

HOW THE MATTERING EXPERIENCE OF LATINO HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS
IMPACTS PERSISTENCE TO GRADUATION: A TRANSCENDENTAL
PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Plan Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand how the mattering experience of Latino students impacts their persistence to high school graduation. The study was aimed to establish a greater awareness of how the mattering experience impacts student success. The central research question was, How does the mattering experience impact Latino student persistence to high school graduation? This transcendental phenomenological study included a purposeful sample of 11 high school graduates within Mannaton County, Pennsylvania. Data collection and analysis included interviews, a focus group, and journal documents. Data analysis included data coding in order to establish themes. Additionally, direct interpretation, narratives, and tables are part of the analysis. Reporting of information was through methods which included horizontalization, clustering, and textural descriptions. The study revealed four major themes for Latino high school graduates including the impact of mattering, feelings of importance, feelings of marginalization, and persistence to graduation. The impact of mattering on the persistence to graduation for Latino high school students is affirming and attributes connections with school staff, communal motivations, feelings of belonging, school satisfaction, resiliency, translanguaging, anti-racism, home and community influence, and educator guidance as influences to school success. The implications of this study are that when individuals experience mattering and are in reciprocal relationships with others they experience a greater consciousness of perceived importance in their school environment.

Findings from this transcendental phenomenological study indicated the reciprocal relationship of mattering had a positive impact on Latino high school student persistence to graduation.

Keywords: high school graduation, Latino, marginalization, mattering, relational reciprocity, school persistence, sense of belonging, significance to others, student resiliency

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to the Latino students who have persevered through varied aggregated life experiences to achieve the goal of high school graduation and to the individuals who played essential roles in the process. Throughout this dissertation journey, I too have had resolve to move through experiences that were mitigated by a special group of cheerleaders in my quasi-cohort of degree candidates and family members, including my daughters, mother, cousin, sister and professional colleagues. Thank you for reminding me that #ABDIIsNotADegree and pushing me forward.

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I would like to acknowledge the participants of this study and the educators who had provided a mattering experience to these individuals. Likewise, I would like to acknowledge the Bethlehem Area School District administration for their support. Lastly, I would like to acknowledge my colleagues for their guidance and encouragement.

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List of Abbreviations

Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR)

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Deferred Action for Childhood Adults (DACA)

Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM)

Driving Under the Influence (DUI)

General Education Development (GED)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

This chapter introduces the transcendental phenomenological research inquiry. The subsections of the chapter include a background review of the historical, social, and theoretical contexts, as well as my position within the study. The purpose and problem statements are shared, along with a description of the study's significance. The research questions and definitions are also formally stated. Finally, a summary of the chapter is provided.

Background

Scholars have noted that a dropout preventative mechanism that influenced student persistence included school-based relationships that mattered (Johnston & Moody, 2013). Mattering is the idea that individuals are in a personal, reciprocal relationship of significance (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). The individual senses a feeling of significance and value from others (Fleet, 2018a). Mattering has also been viewed as a fundamental human need that is in direct relationship to human development. Therefore, individuals who felt they mattered tended to have a greater sense of belonging to and social support within a setting as compared to their peers (Dixon, 2011). This study was conducted to understand the impact of the mattering experience on Latino high school student persistence to graduation. Moustakas (1994) espoused that a researcher establishes a question to arrive at knowledge from experiences through a reflective process. The question, or challenge, of this current study was to assist educators and researchers in finding an effective means to address the issue of persistence to graduation, providing an approach to understanding student experiences of mattering.

Although research exists on factors that affect dropout rates, there was a gap in the research with regard to how Latino students, specifically, arrive at a decision to stay in school.

My research has provided insight into how Latino high school students arrived at the decision to stay in school. The research encompassed an investigation of the impact of the mattering experience of Latino high school student decisions to stay in school to graduation.

Historical Context

A significant hierarchy of deficiency need, as espoused by Maslow (1970), is the need to belong, which is formulated through fulfilling relationships. These relationships afford a sense of acceptance that assists in the motivation to reach self-actualization. There are students whose mattering needs are not met elsewhere so they seek to satisfy the desire to belong within the school setting (Martin & Joomis, 2007). When students feel a sense of acceptance in school, there is a greater motivation to engage in academics. Students may therefore be more committed to the school and their educational process (Osterman, 2000), which may influence high school retention and graduation rates.

According to “The Condition of Education Report of 2018,” the U.S. national average adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) of public high school students was 84% for the 2015–2016 school term, with the Pennsylvania average at 86% (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], (2017a). The national dropout rate of the year 2000 was 10.9%, which decreased to 6.1% in 2016. The national ACGR for Latino students was 79% for the 2015–2016 school term. The 2016 dropout rate for Latinos was 8.6%, which was the highest of all major ethnic groups (NCES, 2018). It is imperative, however, to note that the Latino status dropout rate between 1992 and 2015, decreased significantly, from 29% to 9% (NCES, 2017a).

Significant factors that influenced Latino high school dropout include poor English language acquisition and a genuine dislike of school. According to the Pew Research Center (2009), many Latino students who struggled in middle school with a significant learning gap in

mathematics and reading failed to achieve in these required subjects in high school. This learning gap is another factor in the consideration to leave school (Pew Research Center, 2009). The 2017 “Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups” report indicated that Latino secondary students had a higher retention rate, which has been found to be a dropout indicator, of 3.1% as compared to a 1.8% of White counterparts (NCES, 2017b). Dianda (2008) espoused that all noncompleters of high school are of a national concern. This is because noncompleters affect the United States’ competitive edge, contribute less to the economy, have more health issues, result in higher criminal justice costs, draw on public assistance resources, and usually do not engage in civic activity. It is, therefore, essential for institutions to have a greater understanding of why students choose either to persist to graduation or drop out.

The dropout and retention rates of all students are a significant concern for educators. As practitioners assist students in their persistence to graduation, one consideration is to understand more about the concept of significance. Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) adopted the idea of *matter*ing. *Mattering*, as a concept of significance, promotes reciprocity. This cyclical relationship of *matter*ing provides for gratifying environments with varying levels of attention, importance, and dependency. Dixon (2012) posited that individuals have an innate desire to establish reciprocal relevance and that *matter*ing leads to higher self-esteem, social support, and reduced anxiety, as well as less depression and more academic success. *Mattering*, therefore, contributes to better psychosocial wellbeing of the individual and to comprehensive wellness.

Social Context

Maslow’s (1970) hierarchy of needs asserts that individuals have a desire to move from physiological needs toward self-actualization. With the need to belong in the middle of this process, individuals establish a connection to the learning environment. However, this

progression of self-actualization may be stunted by failures to meet some lower-level needs due to life conditions and experiences, which may lead to fluctuations in levels of development (Maslow, 1970).

These fluctuations may be due to students sensing a feeling of disconnection with their school environments (Halx & Ortiz, 2011). Further, many students reported other institutional barriers such as a lack of sense of belonging and issues of discrimination that hindered future success (Martinez, Degarmo, & Eddy, 2004). Almost 30% of 16- to 18-year-old students without a diploma leave school to work in low-skill jobs. Of these dropouts, 75% are U.S., native-born Latinos (Scott, 2015).

Cavazos (2016) found that Latino mentors who assisted students to perceive that they mattered led these individuals to increased motivation, which had a constructive impact on academic achievement. Additionally, it has been found that moving toward and beyond cultural issues it is possible for schools to better support a perception of mattering which assists in student persistence (Johnston & Moody, 2013). Therefore, it is essential that schools seek new mechanisms for identifying programs and opportunities that work for students to achieve academic success (Thyssen, De Witte, Cabus, Maassen van den Brink, & Groot, 2013).

This study was aimed to better understand the relationship between mattering and student persistence of Latino high school students. It has been established that students who are more engaged feel a greater sense of belonging, value, and motivation to persist to graduation (Niehaus, Irvin, & Rogelberg, 2016). Consequently, peer friendships in school and interpersonal relationships with school staff impact school belonging that researchers have correlated to school and social success (Delgado, Ettekal, Simpkins, & Schaefer, 2016). Beyond the notion of school

belonging, this current study encompassed the ideology of mattering as an underlying current of overall school success.

Theoretical Context

In order for individuals to fulfill their desire to reach their maximum capacity of potential and talent, they must achieve a level of self-actualization (Martin & Joomis, 2007). Self-actualization occurs when the individual's physiological, safety, security, love, and belonging deficiency needs are sustained. Other required needs of experience include growth needs of knowledge and understanding, as well as aesthetic needs (Maslow, 1970). Love and belonging needs are generally met through a variety of sources, but in cases when these needs are not met, students may seek to fulfill these desires to belong in the school environment through school-based relationships. Procuring the needs, such as a sense of belonging, allows students to auspiciously perform academically (Martin & Joomis, 2007).

However, mattering theory goes beyond the idea of belonging with a focus on significance (Flett, 2018c). The act of mattering conveys a direct relationship amongst people. Individuals in these relationships feel significant and reciprocated. This establishes an interdependent connection. Thus, the individuals feel a sense of importance and dependence with the other person. The individuals in the relationship experience a socially responsible bond to each other and the institution (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Similarly, Dixon (2012) espoused that people have an inherent desire to matter in a significant manner to others. It is in this reciprocal relationship that individuals perceive a sense of relevancy. The facet of mattering consciousness is considered to be fundamental to an individual's general welfare (Flett, 2018a). This reciprocal relationship is critical to adolescent development (Zhang, Xuan, Chen, Zhang, Luo, & Wang, 2016). Therefore, according to Schlossberg (1989), relationships built with a

matter condition act as a mediator to facilitate personal growth and a positive motivator of life. Mattering offers a protective element through higher self-esteem that safeguards the individual from life challenges and stressors to maintain overall well-being (Flett, 2018a).

School environments that foster meaningful relationships also create optimal opportunities for social development of students (Eccles et al., 1993; Graham, Powell, & Truscott, 2016; Zhang et al., 2016). Eccles (2004) noted that stage-environment fit theory is focused on the establishment of developmentally appropriate school environments. These environments meet the social, psychological, and academic needs of students. Consequently, the relational roles of students and staff are key to cultivating optimal development (Eccles, 2004; Flett, 2018b; Zhang, 2016). Established relationships of quality care with school personnel provides an evident perception of care to the institution, individual, and their personal learning (Flett, 2018c). Mattering, therefore, can be understood through this concept as a reciprocal experience in which individuals feel significant and develop an aspiration to serve each other and the institution (Eccles, 2004).

Scholars also noted that cognitive engagement is influenced by a student's sense of belonging (Walker & Greene, 2009). Feelings of significance influenced cognitive school engagement, measured by attendance rates, behavioral issues, and academic performance, which are indicators of dropout risks (Lovelace, Reschly, & Appleton, 2017). When schools provide students with social support, academic progress is prevalent (Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996). A supportive school environment with an inclusive culture nurtured and reinforced students' perceptions of belonging, which guided the engagement and achievement of students and staff (Osterman, 2000; Walker & Greene, 2009). The feeling of belonging reinforces cognitive engagement because beneficial interdependency provides opportunities for growth and

development (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Lovelace et al., 2017; Walker & Greene, 2009). Similarly, attachment theory supports the idea that partaking in reciprocal, constructive relationships plays an important function in growth and development (Bowlby, 1969/1982). This is a similar concept to social bond theory, which suggests that effective school bonding in the areas of attachment, involvement, and school commitment mitigates minority dropout risks and increases persistence and success (Peguero, Ovink, & Li, 2016). Further, when students perceive they are supported and valued by school staff, they achieve a level of acceptance that encourages motivation and engagement (Osterman, 2000). This acceptance occurs in environments where mattering is evident.

Situation of Self

I have been a public-school secondary teacher for 20 years. Most of my teaching experience has been at the high school level serving urban youth with a high ethnic minority population identified as Latino. Presently, I am teaching at the middle level, serving mostly suburban students. My experience also includes practice in an alternative education environment, where I spent a great deal of time with students from the urban environment. Throughout my career, I have functioned as an academic, social, and community-based advisor, and mentor through various courses, clubs, and organizations at the district, regional, and state levels.

The courses I have taught throughout my career include homogeneous and heterogeneous groupings geared to offering business, technology, and career skills to kids-at-risk and heterogeneous groupings of social studies with a focus on American history. Relevant to the population of this study is the teaching experience in alternative high school programs, including a self-contained environment, summer credit acquisition, and ramp-up programs as well as

evening courses. Beyond the classroom, I advised a national student organization focused on building business and service skills. Similarly, I served as co-advisor to a bridge-building seminar series between a middle and high school, during which we focused on leadership, skill building, and service-learning of urban youth. Additionally, I was the high school hip-hop dance team coach for several years and, after a hiatus, have taken on this role as an advisor to our middle-level dance company which is focused on urban and contemporary dance. The community organizations I assisted included a Latino-based statewide association and a regional initiative to provide motivational speakers to various programs and building of a minority-based scholarship initiative. All of these services provided learning and empowerment opportunities to urban high schools and environments.

It is consequential to note that I am a mirror of the population that I have served and this study seeks to research, as both a member of the Latin community and a product of an urban environment. My Latin American heritage affords me a communal, inner-city experience such that I was raised similarly to the population of this study. Geographically, my early life was spent in a Puerto Rican *barrio*, or small urban town. Upon migrating to the mainland at about age 5, I lived both in a government-funded, low-income housing community and then moved to the inner city when I was about 8 years of age, where my parents could afford to purchase a modest home. We lived downtown until I was approximately 13 years of age. As the community had adversely changed, my parents “hustled,” or took on extra work, in order to move us out of the inner city to the suburbs, in hopes of providing a safer environment with progressive opportunities for the family.

During my formative and adolescent years, I had confronted more than just economic disparity, but also social trauma from the transition between the communities and racism.

Within this time period, I overcame other challenges that define my approach to education and urban youth interactions. Faced with many of the same socioeconomic, language, and cultural issues of the participant sample, I understand and can internalize the complexities that keep many of our Latino youth from persisting to graduation due situations of oppression. Some of these shared experiences include poverty, homelessness, racial inequities, drugs, alcohol, arrests, sexual assault, violence in the community, and other issues that marginalize this population.

My motivation for conducting this research was to better understand how Latino students in urban communities persist to graduation and how the mattering principle plays a role. I have searched my own adverse childhood experiences and my coping mechanisms that led to perseverance and established a path to resilience. I found that even in the darkest moments of my life there were individuals who genuinely cared for and motivated me to persist to academic and social prosperity. I established reciprocal relationships with these mentoring individuals in a manner that led me to become involved in many service opportunities and civic programs that further assisted established a strength and tenacity to persist.

For instance, although I never felt an attachment or sense of belonging at my mostly Anglo middle and high schools, I did have connections with specific teachers at each academic level who guided me through my secondary school experience by providing me with support and guidance, as well as opportunities in leadership. The middle-level teacher pushed me to challenge gender and race relations in the school community that empowered me with a voice that had been previously silenced. The high school teacher was crucial during a time when my family faced my brother's constant encounters with the law and my father's arrest and subsequent incarceration. This business teacher and club advisor was an asset in keeping me focused on academics and pushing me into further leadership roles in Future Business Leaders of

America, Junior Achievement, and other positions of responsibility at a time when I was angry and despondent. As an act of relational reciprocity, I spent countless hours volunteering in the classroom, preparing for competitions, and leading my group as secretary in my junior year, president in my senior year, and representing our region as Ms. Future Business Leader at the state competition. I was afforded and empowered with similar administrative and competitive opportunities through Junior Achievement.

Another reciprocating relationship was with a community member whom I met in the housing project where we lived upon migration to the mainland. He played a significant role in defining my postsecondary education and community service experience by providing me with guidance and opportunities beginning in fourth grade. This individual gave me a sense of purpose. By establishing a mattering relationship with a sense of importance, he helped me to work through a growth process via community service and leadership opportunities, through which I became civically conscious and politically aware. This mentor served me in varied roles in community-based programs, conferences, and activities. The 30-year mentorship continues to be a substantially significant relationship and is essential to my current support network.

Coming from a community where high school dropping-out was an expected norm, I believe that these types of mattering relationships assisted in my persistence to graduation from high school. The relationships were also essential in supporting my matriculation and completion of college, which was even more rare in this particular urban community. These mattering mentorships are relationships that have become a core part of my student-teacher relationships with current pupils and mentees over the past 20 years.

My philosophical assumptions include both epistemological and axiological assumptions. Epistemological assumptions frame how the researcher knows what is known. This exploration

of epistemological assumptions is done by getting close to the participants and extracting subjective evidence from the individual (Creswell, 2013). The epistemological theory of knowledge that I sought to explore further is the phenomenon of mattering as a concept and how it relates to Latino urban youth persistence to graduation. An axiological philosophical assumption encompasses understanding the value in research when the researcher's biases and values must be transparent (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, an axiological assumption was present in this study because I endeavored to establish a greater understanding of the values that Latinos place on education and relationships. The research paradigm present in this study reflected a social constructivist approach. Social constructivism seeks to understand the world and establish meaning from complex vantage points. I aspired to establish an understanding through open-ended questioning with an emphasis on interactions. The data collection included cultural, historical, and personal background interpretation (Creswell, 2013). As a social constructivist, I sought to determine how mattering influenced the population of urban, Latino, high school graduates and established themes that could be shared with practitioners in improving school-based practices that promote student success.

Because I aimed to learn about the impact of mattering on graduation, as opposed to focusing on issues of dropping out, I also took a pragmatic, practical approach. Creswell (2013) stated that the pragmatic approach is used to understand what was working through a variety of methods using best practices to attend to the research questions. The pragmatic approach was key to understanding the mattering concept, as this research was conducted to extract meaning from the real-world experiences of reciprocal relationships and determine how these relationships influenced persistence to graduation.

Problem Statement

The problem examined in this study was the impact of the mattering experience on Latino students' persistence to high school graduation. Although there are many studies that have been focused on high school dropouts, there is limited research on high school persistence. Furthermore, there are few studies specific to investigating Latinos at the secondary level. The issue of this research gap is significant because Latinos have the highest dropout rate of all major ethnic groups in the United States (NCES, 2016).

Maslow (1970) theorized that individuals have an innate desire to establish a sense of belonging and create intimate communities. Similarly, Dixon (2012) noted that mattering was a fundamental human need to feel significant to others. Adolescents may have oppositional dispositions at school and, if those adolescents do not establish meaningful relationships, they must cope with the terrifying awareness that they do not matter (Elliot, Kao, & Grant, 2004). Additionally, researchers found that "rejection was robustly associated with poor academic performance" (Fite, Rubens, & Cooley, 2014, p. 924). Other perceived barriers to school success include student-staff relationships, peer relationships, and school policies (Vega, Moore, & Miranda, 2015).

Understanding how the mattering experience impacts persistence to graduation is an essential investigation in determining how the mattering experience can promote student success. Flett (2018b) noted that although mattering in schools is a stress buffer that also promotes adolescent resiliency, there is limited empirical research on school mattering. Therefore, more empirical research into the mattering concept is needed to further explore the impact of mattering on high school students and their persistence to graduation. It is essential that schools look for

new ways of identifying programs and opportunities that work for students to achieve success (Thyssen et al., 2013).

Further, there is limited research giving voice to how Latino high school students persist to graduation. There is no literature giving voice to how the mattering experience influences persistence to graduation for Latino students. This research was intended to provide a voice in this arena via a transcendental phenomenological study of 11 Latino high school graduates in Mannaton County, Pennsylvania.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand Latino students' perceptions of the ways the mattering experience impacted their persistence to high school graduation in Mannaton County, Pennsylvania. In this research, *mattering* was defined as a basic human need of individuals to have a feeling of reciprocal significance (Dixon, 2011). In addition, *Latinos* were defined as a collective group of individuals of Latin American origin, such as Mexico, Central America and South America, living in the United States and including both native and foreign-born individuals (Fernandez-Morera, 2010; Fuller & Hosemann, 2015). In consideration of persistence, students who are provided with skills to navigate the high school experience promote greater educational achievement. Educational initiatives that address persistence-building skills include the development of self-efficacy, identity, and coping mechanisms to deal with emotional distress (Caldwell & Siwatu, 2003; Harris & Kiyama, 2015).

The philosophy guiding this study is mattering theory and how it impacts Latino high school student persistence to graduation. Mattering occurs when individuals feel that they are in a reciprocal relationship of significance. This ego-extension may be a motivator of persistence (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). When students feel a sense of mattering and belonging, they

are encouraged in the school environment with a positive focus on attachment, engagement, and achievement (Walker & Greene, 2009). I sought to understand how the mattering experience impacts high school persistence of Latino youth to graduation. Additionally, I sought to understand the contextual factor of school attachment, which moderates academic performance and where students feel attached to their school environment through established relationships, leading to greater academic success (Fite et al., 2014).

Significance of the Study

In 2016, the national Latino dropout rate fell to 8.6%, yet Latinos continue to have the highest dropout rate of all major ethnic groups in the United States (NCES, 2018). In Pennsylvania, the 2017 statewide public-school dropout rate for Latinos was 3.92% as compared to Whites at 1.05%. Specifically, in Mannaton County, the setting for this study, the dropout rate for the two local high schools were 2.51% and 3.84% in 2017. The seven other high schools in the county fell well below 2% (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2018a).

Dropping out is a complex, multifaceted decision that may include adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), that create a pathway to leaving school for high-risk youth (Morrow & Villodas, 2018). ACEs may include abuse, neglect, and other household challenges (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2016). Some 16- to 18-year-old individuals without a diploma left school to work in low-skill jobs (Scott, 2015). Others stated the reason for leaving high school was a feeling of disconnectedness from the school environment (Halx & Ortiz, 2011). Additionally, low social economic status may marginalize students and hinder assimilation. While other students experienced academic impediments, behavior and attendance issues, deviant associations and delinquency, and substance abuse are other factors that may predict school dropout risks (Archambault, Janosz, Dupéré, Brault, & Andrew, 2017). Other

factors, specific to the Latino population, included lack of language acquisition and a genuine aversion of school, while other Latino students struggled in mathematics and reading (Pew Research Center, 2009). Many Latino students reported different institutional barriers such as a lack of sense of belonging and discrimination that hindered future success (Martinez et al., 2004). As a general agenda, educators and researchers endeavor to find effective means to reduce the overall dropout rate. One approach may be grounded in trying to better understand student needs.

There is significant research that exists on factors that affect dropout rates. However, there is a gap in the research with regard to how a student arrives at the decision to quit high school and factors that impact persistence to graduation of Latino youth. Investigating mattering as a part of developmental growth in adolescents, specifically high school student persistence to graduation, provides data on mattering as part of the individual growth process.

Scholars note that greater encouragement from parents and school personnel is associated with better achievement (Martinez et al., 2004). The present study was conducted to understand how the mattering experience and student persistence of Latino high school students to graduation are related. Students who are more connected to their school environment have a greater sense of belonging, experience higher value sets, and are inspired to persist to graduation (Niehaus et al., 2016). The idea that individuals feel they matter to others and that others matter to them may have an impact on student success because mattering conveys a direct relationship where individuals feel significant and it is reciprocated in an inter-dependent connection (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Therefore, the present study was aimed to understand the mattering experience on the persistence to graduation of Latino high school students. The

consideration of mattering as a means to Latino persistence to graduation may help educators to establish practices that could potentially increase the graduation rate for Latino students.

The implication of the study was to contribute to the theory of mattering in the arena of secondary education and add to the empirical literature on Latino persistence to high school graduation. The benefit of this practice may assist students, educators, families, and communities serving the urban, Latino population. The research was an effort to understand the urban community in Mannaton County and provide knowledge for educators that may assist in finding tools to help urban Latino students succeed. Specifically, for educational practitioners, the study provides empirical data regarding the mattering concept to teachers, school psychologists, paraprofessionals, administrators, district decision-makers, advisors of clubs and activities, program directors, secretarial staff, cafeteria personnel, bus drivers, custodial workers, and any other individuals who come into contact with students and who are willing to establish bonded relationships with students. Additionally, the college student in the field of education may find these data useful in establishing a philosophy of education, during their fieldwork, and through practicum experiences. Students who are actively involved in the school environment may be directly impacted through current and future mentor relationships, while students who are distant from school involvement may find inspiration through influential school personnel. In reference to community members, coaches, adolescent instructors, community center personnel, school of education professors, and parents may benefit from a better understanding of how mattering impacts relationships and persistence.

Research Questions

Central Research Question (CRQ)

What are Latino students' perceptions of the ways the mattering experience impacts their persistence to high school graduation?

During the 2014–2015 school year, Latino students in Pennsylvania averaged a 69.5% graduation rate, which is an aggregated cohort graduation rate increase between 2011 and 2015 of 4.5% (DePaoli, Balfanz, Bridgeland, Atwell, & Ingram, 2017). Yet, even with this increase, the overall Latin American student graduation rate across the United States continues to be the lowest of all major ethnic groups (NCES, 2018). The mattering experience may assist students in academic success because, as previously noted, many individuals who experience mattering are in a reciprocal relationship with others (Dixon, 2011). According to Watson (2017), the mattering concept has been consistently recognized as a relevant construct that motivates adolescent psychological and social wellness, which is key to school connectedness and student academic success.

Research Subquestions (SQs)

SQ1: How do Latino high school graduates perceive that interdependent relationships impacted their persistence to high school graduation?

This question served to investigate the “essences and meanings of human experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 105) as well as to better understand how Maslow’s (1970) philosophy of a need to be significant can be attributed as a form of mattering.

SQ2: How do Latino high school graduates perceive that a feeling of importance impacted their persistence to high school graduation?

This question was intended to establish a better understanding of the feelings of students who perceived having significant, bonded relationships. In this sense, mattering acts as a social responsibility and an ego-extension of the self (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981).

SQ3: How do Latino high school graduates perceive that a feeling of marginalization impacted their persistence to high school graduation?

This question was intended to elicit the essence and better understanding of experienced feelings (Moustakas, 1994). When individuals do not establish relationships of shared meaning, they may learn to cope with a perception that they do not matter to others (Elliot et al., 2004). I was passionate about exploring how the mattering experience moves individuals beyond marginalization. Having experienced both mattering and marginalization, I was purposeful in fulfilling the epoché principle. The idea of the epoché principal is to secure that the researcher is free from judgment and perception on the topic (Moustakas, 1994).

SQ4: How do Latino high school graduates perceive that persistence through challenges impacted their successful graduation from high school?

SQ4 was used to inquire about the direct experience of persistence. This knowledge enlightened the understanding of the topic (Moustakas, 1994). Persistence builds self-efficacy, identity, and coping skills (Harris & Kiyama, 2015). I sought to better understand how persistence is influenced by the mattering experience.

Definitions

1. *Belonging* - Belonging, also known as psychological membership, is the extent of which individuals feel that they are not only accepted and respected in the social environment, but also that they are included and supported (Goodenow, 1993).

- Belonging in schools is exemplified when students believe that they are in reciprocally beneficial relationships (Finn, 1989).
2. *Existential Mattering* - Existential mattering is the extent to which people perceive their life as significant and having value. When people have existential mattering, they feel both appreciated and pertinent (George & Park, 2014).
 3. *High School Graduate* - A high school graduate is defined as an individual with a high school diploma, general education development (GED) certificate, or any state-recognized high school diploma equivalent (Electronic Code of Federal Regulations, 2017).
 4. *Latino* - Latinos are a collective group of individuals living in the United States, of Latin American origin, such as Mexico, Central America, and South America (Fernandez-Morera, 2010; Fuller & Hosemann, 2015), and includes both native and foreign-born individuals of varying cultures and social resources associated with Latin America (Moreno & Gayton, 2013).
 5. *Marginalization* - Marginalization is when individuals perceive that they do not belong and are of no significance to others, many times making the individuals feel as though they are in a lowered category of social status (Cheng, 1999; Schlossberg, 1989). People who feel marginalized often feel unhealthy degrees of self-consciousness (Schlossberg, 1989).
 6. *Mattering* - Mattering is when individuals feel that they are in a reciprocal relationship of significance. This ego-extension may be a motivator of persistence (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981).

