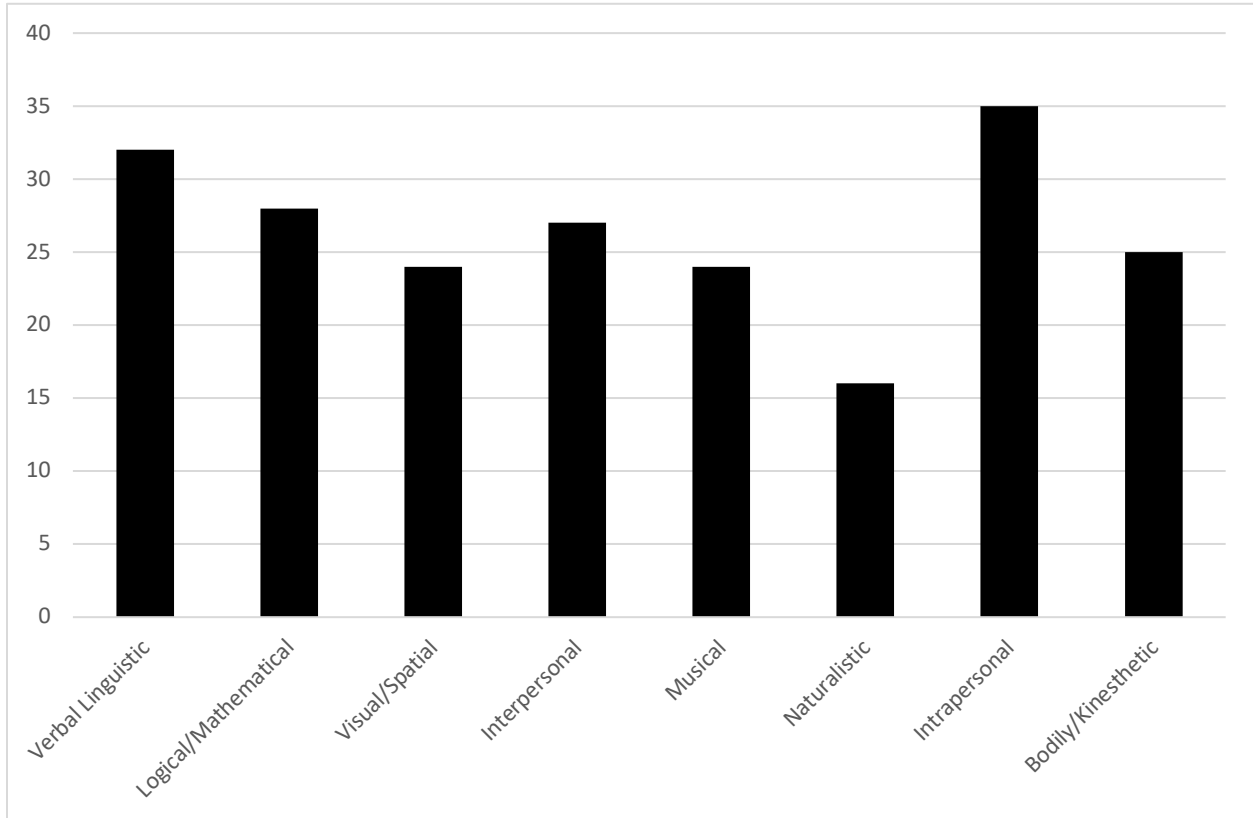
Dena's Multiple Intelligences Quiz Results.



Learning Mode	Score
Verbal Linguistic	16
Logical/Mathematical	24
Visual/Spatial	30
Interpersonal	32
Musical	40
Naturalistic	39
Intrapersonal	30
Bodily/Kinesthetic	37