7. *Need to Belong* - Belonging is established once physiological, safety, and security needs are met. This is a social stage based on psychological or emotional factors in which the individual seeks a sense of belonging within the social group (Maslow, 1970). The need to belong is a normed phrase for the desire to create relationships (Lambert et al., 2013).
8. *Persistence* - Persistence is defined as a “voluntary continuation of a goal-oriented action in spite of obstacles, difficulties, or discouragement” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 229). Persistence occurs when individuals are provided with skills to navigate life’s emotional distress by building self-efficacy, identity, and coping mechanisms (Caldwell & Siwatu, 2003; Harris & Kiyama, 2015).
9. *Sense of Belonging* - The subjective experience of a sense of belonging is the idea that mutual relationships provide a secure feeling of acceptance (Lambert et al., 2013).
10. *Significance to Others* - Significance, or importance, to others is the confidence that others take interest in “what we want, think, and do, or is concerned with our fate” (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981, p. 64). In mattering theory, this does not automatically imply approval, but does imply that others are important (Schlossberg, 1989).

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand Latino students’ perceptions of the ways the mattering experience impacts their persistence to high school graduation in Mannaton County, Pennsylvania. The overarching goal of the study was to establish a greater awareness of how mattering impacts student success. The central research

question was intended to discover how the mattering experience impacts persistence to graduation for high school Latino students. This transcendental phenomenological study included a purposeful sample of 11 high school graduates who completed high school within the past 5 years from one of two high schools located in Mannaton County, Pennsylvania.

This first chapter was an overview of the study, which positioned the research to fill the gap in existing literature regarding mattering and the impact on Latino students' high school graduation. A background of the Latino dropout issue and an introduction to mattering theory was presented. The problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions were also provided.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Chapter Two includes a theoretical framework of mattering theory as espoused by Rosenberg and McCullough (1981), which relates to the reciprocal feeling of significance to others. This chapter also contains discussion of the constructs of basic human need and reciprocal significance. Additionally, the chapter briefly addresses literature on high school completion and marginalization. Chapter Two also includes a deeper review of the relevant literature on persistence. Finally, the chapter provides an orientation to the academic significance of mattering and persistence to the study. The collective relevant literature in this chapter shows the impact of mattering on student growth potential.

Theoretical Framework

Mattering is the belief that individuals are in significant, reciprocal relationships with others (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). This theoretical framework discussion covers the mattering theory to provide a clear definition of the concept, underlying theories, and direct connections. The discussion also serves as a review of the constructs of mattering; including how the sense of belonging, significance to others, support sources, and other relevant ideas play a role in mattering theory. Additionally, this section is aimed to provide a greater understanding of the effects of marginalization, substantiating the necessity to fill the gap in research on the phenomenon of mattering in the educational arena. Figure 1 is a visual representation of the conceptual framework used in this study.

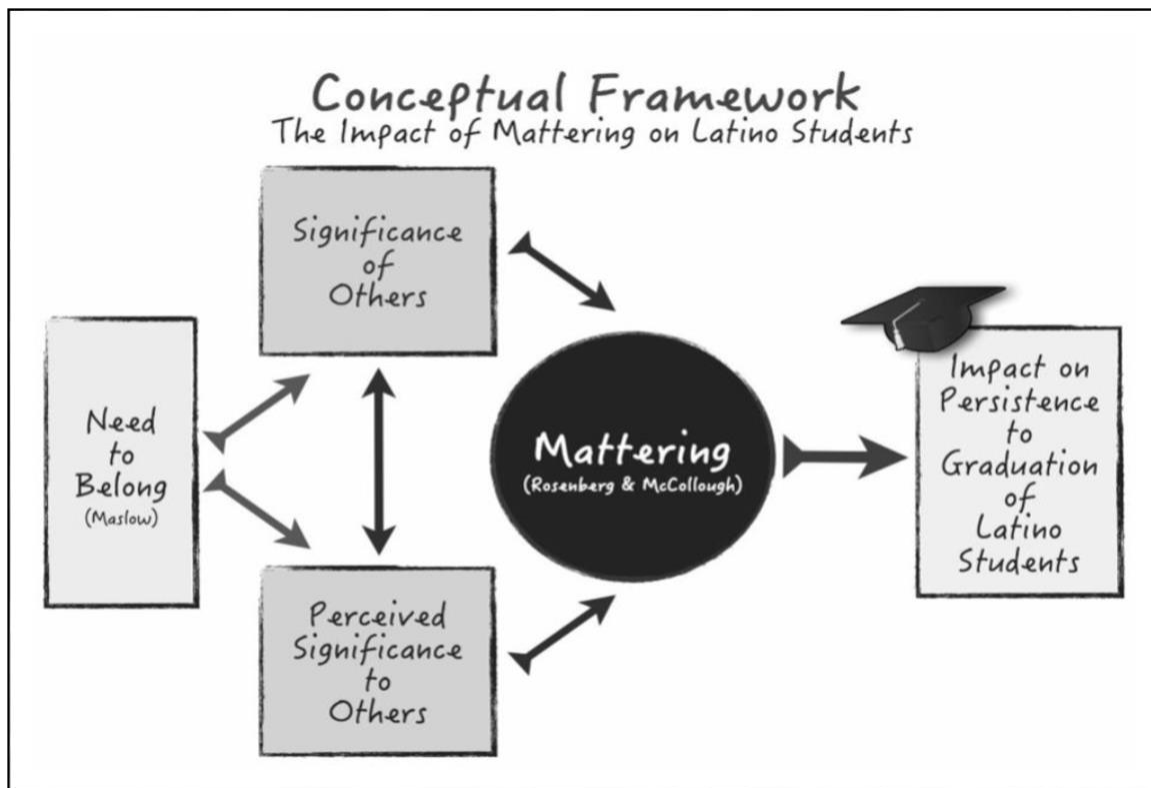


Figure 1. The conceptual framework used to guide this study.

Mattering Theory

People preserve an instinctive yearning and need to matter to others so that those other people want them in return, and they feel they are significant to others (Dixon, 2016). The term “significant others,” as coined by Sullivan (2012), promotes the awareness that individuals matter to others at varying levels. Mattering theory stems from the idea of significance to others. The theory espoused by Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) is a means to explain the inferred significance of adolescents and their relationships with others. According to Rosenberg and McCullough, mattering is the idea that individuals are in a direct, reciprocal relationship of significance, which includes the individual’s desire to feel significant to others. The individual with a sense of mattering feels secure and experiences meaningful connections and social bonds

(Flett, 2018c). The belief that the individual, as the object of another person's attention, is important in establishing interdependent relationships. In order for individuals to feel as though they matter, they must feel importance, attachment, longing for, dependence, and mutual interest (Sheard, 2013). Mattering theory is centered in the three interest-based concepts of attention, importance, and dependence. These concepts are integral to healthy social integration. Additionally, Rosenberg and McCullough stated that the perception of mattering acts as a mental insulator against anxiety and depression, and acts as a motivator for persistence.

Mattering provides the individual with a positive motivation to recognize an affirmative sense of self and world-significance (Elliot et al., 2004; Prilleltensky, 2014). The individual that perceives mattering is better able to increase their own personal capacity for understanding life because the individual can make better life connections and seek out more avenues of mattering (Dixon, 2011). The individual who feels a sense of mattering identifies the self as having a rooted, past identity where they perceive that others relate to their current life as significant (Sheard, 2013). People seek to establish an interest from others in reference to their own thinking, ideologies, behaviors, and beliefs, and this interest is essential creating beneficial human development throughout life (Dixon, 2016). The benefit of mattering to others is the opportunity to produce self-awareness and selfless individuals who make constructive contributions to society (Dixon, 2011). The belief that one is significant to and needed by others provides meaning to individuals (Dixon, 2016). The mattering concept can be utilized as a climate barometer or as a means for personal purpose and effectual change (Dixon & Tucker, 2008).

The confidence that the individual is the focus of another's attention is central to mattering theory because people have an innate predisposition to seek to be seen and understood

(Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Individuals feel a need to experience moments when attention provides pleasurable evidence that they matter through the care of others (Sheard, 2013). The most fundamental type of mattering is the perception that the individual has an inherent desire to acquire the attention of the person of significance by attaining interest or attraction (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). People have a desire to be noticed by and cared for by others (Schlossberg, 1989). The desire for normative experiences of hope and caring from others is an expression of the need for attention (Chhuon & Wallace, 2012). The individual's social self and reputation tend to be rooted in social relationships and impact how the person interprets the self (Hattie, 2003). When people believe they matter in a relationship, they are able to recognize the presence of acknowledged meaning to others and are better equipped to impact associates through a degree of active agency where the individual feels and behaves in a manner that fosters interdependence (Prilleltensky, 2014).

It is within these social interactions of relational mattering, known as relational-cultural theory, that individuals find purpose and meaning (Prilleltensky, 2014). This relational-cultural theory suggests that individuals grow in mutual relationships through building “zest, clarity, worth, creativity, and a desire for more connection” (Jordan, 2017, p. 228). Individuals inevitably need one another and seek to encourage each other through shared voices, confidence, and connection (Jordan, 2017). Within relationships that foster growth, engaged individuals are influenced by the encouraging relationship of a fluid relational experience (Jordan, 2017). This change, via empathy-building, occurs in a complex manner that acknowledges feelings, generates connections, and establishes human supports so that students feel a deep sense of mattering to others (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018). Thus, relational-cultural affairs foster the fundamental dynamic of mutual empathy through care, healing, and wellness (Jordan, 2017;

Jordan & Schwartz, 2018). Mutual empathy moves individuals toward a belief that they matter. It provides for a harmonious, adopted attunement and receptivity within the relationship (Jordan, 2017). Utilizing responsive teaching practices, such as empathy-building, has been shown to promote psychological and academic well-being amongst students while reducing incidences of distress and discrimination (Cholewa, Goodman, West-Olatunji, & Amatea, 2014; Graham et al., 2016).

Fostering culture in the classroom and relationships may lead to relational connectivity. Relational connectivity provides for the growth of both parties and disempowers negative effects of marginalization by encouraging a breakdown of dominant power struggles and feelings of subordination (Jordan, 2017). For instance, teachers have the ability to facilitate school adaptation amongst students through cross-cultural adaptation with the use of positive, culturally aware communication practices (Ngai, 2015). It is within this context that intellectual mattering is cultivated such that interest, profound learning, and inspiration contributes to the learning experience (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018). Classrooms that are culturally responsive establish learning environments that psychologically and academically foster academic and social growth, especially for marginalized students (Cholewa et al., 2013).

Each individual wants to be important to others and feel significant. The expression of mattering is best articulated through the perception that one is important to others while others are concerned with the individual (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). This is not necessarily the seeking of approval, but rather an indication that someone mutually cares (Schlossberg, 1989). In reference to significance and value, George and Park (2014) described an ideology of existential mattering, which is the extent to which people feel that their existence has meaningful value and importance. It is in this place of self-seeking that individuals solicit self-verification

through accurate and validating feedback (Hattie, 2003). This existential mattering experience is necessary to establish a belief of importance and relevance (George & Park, 2014). Therefore, there is an ego-extension that leads to a belief that others care about the individual's desires, thoughts, actions, and providence (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Additionally, there is a communication of care established through relationships in which individuals feel their background and aspirations are known to and respected by others (Chhuon & Wallace, 2012). Frankl (1959/2006) suggested that people were motivated to establish significance in life, while Baumeister (1991) noted that this motivation was a vital facet of human nature. Pedagogy that is culturally relevant provides environments and relationships full of care that formulate mutual trust (Jackson, Sealey-Ruiz, & Watson, 2014). As a result, when educators seek to understand their student's cultural and life experiences, they are appropriately equipped to provide culturally responsive assistance. This promotes positive, culturally relevant supports to promote psychological health (Cholewa et al., 2014).

Individuals articulate their relational existence by establishing interdependency with others. This was established to be a manifestation of the social self with salient relationships that foster mutual understanding with constituents (Hattie, 2003). Often, the behavior of the individual is influenced by these interdependent relationships because others satisfied most human needs (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Individuals depend on others and want to be dependable to each other. This creates a feeling of being needed (Schlossberg, 1989). Hence, there is an innate human effort to establish social relationships that create and sustain social bonds that are flexible and essential for human endurance (Bowlby, 1969/1982).

Beyond social bonds, ego-extension and appreciation are evident in consideration of mattering. For instance, Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) espoused that there were three

dimensions to mattering, including attention, importance, and dependence. Schlossberg (1989) added ego-extension and appreciation to these dimensions. Ego-extension is established when one feels that others would take pride in the accomplishments or be unhappy with the failures of the individual. Regardless of the outcome, the individual affirms that he or she matters to someone else. The second dimension Schlossberg added was that of appreciation. Individuals want their efforts to have value. With a strong belief of mattering, individuals also have higher levels of life-meaning (Lambert et al., 2013).

Constructs of Basic Human Needs

Mattering has been closely tied to Maslow's (1970) idea of a sense of belonging. The individual who perceives mattering has the ideology that they have relationships of value and importance (Dixon, 2011). Maslow (1970) espoused that individuals are motivated by physiological and psychological needs. The psychological needs include safety, love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization. When these needs are not met, the individual becomes motivated to fulfill these desires. To be functional and prosper in society, individuals need to feel both physically and emotionally secure and accepted (Maslow, 1970). Additionally, mattering has been found to be significant in understanding the psychosocial and cultural attitudes of school relationships (Dueñas & Gloria, 2017).

These attitudes are essential for individuals to establish prosperity through a sense of belonging. Thus, people are resolutely inclined to have their lives matter to society (George & Park, 2014). This is evident in Maslow's (1970) motivational theory comprising five tiers of human needs. Belonging was the third tier, where individuals sought to establish intimate relationships that were filled with such qualities as trust, acceptance, affection, and feeling part of a group (Maslow, 1970). In a recent study, O'Neal and Cotten (2016) found that urban youth

experienced life elements of risk that increased their vulnerability to negative outcomes, and established that promotive factor interventions of positive expectations and self-efficacy played a significant role in sense of belonging. Individuals sought to fit in and establish social relationships with a sense of belonging that is critical to higher-level life meaning-making (Lambert et al., 2013). When students perceive belonging, the goal of academic and social mastery can be cultivated and supported (Walker & Greene, 2009). These students often develop their need to belong through vital interactions with others as consistent, active participants in the process of relationship-building (Bronfennbrenner & Morris, 2006). As in their community environments, students seek a sort of *familia*, or kinship, in the academic environment to validate their belonging and purpose (Dueñas & Gloria, 2017).

As previously stated, individuals have an innate desire to feel significant to others and a parallel extrinsic desire to impact others (Prilleltensky, 2014). Regardless of struggles, those individuals who have a positive feeling of existential mattering deem their lives to have a profound and lasting importance (Baumeister, 1991). A major contextual influence for individuals seeking relationships is that others become social actors in their existence (Knight, 2014) and are better equipped to model interdependency in schools, at home, and with peers (Bronfenbrenner & Morris 2006). When students feel welcomed, valued, included, and encouraged, they have both internal and existential perceptions of importance (Goodenow, 1993). In order to maintain perceptive levels of importance, Goodenow (1993) espouses, individuals require relationships that matter. It is, therefore, essential for people to sense they are organically seen, considered, and valued in a way that does not require excessive thoughtfulness or privilege by sacrificing themselves or others (Prilleltensky, 2014).

However, according to Rosenberg and McCullough (1981), there is an element of sacrifice, or giving, in which relational reciprocity is of essential importance for both individuals and society. For instance, individuals in connected relationships need to establish and experience developmental supports that serve as protective buffers (Chhuon & Wallace, 2012; Zhang et al., 2016). Because many positive events come from shared sacrifices and mutual experiences, mattering has been related to life gratification and serves as a motivator for positive self-esteem (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Individuals with a positive sense of mattering are aware of their importance and connection to others within an ethos of caring (Sheard, 2013). For adolescents, this becomes an opportunity for them to work toward personal identification while learning to navigate and foster positive relationships of significance (Dixon & Tucker, 2008).

These significant relationships allow for individuals in need of socially interactive connections to be supported by establishing mutual interconnections. Thus, mattering is important to the social cohesion of society because individuals are bound to society by their dependence upon others (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). For adolescents, there is a need for peer relationships in order to cultivate important, bonding experiences that influence effective development. Individuals need to have welcoming and accepting friendships as part of their social experiences (Drolet & Arcand, 2013). Additionally, research has linked relational mattering to personal well-being (Graham et al., 2016; Raque-Bogdan, Ericson, Jackson, Martin, & Bryan, 2011).

In reference to the educational environment, successful school environments have established processes that serve to develop a positive school ethos through social supports. This is accomplished by acculturating teachers with the capacity to make students feel welcome.

Capacity-building assists students in establishing an understanding of their lives beyond the classroom (Read, Aldridge, Ala'i, Fraser, & Fozdar, 2015). Social supports promote the building of soft skills such as self-control, handling adversity, and dropout reduction (Center for Promise at America's Promise Alliance, 2015). When educators understand the adversity of certain student experiences, they are better equipped to provide various sources of social support. It is through these measures that supported youth persist to graduation (Center for Promise, 2015). For example, young people want support from peers in order to better respond to the demands of life. They pursue assistance to manage stressors such as discrimination, adverse relationships, community struggles, and dissatisfaction with school experiences (Knight, 2014).

The assistance and support that individuals require to succeed includes the antecedent to mattering, which is the establishment of interpersonal relationships of significance and support (Schieferecke & Card, 2013). The Schieferecke and Card (2013) report showed that supports come from both emotional and informational means. Emotional supports provide caring, comfort, and trust; while informational supports constitute insights and advice (Schieferecke & Card, 2013). Additional supports include appraisal and instrumental efforts such that appraisal efforts refer to positive assessments, encouraged self-evaluation, and competency building. Meanwhile, instrumental efforts refer to tangible goods and services such as bus passes, babysitting, or safe spaces. In addition, educators, parents, peers, and adults in the community that provide supportive relationships may also help to buffer adversity (Center for Promise, 2015).

Mental wellness, ethnic identity, and acculturation were part of the stability in established, healthy relationship foundations. A study of adolescents by Dixon-Rayle and Myers (2004) determined that wellness factors of mattering, ethnic identity, and acculturation each

functioned to predict adolescent wellness, whether or not each was directly interrelated. Specifically, the exploration found mattering positively influenced these individuals in the areas of academics, spirituality, leisure, love relationships, self-direction, and friendships. Dixon-Rayle and Myers also concluded that there were wellness differences for minority and nonminority youth: the minority participants generally perceived they mattered less than their non-minority counterparts. Sheard (2013) found that an individual's personal identity determined their ability to competently explore and practice positive approaches to life skills. As such, ethnic identity significantly predicts wellness for minorities and could explain their ability to acculturate in American society. In a similar study on psychosocial adjustment, O'Neal and Cotten (2016) found that promotive factors that increased sense of belonging reduced vulnerability to risk and increased positive mental outcomes and academic achievement in urban youth. When viewed through the lens of critical consciousness as a developmental asset for youth, declarations and perspectives in mattering relationships provide a voice and empowerment to the marginalized and oppressed (Diemer, Rapa, Voight, & McWirtter, 2016).

Hence, there is an evident interrelatedness in relationships in which mattering is the substantive factor of belonging and social cohesion (Dueñas & Gloria, 2017). This social cohesion represents how mattering is also associated with diminished degrees of neuroticism and greater degrees of extraversion, affability, receptiveness, and mindfulness while also being a “powerful psychological resource that acts as a resilience factor and coping resource” (Flett, Goldstein, Pechenkov, Nepon, & Wekerle, 2016, p. 53).

Related Literature

Mattering encompasses the feelings of reciprocal significance in relationships (Dixon, 2011; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). An individual that experiences mattering is both self-

aware and secure in their sense of attachment (Flett, 2018b). The importance of understanding mattering relationships is bound by also understanding the converse concept of marginalization. Marginalization, as described by Schlossberg (1989) is the feeling individuals encounter when they did not feel significant. How individuals move beyond issues of marginalization to resiliency is through persistence. This section is a review of the marginalization and persistency concepts, followed by orientations of practice in mattering and the school significance.

Marginalization

According to Schlossberg (1989), when individuals feel they are not significant to others, or sense that they do not matter, they become marginalized. Marginalization stimulates certain mental contradictions such as love and hate or pride and shame (Prilleltensky, 2014; Schlossberg, 1989). The lived experience of marginalization influences the oppressed person's view of society in relation to their social condition (Diemer et al., 2016). Some encounters of this condition in classroom experiences can marginalize minority students and lead to psychological stress (Cholewa et al., 2014). For instance, children who lack a feeling of relatedness react with avoidance to academic setbacks and display coping emotions of self-pity while hiding difficulties and a reluctance to seek assistance (Flett, 2018c).

Schlossberg (1989) described two types of marginality: permanent and temporary. When individuals are straddling two worlds, such as Latinos in American schools, this is considered to be permanent marginality, while individuals in a transition phase experience temporary marginality (Jacoby, 2015; Schlossberg, 1989). An example of temporary marginality is a high school student living on-campus for college for the first time. Another example of temporary marginality is when students feel they do not understand coursework or lack self-confidence. Jordan and Schwartz (2018) found that marginalized students often withdraw, manifest

behavioral issues, or reject feedback as a coping mechanism to avert. This inability for Latinos to cope increased their stress and feelings of rejection, which have been shown to lead to lower academic success and higher depressive symptoms (Basáñez, Warren, Crano, & Unger, 2013).

There are many consequences associated with marginalization. Marginalization tends to happen naturally when there are life changes, transitions, or roles (Jacoby, 2015; Schlossberg, 1989). Marginalization was discovered to lead to negative impacts on socialization, including both emotional maltreatment and neglect (Fleet, et al., 2016) as well as a feeling of invisibility. According to Prilleltensky (2014), the feeling of invisibility which plagues minority and oppressed communities is an infringement of psychological rights of fairness and righteousness. This injustice has led to increased anxiety, sensitivity, self-consciousness, or a sense of inferiority (Schlossberg, 1989). Further, social anxiety, decreased extraversion, heightened neuroticism, and loneliness are linked to low mattering (Flett & Hewitt, 2014; Flett et al., 2016). Marginalized students tend to have a lower sense of critical consciousness with an increased risk of failure and powerlessness as they possess inadequate coping skills to deal with overt and underlying racism, inordinate disciplinary practices, and other disproportionate social conditions of the classroom (Diemer et al., 2016). Over time, the chronic marginalization of the individual fosters feelings of isolation, disconnection, and disempowerment (Jordan, 2017).

Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) found that a person of significance to the individual wants to know how much they matter to another. Mattering is a people-centered concept in which emotions are nurtured, leadership is fostered, lived experiences are embraced, emotional intelligence is cultivated, mentorship is tended, and positive life outcomes are sought (Sheard, 2013). However, the concepts of mattering to others and the other mattering to the self are not empirically linked. The marginalization concept is understood as an idea of love that is

unrequited because the individual feels another individual matters, but the other individual may not share the same consideration (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Researchers noted that decreased amounts of mattering are associated with robust levels of emotional and physical maltreatment (Flett et al., 2016). This lack of consideration, or feeling of not mattering, increased the feelings of social phobia and anxiety (Dixon, Scheidegger, & McWhirter, 2009; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Individuals who are marginalized may feel incompetent as a person and experience separation psychology as they struggle to achieve maturity and autonomy (Jordan, 2017).

Due to marginalization, many individuals do not self-disclose life situations. Self-disclosure has been established as the sharing of one's mental state, contemplations, and social acumen (Knight, 2014). When individuals feel that others do not profoundly share of themselves, the individual may perceive that they do not matter (Elliot et al., 2004), and instead perceive themselves to be excluded or isolated and experience hurt (Jordan, 2017). Latino adolescents usually consider context as an antecedent to disclosure. For example, for marginalized Latino youth, nondisclosure is often associated with a back-life of negative community experiences, such as violence (Knight, 2014). Individuals who do not disclose often believe they do not matter and are more prone to feeling alienated and are at risk for greater social avoidance since they feel disconnected from others (Flett et al., 2016). However, when adolescents self-disclose as a normative strategy to self-management, they are better able to handle stress by sharing their inner and relational processes, as well as societal impressions (Knight, 2014). Engaging adolescents in a practice of self-disclosure expands cyclical communication which affords the students opportunities to establish a routine of active problem solving that mitigates academic difficulties (Basáñez et al., 2013).

Other recognized threats to the existential mattering experience include aging, bereavement or loss, and death (George & Park, 2014). Many individuals who perceive they do not matter have experienced unfortunate events such as physical or emotional neglect or physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. This maltreatment has led to lasting social and psychological issues (Flett et al., 2016). Relationships that are socially impaired result in individuals lacking meaning in life and experiencing disconnections (Lambert et al., 2013). These disconnections, based on internal and external power struggles of marginalization, hurt individuals (Jordan, 2017). When students feel there is a lack in their sense of belonging, there are higher instances of truancy, absences, negative behaviors, and dropping out of school (Goodenow, 1993). Reportedly, students who believe they do not matter to an institution tend to have lower self-esteem, self-worth, institutional connection, and a sense of belonging and harmony with their academic environment, as opposed to their peers (Dueñas & Gloria, 2017).

When there is a lack of social bonding and mattering, there are psychological and physiological consequences of interpersonal attachment deficiency (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). For adolescents, this led to incidents of social misconduct (Elliot et al., 2004). Many adolescents fear that they are socially irrelevant and tenaciously attached to their peer groups. Sometimes adolescents who feel they do not matter felt helpless, invisible, or depressed (Dixon & Tucker, 2008). This feeling is often because they do not feel that they match up to the institution's values, which diminishes their social capital, efficacy, and social connection (Dueñas & Gloria, 2017). Others act out with delinquent behavior because the desire to matter is extremely powerful. When adolescents are marginalized, they often have a longing to draw attention or make impressions in negative ways. The reactions from adults and peers are valued as

significant. Consequently, the offender may be condemned, but he or she cannot be ignored (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981).

Sanders and Munford (2016) espoused that society cannot disregard that every individual has a past that influences their current life situations and conditions, explaining that individuals each carry a back-life that includes external and internal problems associated with ACEs (Morrow & Villodas, 2018). ACEs are those life events that have an impact on risk behavior, health, and life potential. The more ACEs, the higher the marginalization risk, including high school dropout (CDC, 2016). Even for those who do not experience delinquency, marginalization still affects them due to the back-life of home and neighborhood complexities filled with challenges and vulnerabilities, that are carried into school (Sanders & Munford, 2016). The more ACEs an adolescent encounters, the higher the risk for dropping out, as well as academic, emotional, and behavioral problems that often lead to academic disengagement (Morrow & Villodas, 2018). For example, in communities where violence is prevalent, many Latinos chose nondisclosure of emotions and life-relevant information due to either their victimization apprehension or the lack of trusting relationships (Knight, 2014). Other Latino students are charged with the obligation of putting family responsibilities above academics, which is associated with dropping out (Seroczynski & Jobst, 2016). Adolescents who establish a sense of existential mattering tend to make assumptions about their value and worth in the greater world as part of a bigger story in life (Baumeister, 1991). This back-life influences social interactions and feelings of difference or insignificance (Sanders & Munford, 2016). Marginalized students often feel isolated outside of their communities and often feel rejected because of different interests, minority status, or the failure to meet societal or organizational norms (Schieferecke & Card, 2013). Often, teachers interpret the needs of their students based

on the expectations of a normed environment with expected behaviors; however, there is a gap between this expectation and the student's ability to communicate effectively (Ngai, 2015).

If the meaning-making and relationship-building process is hindered, there may be a development of existential frustration through which individuals questioned their personal worth (Frankl, 1959/2006). These students are keenly aware of the social injustices, oppression, and stigmatization they experience. Many students experience exclusion or discrimination in schools and report feeling that their self-expression and identities are questioned (Gosine & Islam, 2014). Benner and Wang (2014) found that this is a more poignant concern in schools with a lesser amount of peer similarity, which leads many students to feel alone and less ascribed to their school and other demographically different peers. These individuals suffer academically and with social integration. This alienation creates a deep mistrust beyond the school environment. Further, when institutions attempt to address the class and race achievement gap, there is a tendency to establish programs that suggest deficiency, which further marginalizes youth (Gosine & Islam, 2014). Hence, mattering has become an important life mediator because when individuals perceive mattering, the marginalized feeling either dissipates or becomes a motivation to persist (Schlossberg, 1989). Mattering is imperative when fostering a sense of belonging and institutional connection that can foster relationships and processes of student educational experiences as a means to assist them to discern that others have confidence in their abilities while creating persistence motivation (Dueñas & Gloria, 2017). It is a salient situation when demographic marginalization is recognized. Adolescents who are socioeconomically marginalized in their communities are at higher risk for demographic marginalization in the school environment (Benner & Wang, 2014).

Marginalization is significant in the Latino youth community. There is a feeling of exclusion that is evident among nonmajority students (Göppert & Springirth, 2016). Llamas and Ramos-Sanchez (2013) found that marginalization amongst Latino groups is a predictor of acculturative stress. Additionally, many Latinos faced demographic marginalization, as both socioeconomics and race are factors in their educational environment. Because of this, they earn lower grades and struggle, overall, in school (Benner & Wang, 2014). Latino students, in particular, who struggle academically are more apt to lose motivation and abandon hope of academic success (Seroczynski & Jobst, 2016). Latino students who experience marginalization are impacted both psychologically and academically and find it challenging to adapt to school life. Many Latinos experience a feeling of being pushed out by the institution through marginalization or mistreatment by school personnel. This adversely affects social bonds within the school environment that lead to further inequality and devaluation of academic achievement, which result in the inability of personnel to establish, promote, or maintain social bonds that could protect and insulate minority youth (Peguero et al., 2016). Consequently, students focused on the division between cultural norms and school integration (Delgado et al., 2016).

The Latino student's sense of self and sense of belonging in the present study may be inhibited by this marginalization. Based on their study findings, Benner and Wang (2014) surmised that engaging demographically marginalized students in school-based endeavors and endorsing peer and staff connections functioned positively in educational development. Further, the study found that marginalization could be mediated with crucial, positive social supports that assist with adjustment (Benner & Wang, 2014). Fundamental support services of influence for Latino students come from school relationships and increased the sense of school belonging, development, and academic achievement (Delgado et al., 2016). When schools provide caring

communities with emotional supports for Latino families and students, individuals are better adjusted and achieve greater academic success (Conchas, 2001). Attention must be given to provide support for the whole child by providing positive influences for their development (Moreno & Gaytan, 2013).

Persistence and Resiliency

Building adolescent resiliency teaches individuals to overcome adversity and improve self-worth and personal identity while building relationships with a durable capability to rebound from problems and stress. An influential factor of adolescent resiliency development is experiencing constant, intimate connections with caring adults, such as teachers (Flett, 2018b). Mattering assists marginalized youth with tools to build resilience through self-efficacy. Factors of significance that fostered resilience included community involvement and cultural adherence (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2013). The mattering principle is a cohesive factor in resiliency by mitigating negative effects while it increases adaptive factors for success, such as cultivating ethnic pride and academic progress (Basáñez et al., 2013). Resiliency increases self-efficacy, or the feeling of purpose, which promotes the ideas of external influence, skill mastery, and event influence. The individual also feels that he or she could be positive change agents (Prilleltensky, 2014) by mattering to their community. Mattering is a mediation factor against feelings of maltreatment, social phobia, and loneliness (Flett et al., 2016). Interpersonal vulnerability acts as a significant function in mitigating psychological distress for adolescents when feelings of mattering are cultivated (Flett, 2018b). Resiliency fostered in oppressed people creates fewer social condition constraints and develops the agency and capacity that alters life conditions through the development of skills to resolve challenges while it alters self-determination (Diemer et al., 2016). Established resilience in Latino youth builds the skill to overcome challenges

through coping mechanisms that provide meaning and purpose and is an important developmental buffer against life stress (Brietzke & Perriera, 2017). Individuals who experience mattering tend to establish and utilize problem-focused coping skills that allow them to be more stress-resilient and circumstantially adaptive (Flett, 2018c).

Other protective factors that affected Latino students include family involvement, positive academic expectations, and school connectivity (Jimerson, Patterson, Stein, & Babcock, 2016). Protective factors also aided in oppositional behavior change, truancy reduction, and decreased dropout rates. Additionally, students learn to articulate their needs and shared their unique, diverse perspectives and experiences (Gosine & Islam, 2014). Further, critical consciousness develops through resiliency, promotes self- and community-reflection, increases motivation to action, and empowers a shared identity that reinforces development (Diemer et al., 2016). When educators make students feel they matter, the individuals acquire a beneficial critical awareness (Gosine & Islam, 2014). The implications of this awareness for learners, with teacher and peer supports, include motivation, school engagement, and a sense of belonging that promotes persistence (Kiefer, Alley, & Ellerbrock, 2015).

Significant social supports perform an essential role in shielding individuals faced with adversity (Flett et al., 2016). In general, students desire to feel connected to their school environment. It is essential for minority students who face adversity in schools and society due to their minority status to experience cultural adherence (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2013). When pedagogy is involved, the reciprocal relationship fostered between teachers and students encourages opportunities for students to see themselves as significant to the institution and in their own development (Chhuon & Wallace, 2012). Students with a grander desire to learn express an increased appreciation for education. In this regard, the value of education may

contribute to the student's enthusiasm to persist academically even when academic persistence creates an opportunity cost of other, more attractive interests (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). A strong sense of school community is essential to empower student achievement (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013). The promise of school personnel who have served as support conduits cultivates opportunities for student self-disclosure, provides role models, and imparts advisement to students in building coping skills (Basáñez et al., 2013). Positive relationships are key in established peer and student-teacher social networks within the classroom as a means to break down feelings of marginalization while these relationships empower youth with the rewards of support systems (Gosine & Islam, 2014).

Beyond the classroom, individuals who are involved in extracurricular activities develop bonds with educators and friendships with peers in an organic manner of shared interest with a sentiment of safety and care (Drolet & Arcand, 2013; Zhang et al., 2016). These are opportunities to bridge the gap between intended goals and ordinary routines (Göppert & Springirth, 2016). This sense of security improves the school climate through practices of reflection and connection that build the student and staff competence to forge an inclusive capacity to remove barriers for learners (Read et al., 2015). Since much of the teaching experience involves responsive interactions with students (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018), school communities with invested personnel can provide the needed interventions that improve student efficacy and academic success with intensive programs that celebrate academic achievement and move students toward graduation (Legters, Parise, & MDRC, 2016).

Additionally, many students and faculty have a desire to establish an ethos of school belonging. School belonging is the social and emotional connection that a student has with the academic institution and its population (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013). Sanders and Munford

(2016) noticed that when vulnerable students felt a sense of belonging to their school institution, they became resilient (Sanders & Munford, 2016). This occurs when pathways to persistence are established through accommodating relationships with adults who cared by providing resources and supports (DePaoli, Balfanz, & Bridgeland, 2016). Individuals with a positive feeling of mattering to others manage to have a higher degree of social interaction and lower degree of social anxiety and loneliness (Flett et al., 2016). Thus, students respond best when they feel teachers offer respect, involvement, and autonomy over their life conditions (Kiefer et al., 2015). The adolescent who feels both belonging and mattering at school has a dual system of protection that affirms academic progress (Flett, 2018b).

When school personnel act as a franchise of empowerment, they establish conditions that emphasize resiliency development and cultural continuity while contributing to greater school engagement (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2013). This enablement, coupled with a sense of belonging, empowers students to establish an intrinsic importance and usefulness within the school environment, which motivates learning, regardless of academic struggles (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013). Therefore, all students should be encouraged, through a sense of belonging, to maneuver from the margins to the center by promoting discussion and collaboration (Göppert & Springirth, 2016).

Academic Significance: Persistence to Graduation

For Latinos, high school completion has been viewed as a marker for upward mobility (Brietzke & Perriera, 2017). Schools have provided distinctive opportunities to develop student sense of belonging (Allen, Kern, Vell-Brodrick, Hattie, & Waters, 2018). Supportive student-teacher relationships are important to promoting educational outcomes that lead to high school graduation, especially in established, healthy school climates that support racial, ethnic,

linguistic, and cultural backgrounds (Niehaus et al., 2016). For these relationships to occur organically, educators give up their authority in place of influence. When individuals relinquish power and establish connected relationships, they foster mutual growth (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018). Watson (2017) determined that there is a value to encouraging school connectivity through a practice of mattering as it increases student wellness.

Successful student interventions assist the individual in promoting life skills, including establishing life purpose, compassion, morality, and connectivity (Lemon & Watson, 2011). Walker and Greene (2009) found that learning and resiliency cannot occur in desolation, but rather within a complex method that considers the pivotal function of social relationships and interactions. A sense of belonging and strong school relationships increases persistence to graduation, even when students face academic challenges (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013). It is critical for students to feel valued in school in order to foster academic success and persistence to graduation (Niehaus et al., 2016). Young people benefit from mattering experiences through the promotion of significance, caring relationships, and the provision of safeguards against stress and problems with appropriate development of coping skills (Flett & Hewitt, 2014; Flett et al., 2016).

Graduation rates amongst ethnic groups vary. In reference to the general high school student population, DePaoli et al. (2016) noted the recent "Building a Grad Nation Report" achievement of an ACGR of 82.3%. The goal was to get all states to 90% by the year 2020. Pennsylvania was one of 21 states that were either stagnant or backsliding in their attempts (DePaoli et al., 2016). These statistics indicated an increase over the 2011–12 school year when the 4-year ACGR was at 80%. Yet, one out five students still did not complete school within 4 years (Stetser, Stillwell, & NCES, 2014).

These Pennsylvania graduation rates were similar to most states. In 2011, the ACGR was 83% and in 2012 it rose to 88%, showing a marked increase in school and district efforts (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016a). Similarly, 65% of Latinos graduated in 2011, which was followed by a notable increase to 76% in 2012 (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016a). The dropout rate in Pennsylvania for 2011 was 2.2% and increased to 2.8% in 2012 (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016b). The dropout rate was a consideration of students who were enrolled at a period of time during the school year, but not enrolled the following school year (Stetser et al., 2014).

The term used for students who withdraw from school before graduation is coined as “dropouts.” The term “dropout” refers to a high school student who has willingly removed him- or herself from school before graduating (Froman & Miami-Dade County Public Schools, 2015). A student who does not meet the pertinent attendance expectations of the district or a student with unknown whereabouts are also considered a dropout. If a student has withdrawn from a school and not matriculated into another school, the said student is constituted as a dropout. Additionally, a dropout is considered to be any individual who did not graduate and is ineligible to attend school because the person has exceeded the maximum age requirements (Froman & Miami-Dade County Public Schools, 2015). Although traditional focus was on high school dropouts as an issue of dysfunction, further empirical exploration challenges researchers and practitioners to view dropout as a life and academic domain that should be addressed through intellectual, spiritual, and emotional means (Lemon & Watson, 2011).

Dropouts create both societal costs and personal risks (Jimerson et al., 2016). The act of withdrawing from school before graduation is viewed as a negative, downward effect to socioeconomic mobility (Brietzke & Perriera, 2017). The early indications of school

disengagement present a higher risk for students to drop out (Archambault et al., 2017). Disengaged students, especially urban Latinos, have lower academic involvement (Peguero et al., 2016). There were many barriers to academic success and future mobility. Roadblocks to graduation include personal, school, and district complacency (DePaoli et al., 2016). Barriers that affect the Latino attrition rate include obstacles with adverse encounters that disengaged them and hindered the process of persistence to graduation (Moreno & Gaytan, 2013). Many disengaged Latino students experience varying feelings of alienation, isolation, suppression, devaluation, and discrimination (Göppert & Springirth, 2016). Also, many institutions do not understand student needs or how to provide support. Some believe the graduation issue is the concern for others and continuously pass vulnerable students on, which creates a lack of stability and consistency. The lack of accountability is of a greater concern for schools that graduate 67% or less of their students. These schools tend to enroll greater proportions of minority, low-income students constituting approximately 1,000 schools in the United States (DePaoli et al., 2016). Additionally, adolescents with behavioral and emotional challenges in school have increased delinquency and substance abuse issues (Wang & Fredricks, 2014).

According to the Center for Promise (2015), high school youth with interrupted education reported feeling they had fewer supports. The Center for Promise report noted major factors of adversity, which include early parenting, suspension or expulsion, being friends with many dropouts, academic failure, physical or mental health issues, homelessness, and transiency. It is imperative to note that half of nongraduates experienced at least several of these adversities at some level (Center for Promise, 2015). Recent literature suggests that school connectivity is a main factor in adolescent health (Millings, Buck, Montgomery, Spears, & Stallard, 2012).

Schools should continue to implement programs that meet general student necessities (Reed, 2015). Schools and districts must continue to make the rise of graduation rates a priority, especially in meeting the needs of vulnerable students. Early interventions may promote school engagement and development that reduces problem behaviors. These interventions include nurturing school connectivity (Jacoby, 2015; Wang & Fredricks, 2014). For instance, Reed (2015) found that when academic achievement was resolved, Latino and White students possessed a similar tendency to graduate, when interventions were set in early adolescence. By providing research-based strategies, schools are able to better identify and subsequently intervene by implementing practices that are supportive of Latino students' needs that improve behavior, academics, and attendance while building social and emotional skills (DePaoli et al., 2017).

Latino, low-income, and English language learner (ELL) high school students face many barriers to academic success. According to the 2016 ACGR, 11 states reported rates below 70% for Latino students and 35 states reported the ACGR below 70% for ELLs (DePaoli et al., 2016). In 2014, almost 25% of low-income students did not graduate (DePaoli et al., 2016). For the 2011–12 school year, the ACGR for Latino students was 71%, for ELLs it was 57%, and for low-income students it was 70%. Actually, many states with significant Latino populations have not seen an ACGR above 70%, so that when combined with Black student populations, this accounts for 54% of nongraduates (DePaoli et al., 2017). According to Moreno and Gaytan (2013), Latino students, in contrast to White and other ethnic group counterparts, have received a substandard education for over 20 years. Hence, Latinos have the lowest graduation rates amid all ethnic subgroups (NCES, 2018). There are various reasons that have been explored in determining why students drop out. One issue Latino students face is if failure of state-mandated

graduation exams occurred, they were at greater risk for dropping out. As a consequence, Latinos are disproportionately represented in this group of test failures (Jimerson et al., 2016).

Another issue has been language acquisition. For many students the process of language acquisition mastery, or *translanguaging*, is a challenge. Translanguaging is the ability for the speaker to comprehensively utilize a linguistic catalogue without consideration of sociopolitical limitations of the normed language, such as English (Otheguy, Gracia, & Reid, 2015). Although there have been significant gains for ELLs in translanguaging, there have been minimal gains for low-income and Latino subgroups (Stetser et al., 2014). In a study of dropout risks, Latinos and Latino ELLs presented significantly higher risks of dropping out than did the White group (Kim, Chang, Singh, & Allen, 2015). In states with substantial ELL populations, the demographic graduation rate is low (DePaoli et al, 2017). Many of these Latino and Latino ELLs made the decision to drop out in their junior or senior years of high school, stating they felt disengaged (Kim et al., 2015).

Translanguaged bilinguals differ from monolinguals in that they have a linguistic ability to strategically select effective communication that brought their first language into the norming process (Garcia & Wei, 2014). For many native Spanish speakers, English translanguaging was the key to academic success (Reed, 2015; Seroczynski & Jobst, 2016). However, according to Otheguy et al. (2015), schools tend to restrict translanguaging. This restriction adversely affects language proficiency as well as limits the individual's cultural identity while increasing minoritization through cultural and social suppression (Otheguy et al., 2015). Minoritized students are those identified as a marginalized minority due to their membership in an underrepresented community (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016), such as Latinos or native speakers. When native speakers are minoritized, their spoken language is many times racialized, which

emphasizes dominant power structures by challenging these individuals to deny their linguistic backgrounds and causes microaggressions of censorship (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Minoritization often occurs because schools norm monolingualism as part of a monoglossic ideology which promoted the English as the dominant language and as a sovereign skill that operated in a separate context from other languages (Fuller & Hosemann, 2015). Other risk factors that students consider in dropping out include financial issues, lack of community support, lower self-concept, and academic challenges. These issues are reciprocal and play upon each other in a manner that further disenfranchises the student (Jimerson et al., 2016).

There are, however, various mediation effects for Latino students. A feeling of belonging is a contributor to psychosocial functioning and academic prosperity (Allen et al., 2016). Minoritized students describe belonging as an impression of ease with others and security in a particular environment, such as a school (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). A major hindrance to belonging for Latino students, however, is weak teacher-student relationships, disability identification, and English language acquisition (Moreno & Gaytan, 2013). Many minority students, especially those with ethno-linguistic backgrounds other than English, consider themselves as outsiders (Göppert & Springirth, 2016). Without adequate supports, the sense of belonging for Latino students declines throughout their high school years (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013). Teachers who support a sense of belonging, provide the positive characteristics that encourage school belonging (Allen et al., 2016).

In a study on school connectedness amongst adolescents, Watson (2017) found that school connectivity and wellness are strongly correlated when consideration of mattering was part of the process. A recent study established that when Latinos become connected to the institution and establish school attachment, the dropout odds for this group decreases, making

attachment a protective effect for persistence (Peguero et al., 2016). A similar study by Niehaus, Irvin, and Rogelberg (2016) on predictors of school connection and valuing found a significant difference in connection, valuing, behavior, and academic outcomes between Latino and non-Latino students. The results of the study showed significant differences in outcomes of mediation pathways that favored Latino students' persistence to graduation (Niehaus et al., 2016). The conclusion of the study indicated that Latinos who experienced better school relationships felt valued and found a greater importance to the school experience, had better behavior, and acquired higher levels of academic success (Niehaus et al., 2016).

Participants of another study expressed the value of relationships to their sense of belonging (Vaccaro & Newman, 2015). Educators who provide both internal safe spaces and extracurricular supports appropriately recognized all students in an environment where language variation was explored and enriched (Göppert & Springirth, 2016). When individuals bond over life experiences, the relativity of the relationship provides an arena for youth to deal with their issues and experiences such as socioeconomic class, gender bias, race relations, and other identity elements (Watson, 2017). When educators implement measures, such as actions to increase attendance or incentives to change behavior, the procedures become contributory enhancements to adolescent health and are components to success for students at risk (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2013).

In another study on Latino adolescents, Reed (2015) found that students who felt encouraged by teachers and peers also felt safe in school. When provided with encouragement in the form of respect, value, and sense of belonging, adolescents formulate increased feelings of social connection and are better able to mitigate negativity (Millings et al., 2012). The Millings (2012) study concluded that school incorporation and early interventions increase the likelihood

of high school completion. Incorporation and interventions as a means to persistence to graduation was also the result of another study of Latino and Latino ELLs, in which Kim et al. (2015) found a positive correlation between a student's perceived positive student-teacher relationships and fewer dropout risks. A correlate that impacts Latino students' success is the individual's level of language acquisition. There is a higher degree of school connection and feelings of value for students who are either native English speakers or who have mastered the language. Thus, the greater the ability to communicate effectively with educators, the more likely the student is to complete high school (Niehaus et al., 2016). Quality school-based relationships that provide academic and personal support matters to students (Allen et al., 2016). Minoritized students long for relationships that are more profound, authentic, and consciously concerned (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Educators cannot, therefore, realistically require students to embrace linguistic diversity when overall diversity is not embraced in the classroom (Göppert & Springirth, 2016). Intergroup discussions can afford students with teachable moments to learn about various groups and establish greater awareness for common goals and struggles while expanding an appreciation for diversity (Göppert & Springirth, 2016). Policymakers and practitioners should give attention to the inequalities faced by racial and linguistic minority dropout groups instead of focusing on generic approaches (Kim et al., 2015).

Orientations of Practice

Cultural values have been strongly associated with adolescent help-seeking behavior (Guo, Nguyen, Weiss, Ngo, & Lau, 2015). School personnel enhance mattering when they attend to student needs, demonstrate an ethos of caring, acknowledge participation, respect opinions and ideas, encourage completion of goals, and illustrate to the pupil that they rely on the individual for goal and outcome accountability (Dixon & Tucker, 2008). Sanders and Munford

(2016) found that school relationships based on perseverance, adaptability, relationships, time, and honesty established more instances of resiliency. Effective cultural and relational educational interventions impact marginalized students most because these interventions serve to validate the student (Cholewa et al., 2014). School engagement increases among minority adolescents when the student experiences are enhanced by fostered cultural attachment (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2013). However, school attachment is hindered when demographic marginalization of socioeconomics and race is evident and often leads to deficiency in school performance (Benner & Wang, 2014). Marginalized youth can create new narratives of their school experiences in a manner that replaces the sense of exclusion and alienation with caring, social safe havens. Students feel integral to the institution and establish positive identities as they change the school ecology with a positive ethos. This ethos is established through a complexity of sociocultural aspects which influence the need to seek relational assistance (Guo et al., 2015). To establish such relational assistance, many choose to become Americanized via assimilation and acculturation into the American fabric of communities as a means to buffer the stressors of Latino cultural and social identity while pursuing perceived socioeconomic mobility (Brietzke & Perriera, 2017). However, while the assimilation buffer is a factor in academic and life success in first- and second-generation immigrants, according to Archambault et al. (2017) found that this has little effect on the third generation facing issues of marginalization.

Self-esteem is identified as an infused requirement in finding personal meaning. Meaning is recognized as a motivation that influences goals and assists the individual with life circumstance sensibility (Frankl, 1959/2006). Students have opportunity to experience the mattering concept in a manner that allows for self-realizations and foster a better understanding of those people and things that mattered to them in their academic and social spheres (Dixon &

Myers, 2004). Self-esteem and active engagement serve as protective factors when students are given the tools to cope effectively with life challenges (Jacoby, 2015; Wang & Fredericks, 2014). There is a need to assist students in finding appropriate conduits for communication and create a consciousness about the necessity to cope against rejection (Basáñez et al., 2013). With assistance, students are more likely to focus on solving problems and concentrate on self-improvement. They are, therefore, less likely to be disengaged from school or be involved in negative social behaviors (Wang & Fredricks, 2014).

Research shows that schools that exist as spaces that provide affiliative practice for increased social justice are institutions where students have a sense of belonging and acceptance (Göppert & Springirth, 2016). Social supports in school increase levels of self-esteem through relationships as students become more aware of their talents and skills. Social supports also establish a stronger sense of purpose (Gordon, Downey, & Bangert, 2013). Further, social supports, overall, offer coping solutions that mitigate fatalistic outlooks while increasing academic progress (Basáñez et al., 2013).

According to Frankl (1959/2006), individuals need to feel satisfied that they have acquired meaning and established value in life. Individuals want a life narration that encourages motifs that compel them to believe they are meaningful and appreciated (George & Park, 2014). People who feel they matter have valuable relationships that contribute to their life meaning (Lambert et al., 2013). When students feel they matter, there is a clear message that the school staff has provided opportunities for meaningful participation through the use of the individual's personal and academic strengths (Dixon & Tucker, 2008). If students do not feel they matter, they tend to become disengaged. When students do not have a personal value system for education, they lack the meaning-making process needed for their life and goals, including a

trajectory to graduation (Lemon & Watson, 2011). When Latino students felt connected to and valued at their school, the risk of dropping out decreased (Niehaus et al., 2016).

Support sources offer a buffer to Latino students' stress while valuing high educational expectations, encouragement, and encouragement through reinforced connections with teachers and peers in a reciprocal manner. This creates connections for individuals with affirmed social supports that lead to a greater meaning-of-life concept and social value (Lambert et al., 2013). For minority students, such as Latinos, school personnel can incorporate navigation tools for assimilation such as information, awareness, and proficiencies related to ethnic identity and acculturation experiences (Dixon & Myers, 2004). The magnitude to which adolescent Latinos become assimilated into their school community is evident in their school incorporation, such as student attendance and participation (Reed, 2015). However, teachers should be aware that assimilative education is not necessarily culturally or educationally sound for all students (Ngai, 2015).

Support systems are an important orientation of practice for individual prosperity. Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) stated that mattering portrays a compelling social responsibility and a strong connection in social assimilation as individuals are bound to society by the character of dependence on others and by the dependence of others on the individual. Support systems promote more academic prosperity for Latino students than for other White students (Ramirez, Machida, Kline, & Huang, 2014). This is because support systems in schools establish communities of learning that are developmentally responsive (Kiefer et al., 2015). Social engagement, such as peer attachment, is an important factor in providing supports (Millings et al., 2012). Unfortunately, for many youths, seeking assistance generally emerges in moments when stress levels are high (Guo et al., 2015).

Mentor and teacher support services are also an effective mechanism for student advancement. These mattering relationships build the whole individual through augmented inclusion, which leads to an identity of affinity with the institution (Dueñas & Gloria, 2017). Mentors provide advocacy for student voices and their experiences and are shown to be an integral piece to encourage expression and foster bonding (Watson et al., 2017). Islands of support for Latinos include family, community, school mentors, and coaches that embrace and foster positive ethnic identity (Brietzke & Perriera, 2017). School interventions that cultivate school connectivity include a focus on peer and adult relationships (Millings et al., 2012). Adolescents are in need of adult anchors that provided a profound degree of confidence, consistency, and receptiveness through a web of caring adults for social support (Center for Promise, 2015). Adolescent needs are best met when programs and relationships correspond to the preferences and values of the individual (Guo et al., 2015). When students perceive that others care about their preferences, values, and overall self, they are more likely to be productively engaged in the process, establish trust, and take accountability. Latino students must be afforded the same emotional, intellectual, and mentoring supports of other students (Knight, 2014). Strong foundational relationships require consistent nurturing and environments that support mentoring with empathy (Dixon & Tucker, 2008) because the Latino culture customarily regards communal goals for continuing success (Ramirez et al., 2014). Thus, the positive development of relational strengths through mentoring is necessary across all domains of learning (Dixon & Tucker, 2008). Student and teacher relationships are critical variables in the student's positive perception of self-identification and future aspirations (Chhuon & Wallace, 2012).

School staff that want to better identify with student needs become “conduits to care” and are equipped to assist students with the navigation of the system by providing adequate information and services (Guo et al., 2015). In culturally responsive educational environments, relationships cultivate self-disclosure, promote caring, and validate individuals (Cholewa et al., 2014). Further, educators provide student advocacy, which includes identifying and diminishing barriers to education, promoting solution-based approaches to adversity, and fostering student participation. This leads to a better school climate, social functioning, and academic achievement so that students feel as if adults care (Dixon & Tucker, 2008). These relationships of trust establish protective elements that are critical to adolescent development. When educators listen to and try to comprehend student experiences and activities, they establish legitimate, trusting credibility and a positive environment with a sense of belonging (Drolet & Arcand, 2013; Watson et al., 2017), which is further navigated by mattering (Dueñas & Gloria, 2017). Further, culturally relevant, caring relationships structured with mattering in mind provided students and mentors opportunities to learn to negotiate systems through their interactions and social experiences (Watson et al., 2017).