Appendix P

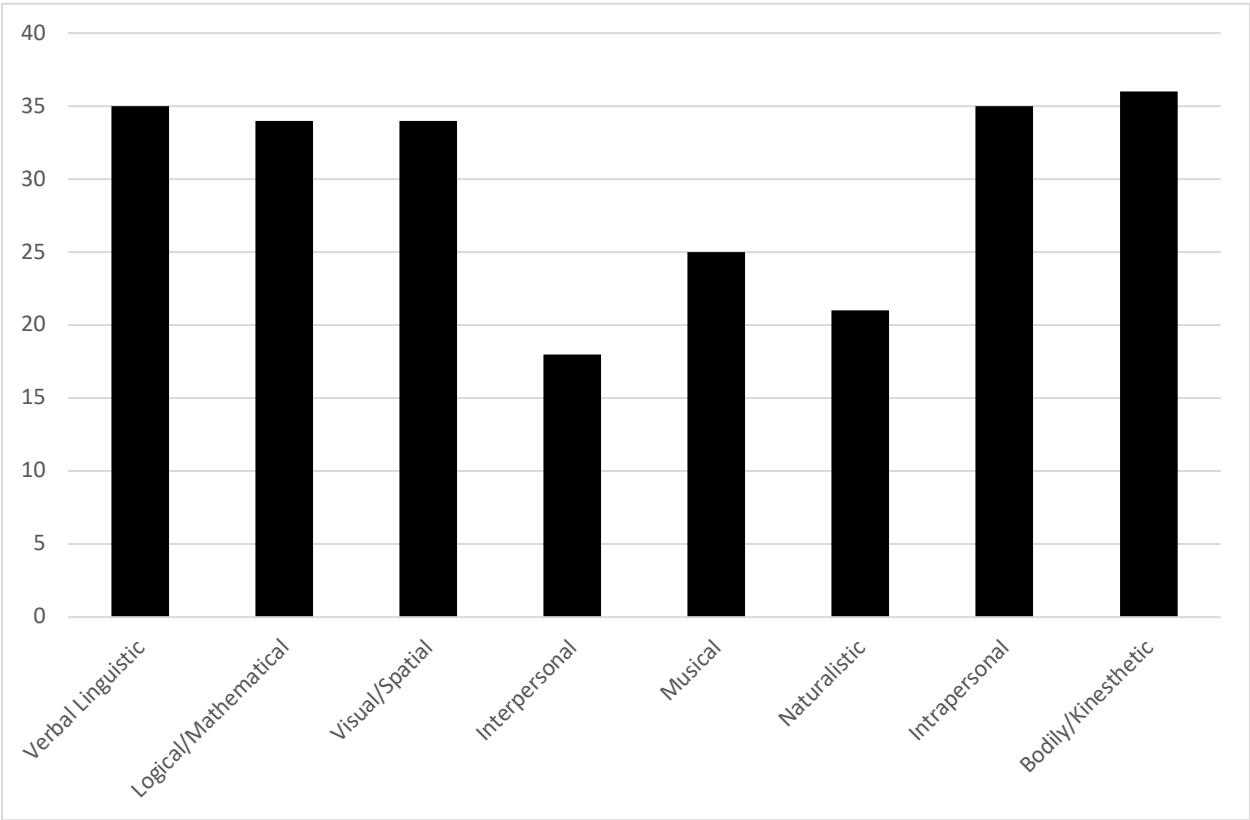
Farah's Multiple Intelligences Quiz Results.



Learning Mode	Score
Verbal Linguistic	32
Logical/Mathematical	28
Visual/Spatial	24
Interpersonal	27
Musical	24
Naturalistic	16
Intrapersonal	35
Bodily/Kinesthetic	25

Appendix Q

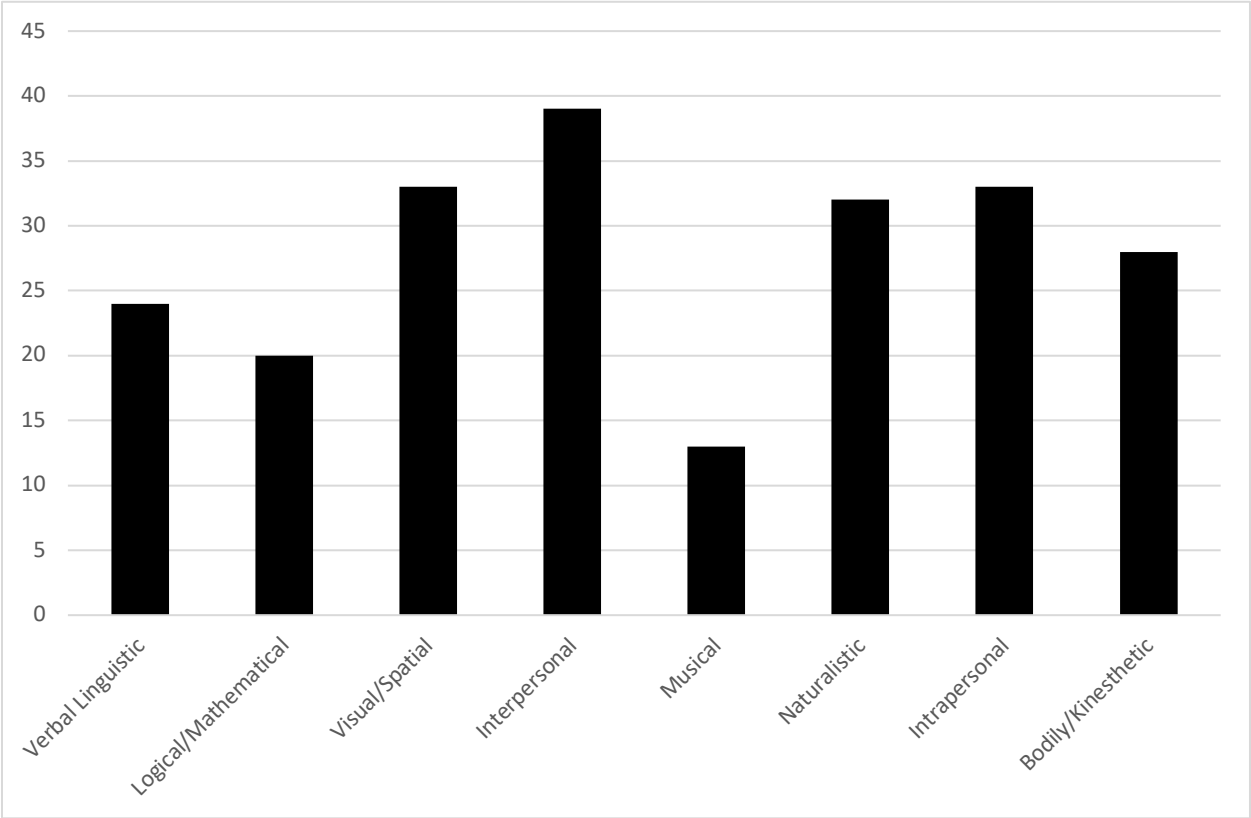
Haley’s Multiple Intelligences Quiz Results.