Students with school mentors are more likely to have less truancy and discipline referrals. They also tend to score higher on connectedness measures (Gordon et al., 2013). About half of the students cited in a recent study noted that supports are key to academic prosperity (Ramirez et al., 2014). The positive impact of these caring relationships filter into the whole school environment, making the school atmosphere more welcoming and safer. There is a greater ability for school personnel to respond in more culturally and situationally appropriate ways that are focused on the adolescent’s life within and outside of the school. This mutually influences behaviors in both communities and reduces the vulnerabilities of the individual (Sanders &

Munford, 2016). Additionally, students acknowledge the important roles that attuned adults had on their academic and social achievement. They appreciate adults who listen with understanding and are flexible to their needs. These students enjoy the knowledge that educators are supportive and take their concerns seriously, provide praise, and share tactful candor (Drolet & Arcand, 2013; Watson, et al., 2017).

Due to academic and societal barriers, success for Latinos must include a commitment constitution. For instance, foundationally speaking, Latinos maintain an abundance of social and cultural assets relative to their children, including strong educational aspirations (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), a healthy overall life optimism (Kao & Tienda, 1995), and family values of high work ethic, loyalty to family, and positive attitudes of educational institutions (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995). School supports are significant to promoting essential developmental goals for Latino students' success (Niehaus et al., 2016). When given adequate supports, students display improved educational results (Ramirez et al., 2014). However, many students feel that they do not belong in the school community due to a deficiency of appreciation for their cultural heritage (Göppert & Springirth, 2016).

In addition to home supports, mentors and school supports need to be committed to the student in order to be effective in the mattering relationship (Goodenow, 1993; Ramirez et al., 2014). Supportive environments are found to be relevant during adolescence because this is when students become aware of their potential and ambitions, thus increasing their functional value in scholastic pursuits (Goodenow, 1993). An examination of school relationships by the Center for Promise (2015) indicated that it is essential for adults and peers to invest a significant amount of time listening and helping. Time also needs to be coupled with an unconditional commitment to be there, no matter what, by presence and support, regardless of immediacy or

long-term conditions (Center for Promise, 2015). Within this commitment, there has to be individuals who listen completely to narratives, provide organic supports, and offer direction in lay language that displays support (Dueñas & Gloria, 2017). It is necessary that supports be empathetic, accepting, and assistive without judgment. These individuals become critical connections to students' futures (Center for Promise, 2015). The teacher-student relationships are built by availability and establish connections with the students in a manner that is both approachable and receptive (Kiefer et al., 2015). School personnel commit resources to conversing with students as preemptive measures (Ramirez et al., 2014). Latino students who perceive positive relationships with committed school staff establish more interest and value in school, exhibit better academic norms, have greater engagement, and increase their persistence to graduation (Niehaus et al., 2016).

Established cultural competency of Latino students provides an essential infrastructure that includes culturally sensitive instruction (Moreno & Gaytan, 2013). This infrastructure establishes a community of trust which acknowledges and deepens mutual relationships that are open, genially demanding, humanizing, and committed (Watson, 2017). The link between engagement and teacher support is a strong motivator for student success (Conner & Pope, 2013). Engagement includes guiding students to establish a perception of mattering and traverse their place in the institution through relationships, or academic family (Dueñas & Gloria, 2017; Jacoby, 2015). Behavioral engagement for Latinos is a strong indicator of valuing and positive educational outcomes (Niehaus et al., 2016). This engagement celebrates cultural competency, which is essential to establish empathy and is a key conduit to the mattering relationship. Mutual empathy builds engaging relationships and connections, which are essential to personal health (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018).

Summary

The theoretical framework and literature outlined in this chapter provided insight into mattering theory. The framework discussed also included empirical evidence regarding marginalization and its consequences. The related literature provided information on high school persistence with a focus on graduation and dropouts. Dropout data, specific to the Latino population of the current study, was also presented. Even with the various studies on dropouts, there is a gap in the literature that links these concepts, specifically for Latino students. Mattering is about significance and this study was conducted to understand the impact that mattering has on Latino high school student persistence. In addition, this study served as an opportunity and motivation to provide a better understanding of Latino students' perceptions of the ways the mattering experience impacted their persistence to high school graduation in Mannaton County, Pennsylvania.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand Latino students' perceptions of the ways the mattering experience impacts their persistence to high school graduation in Mannaton County, Pennsylvania. Chapter Three includes information regarding the methods for the research. My role as the researcher is explained, along with a rationale. Subsequently, the setting is described and the participants are detailed. Next, the procedures used for data collection and analysis are explained. The chapter concludes with a discussion of trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and a summary of the research study.

Design

This is a qualitative study with a transcendental phenomenological approach. Qualitative research is used to establish an understanding of social and historical experiences (Creswell, 2013). I sought to understand how the mattering experience of Latino high school students impacts persistence to graduation in Mannaton County, Pennsylvania via a qualitative study. A qualitative inquiry includes studying and seeking to understand the human experience via first-person narratives that serve to examine both experiences and behaviors (Moustakas, 1994). In this study, the participants provided narratives regarding their experiences in high school and how their mattering relationships led to their persistence to graduation.

The study utilized interviews, journals, and a focus group to provide reflective data for analysis. According to Creswell (2013), a phenomenological study is used to explain a shared experience for individuals of a phenomenon. The phenomenological approach engages the participants in a manner that encourages them to consider their experiences through comprehensive explanations and an awareness of practice to get to the experiential essence.

Each participant was provided an opportunity to share their mattering experience, which provided explanations and awareness of how this impacted persistence to graduation. Then, I established themes (Creswell, 2013). The themes provided a clearer picture of how mattering impacts Latino high school students' persistence to graduation.

The essence established through the transcendental phenomenological model excludes presuppositions to understand the experience. Each experience is studied separately (Creswell, 2013), while each separate individual follows a process of reasoning that is benign to bias, belief, or praxis (Moustakas, 1994). The individuals in the study were provided with the opportunity to share and reflect upon their experiences with mattering relationships during high school. In the same sentiment as separation, I anticipated that in utilizing the transcendental phenomenological approach I would need to refrain from making assumptions. It is essential to concentrate on the subject in a manner of naïveté by allowing the questions to guide the study through the use of epoché. According to Moustakas (1994), epoché is the conscious act of withholding opinions or judgment about the research in order to be attentive to experiential analysis. Through epoché, I was able to conduct a more organic reflection and analysis of data and offer sources for further research (Moustakas, 1994). As the researcher, I was sure to reserve all preconceptions and judgments of the mattering experience of the participants.

Research Questions

Central Research Question (CRQ)

What are Latino students' perceptions of the ways the mattering experience impacted their persistence to high school graduation?

Research Subquestions (SQs)

SQ1: How do Latino high school graduates perceive that interdependent relationships impacted their persistence to high school graduation?

SQ2: How do Latino high school graduates perceive that a feeling of importance impacted their persistence to high school graduation?

SQ3: How do Latino high school graduates perceive that a feeling of marginalization impacted their persistence to high school graduation?

SQ4: How do Latino high school graduates perceive that persistence through challenges impacted their successful graduation from high school?

Setting

The setting for the study was a local community center in Mannaton, Pennsylvania, located in a public housing project, with a pseudonym of Southside Community Center. The resident population of the state of Pennsylvania was estimated at 12,802,503 in 2015, of which 6.8% are Latino. The median income is approximately \$53,600 with about 13% of families living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015b). In the 2014–2015 school year, the cohort graduation rate was approximately 85%; with Latinos having an almost 70% graduation rate, and migrant students, most of Latino origin, at around 62% (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016a). Of all the reported racial and economic subgroups, Latinos have the lowest high school graduation rate and, thus, the highest dropout rate (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016b).

The research site for the study was in Mannaton County, Pennsylvania, located in the southeastern portion of the state. The area is located about 70 miles north of Philadelphia and 80 miles south of New York City (TravelMath, 2017). The county has an estimated population of

over 300,000 people with an identified Latino population of 12.4% and the median income is approximately \$61,000, with an 8.8% poverty rate (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015a). The pseudonym for the specific city within the county that was the focus of the study was Mannaton School District. In 2010, Mannaton had an estimated population of 75,000 with an identified Latino population of 24.4%. The median income is approximately \$47,000, with a poverty rate of 17.5% (United States Census Bureau, 2015b). Within Mannaton, I selected an urban environment with a high concentration of Latinos, many of whom would also be considered socially and economically disadvantaged. The site was selected based on my knowledge of the community and experience with individuals within the community as an educator in this area for 20 years as well as through service work as a mentor and Latino community advocate between 2000 and 2010.

Within Mannaton there are several public, charter, and parochial schools. I focused on graduates from two public high schools within Mannaton labeled Kennedy High and McKinley High. The selected district, under the pseudonym of Mannaton School District, is within the top 10 largest districts in the state of Pennsylvania, servicing over 14,000 students. At these high schools, students must achieve 26 high school credits and 60 hours of community service to graduate. The school district hosts 40.21% of the population enrolled as Hispanic or Latino (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2018b). The combined district graduation rate was 83% for the 2014–2015 school year of both high schools, identified by the pseudonyms Kennedy High and McKinley High. Kennedy High had an almost 80% graduation rate with only 65% of Latinos persisting to graduation and McKinley High had an approximate 86% graduation rate with almost 70% of Latinos completing high school (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016a). In comparison to the other nine high schools in the county, Kennedy High and

McKinley High had the first and second highest dropout rates for the school year (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016b).

To complete in-depth research, it was essential to collect data from participants; interviews, documents, and a focus group at this site over a series of several months to be sure to accommodate varying schedules. Individual interviews were conducted at the convenience of the participants with sincere consideration of time and place. Documents were collected over a period of a few months to allow for greater participation and reflective thought. A focus group was scheduled after collecting documents and conducting interviews with adequate notice and invitation to participants.

I sought to establish a partnership with a community center within the south side of town, which represented the population for the study. The center fosters after-school and extracurricular programs that serve both school students and postsecondary volunteers. The center director was a point person with communication and assistance of establishing a research population base and providing a venue for both the interviews (as needed) and a focus group panel discussion.

The purposeful selection of the site was convenient for data collection. It provided access to a population of Latinos with a rich, cultural background within the community. Most of the individuals considered for this study still live within or near Mannaton County. Because of their community connection, participants tended to be more likely to share their lived experiences as students. This afforded a plentiful, adult reflection of their high school experiences.

School District Description

Mannaton School District is one of the 10 largest school districts in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and serves approximately 14,000 students. The two high schools, Kennedy and McKinley, provide instruction for students in Grades 9 through 12. As a public school district, course offerings include academic, elective, and advance placement with some students electing to take advantage of the dual enrollment agreement or attending the vocational school. Students are encouraged to participate in a plethora of extracurricular activities and sports. The minimum credits needed for graduation are 26 with 60 hours of community service. The district seeks to establish “Excellence Through Equity” by utilizing restorative practices for student engagement, response to instruction and intervention for core learning, career pathways and problem-based learning for stretch learning, and is a “No Place for Hate” district. The district’s mission is to establish school, home, and community partnerships and is devoted to administering school environments that are both free from harm and provide advocacy where students may acquire academic and life skills while developing the necessary capacity to become civically engaged, continuing learners within a technological society with cultural capacity. Further, the district’s purpose is to eradicate race and financial status as school progress forecasting by assuring equal access to schooling and advancement opportunities for all learners.

Participants

The participant sample included 11 high school graduates from Mannaton School District between 2014 and 2018. These graduates were typically between the ages of 18 to 23 who self-identify as Latino. There was a balanced representation of males and females. Additionally, ethnicity, phenomenological experience, and participation willingness were the main factors of consideration of participants (Moustakas, 1994). The sample was purposive as there was a

context of experiences reported by participants (Blackstone, 2012). This context included personal identification of the individual as Latino. Latinos are defined as a collective group of individuals of Latin American origin (Fernandez-Morera, 2010; Fuller & Hosemann, 2015). The personal context also included the phenomenological experience as the self-identified sense of mattering to others in their high school experience in which mattering is the feeling of reciprocal significance (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Additionally, the participants recognized mattering as a function of their persistence to graduation. Persistence is when individuals are provided with life navigation skills that build self-efficacy (Caldwell & Siwatu, 2003; Harris & Kiyama, 2015). Their willingness to participate was based on their informed consent to voluntarily participate in interviews and data collection that included recording and publishing of information (Moustakas, 1994).

All the participants were selected based on their ability to discuss the central phenomenon of mattering and high school persistence. The participants each had experience in persistence to graduation and mattering relationships during their high school tenure. This constituted a heterogeneous sample group (Creswell, 2013). Data were collected from 11 Latino participants, although Creswell (2013) suggested studying approximately 10 participants. Moustakas (1994) suggested utilizing Fraelich's investigation of presence example of selection by providing potential participants with a written explanation of the participant selection criteria and instructions for communication with the researcher. Pre-interviews were completed to determine the appropriateness of the volunteer for the study. This interview included a detailed description of the study's purpose and an estimated time commitment.

I utilized a snowball sampling approach because I relied on the initial participants to assist in the identification, or referral, of additional participants (Blackstone, 2012). An initial

contact of 10 participant connections with the chain referral sampling approach was provided. There were 15 additional potential participants in the sample pool. The greater pool of individuals created a greater opportunity to establish a core group of participants from the community. I conducted pre-interviews with 20 potential participants in the sample pool to establish content and face validity. Face validity was needed to establish whether the intended questions measure the intent of the research (Patton, 2015), while content validity measured whether each question represents all questions of a similar type that could be asked (Creswell, 2013). Known Latino graduates in the community were invited to become participants of the study. As part of the initial contact, a request was made to those individuals, who provided further potential contacts.

These initial and referred contacts were cohort and non-cohort graduates within the past 5 years from either Kennedy High or McKinley High. Each participant identified as Latino. I anticipated an equal distribution of gender and school representation, but was aware that McKinley High had a higher Latino population and, initially, referred contacts were mostly female. Although I was aware of this distribution, school and gender were not included in factors of nonselection. In reference to nonselection, general education diploma recipients were not considered for the study. Each participant had an experience with mattering and were able to share their perspectives on their persistence to graduation.

The purposive and chain referral sampling methods began with the pre-interview survey. The strategy for identifying and recruiting participants into the study included specific criteria for screening, the estimated number of individuals to be included, the locale and the approach (Family Health International, 2012). The identification process began with direct phone calls to known Latino graduates from McKinley and Kennedy High Schools. Names and phone numbers

from these graduates were obtained as chain referrals. A short description of the purpose of the study was included in the chain referral conversation. Once the potential participant agreed to consider being a volunteer subject, a Google Form link was sent via e-mail to the individual. The closed-ended survey provided a purpose statement using layman terminology. A series of questions was provided, including the individual's name and contact information, whether they self-identify as being Latino, if they graduated from high school and the graduation year, and whether they had a mattering experience during high school. This survey also informed the potential participant that their selection as a volunteer was based on the individual's willingness to participate and how thoroughly the individual understood the objective of the study. Additionally, a statement of expectations was provided. A privacy statement was also provided (Family Health International, 2012). For all but the demographic collection information, the individual was asked to answer either yes, no, or more information is needed. This same process was repeated for each participant unless it was deemed necessary to provide a verbal or printed survey. The level of reliability—meaning whether the data collection could be repeated with different individuals, under different conditions, and at different times (Creswell, 2013)—was high for this survey. The face validity—meaning the subjective judgment of the construct (Creswell, 2013)—held for this closed-end survey because it could be used to transparently obtain basic demographic and volunteer criteria for participant selection.

Procedures

Following a successful defense of the study proposal, a formal approval to begin the study was granted from Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB; see Appendix A). After receipt of the IRB approval, individuals were contacted by phone to provide them with the purpose and rationale for the research and to request their participation. Names and contact

information from other possible participants were requested and this process was repeated until there was sufficient group of at least 25 total potential participants with a final goal of 11 actual participants. There was follow-up with each potential participant phone call with either an email thanking the individual for their time, or a request to complete a preparticipation Google Form online. Once the preselected population completed the Google Form, the collected information from the closed-question survey was analyzed and a determination was made as to how many participants fit the criteria for the study.

Subsequently, each individual received a response with an email thanking them for their survey completion and, for those selected to participate, another Google Form with interview scheduling information and the relevant documents. These documents included a purpose statement, volunteer expectation statement, and consent form. There was a follow-up phone call to schedule the individual interviews at the convenience of the participant. At the start of the interview, individuals were asked to reread the documents and sign the consent form. The purpose of the study and nature of volunteer participation were reiterated. Individuals were selected based on a desire to participate in the study as well as verification of their identification as a Latino and status as a high-school graduate from either McKinley or Kennedy High Schools. Additionally, the individual verified their willingness to participate. Once the individual signed the forms, data were collected via an initial interview and a journal topic on their maturing experience, followed by scheduling a focus group to document reflections of experience. Participants selected from the initial survey represented each data collection event in the triangulation process through a follow-up journal submission and a focus group invitation.

Data from the interviews were collected via notes, memos, and digital recordings and stored on my laptop and external drive within a secure folder and on a cloud-based server. For

confidentiality, each file was labeled with the pseudonym for the individual participant. During the individual interviews, each participant was asked to either handwrite or type a short responsive journal entry on the topic of their mattering experience. Written journal entries were scanned. All digital copies were filed and stored electronically in secure files labeled with pseudonyms in a cloud-based system. The focus group interview included a digital video recording, saved electronically in a secure folder and cloud-based system. Each interview and focus group meeting was transcribed.

The Researcher's Role

As the human instrument for the study, I sought to establish a rapport with the participants (Moustakas, 1994). However, according to Creswell (2013), it is important for the researcher to maintain a philosophy that does not foster presuppositions. Therefore, I needed to suspend all judgments to establish a basis of confidence with the participants. I sought to interpret an understanding and provide descriptions of elements that profile mattering and its impact on persistence to high school graduation. I am aware of my biases in that I have a passion for people and believe that all individuals matter.

Also, I have been in education, mentoring, and community service for much of my career, which influences my philosophy on moving individuals to a sense of belonging and the importance of interpersonal connections. The initial group of contacts for possible consideration were graduates of the schools represented in the study. The sample individuals had graduated from high school within the past 5 years, in order to eliminate any conflict of interest as I had left the high school environment 4 years ago. This allowed for deeper reflection, as these individuals were removed from the high school environment, but only within a few years, enabling them to

recall their experiences. Additional sample participants came through a snowball referral process.

As a human instrument, I also collected and analyzed the data. I was aware of my personal biases and assumptions in reference to the study. Therefore, I maintained the study's integrity by being honest about my belief system, yet removing it from the data collection and analysis process and depended upon the literature to guide the study. Thus, as Moustakas (1994) noted, I bracketed myself out of the study.

However, throughout the study, I continuously explored the various philosophical assumptions that I held. I had axiological and epistemological considerations. In the axiological nature of understanding values, I needed to control my research biases and accept the values of others (Creswell, 2013). I also sought to study and understand the value Latinos place on education and relationships. In reference to epistemological matters, I considered mechanisms that allowed me to get closer to the participants with the goal of drawing out subjective information. During the study, I considered that realities were established through shared experiences (Creswell, 2013). The epistemological theory of knowledge explored in this study was the persistence of Latino high school students to graduation. With consideration of these assumptions, I related my life experience as a Latino learner with close ties to the community and the values my family placed on education. Additionally, as an educator, I have been involved in reciprocal, caring, mentor-type relationships with Latino students. Lastly, I have a deep desire to better understand how relationships build perseverance in this population of youth and the extent to which the mattering experience relates to their values and knowledge background.

The initial group of up to 10 potential participants was to be a mixture of contacts between students known by my colleagues or myself. From this initial group, I sought referrals from other students. I correctly anticipated having had previous personal contact with none of the initial potential participants. Using this method assisted in establishing trust and buy-in from the initial group that could be reported to the subsequent group of interviewees.

Data Collection

Data for the study were collected using individual interviews, a focus group interview, and reflective journals.

Individual Interviews

The initial data collection for this study was individual interviews with participants, which I conducted independently. Qualitative research interviews are a data collection method in which two or more individuals communicate information through an array of questions and responses (Blackstone, 2012). The interview was an extended, lengthy process in which participants engaged in detailed information sharing. Each participant in the study was interviewed individually in a setting and at a time that was convenient to them. The open-ended interviews were informally conducted with a set of guiding questions to begin the interview and an opportunity to candidly share high school experiences (Moustakas, 1994). However, an online video conference or phone interview was necessary for four participants in order to be considerate of individual schedules and geographical locations. Interviews were digitally stored and transcribed (Creswell, 2013). The questions were personally and socially significant. The verbiage for the questions was clear, with definitions provided for clarity as needed. Clear language allowed the participants to reveal and describe more about their experiences

(Moustakas, 1994). Follow-up and probing questions developed naturally as the interview progressed.

Initial interview questions followed an interview guide approach because I wanted to keep the interview governed by the research purpose, offering a systematic approach to data collection and interpretation. Yet, I also sought to keep to a conversational manner of dialogue (Patton, 2015). The interview questions for the study included the following, with the central research question (CRQ) and/or the research subquestion (SQ) noted in parentheses for each.

1. Please introduce yourself to me as if we just met.
2. From what school did you graduate?
3. What year did you graduate?
4. How important do you perceive high school completion is to your family? (CRQ)
5. How important did you perceive high school completion was important to you in ninth grade? (CRQ)
6. How did the level of perceived importance of high school completion change over the next 3 years? (CRQ, SQ4)
7. Please describe school-based relationships you perceived to be positive during your high school years. (SQ1)
8. How did these perceived positive relationships make you feel? (SQ1, SQ2)
9. How do you perceive these positive relationships assisted you with perseverance to graduation? (SQ1, SQ2, SQ4)
10. Please describe any perceived negative experiences you had during your high school years; either school, home, or community based. (SQ3)
11. How did you navigate through these negative experiences? (SQ1, SQ3, SQ4)

12. What impact do you perceive school relationships have on your path to graduation?

(CRQ, SQ1, SQ4)

13. What else would you like me to know about your high school experience?

Questions 1 through 3 were basic information-gathering questions. These are demographic types of questions because they are noncontroversial and less invasive. They were intended to provide uncomplicated statements with nominal recollection (Patton, 2015). These questions were designed to get a sense of the individual's comfort level and willingness to participate. Additionally, they established a level of rapport between me and the participant (Patton, 2015).

Questions 4 and 5 were experience questions (Patton, 2015). They were designed to provide insight into the personal and family background dynamic as it related to family influence on graduation. Question 4 was focused specifically on the family demographic while Question 5 was focused on the individual's background. Both of these questions were intended to elicit information about the individual's personality (Patton, 2015) with reference to their educational worldview. These questions also provided insight into the SQ3 on how Latino students experience marginalization. This afforded for a sophisticated understanding of the experienced feelings (Moustakas, 1994).

Questions 5 and 6 were opinion and value questions. These questions were intended to understand the interpretive importance of education to the participant at various times during high school (Patton, 2015). Responses to these questions informed the research regarding personal experience, goals, and expectations (Patton, 2015). They also provided data on the SQ4 on how the Latino high school student experience of persistence leads to graduation. These questions also provided data for SQ3 as they fielded responses regarding perceived

marginalization. The questions were essential because they served to understand the direct experience with persistence (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, these questions addressed how persistence produced self-efficacy and increased coping skills (Harry & Kiyama, 2015).

Questions 7 through 11 were experience questions, addressing what the participant experienced and the activities that the participant observed or encountered (Patton, 2015). These questions were connected to SQ1 on how the Latino high school student experiences significant interdependent relationships in high school. These questions also addressed SQ3 and SQ4, regarding understanding first-hand encounters, feelings, and the overall essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Responses to Questions 7–11 provided greater insight into the need to feel significant (Maslow, 1970) and how this could be associated with the mattering experience.

Questions 9 and 11 were feeling questions, eliciting responses that evoked emotions or sensitivity of the individual's thoughts, experience, or activity in an affective capacity (Patton, 2015). This set of questions provided data for the SQ2 on how the Latino student experiences a feeling of importance in high school. These questions also provided insight into the SQ3 and SQ4. In addition to providing information regarding experienced feelings and enlightening a greater understanding on the topic, the questions served to dig deeper into the participant's engagement with the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The student's feelings associated with the idea of significant relationships were better understood as the mattering experience acted as a social component and ego-extension of the individual. Question 13 was the final or closing question and afforded the participant an opportunity to close the interview with any statements or considerations not covered by the question outline (Patton, 2015).

The entirety of the interview was digitally recorded and stored. These raw data, including relevant memos and notes, were later transcribed for analysis. Transcripts were verbatim from the interviews in order to ensure validity (Patton, 2015). I used this detailed information to make the determination of whether I needed to conduct follow-up interviews or seek clarity for in-depth understanding after initial analysis (Creswell, 2013).

Focus Group Interview

Focus groups are another type of qualitative interviewing method, but in a researcher-led discussion congregation (Creswell, 2013). Focus groups provide a sense of shared meaning between group members (Patton, 2015). There was one focus group meeting held at the South Mannaton Cultural Center, a pseudonym for the community center, facilitated solely by me. This group was free to discuss the topics as a natural group with a loose format. The defining characteristic of the focus groups was the data collection from the discussions (Blackstone, 2012; Patton, 2015). By connecting individuals with similar experiences and backgrounds, the focus group created opportunities for engaging in significant conversations and provided a collective voice for those individuals who have been marginalized in the greater community (Blackstone, 2012; Morgan & Hansen, 2008). Beyond the statements, the focus was on observing the human interaction of the group (Blackstone, 2012).

The focus group interview was digitally recorded over the 2-hour meeting and transcribed for analysis. The focus group interview started with a general introduction (Patton, 2015). First, each group participant stated his or her name, graduation year, and high school. Next, group norming rules were presented, including when to speak, to encourage confidentiality and respect (Patton, 2015). The issue of confidentiality was addressed. According to Blackstone (2012), a

researcher cannot promise complete confidentiality due to the nature of the group setting. The same process for transcription of interviews was followed for the focus group interview.

In selecting the group, awareness of the comfort level of participants to speak in a group was essential. Additionally, the participants selected were actively interested in sharing their experience (Blackstone, 2012; Morgan & Hansen, 2008). Actively engaged groups might need a bit more control on equal response time (Blackstone, 2012). The group goal was approximately five participants with a recruitment of 12 individuals from the initial interview set (Patton, 2015).

As moderator, I took on a less directive position as more of a facilitator. A facilitator role was necessary to keep the structure of the focus group more casual and allow the participants to direct their own course (Morgan & Hansen, 2008). As the moderator, I provided the purpose, assisted with comfort, and facilitated interactions (Blackstone, 2012; Patton, 2015). The leading questions to the group were as follows, with the CRQ and/or the SQ noted in parentheses for each:

1. Please describe your overall feelings about your high school experience. (SQ1, SQ2, SQ3)
2. Please provide a description of the positive relationships you had in high school. (SQ1)
3. How did these positive relationships help you navigate high school? (SQ1, SQ4)
4. How did your mattering experience impact your decision to stay in school? (CRQ, SQ1, SQ4)

Questions 1 and 2 were experience questions regarding the individual's encounters and observations. Question 3 was a feeling question regarding emotions or sensitivity. Question 4 was essential to the central phenomenon of how the mattering experience leads to persistence to

graduation (Patton, 2015). The individuals were encouraged to speak on the topic, freely.

However, it was my duty to remind individuals that background assumptions were to be avoided as many, if not all, participants had little or no intimate relationship with the others (Blackstone, 2012).

Reflective Journal

A third data collection type that was utilized in the study was the examination of participant journaling. The journals offered an opportunity to capture rich writing that reflected experience contemplation, sentiment, and self-reflection (Smith-Sullivan, 2008a). I asked five participants, derived from the initial interviews, to journal a specific experience when they believed they mattered during high school with specifics on the individuals involved, the setting, and the incident with a statement of personal impact. As a researcher, I considered the comfort level of the journaling process of the participants (Creswell, 2013). Individuals felt extremely comfortable with the journaling process as it provided a varied opportunity for self-disclosure through this private writing process (Smith-Sullivan, 2008b). Individuals responded to the following prompts (with the CRQ and/or the SQ noted in parentheses for each):

1. Please provide details regarding an example in high school where you believed you mattered or not. Include who, what happened, and your feelings. (SQ2, SQ3)
2. Please provide details regarding an individual that you perceive had a major impact on your persistence to graduation. Include a specific scenario of reflection. (SQ1, SQ4)
3. Please explain how mattering relationships from high school have influenced your ability to navigate your current life situation. (CQ, SQ1, SQ4)

Question 1 was an experience question that addressed the experience and observation of the phenomenon. Question 2 was a feeling question that sought to evoke emotion. Question 3 was a value question used to interpret the importance of the experience (Patton, 2015). All questions and responses were electronically transcribed and stored (Creswell, 2013), as previously stated.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for qualitative research includes preparation and organization of the data collected, transcribing, and then creating codes from related pieces information (Creswell, 2013). After the data were collected, they were securely saved to a secondary source, then transcribed prior to data horizontalization. Once the data were collected, they were horizontalized in search of codes apparent through relevant statements. The codes were clustered and then reduced into themes. The themes were represented through a synthesized discussion in order to determine the essence of Latino students' perceptions to the ways the mattering experience impacts their persistence to high school graduation. Figures and tables were provided and stored. The coded information, synthesized analysis, figures, and tables were stored in an organized system (Creswell, 2013).

Creswell (2013) noted that organized information management facilitates the storage and retrieval of data for analysis and reporting. The individual interviews and focus group interview were digitally recorded and transcribed for ease of review and analysis (Moustakas, 1994). The interviews were conducted using the open-ended questions as previously noted. Notes were made digitally and stored both in a cloud-based system and on a personal computer. Initial responses were built upon to dig further into the experience. Utilizing an inductive approach to learn more about the phenomenon, data were utilized to find patterns in information. Repeated

responses were utilized to establish a consensus of similar information to establish a relationship of elements of the phenomenon. Similarly, the journals were either submitted in a digital format or scanned to create a digital document and analyzed for patterns of information to establish a greater understanding of the phenomenon. Memos and notes were transcribed into digital documents relevant to and organized according to the participant, focus group entirety, and journal entries. This information was reviewed to note repetitions in experiences and analyzed by established categories. All items were stored in secure folders on a hard drive, a backup external drive, and on a cloud-based system.

Creswell (2013) also emphasized keeping memos. Therefore, I took notes on analytical thoughts, using a deductive approach to group responses, while reviewing the transcripts, ideas or contexts presented in the journals and field notes during the interview. Through an incubation process of personal contemplation, I was better able to become more intuitively aware of the participants' intuitive perceptions. This step was essential for me, as the researcher, to establish greater meaning of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1981). Additionally, the epoché process was crucial throughout the analytical phase, where epoché means to avoid judgment or beliefs (Moustakas, 1994). As the researcher, I was attentive to my biases and disqualify any personal engagement (Patton, 2015).

During the bracketing process, each element was individually contextualized to uncover, define, and analyze the construct as an instance in the phenomenon and eliminate my preconceived ideas of the phenomenon. Epoché was established through identifying personal experience, interpreting meaning as an informed researcher, gathering the participants' interpretations, and defining and inspecting essential revelations and their recurring characteristics of the collected data (Patton, 2015).

Data collected included digital recordings and digital transcripts of the individual interviews and focus group interview. Data collection also included digital copies of journal responses. Each item in the collection was examined with equal weight (Patton, 2015). The transcribed interviews and focus group sessions were studied utilizing the phenomenological analysis techniques as arranged by Moustakas (1994), which included horizontalizing the collection of information to investigate perspectives or germane statements that provided meaning to the questions. Horizontalization is the act of listing each relevant expression of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Any delimiting items that were found to be repetitive, irrelevant, or overlapping were set aside (Patton, 2015).

Next, I created a unique pattern and descriptive coding system. The text was aggregated into various categories then labeling these with a code distinction to establish patterns (Creswell, 2013). It was essential to abstract and classify each significant experience and eliminate any items of irrelevancy to the research questions (Moustakas, 1994). This was the idea of convergence, through which recurring regularities uncover patterns of internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. Internal homogeneity reveals how the items are closely related while external heterogeneity reveals the clear differences (Patton, 2015). Once external heterogeneity eliminated unneeded data, I established internal homogeneity prevalence.

Frequency of occurrence was noted for each code (Creswell, 2013). Associated codes, or related components of information, as noted by Creswell (2013), establish themes for the study. Codes fell into various areas from which these themes emerged. These themes included experiences based on the Latino demographic group as well as behavior, opinions, values, feelings, and personal knowledge (Patton, 2015).

After eliminating overlapping and duplicated statements, the horizontalized data were clustered into themes, or universal categories, with rich descriptions. Each of the themes was evaluated to determine if it is explicitly expressed in the transcription and compatibly expressed amongst various participants (Moustakas, 1994). Through the idea of imaginative variation, I developed an augmented and amplified interpretation of the theme, as the details of the experiences were elaborated (Patton, 2015). Moustakas (1981) called this a state of illumination. If a theme was not explicitly and compatibly expressed, the theme was eliminated as a cluster group (Moustakas, 1994).

The data were interpreted by conceptualizing the greater meaning, or synthesis, of the collected data by connecting them to related literature (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). This conceptualization allowed me to construct both meaning and interpretive essence that created a composite (Moustakas, 1994) of the mattering phenomenon on Latino high school persistence to graduation. Here, I established structural descriptions about the experience framework of the group entity (Patton, 2015) by “understanding how the co-researchers as a group experience what they experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 142). While analyzing the data, I sought to utilize participant language to create composite descriptions (Moustakas, 1994).

Finally, as recommended by Creswell (2013), the data are presented through various forms of representations and visualizations. For instance, I provided several comparison charts to include theme comparisons by schools. Moustakas (1994) suggested representing the data by describing the experiences of individuals with a list of significant statements and providing a textural description of what occurred. Then, a structural description is provided of the location and circumstances (Moustakas, 1994). In this current research, the setting was the high school and the circumstances were instances of mattering. The last representation was the final

narrative, a composite description that provides the experiential essence of the study that informs the reader about what was experienced and how (Moustakas, 1994).

The essence of the experience as understood by me was shared with the participant in order to secure that the participant's statements are correctly interpreted (Creswell, 2013). Another validating feature was the triangulation of the data collection and its analysis. Through source triangulation, I established themes that are consistent between all three data sources of interviews, journals, and focus groups to validate findings and establish greater creditability (Patton, 2015).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness for this study was ensured through the establishment of credibility, dependability and confirmation, and transferability.

Credibility

Credibility in was insured by utilizing rigorous methods for data collection and analysis while exhibiting naturalistic investigation and holistic thought (Patton, 2015). I utilized triangulation of data through analysis of individual and focus group interviews and journaling to increase credibility. The data were viewed relative to relevant literature in order to provide a complex view of the phenomenon experienced (Creswell, 2013).

Dependability and Confirmation

In the analysis of the data, it was essential to meticulously check verbal and written statement consistency and comparing these to other points of views (Patton, 2015). Participants were afforded the opportunity to review the transcribed information and review my interpretation and deep description of the essence of the individual's sense of the phenomenon of the mattering

experience (Creswell, 2013). Throughout the process, the dissertation committee was responsible for holding me accountable.

Transferability

In order for this research to be considered transferable, there must exist the capability to either be replicated or implications must be evident in similar settings. To assure transferable findings, a thick, detailed description was provided. This was possible through the process of triangulating the study (Creswell, 2013). This corroboration added to the validity of the data collection and analysis and was checked with participant through member checking in search of providing the sincere essence of their experiences to increase the integrity of the research (Moustakas, 1994).

Ethical Considerations

The study utilized human subjects as research participants. Therefore, written informed consent was obtained from participants after a clear discussion of the study's intent (Family Health International, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). Informed consent (see Appendix B) ensured that participants understood their role in the study (Family Health International, 2012). The data collection occurred only after the consent was received and the Liberty University IRB granted approval (see Appendix A). Throughout the study, I remained transparent with participants and peers. I explained how confidentiality was kept throughout the study by utilizing pseudonyms for the setting as well as for participants and individuals named in stories of experience (Creswell, 2013). I evaluated all risks and shared any concerns with participants. I was prepared to honor requests that moved beyond social norms, except in cases when an individual may have either harmed him- or herself or another person and the risk was deemed imminent, but no such

issues occurred. Participants were clearly notified that they were volunteer subjects and could choose to discontinue their participation in the study (Moustakas, 1994).

I bracketed my biases out of the discussion and did not share personal experience with participants to avoid any influence on experience-sharing (Moustakas, 1994). However, personal disclosure occurred when discussing with peers in order to secure that biases were not influencing data collection, analysis, or discussion. All procedures were clearly stated and documented. These ethical considerations built upon the integrity of the study (Creswell, 2013).

Summary

This chapter included the research design for the study. This was a qualitative study with a transcendental phenomenological approach. Justification for the selection of the research design was provided. The detailed rationale for the site selection was established with a discussion of the participant selection process. Data collection procedures were explained with details of the analysis considerations, including coding, theme establishment, and synthesis. Trustworthiness and ethical considerations were addressed to increase confidence in the study. Triangulation by utilizing three data collection methods of interviews, journaling, and a focus group was presented with an explanation as to the motivation to provide a more valid analysis. All integral parts of this chapter were utilized as a means to complete a concise study of the mattering experience of Latino high school youth in their persistence to graduation.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand Latino students' perceptions of the ways the mattering experience impacts their persistence to high school graduation. Two local high schools in Mannaton County, Pennsylvania were selected in a large, urban school district. I intended to describe Latino high school students' educational experiences regarding their mattering experiences. This study included triangulation of the data from individual interviews, a focus group, and journals to establish codes. Each school phenomenon was analyzed and coded individually, then a phenomenological analysis was conducted to determine consistent themes. Four central themes were ascertained, including the impact of mattering, feelings of importance, feelings of marginalization, and persistence to graduation. The main source of data collection was derived from individual interviews conducted with 11 recent graduates from Mannaton School District. The second data source was a focus group conducted with 11 of the initial participants. The final data source was the journal submissions from 11 of the initial participants. The participant descriptions are provided in this chapter, followed by a subsection of phenomenological descriptions for each school and a conclusion of cross analysis results of the phenomenon.

Participants

The study participants included 11 high school graduates from McKinley and Kennedy High Schools in Mannaton, Pennsylvania located in Mannaton County. All participants graduated between 2014 and 2018, self-identify as Latino, and had a mattering experience. The first few individual interviews, not included in this study, were a pilot group of previous students who assisted in identifying a total of 10 potential participants. From this group, another 15

individuals were identified as potential participants. The initial, informal interviews provided an opportunity for me and the potential participant to discuss the purpose of the study and gain a clear understanding regarding the mattering concept and the expectations of participation. The individuals, if interested, then signed the consent form (see Appendix B) and a formal interview was scheduled. Various e-mails were exchanged to collect basic contact and demographic information, as well as to provide digital copies of the consent form, and disseminate information on participation, next steps, and the opportunity to review transcripts. Communication with participants was mostly through digital means such as e-mail, messaging, and text. Most interviews were face-to-face, but four interviews were conducted through a video chat to meet the varied schedules of the participants.

Initially, it was fairly easy to schedule interviews. However, as the summer inched closer, schedules became erratic, making scheduling more difficult. Sourcing individuals from both schools was not a challenge, but the actual scheduling of individuals from McKinley High School was difficult. During the data collection process, I informally interviewed a total of 25 interested individuals. Of these, 15 met the criteria of self-identification as Latino, experience of mattering, and a sincere willingness to be interviewed for this study. Of these, 11 had schedules that afforded the interview process to come to fruition.

The participants from Kennedy High School included six Latino, high school graduates. Four females and two males were interviewed. All these graduates had matriculated into college, post high school, and worked part-time jobs. There were five high school graduate participants from McKinley High School. Of these, four were female and one was male. Of these five graduates, four had matriculated into college and four worked part-time jobs, while two worked full-time.

All the participants displayed a high level of interest and professionalism. They were willing to share time from their busy schedules to meet and discuss their high school experiences. Although all the interviews were conducted at a time and location that was convenient for the participants, a few interviews had to be conducted via video chat due to scheduling conflicts or distance.

Table 1 shows the participant demographics. The table includes the participant pseudonyms, school, gender, year of graduation, age, their current educational level, and work status. Additionally, following Table 1, a detailed narrative of each participant is provided.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name	High school	Gender	Years of graduation	Age	Current college educational level	Work status
Abel	Kennedy	Male	2016	21	Senior	Part-time
Frederico	McKinley	Male	2014	23	Not applicable	Full-time
Ivan	McKinley	Male	2018	19	Sophomore	Part-time
Karina	McKinley	Female	2018	19	Sophomore	Part-time
Leo	Kennedy	Male	2016	20	Senior	Part-time
Margarita	Kennedy	Female	2018	19	Sophomore	Part-time
Marisol	Kennedy	Female	2018	19	Sophomore	Full-time
Naomi	McKinley	Female	2017	20	Not applicable	Full-time
Paloma	Kennedy	Female	2017	19	Junior	Part-time
Selena	Kennedy	Female	2017	20	Junior	Part-time
Valentina	McKinley	Female	2015	20	Senior	Part-time

The following is a more detailed description of each of the participants. The details include gender, year of graduation, age, current educational level, and work status. Also shared are the participants' descriptions of their positive relationships during high school, followed by

the participants' thoughts regarding the impact of school relationships on graduation. The participants are listed in alphabetical order by their assigned pseudonyms.

Abel

Abel was 21 years of age during the study. He is a 2016 graduate of Kennedy High School and Mannaton Area Vocational School, where he received a degree as an automotive technician. As one of five children, he is the youngest and the first migrant student from the family in a mainland, U.S. school. His family migrated from Puerto Rico when he was in ninth grade. All five siblings were first-generation high school graduates. Each of the siblings pursued various levels of college. For the core family, education was important. However, Abel noted that many of his older, extended family members and peer-group cousins did not graduate high school. Yet, the new generation of family youth are seeking to further their education.

At the time of the study, Abel was a senior in college, studying engineering. He anticipated continuing university studies in pursuit of a master's degree. During high school, Abel was challenged as a native Spanish speaker in a U.S. school by learning English as an ELL. He also had to learn how to navigate in an urban setting, as he was raised in a more rural environment. At school, he faced racism from not only Anglo students, but also from fellow Latino American students, who were born on the mainland. This was both perplexing and disturbing to Abel. Regardless, he was motivated to succeed by core family members, a supportive group of teachers, and his baseball coaches. Abel believes that although he had to overcome some challenges, the interactions with trusting individuals throughout his high school career afforded him the opportunity to be successful and influenced his decision to pursue a college degree.

Frederico

Frederico is a 2014 graduate of McKinley High School. At the time of this study, Frederico was 23 years of age and was excited to be starting a new full-time job, as he had been unemployed for some time due to enrollment in a treatment program. Prior to this position and post high school, Frederico attempted community college to no avail. He then enrolled in and received his auto technician certification from the Job Corp. Subsequently, upon returning to the area, he found himself homeless. He was arrested on three occasions within 10 days for driving under the influence (DUI). In lieu of a possible 10-15-year prison sentence, Frederico chose to complete a 2-year treatment program. Frederico stated that many of his adult struggles stemmed from an upbringing within a home with an absentee father and a mother with alcohol and drug addictions.

Regardless of these life struggles, Frederico felt school was always a safe haven for him. He believed that high school completion was necessary for the future. Frederico noted that education was important to family here in the United States, but was not as important to his family in the Caribbean because “you don’t have to leave the island to make a good living.” Thus, many members of his Caribbean family did not complete high school and even fewer pursued a college education. Most of his U.S.-based family members, however, understood the importance of an education and, specifically, obtaining a work skill, in order to compete in the marketplace.

In his freshman year, Frederico was highly motivated to complete high school and attend the Mannaton Area Vocational School to become an automotive technician. Frederico also played on the freshman basketball, baseball, and football teams. However, over the course of the next few years, his mother’s addictions forced him in and out of the home and, at various

intervals, he was placed with family members. The family complexities took a toll when he became the caretaker for his mother in his mid-junior year. He became disconnected with the academic environment where he felt few school personnel were of assistance to him in this life condition. Frederico noted that he struggled with his teachers and coaches as well as with school attendance. Yet, even during this difficult time in high school, Frederico had a strong connection to the sports team members and coaches. Sports is what kept him returning, although, by his senior year, he was not qualified to gear up or participate in games. The reason he continued to show up for practices, even though he sometimes did not attend classes, was because he felt that the correlation with the overall team approach to the sports and the relationships with the individual players were a motivation to not quit school. He felt like a needed and important part of the group. Additionally, the teams afforded him the much-needed physical outlet to relieve physical and emotional stress in an environment where verbiage was not necessary to decompress.

School and sports became his only escape from his life overall. Yet, in his senior year, he missed 100 out of 180 days of school. Between the fall and spring semesters, Frederico's mother had experienced several arrests and a near-death, overdose experience. By the spring baseball season, he could not qualify to even practice with the team. At this point, counselors, teachers, and coaches attempted to assist Frederico at every juncture to be sure he acquired the credits necessary to graduate. Frederico noted that while he was in the "thick of it" he did not appreciate what the McKinley group did to move him to graduation. He stated he was too self-absorbed in his own world of anger, animosity, and pain. However, through his treatment program, Frederico realized that there was a community of people who he realizes were essential to his perseverance.

Ivan

Ivan is a 2018 graduate of McKinley High School and was 19 years of age during the research. Ivan was the first generation on his paternal side and second generation on his maternal side to graduate high school. Ivan was also first-generation college student. Ivan struggled in the charter school environment in his freshman year, but then gained academic and extracurricular success once he attended McKinley High School. For Ivan's family, education has always been touted as necessary for success. He never wavered in his desire to graduate high school. However, his level of participation in extra-curricular activities and a desire to seek a college education were directly associated with the positive experience he had in the public school environment, where he felt like an included individual.

Prior to his experience at McKinley, Ivan attended a small charter school that few Latinos attended. He felt culturally different and isolated. Additionally, Ivan had undergone various treatments for scoliosis since sixth grade. He walked differently and missed many days due to his sickness. At the charter school, he felt ostracized. However, he stated that at McKinley he was never made to feel "different" or isolated. At the public school, there were more people who looked like him or had other physically evident issues. When he missed a class, there were teacher e-mails or friends who would bring him his work. If his bookbag was too heavy, someone helped lighten his burden. Even in physical education class, there were highly capable individuals who would rather do activities that were at his parallel. His voice was heard in conversations and discussions. The most poignant parts of his educational experience were those moments of deep discourse and reflection with certain teachers who followed him from freshman to senior year. These were his safe places.

At the time of this interview, he was a sophomore in college working on a degree in elementary and special education. He also worked part time. During the subsequent summer after graduation, he had undergone another back surgery. He noted a fear of not having the same supports he did in high school, but that he was confident that the skills of resiliency he acquired during his McKinley tenure would be useful in persevering through college. In addition to teacher relationships, Ivan also had a support network of extended family and activity advisors, to whom he still reaches out for academic and social support, and intends to utilize in this next phase of his academic life.

Karina

Karina's family immigrated to the United States before she was born. As a first-generation U.S.-born child, her parents instilled in her the importance of education. Karina had always known that she would graduate high school; however, she wavered a few times in her sophomore year because of her academic abilities. It was during this time that Karina began to stay after school to seek extra assistance. This created important relationships with teachers and peers that formulated a quasi-cohort group. The cohort became a support for one another with two unofficial teacher advisors that were key in keeping her on track to graduation and assisted her into college matriculation.

Karina is a first-generation high school graduate from McKinley High School in 2018. She was 19 years of age at the time of the study. Although she never wavered in her desire to graduate high school, she initially had not considered college. However, due to her academic abilities that were strengthened by her cohort, she was strongly encouraged by her classmates, teachers, and advisors to continue her education and seek out her life purpose. These individuals

were a motivation to building her passion for education and a desire to matriculate into college where she was studying business management.

During the study, she was a sophomore in college while working in retail. She stated that because of this special group of people, she had obtained the skills to self-advocate, seek assistance, and engage in meaningful conversations that have translated into the college and work environments. Because of this, she hopes to obtain a future management trainee position in order to gain experience and assist her parents with college expenses.

Leo

Leo migrated to the United States in his freshman year of high school. He was fully bilingual, as he received a private school education in Puerto Rico. Yet, he stated that his accent did draw him both positive and negative attention. He noted that it had little effect on his psyche, but was rather an annoyance and he would remind his fellow Latinos who face this issue that “it didn’t matter how you spoke as long as they understood what was spoken.”

Leo was the middle child of five children in a blended family. His mother is a first-generation high school graduate, but his biological father did not graduate. His stepfather is a college graduate. His two older sisters, from his mother’s side both graduated from high school and pursued college degrees, one at the associate level in the business field and the other at the bachelorette level in the medical field. Therefore, high school and college completion were expectations and Leo graduated Kennedy High School in 2016. Additionally, Leo completed a certificate program at the Mannaton Area Vocational School, where he studied medical science and received a nursing assistance diploma. He was accepted into a large southern university where he is currently studying neuroscience with a desire to attend medical school after graduation.

During the study, Leo was 20 years of age and worked part time. Leo was consistently pushed to graduate from high school by the forces of his family and the responsibility of being the eldest sibling at home. However, he wavered in his junior year due to personal and internal identity conflicts. He was anxious about understanding himself and fearful of losing relationships. However, he believes that he was lucky to have established safe spaces, early on, that were key to his overall educational success and were influencers in navigating his personal journey and in the transition into college matriculation.

Margarita

Margarita was born the youngest of five children to parents who immigrated to the United States and maintained Spanish as the primary language at home. Of the five children, four graduated high school as first-generation graduates. The fifth child eventually received a GED diploma during incarceration. Education was important to her family. During high school, she and her siblings were not allowed to work because their “job was to do good in school.”

She graduated in 2018 from Kennedy High School and Mannaton Area Vocational School, where she received a culinary certificate with a focus on pastry arts. Although she spoke English well, she was an exited level ELL student, because it was determined in middle school that as a bilingual student, she coded comprehension in Spanish as opposed to English. She stated that she did not mind the extra supports because the ELL support classes were smaller and she always had a teacher as a case manager that followed her throughout both her middle school and her high school tenures. In Margarita’s freshman year, she struggled to focus on academics and was quickly set on track by several teachers and a friend. Additionally, she faced racism throughout her high school tenure. She quickly learned lessons and coping mechanisms that have assisted her through to her college experience.

She believes that having made friends and connections with her teachers in this environment helped her to pursue her desire in culinary arts. Through this support and the skills obtained at the vocational school, she competed at the regional and state levels in her junior and senior years. She noted that the competitions were not just about the skills, but also the ability to present and defend her work. Because she had a small group of individuals at her home school who enjoyed both her baking and her passion to share the nuances of the process, she was able to compete successfully.

Although she chose to forego culinary school, she did decide to go to college. At the time of the interview, she was 19 years of age and also worked part time when not at school. She was a sophomore studying business management with a desire to open a bakery business focusing on Latin pastries.

Marisol

Marisol migrated to the mainland in junior high school and matriculated as a novice ELL student. She established close relationships with her teacher/case-manager and cohort of students in her ELL classes. She continued those close friendships through high school. For Marisol, those individuals and her high school ELL teacher played key roles in her ability to maintain a positive demeanor in high school, which was necessary because Marisol experienced bouts of racism and discrimination at the high school level. She stated that she felt a degree of difference due to her race and speaking ability at the middle level, but that she felt protected. However, the discrimination at the high school level, where there were freer transitions and fewer individuals monitoring conversations, made it easier for individuals to target her and fellow ELL classmates.

Marisol also initially struggled with academics in high school, due to lackadaisical behaviors, but always intended to graduate high school. She was aware that she needed the diploma for both matriculation to college and the ability to make a viable wage to pay for her degree. The established relationships with her ELL classmates, her ELL case manager, and another teacher were consistent in motivating her through her high school challenges to graduation.

At the time of the study, Marisol was a 2018 graduate of Kennedy High School. She was a second-generation high school graduate and was 19 years of age at the time of the study. She worked full-time to assist with college tuition. As a sophomore in college, she was studying business management and was part of a 5-year program that allows her to achieve a master's in business administration.

Naomi

Naomi, a first-generation graduate, graduated from McKinley High School in 2017. At the time of her graduation, she had two children. Her son was born in the fall of 2015 and her daughter was born in 2017. Although she had a relationship with the father of her children, they were not cohabitating. Yet, with the assistance of a strong support network, this single mother managed to graduate high school with her class.

Throughout her schooling, Naomi struggled both academically and socially. In middle school, she was bullied due to her academic struggles as well as her weight. By the time she was in high school, however, she had established coping mechanisms to protect herself and self-advocate. At times, these included verbal and violent eruptions that got her suspended. Once she became pregnant with her first child, however, she realized she wanted something different for her family. She had always accepted the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) academic

supports from teachers, but had not previously embraced the social supports provided. It was at this turning point, when she most believed that she would lose what little advocacy was available, that she allowed individuals to provide wrap-around support to be sure she and her child saw graduation. Her grades began to improve and her attendance was consistent. She stayed after school to work ahead and gave up periods of lunch or activities in order to work modules that would keep her on track. Naomi believed that these teachers were the motivating force for her to stay at the high school, in regular education, as opposed to going into a self-contained placement for teen mothers. With the assistance of specific educators and her parents, she proudly walked the graduation stage with two of her children as the only sibling of six who received their diploma.

At the time of the interview, Naomi was 20 years of age, expecting her third child, and was working full time. She stated that she had limited community and family support as a single mother and had recently become estranged from the father of her older children. Regardless of these challenges, Naomi recognized that education was important for her future and she hopes to instill this importance within her children. Naomi has very strong opinions regarding the importance of school relationships, in which educators, counselors, and administrators play a major role in student success. She is hopeful that her children never experience bullying as she did, and that they establish trusting relationships in school. She believes these relationships were essential in helping her establish connections to resources that afford her the ability to parent her children and work toward a positive future.

Paloma

Paloma struggled academically in middle and high school. In seventh grade, she was provided with an IEP that offered her academic assistance and a case manager to guide her

throughout her tenure, at each school. In middle school, she embraced the IEP process. However, in high school, she felt ashamed of the push-in supports and the requirement to assess in a pullout setting. Over time, she recognized that these supports were necessary for her academic success and began to verbalize her feelings to her case manager, who provided her with a voice to the academic teacher and push-in support paraprofessional, and changed the classroom dynamics for other students. Paloma also recognized that if she stayed with her friends, after school, she could formulate relationships with her teachers and with students who were also in need of tutoring. Over time, she established relationships that would carry her through her high school tenure.

Sadly, this proved to be essential at a time of family heartache and troubles when the family matriarch, her live-in grandmother, passed. She found solace and assistance in her fellow classmates and understanding and guidance from her teachers. Her grandmother, who completed an equivalent of up to eighth grade, spoke to her about two major opportunities for women that she should never take for granted: education and suffrage. She believes her grandmother set the stage for the expectation that all of the children and grandchildren to graduate high school and become civically engaged.

Paloma was a second-generation high school graduate in 2017, from Kennedy High School. At the time of this study, she was 19 years of age and a registered voter. She worked part time and was a junior in college. Early in her high school career, she knew that focusing on academics would assist her in achieving her future success and move her toward college matriculation, even though she struggled academically. Having had an IEP in high school, she utilized the guidance from her case manager to assist her with finding solutions to academic and social challenges and frustrations that she believed may have otherwise hindered her success.

These relationships also provided positive energy and security, as well as a path to assisting in her progression to college with tools that have proved to be essential in academic and social success.