Learning Mode	Score
Verbal Linguistic	35
Logical/Mathematical	34
Visual/Spatial	34
Interpersonal	18
Musical	25
Naturalistic	21
Intrapersonal	35
Bodily/Kinesthetic	36

Appendix R

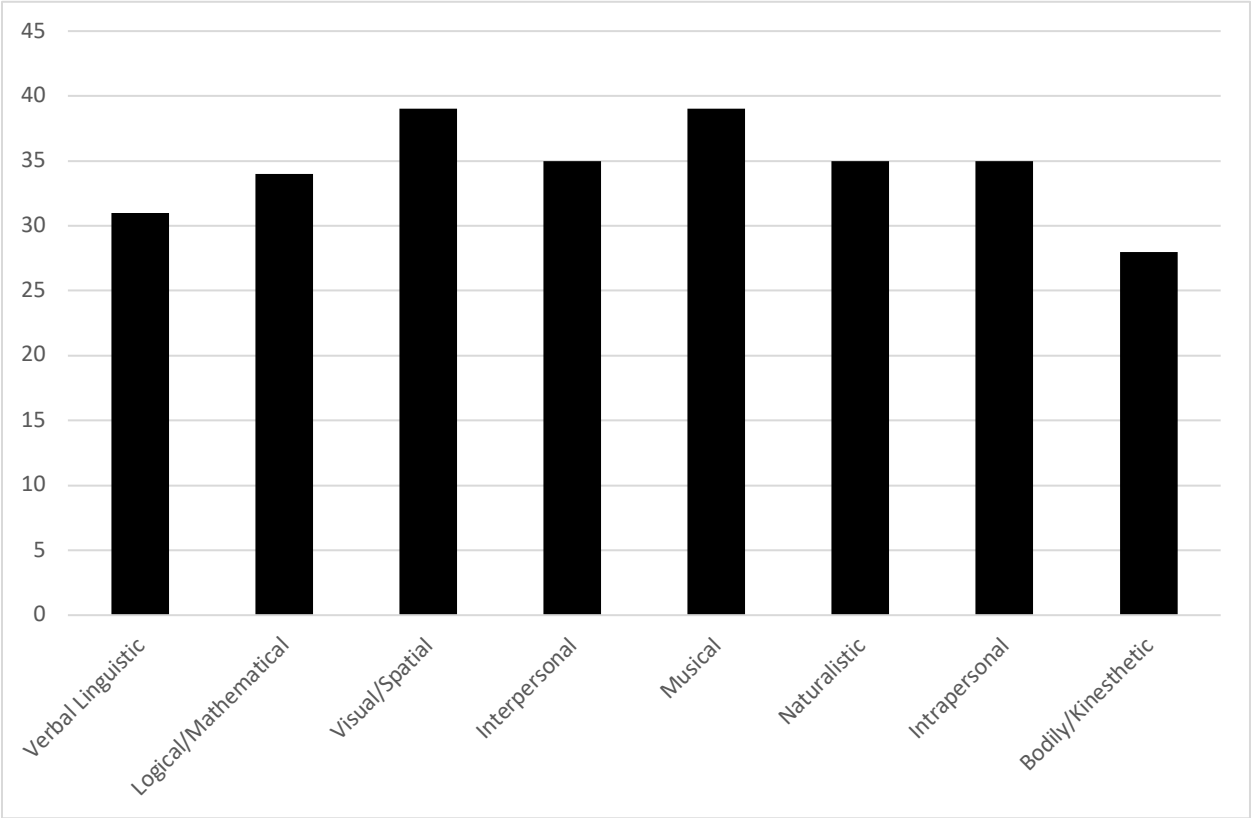
Isla’s Multiple Intelligences Quiz Results.



Learning Mode	Score
Verbal Linguistic	24
Logical/Mathematical	20
Visual/Spatial	33
Interpersonal	39
Musical	13
Naturalistic	32
Intrapersonal	33
Bodily/Kinesthetic	28

Appendix S

Jalen’s Multiple Intelligences Quiz Results.



Learning Mode	Score
Verbal Linguistic	31
Logical/Mathematical	34
Visual/Spatial	39
Interpersonal	35
Musical	39
Naturalistic	35
Intrapersonal	35
Bodily/Kinesthetic	28