Selena

During her high school tenure, Selena faced racism due to her immigrant status and strong accent. Her family moved to the United States when she was in middle school. Although she noticed the differences in middle school, she felt more protected in this environment. However, in high school there was a different ethos that she could not explain, but referred to having a “feeling of being different” and “hearing words that hurt.” She did find assistance in support from fellow ELL students, her ELL teacher, and a few other teachers that she clung to throughout her 4 years at Kennedy high school. At one point, though she considered dropping out of school. This was not because of the issues of marginalization, but because she was working two jobs to assist her family with finances and the realities of potential homelessness. In disclosing to school personnel why her grades were suffering, the school was able to assist her in obtaining wrap-around supports that allowed the family to stay in the home and eased her burden of working two jobs. She believes that her family’s conviction to education and strong Christian faith are what allowed her to manage through this situation. The financial situation improved within a few months and Selena’s grades eventually got back to where she needed so that she could apply for college.

Selena was a 2017 first-generation graduate and graduated from Kennedy High School, as the first in her family peer group, close to her age, to graduate on time. At the time of the interview, Selena was 20 years of age, working part-time, and a junior in college, where she was studying business administration with a minor in ethical leadership. As an undocumented

student in the United States, Selena was what we would call a DREAMer, named after the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act. As a participant of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) group, she was initially apprehensive about speaking to me about her experience. However, because of her trust in her school mentors, she took the risk. Selena and her family must work extra hours to pay college tuition, as she receives no state or federal assistance due to her status. Yet, since the age of 18, she has had an Employment Authorization Document, covered under DACA, that allows her to work and assist in paying college tuition. Unfortunately, Selena noted that due to the current political climate, she and her family live in constant fear of separation and her need to leave her schooling. Thus, education and trusting relationships have become increasingly important to her and her family.

Valentina

Valentina, a biracial Anglo-Latino, stated that she always felt a stronger connection to her Latino side of the family due to the close dynamics of family and culture. She noted that she had a sheltered upbringing, spending her first 8 years of schooling in a Catholic, parochial setting. Therefore, when her parents forced her to attend public school in the eighth grade, she was extremely apprehensive about the experience of being in a large environment with thousands of strange students. However, she quickly realized that this was a welcoming environment where she truly learned to embrace multiculturalism. She became involved in the Spanish Club, Students Against Destructive Decisions, and Key Club. These programs offered her an opportunity to get to know other students, formulate relationships with teacher advisors, and serve the community. Further, she had small group opportunities to learn about the “rich diversity of culture and life experiences that would have otherwise been missed.” What she did not realize, at home, was that her parents had been pulling away from the Catholic church, in

which she and her sister had been raised, due to fundamental disagreements. This left her with a lapse of understanding that took years for her to reconcile as she learned to move from the ideology of religion to a gospel-led relationship. She believes that being in a supportive, liberal environment with open conversations with her friends allowed her to open up to the concept and made her mindful of her personal walk with Christ.

This personal experience was ultimately why Valentina chose to attend a Christian college as opposed to a Catholic college. As a second-generation graduate from McKinley High School in 2015, she had originally wanted to attend the Catholic college her mom had attended. At the time of this interview, she was a 20-year-old junior, working part-time while studying Spanish and nutrition. In high school, she never wavered on the expectation to graduate. Her school-based relationships served her in navigating the large, urban school environment, changing of spiritual norms, and preparing her well for college. She believes that the welcoming and supportive school ethos made it easier for her to become a reciprocal part of the high school environment.

Results

This study was guided by a central research question and four subquestions addressing the perception of the mattering experience of Latino high school graduates. The central research question was focused on Latino students' perceptions of the ways the mattering experience impacted their persistence to high school graduation. The subquestions were focused on the impact of mattering through interdependent relationships, feelings of importance, feelings of marginalization, and persistence.

To review the mattering phenomenon with a new perspective, I established the themes in participants' responses as they emerged by charting individual responses and making notations

of commonalities on the transcriptions and reviews. Although I have previous experience with the mattering concept, I had no prior experience in the specific process of data collection, transcription, or review of mattering with an investigative methodology. Therefore, in keeping the integrity of the research as key to exposing phenomenological themes, I did not form any assumptions, presuppositions, or deductions about the participants of the study or the data collected.

Table 2 and following explanation articulate the themes, subthemes, and codes that were developed in my examination of the data collected. There are four major themes referring to the (a) impact of mattering, (b) the feelings of importance, (c) the feelings of marginalization, and the (d) persistence to graduation. A total of 11 subthemes and 47 codes are represented under these themes. The themes are independently discussed with fundamentally textural descriptions to elucidate the participants' experiences.

Table 2

Themes, Subthemes and Codes

Subtheme	Code
Impact of mattering	
Educator interaction	Good relationships
	Effect
	Strength and bonds
	Mutuality: Reciprocation
	Long-term perceptions
Motivations	Extracurricular activities
	Goal-setting
	Building character
	Personal responsibility
	Assistance and extra help

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Subtheme	Code
Feelings of importance	
Relationships	Teachers Other caring staff Friends
Family	Guidance to prosperity Level of influence Family graduates First-generation family graduates
Liked school	Positive school outlook Extracurricular influence: Sports Extracurricular influence: Clubs
Feelings of marginalization	
Community and school culture	Ethos Education abroad: Comparison to U.S.-based experience
Intimidation and dislike of school	Language Non-understanding of culture, language, and norms Racism Disconnect (Un)safe spaces Feelings of inadequacy
Family and home life	Absent parents and trauma Community and housing Feelings of noncaring of the subject Home responsibilities Personal responsibility and self-efficacy
Adversity	Attendance Troubles and behavior Lack of friendships Educator negativity toward subject Feelings of nonsignificance Failures Other aggregated negative experiences

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Subtheme	Code
Persistence to graduation	
Educator posture	Educator, coach, and advisor roles Safe spaces Mutuality: Reciprocation and assistance
Life strategies	Building personal skills Latino cultural influence Personal accountability and choice

Major Theme 1: Impact of Mattering

The first major theme established from the data as a result of this inquiry was the impact of mattering on participants of this study. One of the theories that directed this study and the establishing of the research questions was mattering theory as ascertained from Rosenberg and McCullough (1981). It was essential to comprehend participants' high school experiences as related to their understanding of the concept of mattering. The two subthemes that substantiated the perceptions of the impact of mattering on Latino high school students were educator interactions and motivational effects for participants (see Table 3).

Table 3

Theme 1: Impact of Mattering: Subthemes, Codes, and Frequencies

Subtheme	Code	Frequency
Educator interaction	Effect	(43)
	Mutuality: Reciprocation	(24)
	Good relationships	(21)
	Long-term perceptions	(18)
	Strength and bonds	(09)
Motivations	Goal Setting	(22)
	Personal responsibility	(18)
	Building character	(17)
	Assistance and extra help	(13)
	Extracurricular activities	(09)

Educator interactions. The first subtheme realized from Theme 1 was the participants' perceptions of educator interactions that impact mattering. Participants expressed a general consensus in that their high school experience included many positive relationships with students and teachers. An overarching factor was the ability of the educator to connect with the student, specifically with establishing good relationships. Victoria documented that even though an educator may not have been the "best teacher," the relationship with the instructor was a greater factor in success. This point was also noted by Abel, Ivan, and Leo. The key, as Victoria explained, was that "when we are building that relationship with the teacher, [the teacher] was able to help me with the class. I knew them." Some participants, like Karina, found their place with specialized teachers in freshman and sophomore years due to their language acquisition and cultural connections and these bonds, according to Karina, strengthened throughout the high school tenure: "Building those relationships with [the teacher] really, especially my first year, really, really helped."

In general, however, the data illustrated a shift in the general relationship-building dynamic between the second and third years of high school, as Ivan remarked, "Once 11th and

12th grade came, that's how I started building relationships with teachers and even the principal remembers my name. I'm surprised how, because. . . . There's a lot of people at that school."

For Karina and others, the conversations with teachers were fundamental to the relationship building because as Karina described, "just having that conversation with them, and especially them checking in with me without me having to do a thing, that was nice; without me having to facilitate the conversation, first."

All participants expressed that these relationships had a positive influence on their lives. For instance, Marisol noted that the relationship helped guide her to graduation at times when she wanted to quit. The participants consistently expressed feelings about the educators trying to establish good relationships and a mutual sharing of their desire to succeed. Karina shared that because of the conversations and her academic determination: "I know I made an effort to just have good relationships with them and they knew that I was passionate about my work and they became passionate about me finishing school and stuff." Comparably, Marisol noted, "You have to have a good relationship with a teacher to be able to guide you." This proved to be essential for 10 of the 11 participants who faced various, extreme adversities mainly in their junior and senior years, which prompted several to proclaim statements such as Selena's, whose family faced major financial issues at this time. She expressed how one educator, "made a really big impact on the lives of a lot of students . . . a big impact on me because of how [the educator] was with me and my family." A teary-eyed Selena continued expressing the impact of these relationships: "I think, every once in a while, about them and try to find them, like on Facebook. I want to reach out and thank them because I never really had the chance to fully thank them."

It has become apparent that these relationships have had an effect on the lives of the participants. The participants generally noted that the positive interactions and relationships

made them feel that they could prosper because they knew someone was there for them on a consistent basis, no matter what else was occurring in their lives. For some, like Abel, it was a safe space during the transition after migrating from Puerto Rico: “I feel that the safe protection from that big transition that I had made me feel comfortable and encouraged me to do better.” For Ivan, whose transition was between a charter school to public school, it made him feel like somebody was there for him. For Karina, the terrifying transition from middle school to high school as an ELL was mitigated by these relationships: “They always just make sure that you are aware of what you’re capable of.” Although there were references to established safe spaces, the participants were clear to note that these were not shields of protection, but rather places of guidance. Karina noted her teachers, “helped me to see that I have to create my own independence. I have to do what I have to do without being told so I could be ready for college because I didn’t need to be coddled.” This similar experience was expressed by Valentina: “with that support, like the independency they help you develop, and doing it on your own, it helped me get to college and it helps me today.”

Most participants noted that even small interactions had lasting effects. For Margarita, those small interactions helped her get through to graduation. For Leo, these interactions, at times, just helped him get through the day. Overall, all the participants agreed that the effect of these relationships was a good experience and influenced their current lives. For instance, Margarita noted that she learned many life lessons from her teachers. Marisol noted that she learned to self-advocate and was literally given a voice by helping her develop English language communication skills. Marisol stated that her teacher, “would be there to help me say what I needed to say. Just little steps made for big progress in me, in my life . . . and then helping me feel comfortable and relaxed” in her ability to communicate. By and large, the participants

expressed a consensus that teachers helped with school work. As Abel stated, “with that positive relationship, you are seeing progress through time.”

Some participants remarked that their interactions with staff were the reason they looked forward to coming to school. Naomi looked forward to coming to a class because her teacher was nice: the teacher, “always made me feel confident. She would always make sure I knew what I was doing.” Paloma mirrored this statement: “It was all positive energy. It was all this energy that was going to make you move up and one day succeed.” Paloma believed that these teachers, “do have a really big impact in graduating students because they’re there to help you.” Karina felt that the relationships were inspiring and they were, “more like a reward because [she] came to school and did our work.” Karina, like many others in these relationships, did not fear seeking assistance. Rather, they felt a series of successes and looked forward to completing tasks that would steer their future. In reference to showing up every day, Marisol stated, “I could just look forward to being successful and towards completing anything . . . like, literally, I had one teacher who made me believe if you put your mind to it you can do it.” These interactions were what made Marisol, who was grateful to have completed high school, expressed, “they all showed me I matter”; a specific sentiment shared by Ivan. Victoria shared that she was emotional with overwhelming gratitude for her teachers.

Others believed that if it not had been for these educators, they would not be where they are in their educational journeys. For instance, Selena noted a lingering impact on her family.

I had one teacher, Miss Lorne [pseudonym]. Impacting. She was impacting to my brothers. I got into the international program because of Miss Lorne. She was a big influence on my brothers. If it wasn’t for Miss Lorne, they wouldn’t have graduated. . . . She had an attachment to them and them to her.

In reference to this same educator and another teacher who works with Miss Lorne, Leo noted, “Even small interactions with them definitely helped me get through the day.” Ivan furthered this sentiment of valuing brief moments of interaction by explaining that the effect of these exchanges has created lasting friendships with educators and noting that he is still in communication with a few of these teachers: “I think those are relationships that I’m going to keep for a while.” Leo added, “The interactions with those teachers have impacted my life in high school and beyond” and “[My teacher] was always so interested in anything I had to say about my interests and what I want to study.”

Many participants noted strong bonds. Abel felt that these attachments were as strong as family bonds: “The most important thing about high school is the bond you have between what you have with the teacher and the student.” These bonds were formed, for Karina, by having, “personal conversations about preferences.” She felt she could have intimate conversations noting, “I talked to her about everything.” Naomi experienced a similar level of attachment, sharing that her teacher, “would talk to me like we were friends.”

The long-term perceptions of these educator interactions are a general mindset that the participants have both positive self-esteem and self-efficacy. “I feel like my mindset and how I see life has definitely been influenced by them,” shared Leo. Abel expressed that these relationships, “make me feel good about myself. It makes me feel like a good person. I feel that this knowledge is powerful. I feel if you have that knowledge you can open doors,” further noting that “teachers and counselors at schools set their priorities on helping,” and this influences futures. This attitude was shared by all participants, but Frederico, who fostered the fewest bonds of the group, expressed that these relationships, “made me feel important. They made me feel like I was part of something.” The long-term significance for Karina was that she was

“never made to feel less than anyone else in [her] classroom based off of anything, whether it was race, the color of my skin or the way I look.” She also noted,

I made these connections because I had teachers that were passionate about teaching and interested in what I had to say and what I was doing within their classroom. I was able to make a connection that translates in my life today.

Margarita shared that these relational experiences helped her realize that she can do anything she puts her mind to while Marisol learned early on, in freshman year, that she mattered and that many people believed in her. This was shared by Ivan who learned in sophomore year about the positive, reciprocal nature of these bonded relationships.

These mutual relationships were bonded through the established interactions between the participants and specific educators. Many shared that they sought out some teachers after a course was completed. Karina appreciated this welcoming ethos about a teacher she had in freshman year: “I still went to visit her classroom on a regular basis until the completion of my senior year, just to see how she was doing and see if she needed anything.” Because of this bonded relationship of mattering, Karina anticipates one day returning to McKinley High School to “pour into the school what they have given me.” Selena stated that one teacher appreciated the desire for growth and provided open space to formulate study groups after class that were not related to the teacher’s subject. “We would motivate each other. . . . We found ways to get involved in her clubs through community service. . . . I learned it was important to have these teachers and peers,” said Selena. Valentina shared that this team mentality was essential to her success: “It is about a joint success. I needed to push myself to understand different personalities. My teacher was a positive role model. I got to see her strength and build my own.” This opportunity occurred for Valentina outside of the regular school day. These

opportunities for mutual relationship-building developed into a high level of mutual respect amongst the participants and the select teachers who embraced their growth process. Of the 11 participants, 10 mentioned various teachers with whom they still communicate. Although graduation was some time ago, these teachers are invested in the participants. Abel noted, “They’re going to help you be the best of yourself and are going to help you when you need help.”

Motivations. The second subtheme established via data analysis of Theme 1 was participant motivations that impact mattering relationships. A common motivation for these participants was involvement in various extracurricular activities such as sports, clubs, community service, and step team. For Abel, track and field was a major motivation. He stated that he was fortunate and appreciative to have a great coach: “He always had our back . . . he was like another father who always encouraged you to do better.” Abel also mentioned that his physical education teacher had a positive influence on him and he further attributed that teacher with his inclination to sports that superseded his linguistic abilities to communicate. Abel stated that, for him, sports became a part of “human interactions and that is a big value that teachers and myself needed to understand each other. That is what my coach taught me.” Frederico shared similar sentiments, noting that his coaches and teams “made me feel like I had some type of worth.” Because he felt a sense of belonging and established comradery, even while facing life struggles, he noted, “I was needed. Somebody other than myself needed me. Somebody other than Frederico needed Frederico to perform to do well. And, that’s what gave me importance.” The sentiment amongst participants was that advisors and coaches had a different type of impact of influence in their lives because it moved beyond their academic abilities and included their holistic selves.

Part of these advisor, coach, and classroom teacher relationships that influenced the participants was the installation of importance of goal-setting as a continuum of motivation to succeed. For Abel, it was simply establishing a willingness to stay after school for tutoring or for practice, where he was encouraged to pursue his passion: “I feel like it was the counselors, coaches, teachers, and other students that pushed me to go to college.”

A parallel acknowledgment was shared by Ivan who realized, as an upperclassman, that a major goal of school and life was perseverance and that it was okay to accept assistance. In reference to his school mentors, he indicated they “made me feel that I can do it, even though there were a lot of practicums and tests that were hard. But, I can be supported.” Karina expressed that the motivation experience from school staff was related to their encouragement, early on, that she had the potential to go to college and create a successful future. She appreciated that “they were always excited to hear what was next, what I’ve discovered and learned . . . why I was so passionate. They wanted to make sure I was getting what I needed to succeed.” She added that they “definitely sparked my passion and made me feel like I could pursue it.” Most participants shared a confidence in taking risks in these secure relationships. Paloma stated, “they made me feel secure that I was going to be able to succeed.”

At varying times, these motivational mentors were a reality check on the future for the participants. Selena testified, “I felt that if I didn’t graduate from high school, I thought, ‘Where was I going to go? What was I going to do if I didn’t succeed and graduate?’ I realized I needed to graduate.” That motivation was slightly different for Valentina, who always knew she would graduate: “My motivation to succeed and complete high school became getting into a good college.” Paloma was also walked through the process and was consistently reminded, “You do

have to be responsible and do your work, yourself. At times it will get kind of hard.” But Paloma, like Valentina, walked into high school with a desire to go to college.

All of the nine college students stated that they appreciated how the teachers spoke to them about the college experience in both a textual and anecdotal manner because this gave them insight into what college was really like. Although, initially, college was not a consideration for Abel, he revealed, “The experience they shared about college, they would say, ‘it’s going to benefit you in the long run.’ And, they always kept pushing me until I decided to apply for college, then helped me through the process.” Ivan was supported by two specific teachers who motivated him forward by stating, “having teachers like Dr. Drescher and Mrs. Matlock [pseudonyms] pushed me towards the decision to go to college.” Valentina summarized the attitude of the group with reference to the college-bound experience and how her teachers made her feel: “Regardless of temporary stress or anxiety, I always believed I was capable of great things.”

This belief that was either built or encouraged in the participants was observed universally. Selena learned to value advice “because the people who I mattered to in high school cared about me, they gave me advice and I take it.” Ivan shared this thought, noting that it helped him establish independence and influence his college bound decision. Abel learned to easily make friends, which he stated is, “a personal trait that makes me feel good. I can make friend with whoever, no matter what race, gender, religion, or background.” Abel shared that over time he began to share the belief that “if you put your mind to it, you can do it.” He approaches his daily life with this approach. Margarita and Leo built technical life-skills in their vocational programs. Margarita took a risk and competed in both a regional and state

competitions. She shared, “I competed for a scholarship. I didn’t win, but it was a good idea. It was a good experience.”

Some participants began to realize that they had a social responsibility to their younger counterparts. For example, Naomi shared that sometime in junior year there was a shift in mindset when she found herself serving as a mentor to her younger cousins by redirecting their behavior, and became aware of her responsibility to act appropriately. By sophomore year Paloma learned that the people with whom one associates have an influence on one’s prosperity. She shared, “I looked at my record, at what I was doing and who I was with. Then, I decided I would try to go hang out with ‘those’ kids because they were always more advanced.” She believes this positioned her to stay on track to achieve her college goals. Yet, Paloma noted that she did not regret anything about high school, even the bad experiences, “just because it kind of makes you stronger and it kind of builds you as a person.”

Valentina’s cultural worldview grew with her transition from a small parochial school to the large, economically, culturally, and socially diverse high school: “The diversity helped me so much to understand that I don’t care about color, how you speak, who you love, it did not matter.” She further detailed that the experience

truly helped me, overall, with speaking to people with respect. I truly do not care who you are. I will treat you with respect as long as you treat me with respect. So, I am really grateful that my parents pushed me into this environment.

This mindset, as well as appropriate school behavior afforded Valentina a nomination for a character award, which included a scholarship: “That meant the world to me because I really do try to always be honest and live with integrity.”

This integrity is a personality trait that the participants seemingly share, universally. Abel, who became a captain on the track team in his senior year, understood the concept of accountability and shared his belief: “If you can do more with yourself you will be a better person for yourself and others in the future.” According to Abel,

You should build upon the relationships that are going to teach you what you need to know. Then, you should do what you are taught and then teach others. After that, you get to know who you are and could become.

This profound statement corresponds with Karina’s experience in which she learned to focus on those who spoke to her in a motivational manner. Marisol realized the importance of motivational behavior from the moments when it was lacking in her early high school tenure. She asserted,

It’s a good thing to have a motivational person like that because not a lot of teachers are like that. When people motivate you, it helps you. It helps to be like, “Okay, I really want to do this.” It helps you to push forward and feel passionate about what you are going to do, for yourself and for others.

This motivational accountability was an essential part of the process for Naomi. As a single mother of two by graduation, she was determined that “even though it was hard and they kept saying I wasn’t going to make it, I had a responsibility to get this diploma for my kids, for my future.” The motivational mindset is what propelled Paloma to decide to take her second chances seriously by deciding that she would “try to hang out with kids that were in more advanced classes. I wanted to hang with the gringos and stuff like that,” because those White students displayed the academic character she wanted to share. Paloma elaborated that she wanted to stay away from the drama and problems that her cultural group generally displayed.

In her desire for self-preservation, she realized at that she needed to “walk away from all the negative energy and just stay where I was motivated.” She is proud of her decision and declared, “I literally did what school was actually meant for. I came to school. I came to school. I went to class.” Later, she realized, that others were watching and emulating her change. Like Paloma, Ivan shared his personal growth:

High school helped me even though there were times I didn’t want to wake up in the morning. But it geared me to become more positive. High school moved me into not thinking everything was negative all the time. I learned if you set your mind to it, it can be done.

He learned to embrace his purpose and began to share his passion for people and seeks to be, “something better, something of honor.” Analogous to Ivan’s daily struggle to be motivated and self-motivate, Selena stated that through her process, “I always became stronger. I had to push myself to graduate.” This has influenced a new generation of family members toward perseverance.

This influence and motivation were possible through the willingness of the participants to seek and accept assistance on their educational journey. Most stated a general accord that if they asked for help, staff were obliged to provide help (many times staying after school or after practice). It was during these times when much of the relationships were formulated. It was not just about the extra academic assistance or dexterity in their skills. For Abel, it was language acquisition. For Ivan, it was someone to share his school and life experiences. Ivan said,

They were very flexible in terms of assignments. If people were struggling, they would be willing to push back an assignment or test to give us more time and prepare. Even for

a paper, allowing us to get their insight and their opinions. This made me and my friends more confident about the learning experience, which was otherwise daunting, for me. For Karina, it was sharing in affirming her progress. For Leo and Francisco, it was about getting the diploma. For Naomi, it was about confidence-building. As Valentina poignantly noted about these interactions, “They spoke about their own experiences and how it improved their career paths. If I had any questions, there were many teachers who had time for me. This was helpful for me and for my friends to be prepared.”

Major Theme 2: Feelings of Importance

The second major theme determined from the investigation of this inquiry was the feelings of importance as perceived by the research participants. One of the theories that guided this study of mattering was Maslow’s (1970) hierarchy of needs; specifically, the need to belong which creates fulfilling relationships and assists in the development of self-actualization. These self-actualized individuals expressed feelings of importance as part of their high school experiences and provided insight into these feelings as core to the concept of mattering. The three subthemes that supported these feeling were relationships, family, and liking of school (see Table 4).

Table 4

Theme 2: Feelings of Importance: Subthemes, Codes, and Frequencies

Subtheme	Code	Frequency
Relationships	Friends	(22)
	Teachers	(22)
	Other caring staff	(17)
Family	Guidance to prosperity	(27)
	Level of influence	(21)
	First-generation family graduates	(15)
	Family graduates	(13)
Liked school	Extracurricular influence: Clubs	(8)
	Extracurricular influence: Sports	(5)
	Positive school outlook	(5)

Relationships. Many of the individuals in this research expressed that student-teacher relationships were core to the feelings of importance. Leo noted that interactions with teachers created safe spaces that assisted him with daily perseverance and completion of high school. Ivan noted that there was a sincere willingness from teachers to help him and work with him on a regular basis. Karina shared that the relationships provided an orientation of her progress as these intuitive interactions provided insight from other teachers for Karina’s progress. For Karina, it was “just pure encouragement . . . it was exciting to hear positive things other teachers were saying.” Margarita described her relationship with her ELL teacher:

Ms. Liembeck [pseudonym], my English Language Learner teacher, was my first teacher in high school. She was the number one to help me with everything. . . . If I needed help with science, she would help me out. She had a big impact. She was like another mom to me. She really helped me out.

For Abel, although learning English was difficult, his major student-teacher relationships made him feel secure in his linguistic abilities and positive about his academic abilities.

Another indicator of the importance of student-teacher relationships was the level of friendliness established. Naomi explained that teachers who were friendly were able to reach kids more readily. These were the types of teachers that helped build her confidence and motivation: “If I wouldn’t have had serious talks with my teacher, I might not have finished.” Of the 11 participants, 10 noted that they still have a relationship with at least one educator from their high school experience. All participants shared anecdotes regarding specific teachers they were able to confidently name. Participants shared relational moments that made them feel lucky to be part of a relationship, especially with words of encouragement. When Selena was struggling, her teacher would remind her of the importance of graduation with statements such as, “Listen, you need to graduate. Graduation is important. If you don’t graduate, you won’t get a good job. If you don’t get a good job, you won’t have money.” In a like manner, Valentina shared that these relationships induced confidence and influence to her to endure beyond her conceived capacity.

Another intrinsic factor in perceived feelings of importance shared by the participants was an ethos of caring. Leo defined this as “knowing that somebody cared for you can take somebody far.” Like Leo, Karina felt that she was cared for in this environment and noted that she felt important because these caring relationships afforded her opportunities to be heard. Much of the caring community building was established during one-to-one interactions, such as Valentina’s experiences with counselors or staying after school, which provided opportunities for in-depth life planning conversations and encouraged curiosity. Selena felt safe in this nurturing environment, which encouraged finding purpose and establishing personal pride. “Having good people in school who pushed you was a good thing,” she said. Ivan felt championed when teachers would assist him with whatever his needs were. Sometimes, these needs were tangible

such as when Selena did not have the resources to participate in an event but was sponsored by a teacher which allowed for her participation.

An additional element to school relationships moves beyond educational influences to include school-based peer friendships. Prior to transferring to McKinley, Ivan was unable to make friends. However, in the new environment, he was able to make peer connections easily. Initially, Abel struggled to make friends, but once he was able to formulate these peer relationships, he stated that these connections were notable for their high levels of respect and support. Frederico found the same, noting, “It was like being able to have people around doing the same thing and having fun doing it. I was just happy to be in a world of people in their presence.” They all noted these relationships were encouraging and supportive. Karina was currently attending a university with her two closest friends with continuous, close connections. Margarita had two friends that became her accountability partners: “We just really pushed each other to do better. We always helped each other out in whatever way we needed.” Paloma and her friends thrived on this “really good, positive energy.” Paloma was grateful for these friendships because she believed that this assistance kept individuals from feeling lonely or ignored in a social environment, stating that friendships “help you a lot because you know that you’re not alone.”

Family. School-based interactions with educators and peers were just as essential to building relationships as familial synergy. These data show that families provided guidance and influence. For many, extended family members helped to establish a desire to graduate or emulate graduation success.

The participants indicated that families provided guidance to prosperity. Each noted that they were all pushed in some way to get their high school diploma. Whether it was a parent,

grandparent, sibling, or extended family member, each shared a common experience that pressed the importance of education and high school completion and its necessity for prosperity. As Karina explained,

My whole family from my mother's side had always pushed me to graduate, especially once I started bringing home good grades. They encouraged me to keep going and never stop and continue to gain knowledge. Without them, I might not have graduated or even gone to college. They pushed this education stuff. They wanted to see me succeed. And, they were going to make sure that happened and encouraged me until that happened.

Paloma was pressured by her mother and older sisters and sees herself pushing her younger brother in the same way. Valentina noted pressure came from both the maternal and paternal sides of the family. For Valentina, the push was more about matriculation into college as opposed to high school graduation. In some cases, families amplified the consequences of not graduating by citing examples of family failures. Ivan recognized, "I felt like I never wanted to disappoint my parents what they hoped for me in my life." These individuals also understood the struggles family members faced in earning a diploma. Margarita shared that she, like many of the participants, was a first-generation graduate: "One person that was a big influence on my life was my grandfather. He was hardworking, but he didn't graduate from high school. He wanted me to do better." Each participant was grateful for this support. Karina, Leo, Paloma, and Valentina also noted that this support continued to be strong as they matriculated into college.

For each, there was a heightened level of influence of platonic family members who had the greatest influence and this played a huge role in individual success. The belief, according to

Frederico, was “that with a diploma you can do whatever you want and get any kind of job.” In extreme cases, such as Marisol’s, families were clear that a lack of persistence to graduation would mean unacceptance in the household. A different kind of pressure came from understanding the immigrant experience of transitional issues and hard labor. About her father, Paloma said, “to hear his story and hear how much effort and time and energy he put into coming here for a better life and to do what was best for his kids. This made me want to do what was best.”

Ivan noted that his father’s family seemed to push more because there were fewer graduates than on his mother’s side, which had made graduation a part of the status quo. Selena’s push came from similarly aged cousins who pushed each other. The outlier in this area was Frederico, who noted that education was important to his mother, but not to the extended family outside of the United States, where unskilled labor was much more available.

As noted, the influence of family graduates was a motivation for many participants. Their belief system, overall, was that Latinos have this expectation. Most participants with an older sibling graduate were expected to graduate. The influence of older first-cousin graduates was just as profound as sibling graduates. For instance, Ivan shared that in freshman year he attended his cousin’s graduation and determined that was what he wanted to do. This was further intensified for Ivan when he attended the college graduation of another cousin. Karina reported that her uncle, who was the second born, was the first to graduate. In Margarita’s home, she was the youngest of five children where four of the five children were first generation graduates and one sibling did not complete secondary schooling. Naomi shared that her brother, who was in jail, was influenced to graduate based on her achievement.

Although each participant had a major familial influence toward graduation, most participants were first-generation high school graduates. Ivan was part of a group of siblings and cousins who all graduated high school, but this group was changing his paternal family's narrative as all first-generation graduates. This was the same influential factor for Karina, who noted that she was told, "education was going to be how I would grow. I was told I had to do something different from everyone else who had not seen graduation." In Naomi's case, she was the only one of six children to walk the stage at commencement. She said, "I have a big family. And, out of about 100 of us, I would say maybe four graduated. I was one of those four." Selena claimed that her parents, uncles, and aunts did not graduate. Further, she noted, of those that did graduate, she was the first to do so on time.

Liked school. Another contributing factor to feelings of importance is the consideration of how much each individual liked school. The study findings indicate that positive school outlook and extracurricular involvement in sports and clubs were material factors in establishing importance with the school entity. All participants noted varying levels of positive gratification with their overall school experience. Most were highly positive about their experience noting that regardless of their daily difficulties and challenges, the school environment was a safe and enjoyable place. Abel noted that once he moved past acclimation to his school environment, he started to like school, even finding it fun and, thus, this made it easier to make friends. Beyond freshman year, over time, Valentina found herself waking up early with energy to go to school. Ivan immediately appreciated the vast difference between his challenges at his charter and his prosperity in the public school. Margarita related the positive vibes were directly tied to positive relationships, noting that, in high school, "my relationships were mostly positive and, since these relationships were pretty good, everything turned out pretty good."

A contributing factor to school satisfaction for many of the participants was their association with extracurricular activities. For Abel, Frederico, Valentina, and Ivan, sports provided a means of engagement and camaraderie. Abel was a member of track and field and was motivated by both the individual growth aspect and the team effort. He shared his appreciation for his coach because “he was like a father to me, he motivated me.” Frederico’s high school focus was on sports with an understanding that without good academic scores, he would not be able to play. His focus was on eventually obtaining basketball scholarships, although life challenges proved too difficult for college upon graduation. Regardless, Frederico shared, “being an athlete, having that extra something to look forward to, to be a part of something bigger on a team, that really helped me.” Valentina’s responses echoed this as a softball team member:

My coaches pushed me to be better inside and outside of the classroom. They pushed me to really work hard as a team member because I didn’t always start, but that I was still essential to the team. I realized that I was part of a team in life, wherever I go.

This also helped her in formulating positive relationships in school. Ivan played baseball and noted that his coaches pushed him to build his skill and focus on the future. He began to understand that despite life challenges, education was extremely important and therefore was, in itself, a reason to persevere.

Similar to the sports participation experience, clubs played a role for other students. Six of the 11 participants played active roles in various extracurricular activities. All obtained leadership status in their respective organizations by senior year. Karina reported that being a leader in the club taught many skills, but it was also a means to learn from feedback while getting recognition for one’s efforts. Valentina was involved in the honor society and service

clubs. The clubs gave her leadership experience and really helped her understand the importance of diversity, especially the diversity of need and the importance of service. Paloma, captain of the step team, moved into leadership early in her sophomore year. This quick transition forced her to really evaluate herself and become a role model for younger members while establishing a high level of respect from older members. Paloma encouraged members to practice hard and maintain good grades. Selena, who was very involved in school while working part-time and being an active member of her church congregation, shared that her biggest influences were the Spanish club and international club because they mitigated that acclimation process in a way that allowed her to assimilate without losing her cultural and linguistic identity. She also noted that, in her experience, those who were most involved in school sports were usually more successful and completing the required 60 community service hours way before graduation. “I finished my community service hours early in sophomore year. By the time I had reached senior year, I had earned silver cord,” Selena noted. A silver cord indicates recognition of the achievement of 120 hours of service; individuals are publicly honored with a silver cord worn during the graduation ceremony. Of the 11 participants, five achieved this honor.

Major Theme 3: Feelings of Marginalization

The third major theme developed from the data from this investigation was the participants’ feelings of marginalization. Marginalization, as defined by Cheng (1999) and Schlossberg (1989), occurs when people perceive that they do not belong and are of no significance to others, often with a sentiment of being of lower social status. It was essential to understand participants’ impressions of marginalization to better understand their perceptions of mattering. The four subthemes demonstrated as feelings of marginalization included community

and school culture, intimidation and dislike of school, family and home life, and other examples of adversity (see Table 5).

Table 5

Theme 3: Feelings of Marginalization: Subthemes, Codes, and Frequencies

Subtheme	Code	Frequency
Community and school culture	Education abroad: Comparison to U.S.-based experience	(06)
	Ethos	(06)
Intimidation and dislike of school	Feelings of inadequacy	(21)
	Racism	(19)
	Disconnect	(14)
	Language	(14)
	(Un)safe spaces	(07)
	Non-understanding of culture, language, and norms	(02)
Family and home life	Absent parents and trauma	(09)
	Community and housing	(07)
	Personal responsibility and self-efficacy	(07)
	Feelings of noncaring of the subject	(04)
	Home responsibilities	(03)
Adversity	Troubles and behavior	(12)
	Lack of friendships	(10)
	Educator negativity toward subject	(08)
	Failures	(08)
	Other aggregated negative experiences	(08)
	Attendance	(07)
	Feelings of non-significance	(02)

Community and school culture. The study participants expressed varying levels of satisfaction with the school ethos. Participants from McKinley High School seemingly prospered in a positive school environment with socioeconomic and cultural diversity. Valentina, a McKinley High school graduate, was initially intimidated by the sheer size of the campus and the approximate 3,500 students and staff members: “I was this little timid freshman just trying to navigate. I focused on my day-to day classes.” Overall, this was her most negative shared experience and she noted that her general experience was positive. Ivan was also

intimidated at the start of his tenure at McKinley. However, he stated, he felt supported early on and was able to navigate his environment.

Some participants described their experiences with the overall ethos of the school environment with comparison to their home countries. A few migrant and immigrant participants shared their comparisons to their home country's educational opportunities and the U.S.-based experience. Abel noted that his personal experience and those shared from family members was that the educational systems in South America, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic were very different, such as in a lack of resources like technology, teaching assistance, and funding. He observed that the way individuals interacted with staff and academic expectations were different. As a Kennedy student, Abel also expressed moments of adversity in the environment. Yet, he noted his appreciation for the education he obtained: "The way we interacted and the experiences we had to go through in order to learn was different. . . . I just feel like the studies here are way more advanced and they teach you more than they do over there." Marisol echoed this sentiment by sharing that even though she had issues with teachers and students regarding her linguistic abilities, her overall sentiment was that migrating from Puerto Rico was the best thing her parents did for her family as the schools were not good: "My dad just wanted the best for me and my sister." Paloma, as a first-generation citizen, shared Marisol's sentiment: "It was very important because my parents came from Ecuador. They came to start a better life here. All they expected of us was to get a good education."

Participants from Kennedy High School expressed an overall positive experience due to perseverance in a less diverse and antagonistic environment that was less hospitable to Latinos and those of diminished socioeconomic means. Leo shared his experience at Kennedy High School by noting that he and other students from his neighborhood had a consistent feeling of not being

the same. He noticed he and those like him lacked the same academic opportunities through being targeted for lower-level classes with few opportunities to move into more challenging courses. Further, Leo explained that Hispanics were less likely to have college matriculation advocates:

Being a minority in a school like that is so annoying because you were not expected to succeed. You were not pushed to succeed. You were treated very differently. I never took any AP [advanced placement] courses. I was always in those classes with all the “ghetto kids.” I honestly felt like they looked at the zip code before the individual student.

Intimidation and dislike of school. Participants gave other reasons for negative school experiences that surrounded issues of intimidation and dislike. For ELLs, linguistic ability was a factor in their learning experiences. Further, misunderstanding of culture, language, and norms was a general issue for all participants, but greater for immigrant and migrant students. A few participants noted racism and unsafe spaces as factors of intimidation, while disconnection and feelings of inadequacy created a sometimes tenuous relationship with school.

Abel, Margarita, Marisol, and Selena each pointed out language learning as a factor in their academic experiences. Each expressed feeling intimidated with the learning process and terrified of their inability to communicate and each provided anecdotes of their encounters. Abel, who arrived in his freshman year of high school, shared that when he first arrived from Puerto Rico, he was overwhelmed by the differences of the culture and language because his grasp of the language was at a novice level and taught by native English speakers: “When I first got over here my English wasn’t all that great, my grammar was not all that great . . . it was a little intimidating ‘cause it was a lot different.” Abel feared that his teachers would have a “bad

time, a hard time” with him. His anxiety surrounding his skill level made him believe that his teachers would become frustrated with him or that he would not be “good enough.” Although he did experience moments of frustration with educators, for the most part, this fear-fantasy proved to be unfounded. Marisol was born in Puerto Rico and her family migrated to the mainland when she was 9 years old: “I didn’t know any English. Just a minimal amount from watching Disney shows here and there.” Although she had a grasp of the language and culture by high school, she continued to naturally code in Spanish. Marisol faced an oppressive situation in her sophomore year with a teacher who took issue with her seeking assistance from a bilingual peer for clarification on an assignment.

Margarita also experienced real intimidation due to her linguistic skill as she was called names. Her perplexity about this harassment was that much of it came from her fellow Hispanic peers:

Here comes the teacher saying, “I don’t want you speaking Spanish. We speak English here in America. It’s the root of all hell that you’re speaking Spanish in my classroom and I cannot understand!” And, she continued to say, “Your mother should’ve taught you better.”

Marisol shared how embarrassed and offended she felt about being shut down: “It is very hurtful for anyone, it doesn’t matter if you’re speaking Spanish, English, French, whatever you are speaking just because they don’t understand. It is hurtful.” She sensed a need to clarify that she was confident in her ability to read, speak, and write in both English and Spanish whilst acknowledging that sometimes she forgot terms. Marisol’s belief was that while some teachers did not like when students spoke Spanish, they did not have a right to minimize students.

Selena also expressed moments of linguistic marginalization. She noted that there was a consistent stigma, even amongst other Hispanic, non-native speakers. There was a negativity associated with having an accent. Selena vented that she did not understand the disapproval of her language and culture: “I am Hispanic. I speak Spanish. I speak English with an accent, but I speak English. Why is that not good enough?” Abel also experienced such moments and shared his belief that individuals would purposefully use words that he did not understand to keep him out of the conversation. Similarly, Naomi believed that some teachers would disengage students by utilizing terminology that was beyond their comprehension or provide terms that were out of context, which she perceived to be intentional.

Whether the experiences of linguistic and cultural discrimination fell between bias and xenophobia, a shared experience for most of the participants included some level of prejudice that affected them personally. Several participants shared the perplexing nature of same-race discrimination, which seemed to affect them more because they had grown to accept bigotry as part of their assimilation process. Margarita stated she would get upset with individuals calling her names or making fun of her accent, sometimes “flipping on them.” Eventually, she got hardened to their harsh words until those words were disempowered. To her, it became a sort of “background noise.” What she could not ever get used to was when other Hispanics would do the same: “When it was other Hispanics, it was really bad. I didn’t understand it. I still don’t understand it.” According to Marisol, seeking understanding from teachers was not always possible, as there were instances of teachers forbidding Spanish in their classrooms. She could not understand how the school culture valued her good grades in her native speakers’ Spanish class, but that she could not speak it outside of that particular classroom. Marisol said, “it was very hard for me to understand why I couldn’t speak Spanish.” Selena noted that the feelings of

racism went beyond language discrimination to include hate speech. “It wasn’t enough that we were called *gualas* [a derogatory slang term for Spanish native speakers] by other Hispanic kids. There was one time, during lunch, I was called the n-word by a White kid.” She narrated her argument with the student and the lack of response by administration to her complaint. She perceived such discrimination was not just peer-related:

A lot of African American people and Hispanic people, if they do something small, it was the end of the world. But, when a White person did the same thing, it was a “don’t let that happen again” situation. And, that is not fair.

Marisol also noted that this was more prevalent toward Hispanic and African American students who were bussed in from the other side of town, which was considered to be a lower socioeconomic community:

I think this is because we live on the southside, we are considered nothing. Because we are poor. And, on the township side, parents have money because they have the great jobs and education. I’m tired of the racism, of people being rude to me, hurtful just because of how I live or where I am from. The administration and teachers make you feel like you should just suck it up, like this is the way of the world. It is moments like these when I felt I did not matter.

Selena’s worst heartbreaking situation was when Hispanic students discriminated against one of her favorite teachers, who taught Spanish. “Some Hispanic person called her every name in the book and said, ‘You’re White! You shouldn’t even be teaching Spanish.’” Selena recalled that the teacher cried and it hurt her personally. Selena felt ashamed because she said and did nothing to intervene because “once you experience people doing nothing to help, well, why bother.”

This type of culture in the school environment created what some participants described as intimidating environments. Unwelcoming environments, at times, created insecurity. Such was the case for Naomi and Selena, who faced bullying situations, but learned to navigate these instances with personal growth and resiliency. Initially, they internalized the situations because they felt responsible for the harsh criticisms. Eventually, each learned to either disassociate from the circumstance or self-advocate. “After 4 years, I just let it slide,” shared Selena. For Abel, however, school provided an environment where he had established relationships with teachers and staff that allowed him to establish trust. He knew that when he was at school, with the principals, he was afforded a safe and comfortable space where he did not need to be scared. All participants noted there was always at least one staff member available to go to, creating a safe space, during the school day. These individuals were helpful to moving past negative circumstances.

Of the 11 participants, 10 shared a moment where they felt disengaged from the school environment, but because of a relational component in their educational environment, they persevered. Frederico noted, “My teachers really didn’t like me. My counselors really didn’t want to talk to me. But my coaches tried to work with me.” Ivan explained that his disconnect with school occurred due to a bout of depression in his sophomore year: “There were a lot of times where I just didn’t want to go. I kinda just wanted to stay home, in bed, being laid back.” However, Ivan had teachers who sought him out through e-mail or a counselor who would call, so it became easier for him to just get up and go to school. Eventually, life just became easier, overall. Leo, who noted a perceived biased of how teachers and administration work at Kennedy High School, felt that Hispanic students from the southside were not encouraged to pursue

education as a priority: “White students were counseled into college or a transition plan while Hispanic students were ignored or counseled out.”

Marisol felt a moment of disconnection when a family and consumer science teacher, whom she worked hard for in the early learning classroom, muted her expression of an opinion because she was an ELL. Marisol perceived that the teacher thought she had a reduced capacity to understand American culture: “Obviously, I was very upset. I couldn’t believe a teacher would treat me that way. I was simply trying to communicate, but was shut down. It made me feel like I had no voice.” Naomi also started her freshman year at McKinley feeling like high school was not that important: “I wasn’t planning on graduating, at all. I was planning on saying f- it and go get a GED. I didn’t have a connection or an incentive.” Even Valentina, who always knew graduation was on her horizon, shared that coming from a small parochial school to a large public school was overwhelming: “I did not like it. I don’t know why, I just felt like I couldn’t do it. It was too big, there were too many people. I thought I would get lost. I felt unseen.” Selena shared that the large environment also affected her, early on, in a way that made her feel “disconnected and sad.”

At times, these disconnected feelings filtered into a sense of inadequacy, which was a marginalization factor that most participants shared. Abel initially viewed high school as a means to an end, graduation: “I just wanted to get through high school and go to work.” His encounters brought him to a belief that Latinos, who generally did not have good school relationships, were “just made to feel they were not good enough.” Abel remarked that many Latinos “thought they were better off going to work instead of going to school. It made it easy to just drop out.” Over time, Abel realized that he needed to pursue life more deeply in order to advance his future: “You can work at McDonald’s and, yeah, it pays the bills, but you could have

been a doctor, or a writer, or the next anything.” His understanding ultimately brought Abel to a perception that “we Latinos just want to do more, but I feel like we don’t have the encouragement because of all the people who knock us down.” Leo also shared feelings of disparities of being a Latino and a minority. He was put in classes where the “ghetto kids” were placed. He was never encouraged to take more challenging classes such as college-bound or AP classes: “I feel like I was looked at differently at Kennedy High School because of my race and my accent. But, not just me, but other Hispanic students, too.” He was adamant about his perception that kids like him were pushed into lower-level classes because they were Black and Brown kids from the southside of town:

I feel like during high school I was not pushed to go as far as I could. I was only pushed to get a high school diploma. I feel like it was expected that I would just get some sort of factory type of job. Reflecting back, now, I realize things that had an impact, but I didn’t see at the time.

The long-term effect of the experience that Leo shared was that he learned how to navigate the system enough to be an advocate for his sister’s IEP process. He made sure to be there for her meetings because he feared she would be obligated to take lower-level courses and not be challenged. His concern was that as a Hispanic person with a learning challenge, she would not be motivated appropriately. He noted that his participation was essential; that if he did not participate, “they were going to try to put my sister into classes where they put all the ‘ghetto kids’ or the kids that aren’t expected to go further than a high school diploma. I knew exactly what they were doing.” Leo learned and provided a voice of advocacy. This was also Selena’s experience. During her first year, she was more of an observer while absorbing the negativity presented to Black and Latino students who were made to feel bad about themselves because of

who they were and where they lived: “I got use to the racism and the negative experiences. One time, I went to the administration and they did nothing. There is only so much you could tolerate.” Selena felt she didn’t have a voice and that she was in a constant fight with peers and teachers:

Hispanics don’t have a voice. We have to fight to get our side heard. If we don’t know how to dispute a situation, we get suspended or expelled while White kids get a free pass. . . . In our classrooms, they kept us pressed down because we didn’t deserve to be in the higher classes.

For example, Marisol initially kept silent because she felt that “sometimes it’s better to stay shut in these situations.” Marisol did not really learn to self-advocate until much later in her high school tenure. She explained that there were times,

[I] wanted to leave school because I didn’t think I was meant to be the person that graduated in 2018. I had so many things going on and no advocates. Sometimes, I thought, it would’ve been easier for me to drop out.

Family and home life. Marginalization, although a major factor in the school environment, occurred in many cases outside of the school environment. Most of the participants had home situations and community lives that aggregated their life experiences with moments of adversity and perseverance. For some of the participants, these included various experiences at home, including absent parents and trauma, community and housing, lack of support, home responsibilities, personal responsibility, and self-efficacy.

During high school, four of the 11 participants lived in single-parent homes, five of the 11 participants lived in blended-family homes, and one participant lived in a platonic home environment. Frederico lived portions of his high school tenure with extended family and with

his mother. His father was never really a part of the family. Because of his mother's chemical addiction, Frederico found himself needing to establish housing on his own. Although he was appreciative to be able to live with cousins, he felt like an outsider in his attic room. School, therefore, became an escape. Leo's blended family had a mixed response, mostly "rough" to his "coming out" in sophomore year. Naomi's family faced emotional and financial difficulty that tore through her home when her brother got arrested, convicted, and was sentenced. "My parents were fighting, every day," she declared. This filtered into her school life as this plagued her mind: "Instead of paying attention to my studies, I was busy thinking about my brother and my parents fighting. That affected me negatively." This type of negativity overwhelmed Paloma in her senior year when she lost her best friend to suicide. On a personal level, Selena and Ivan felt the grips of depression capture their insecurities. Selena explained, "I am a very sensitive and insecure person, especially experiencing the things I've seen and gone through. Senior year was emotionally taxing. It was rough."

At times, there were community and housing influences that affected the individual participants. Leo lived on the southside of town in a public housing facility for 8 years. He summarized his experience as one which, in this low income community, he was constantly surrounded by drug addicts, gangs, and criminals. He said, "that me feel like an outcast, at times, because out of all the kids in the area, I only met two others who wanted to go to college, like me." This became evident to Leo during his bus rides across town to school where he would travel from a desolate neighborhood to suddenly being exposed to large, single-family homes with yards: "I was like, wait a minute, I didn't know these nice houses existed." He realized, once he started at Kennedy High School, that there was something different for his future, he wanted something better.

Naomi knows, first hand, about those issues of addiction in her community: “I have uncles who were addicted to drugs, and fighting, and guns. I have friends and family who have been shot. I know people who were thieves. They would steal cars.” She shared her belief that “this is just what you expected from Southside.” Selena expressed similar experiences with her environment, but also defended her community:

Yes, there was more crimes than other parts of the city. But, most of the people are good people. We live in a society where so many people judge us based on the area where we live. If there are Hispanics or African Americans are there, it is considered a ghetto. But in this ghetto are people who look after you, take care of you. We have pride in the little we have and the relationships we share.

Although Selena felt she lived in a supportive community, she also felt her family was not as encouraging, except for her mother. She felt like it was a constant battle when she was in a place of prosperity. Others expressed a similar situation in which, for the most part, their platonic families fostered advancement. However, extended family support was afflicted with individuals who would speak negatively about the participants’ experiences. Naomi shared, “I would say my whole family really cared, people straight up let me know, ‘you are not going to make it.’” She further noted that not caring was fine with her, but the gossip was unnecessary. Margarita shared a similar sentiment that although she loved her family and community, “it seemed that if any of us did a little better for ourselves or our family, there was always someone around the corner talking junk.”

All of the participants shared that their lives were busy due to responsibilities beyond the school day. Of the 11 participants, nine shared that they often made conscious choices to invest in their studies and school, staying off the street, working part-time jobs, being involved in

church activities, and sharing in family tasks. However, for some, it was more stressful than for others. For Leo, the walk home from the bus stop was the worst for him, as he had to walk through gang territory. He would keep his head down and walk with his crew of athletes. For Selena, it was having to let go of some of her activities in her senior year to take on a second part-time job to assist with family finances while still maintaining her level of service at church. Selena shared, “it was four different things at once going on. At some points, I seriously considered dropping out. Fortunately, my parents did not let me.” Margarita was impacted by her grandfather’s cancer in her junior year. She took on more work hours so her mother could spend more time caring for her grandfather. She shared her secret blessing by revealing, “This time was stressful for us all, but I also remember the moments with family meant more.” These types of moments resonated with Naomi, a single mom with two children upon graduation. She shared that the stress of dealing with a sometimes-present father, a baby, and a toddler while working part-time and going to school was difficult. She also noted that beyond her parents, she had limited family support, but that she had stopped expecting assistance way before her senior year.

Regardless of the stress level or responsibilities that were a condition of life for these participants, each shared a consensus of personal responsibility. This showed a high level of self-efficacy that was built over time. For instance, Abel realized, as an underclassman, that he had to become stubborn with his desires and time: “If you don’t take the time to learn and go beyond the minimum, if you just want to get it done and over with and don’t take it seriously, you won’t learn and you might not get far.” Abel believed in the philosophy of learning to work smarter and not harder. Ivan’s struggles made him realize that he just needed to put one foot forward, in front of the other, and keep moving. This allowed him to eventually learn to enjoy

school and life, in general. Margarita learned to “get your stuff in on time” and to behave like the grown-up she desired to be. “I was still in the habit of turning my work in late, extremely late, and still getting credit until a teacher finally held me accountable. I was so hurt and confused, I needed to make a change,” she shared. For Marisol, completing high school became one of her top goals. She made the change at the end of middle school to make school a priority: “I wanted to make my family proud with my good grades and high GPA [grade point average].” She began working harder on her academics and found that socially, things fell into place for her fairly quickly.

Adversity. Most of the participants faced some level of adversity at school beyond the normal course of student experiences. A few had attendance issues or troubles due to behavior, while others felt a lack of friendships, some due to transiency. Another factor of school adversity was educator negativity toward the participants and feelings of insignificance. For some, these feelings stemmed from failures and other aggregated negative life experiences.

Initially, Naomi’s attendance was great. However, as learning became more difficult and home stress increased, Naomi found herself unable to speak for herself. She stopped utilizing the protections of her IEP for her learning disability, which required her to self-advocate in order to assist with having her needs met. Naomi shared, “At some point I decided and went only to the fun classes.” She noted that she would skip a class if a teacher was “mean or giving a child a hard time.” Naomi also found it became easier to find reasons to be absent, such as being bullied: “I was bullied in elementary school and middle school and moved past it. Then, I felt like I was bullied again, in high school, by students and teachers because I had a baby and, well, an attitude.” Frederico missed 100 days in his senior year. It finally got to a point, during the last few weeks of school, that he was given an ultimatum. He disclosed, “I had to show up every

day and sit in an office and do a whole semester of work or I would not graduate.” Frederico made the choice to show up every day and work in seclusion because he felt he had no other recourse for his decisions. Abel’s decisions guided him to do better when he began to slack during senior year. “It became too easy to sleep in. I felt established and that being tardy was not a big deal. My mom did not feel the same way.” This pressure pushed him to get back on track. This was a similar experience to that of Paloma, who felt it was okay to skip class every so often with friends in sophomore year, until her dad got a call and straightened her out for the rest of her high school tenure.

Attendance was only a small indicator of troubles for several participants. Frederico pushed boundaries with coaches to the limit, eventually having him removed from his teams. His home life began to weigh on him and his anger overtook his mindset in his safe space, which was school. He shared some resentment at his downward spiral and that the coaches and teachers did not reach out: “They basically saw the progress of my grades going down. My attendance went down. I was kicked off the team, but I really don’t understand how no one said anything until it was almost too late to graduate.” He had hoped these conversations would have happened, but instead he felt “written off.” This was the moment that he thought he would not graduate. Ivan also feared he would not graduate on time because it was discovered, in his sophomore year, that the charter school credits did not transfer to the high school. He was grateful for the teachers and counselors who were flexible enough to help him get these credits and move him in the right direction. Naomi also was fearful about graduating due to her home issues. By senior year, she had finally gotten a grasp on her IEP, but became pregnant with her second child. Suddenly, “graduation was not important” to her. She experienced, “a lot of

negativity at school. I was always a fighter at school. I started getting into fights. But, my school work was always done.”

The participants who overcame adversity have done so with a strong social network. However, most of the participants experienced a lack of friendships due to life conditions or transiency. When Ivan moved to McKinley from the charter school, he had a few upperclassmen family members for support, but no friends. That was hard for him, especially since most of his classmates had been friends with each other since elementary school. Outside of his fellow athletes, Leo had few friends. He did not want to hang out in his community and he felt that he shared little in common with his fellow students in his classes. Leo noted that “there was a lot of isolation that took a negative toll.” Marisol was shy as a ninth grader, so going to high school was an awakening: “I did not know a lot of people and found it tough to make friends with people who were completely different to who I was.” Naomi explained that she went to three different middle schools, so she knew a lot of people. “I learned to move around and find another group to hang out with if things went bad.” However, Naomi noted that she did not carry this skill into high school due to the overwhelming atmosphere and higher degree of academic expectations. She admitted that had she done so, her high school years would have been easier. Paloma faced a slightly different challenge with her annoyance with kids like her who did not care about school or value their opportunities. She decided to socialize with students who were completely different from what she was used to. In a sense of self-preservation she limited herself to five friends who were goal-oriented. When friendships were discussed with Frederico, he simply stated, “Na, I kept to myself. Other than my teams, I just kept to myself.”

Participants also noted that they experienced negative situations from some educators that they described as personal in nature. In his senior year, Frederico had a teacher who he felt really did not like him beyond just a personality conflict. He felt this educator did not treat students well and looked for opportunities to sabotage graduation by giving him low scores on his assignments, although his grades in all other classes were fine. Ivan noted that he experienced moments of what he now calls “miscommunication” with certain instructors. However, at the time he felt “picked on” and “it made me feel really bad.” Leo believed that there were teachers who did not expect him to succeed or go beyond a high school diploma. As he reflected on his high school experience, he noted that there were moments of annoyance: “They didn’t look at me personally, but rather where I was from. I think now, ‘if you inspire other kids, why was that not done for me?’” Naomi also shared moments with several educators when she felt that they were “mean.” She shared, “When you’re constantly a mean teacher, kids don’t want to go to your class.” This was the reason why Naomi would task-avoid by skipping class or was consistently tardy. Specifically, she explained that when she became pregnant with her children, they sought to remove her from school “instead of asking me or providing programs for me, the first thing they wanted to do was kick me out of school.”

Others had strong feelings of insignificance throughout their high school tenure. Margarita revealed that in the beginning of high school she felt she did not matter. She struggled with finding safe spaces and people with whom to connect. Although she was grateful that these feelings subsided overtime, she noted that she understood how others with fewer life skills and resources could get lost in this environment. Naomi also had moments of feeling insignificant because she did not feel that people cared about her at school and she did not have extended family support: “I wouldn’t say my whole, entire family really cared. People in my family were

easy to say, ‘you are not going to make it.’” Selena shared her feelings of not mattering were based on her experience of racism at school and not being supported by her family.

Selena, like all the participants, also noted that academic failures were part of her struggles in high school: “There were times where I was failing classes and didn’t think I was supported.” Ivan felt like a failure during his transition, not understanding the cultural nuances of the public school environment. Margarita felt like a failure due to failing a class and needing to take it again in summer school. This feeling of adversity was enough to make her decide to be a good student, although she struggled to define what a good student was, beyond academic ability. Marisol’s failures made her want to quit school after ninth grade. Although she came into high school with a desire to succeed, once the year was over, “I didn’t really want to do this anymore. I didn’t really want to do anything. I became very lazy, until the summer before senior year.” It was at this time where she realized her GPA was not good enough if she wanted to go to college. Abel also felt negatively about his academic progress at times, especially if he failed a test. He expressed that, even though he was told that failures were a part of progress, he internalized academic failure as a failure of himself or to his mother. Abel also had a community incident in which he, with friends, got into trouble at a local college campus. He was investigated as an 18 year old. He was scared and upset that he disappointed his mother.

Other aggregated negative high school experiences that caused adversity for these students included school expectations and norms. Naomi noted that high school was a challenging environment for even the smartest students: “For people who are tough, for people who are smart, it is hard. It is harder when you have kids or when you have a lot of problems.” Selena recalled being kicked out of class for allowing a peer to borrow a pencil: “The teacher yelled at me over a pencil, saying, ‘you people.’”

Paloma perceived that there were teachers who did not care about what students were going through because, “it is what it is.” She also understood that high school behavior may have been social immaturity. Valentina shared, and Ivan reiterated, that the vastness of the school and the number of students and personalities posed challenges. According to Valentina, “During the day there was constant traffic in those hallways with six minutes to get to the other side amongst thousands of people.” Several participants noted that arguments and fights would occur during these transitions and this was an intimidating situation.

Major Theme 4: Persistence to Graduation

Regardless of the many experiences of marginalization, persistence to graduation was the fourth major theme developed from the data as a result of this research. Persistence has been defined as a personal state when individuals have acquired the skills to navigate life’s emotional distress by building self-efficacy, identity, and coping mechanisms (Caldwell & Siwatu, 2003; Harris & Kiyama, 2015). It was necessary to comprehend participants’ characterizations of persistence to better understand their impact of mattering on persistence to graduation. The two subthemes that emerged from the data included educator posture and personal life strategies (see Table 6).

Table 6

Theme 4: Persistence to Graduation: Subthemes, Codes, and Frequencies

Subtheme	Code	Frequency
Educator posture	Educator, coach, and advisor roles	(39)
	Safe spaces	(35)
	Mutuality: Reciprocation and assistance	(09)
Life strategies	Personal accountability and choice	(33)
	Building personal skills	(17)
	Latino cultural influence	(08)

Educator posture. Educator roles that influenced participants' persistence to graduation included teachers, administrators, counselors, coaches, and extracurricular advisors. Educator posture also incorporated safe-space environments where participants felt a high level of confidence against discrimination. It is within this context of positive educator posture that participants disclosed mutual roles of reciprocation and assistance that motivated persistence.

For all participants, educators in the context of this study were predominately teachers but also included administrators, counselors, coaches, and advisors. In a few anecdotes, peripheral staff such as hall monitors and cafeteria workers played a role for participants. Each individual documented high levels of educator involvement in their persistence to graduation. Leo imparted that educators played a "huge role in me completing high school, in general." Abel included in his experience that, overall, he had a positive relationship with his teachers and that was a major factor that kept him progressing. He expressed that in his opinion, the more interactions and bonds created between school staff and students, the lower the dropout rate. "From experience, I know that if someone needs help, *someone* [emphasis added] at school is going to help," added Abel. Ivan shared a narrative about getting to senior year and two teachers realizing he did not have enough credits to graduate. These teachers sought assistance from a guidance counselor for scheduling assistance:

They were with me the whole time. They could have just left me with the guidance counselor who I just met. Instead, they walked me through what I needed to do so I could graduate on time. They didn't leave my side.

Karina and three other participants experienced this with the constant motivation provided by the principal, Mr. Barnes (pseudonym). Every year of high school he would gather the entire student class body and remind them of their roles and students and the importance of preparing for the

future. According to Karina, “That was something Mr. Barnes always hit on. He talked about having a purpose in the world and having a passion, and using this passion to fulfill a purpose.” She also recounted moments when staff members shared their stories of resiliency from struggles. Specifically, the statements that resonated with her were those of individuals who thought they would never graduate, but did, and those who, against all odds, matriculated into college. “I say it definitely encouraged me to just keep going and continue trying,” expressed Karina.

Marisol’s greatest advocate as an upperclassman was her counselor who constantly reminded her about the risks of dropping out and the opportunities she could lose through real life, relevant examples. Marisol appreciated that her counselor and teachers would

not sugarcoat things like other people did. I think the best thing to do was to tell me, to tell them straight up how it was going to be. Because, if you sugarcoat things as if everything is gonna be okay, it is a lie. For me, I needed them to be honest and give straight answers. With sugarcoating it, I’d be like, whatever. I’m not gonna care. I couldn’t imagine things happening to me. I needed to see a reality with examples that were relevant to me.

Another example was shared by Naomi who struggled in class. With an IEP and a self-disclosed negative attitude toward learning, she shared that there were teachers whom she could trust to keep her on track by slowing down or adjusting for her needs, breaking down concepts, providing significance to concepts, and securing that she was academically prepared. Naomi shared that her administrator would counsel her regularly to make sure that her mindset was clear for learning and inquired about grades, behavior, and home life: “At first, he thought I was a trouble maker and there were times where I had to suffer consequences. But he talked to me and

reminded me that my decisions were for the rest of my life.” She said she became enlightened as she matured over her 4 years: “If I was that little ninth grader with the same mindset in 12th grade, I would have never graduated.”

Paloma also had an IEP with a case manager that supported her with both academic and personal problems. Paloma noted that her manager had a large case load, but that she felt a personal connection to this teacher who looked out for her needs and “would always keep up with me and help me out with every single problem I had. . . . If I failed an exam, she would help me find a solution to get a better grade.” Selena described a teacher that made her feel like she mattered. This teacher pushed and motivated her and Selena recalled a day when “I went home and cried because I couldn’t understand why this teacher wanted to help me progress.” Similarly, Valentina felt her path to graduation was navigated by a few teachers that supported her to graduate and plan beyond high school. Abel shared his experience as feeling helped and advocated for because these teachers “would do anything to make sure you were understanding the subject and make sure you were okay.” However, due to initial experiences in the new environment, Abel was skeptical of the assistance, but learned to embrace it. It was those individuals who reached out that provided the most influential supports that helped him stay in school. According to Margarita, “If it wasn’t for them, I know my high school experience would not have been so great. I had many people that helped me out and eventually I learned to help others.”

For Abel, Frederico, Ivan, Karina, Paloma, and Valentina, coaches and advisors played as much of a role in their prosperity as did teachers, counselors, and administrators. Abel noted that he was trained hard; not just physically, but also mentally, and that is how he improved his life overall. Abel noted that this was an essential part of his support to stay in school. Frederico was

constantly reminded that it was not just today that mattered, but that the next weeks and months mattered. His coaches also reminded him that the team mattered. Ivan learned new skills and was encouraged to teach others. This allowed him to master skills while also learning leadership. Karina was encouraged to push beyond her limits by her coach and realized the importance of this skill when she became overwhelmed with school and life stress. She realized that in the end, with clear thinking and a goal, “it all gets figured out. You are very capable of figuring it out.” Paloma learned leadership skills through her school experience and after-school programs as taught by her advisors and she shared these skills as an officer in these groups. Valentina was inspired to train hard in softball and be a better team member. She also was urged to take on more roles of leadership in service learning.

Many of these teachers provided essentially what the participants described as safe spaces. When educators provided internal and physical safe spaces, they provided students with an environment of enrichment (Göppert & Springirth, 2016) while providing a supportive ethos that buffered adversity (Center for Promise, 2015). Leo described his interactions with teachers and their classrooms as places that provided a location and presence where he could not be touched by negativity. Frederico described his school shelter as being when he was at practice until 5:00 p.m., daily. Ivan used his safe space teachers’ classrooms as a place to vent frustrations and fears and said that in these classrooms, “I felt like, like, somebody was there because they were able to talk with me and they were able to do something about a situation for me.” Karina also expressed that her place of protection was not just a physical classroom. She stated that her teachers were “really interested in making me able to speak up about how I felt about certain things. In these respectful environments we had a voice and could discuss how we felt.” She, like most of the participants, had a specific go-to teacher if she felt lost or anxious.

“It helped me to know that whatever I was going to come into, whatever problem I was having, I had someone in my corner, backing me up and letting me know all was okay,” recalled Karina. She felt that she knew where to go for assistance and guidance. An example of such an experience was when Leo disclosed his homosexuality to his family:

I showed up to school really distraught and broken down. However, I knew I had that one spot, that one safe place and I ran to her classroom. . . . [My teacher] was outside and she took the time to calm me down. That was really helpful.

When Marisol experienced racism she knew she had a trusted teacher with whom to share her feelings. She noted,

[These] relationships made me feel safe that I had a person that I could go talk to about anything about what was going on without being judged. They would treat me the same and give me advice on no matter what it was.

Naomi had a teacher who went out of her way to make sure she was okay. This individual made her feel cared for and was helpful with her daily struggles. Most importantly, to Naomi, this teacher had a way of making her laugh on even her worst days when she was most upset.

Paloma once faced the suicidal death of one of her friends. She shared,

All my teachers gave me extended time on work, but it was one particular teacher who checked on me every day as I faced a situation I couldn't understand. There was a point in time where I didn't even care, you know. I knew that everyone had their own way of grieving, but I didn't think anyone understood mine. I heard from many of them, “I understand what you're going through” and they would share their story. I didn't feel so alone.

Selena had a teacher that she knew she could count on in moments of despair. It was someone she felt she could trust, even more so than her closest friends because this individual was able to advise her in difficult situations. This made her feel wanted and cared for by this teacher, who also pushed and motivated her in times when she wanted to give up academically.

Abel felt welcome in certain classrooms. He said he rarely felt alone because there were “so many people that were kind and courteous. If they saw you needed something, they would help you.” He was grateful for, overall, an “excellent group of teachers who had no tolerance for bullying.” He appreciated this type of support. Ivan explained that once he got acclimated to the school, he was able to connect with “amazing teachers that were very supportive.” He attributed his “safe learning environment” to being able to ask questions and formulate relationships. He also found a place of comfort in the student service center where his counselor was located because he could discuss issues regarding his transition and friends. Ivan found that people were genuinely concerned for him and that things would be taken care of appropriately. Paloma found that having safe spaces provided an escape from the need to excuse herself from negative peer interactions. She stated that “whenever you didn’t want to be involved in something, you just went to your teachers to sit and talk. It was a way to get out of bad stuff.” She believed this was the most positive way to avoid drama. Additionally, she noted, that having someone upon whom she could rely allowed her to be more responsible with her behavior and work: “At those times when it got hard, it was good to have somebody and some place that you could fall back on.”

The safe places and people were part of a reciprocal relationship of mattering. Abel appreciated an environment where his needs were respected, thus encouraging him to display reverence to his peers and school staff. Abel shared that the positive feedback was communal. Ivan felt that this reciprocation, which he learned from his mother, provided for a greater

understanding from and for staff members. He also noted that this was how he managed to get through his anxiety and depression. Karina appreciated the connections she formed with others. Marisol learned, “If you have a good relationship with anyone, that person is going to help build you up. They are going to hype you into a better person, especially graduating high school.” Naomi added that in these relationships, it was easier to rebuke an individual because trust is present. Teachers and administration, for Naomi, “were always pointing out my wrongs in a way which helped build a relationship. Pointing out my wrongs helped me.”

Life strategies. The individuals in this study each established a set of life strategies over their 4 years of high school. These skills assisted them in establishing a personalized system with which they currently manage their lives. These skills were established through a confluence of formulating a set of values and conscious decision-making. The strategies were established by building personal life skills, embracing the Latino cultural influence, and choosing to establish personal accountability.

In reference to building personal life skills, the participants generally increased their desire to learn, reduced procrastination, embraced the need of a high school diploma, behaved in a positive manner, and established a post-high school life plan. Abel was encouraged to do better for himself by understanding the importance of academic performance. The encouragement that he received is the encouragement he now shares with others. Frederico reiterated this mindset with the understanding that homework and assignment completion was just as important as the summative evaluation or test because “follow-through was important from beginning to end.” He realized that had he stayed the course in his personal responsibility, he could have achieved honor roll. Karina talked about the pillars she implemented in her personal life: passion and purpose. For Margarita, understanding her goals were what helped her

stay focused on timely completion of work once she overcame procrastination and excuse creation. Marisol's main goal was simply to get to that diploma because she realized that future opportunities were dependent on it. She learned to self-advocate and become self-reliant based on the skills achieved throughout high school. Naomi learned much of the above, but added that in high school her faith in her abilities and in people increased. "When you always have faith in somebody or something," she said, "and when a person believes in you even if you have lost faith, you realize that you are somebody with something to offer." She realized in these moments that if others believed in her, she had the responsibility to believe in herself. Naomi learned to face negativity and turn it into a positive: "I don't ever dwell in my past. I use what I learned for a future reference of what to do or not do." She found that she could move beyond shame and frustration to prosper. Paloma learned organizational and time management skills, as well as how to select the appropriate group with which to associate. Selena pushed herself to graduation, noting that her community, in general, struggled to push kids to graduation because they did not want to continue a cycle of needing two or three jobs to get by. She chose to stay after school to get extra help and become more accountable for her work more often as she started to appreciate the struggles of others. Ivan kept pursuing bonded relationships as a means to create a support system of assistance and guidance. He understood that all decisions he made post high school needed to be in alignment with his life purpose if he was to make a greater impact on other people.

Each of the participants embraced themselves in relation to society as self-defined Latinos. The participants expressed various interactions and norms that influenced their cultural identity. For all participants, their personal definition included race and family disposition in reference to practices and responsibilities as displaying a Latino influence. For a few, language

was also an influence. Socioeconomic factors were expressed by 10 of the 11 participants. All participants pointed out that education was an expected responsibility in the Latino home. “Hispanics want their kids to be successful, they want them to live a better life. For many parents, this was the reason they came here,” stated Able. Karina shared this push for high school education as a “basic, no questions asked” situation. She added, “I was graduating. No discussion. I was graduating.” Marisol, like Leo, Selena, and Abel, also had to balance her education with keeping Latino traditions and the Spanish language as a core part of themselves. Marisol explained, “I had to always keep my head held high. But sometimes I did not know which way to turn it. Was I American or Latina?” Abel expressed the same as a feeling of straddling two worlds, but noted that he is happy he has not given in to assimilation and lost himself in the Americanization process.

There were nine college students in this study. Eight of them expressed serious economic issues in financing college. Marisol’s family encouraged high school graduation, but it was clear they could not afford college: “I had to plan to pay for it by myself.” Leo, who was premed at the time of the study shared that his parents, “have helped me this far, but I don’t know how we will finance medical school.” Each expressed that there have been times where they thought they might need to take a break from school due to finances. However, none, at the time of this narrative, have found themselves in such a dire state as to not be able to continue their education.

This may be in part because each has accepted their personal lot in life and established skills that have made them accountable to their own goals. Each participant understood that their decisions held either positive or negative consequences and they were responsible for their choices. For instance, each participant understood the fundamental concept for the need to graduate high school. Each participant, however, had varying situations that they needed to

address in order to meet the goal of graduation. Personal choice for Frederico meant embracing the fact that he needed others in order to succeed. Abel had to learn that being smart academically was not enough. He needed to behave in a mature manner if he wanted to be taken seriously. Ivan, who as an underclassman was consistently anxious and battled depression, learned as an upper classman to embrace challenges and establish plans to deal with adversity. Karina learned that school was important for her future and, once she began to take her coursework seriously, she began to get good grades and established a sincere interest in learning: “Around junior year, that’s when it really hit heavy that next year was the year I would graduate. I needed to finish strong. By then I knew how to get help and reach out.” She shared her excitement about receiving acceptance letters for college. Leo learned to surround himself with like-minded goal setters:

I feel that living in the environment where I lived with the aspirations that I had for life, the people around me didn’t have goals or any goals that were similar to mine. I feel like the environment that I was raised in definitely played an impact on me to want something more for me and my family.

Leo shared a story of when he needed to advocate at his sister’s IEP meeting. He made sure that she was put in challenging classes. He expressed to the IEP team that he was not okay with her being placed in lower-level classes simply because of her academic challenges. “Ghetto kids or kids like us weren’t expected to go beyond a high school diploma. I made suggestions and we were taken seriously.” In ninth grade, Margarita wanted to finish high school. She simply “wanted to get it done, graduate, and go to college.” Margarita realized that she would have to finance this endeavor and began working with this anticipation. Throughout her tenure in high school she embraced positive, caring individuals that helped her achieve. Naomi noted that she

was proud to have established resiliency and the basic skills necessary to graduate. She walked across the stage with both of her children: “I wanted to prove everybody wrong who didn’t believe I could finish.” Naomi shared that her kids were her biggest motivation. She wanted to provide them with more opportunities. Paloma’s greatest lessons were learning time management and steering clear from drama: “A dream of mine was to be accepted into a 4-year college. I decided to just always be in class, on time, and take school seriously. I didn’t have time to fool around.” She also made it a point to find the smartest individual in the class to work with for group projects.

Research Question Responses: CRQ

The CRQ guiding this study was, What are Latino students’ perceptions of the ways the mattering experience impacts their persistence to high school graduation? The central question was employed to create a description of each of the participants’ life experiences and perceptions of the impact of mattering on their persistence to graduation. All the participants described a perception of mattering and how that influenced their persistence to graduation. Although their descriptions of the mattering experience differed in regard to individual experiences, there was a commonality in the accounting of a sense of belonging within the school organization to an extent that it influenced their general academic persistence.

The subquestions sustained the CRQ and were supported by themes, which served to answer the CRQ. The participant narratives, which provided insight into the impact of mattering, feeling of importance, marginalization, and persistence to graduation disclosed the essence of the Latino high school student life experiences and how the mattering impacted the persistence to graduation. Of the 11 participants, 10 disclosed that mattering had an influence on their persistence to graduation. Leo shared that his teachers played a huge role in his completion

of high school. A similar sentiment was shared by most of the participants like Abel who noted that he “had many people that helped me out to make it through.” Also, this was noted by Valentina who believed that the mattering relationships helped her navigate through high school better.

The one outlier, Frederico, expressed moments of mattering. However, his experience was converse to the other participants who felt they mattered more as they moved through high school. In spite of a similar, engaging start to high school, Frederico’s home life proved to be extremely challenging. Frederico moved from being actively engaged student and athlete to being a disengaged individual who avoided attendance. By senior year, the school had become nothing more than a safe space where he existed. Francisco disclosed that he felt increasingly disenfranchised and shared, “My teachers really didn’t like me. My counselors didn’t really talk to me, except about my grades.” Eventually, he stopped coming to school and risked graduating with his class.

The study participants described their personal and perceived relational experiences. Participants described several mattering experiences that were classified by importance in relationships and the impact of these relationships. These included relationships with teachers and staff, friends at school, and a general school ethos. Responses to the subquestions substantiate the explanations needed to evoke a profound comprehension of the mattering phenomenon. The subquestion narratives are provided in the following sections.

Research Question Responses: SQ1

The first research subquestion was as follows: How do Latino high school graduates perceive that interdependent relationships impacted their persistence to high school graduation? The major themes used to answer this question were the impact of mattering (Theme 1), the

feelings of importance (Theme 3), and persistence to graduation (Theme 4). The theme of impact of mattering served to explain the participants' descriptions of the perceived effects of educator interactions and personal motivations. The theme of feelings of importance served to explain the participants' school-based relationships. The theme of persistence to graduation serviced to explain the influence of educator roles. In mattering theory, Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) described mattering as a sentiment that individuals felt when they were in a reciprocal relationship of significance.

Understanding how Latino high school graduates perceived that interdependent relationships impacted their persistence to high school graduation promotes an awareness of the impact of mattering. A key for many of the participants was building good relationships with staff. Karina noted that she had made an effort to formulate good relationships with certain teachers because they were passionate about their work and in her success. Marisol shared her belief that to formulate such relationships with educators, one had to allow oneself to be guided and share questions or concerns. The effect of these relationships provided for safe spaces, especially for those who experienced the trauma of transitioning from other schools or communities. Anthony said, "there was a safe protection in the big transition that made me feel comfortable and encouraged to do better." Paloma shared her belief that these relationships created a positive energy that propels individuals to succeed. These relationships also allowed students to formulate strong bonds. Karina said that through these bonds, she was able to have conversations with others at an intimate level. Anthony shared that this helped create a sense of diverse community where various experiences were shared in a secure state which made it easier to bond with others. These bonds created a sense of mutuality where connections are formulated and individuals felt comfortable sharing their life experiences and considered themselves to have

been a part of something greater than themselves. Frederico stated, “I was needed. Somebody other than myself needed me . . . and, that’s what gave me importance.” Valentina noted that this was often shared through gratitude. Although most participants formulated these relationships in regular education classrooms, many times extracurricular advisors and coaches played a vital role in the assistance to persistence for students. Anthony felt that his performance was increased with time and that he became an integral part of the team. Whether in the classroom or after school, all participants noted that the help and assistance they sought made it easier for them to function in school. Naomi added, “My teachers made me feel confident, always.” Valentina also expressed increased confidence that she drew from lengthy conversations sharing, “if I had questions or concerns, there were a lot of teachers who would take time to assist.

Comprehending how these participants felt that interdependent relationships made them feel important will promote an understanding of the impact of mattering. Teachers play a key role in the establishment of relationships as noted by Leo. He said, “interacting with these teachers created safe spaces that provided help that got me through high school.” Naomi noted that when teachers were friendlier, it was helpful to her as a student. Other caring school staff made participants, like Karina, feel important and heard. Valentina said, “I was definitely supported. . . . I knew if I would have a problem or drama or bullies there were one of three staff members I could have gone to and known I would be cared for.” Besides teachers and staff, friends played an important role in the school community. Paloma associated with school friends who took academics seriously: “We’d still hang out and do crazy stuff, but when it came to being in class we created a really good, positive energy.” Selena echoed this sentiment by noting that she kept a small group of five close friends in high school: “These were the ones that

pushed each other. When one wanted to drop out or quit, the others would encourage them with, ‘Na, we can do this!’”

Knowledge of how these interdependent relationships assisted students in establishing a persistence to graduation promoted an understanding of the impact of mattering. Educators were fundamental in influencing persistence. Leo shared that interactions with positive teachers created safe environments and encouragement to continue. Naomi felt that those teachers that helped were usually friendly to others, creating a positive environment. According to Frederico, coaches and advisors also played key roles: “Being an athlete and having that extra something and someone to look forward to really helped me.” Ivan and Valentina also shared that positive relationships were many times formulated after the school day. Over time, most of the participants noted that what often started as mentoring roles turned into mutual roles. Anthony appreciated the high level of mutual respect he experienced: “I want to respect you; that way we can have a mutual and great friendship.”

Research Question Responses: SQ2

The second research subquestion of the study was as follows: How do Latino high school graduates perceive that a feeling of importance impacted their persistence to high school graduation? The major themes used to answer this question were the impact of mattering (Theme 1) and the feelings of importance (Theme 2). The theme of the impact of mattering served to explain the perceived effect of educator interactions and personal motivations. The theme of the feelings of importance served to explain the participants’ descriptions of the perceived effect of school and home relationships and how much the participant liked school. In mattering theory, the concept of significance, or importance, to others as described by Rosenberg

and McCullough (1981) establishes a confidence that others take an interest in what people desire, believe, and accomplish, or are interested in another's future.

Knowledge about how Latino high school students' impact of mattering promotes an understanding of the persistence to graduation. The effect of the mattering impact was an increase in positive interactions between the participants and staff over time. Leo learned that positive interactions had a great influence on his desire to persist in high school. Karina shared that a major effect for her was understanding her capabilities. The effect for Paloma was that the teachers and students in her environment pushed her in times when she wanted to quit or was struggling beyond failures. A major effect was the building of personal character, over time. For Valentina, this included a better understanding of diverse individuals; while for Ivan, this diversity of people and learning styles helped him to better understand his role in society while respecting others.

Insight regarding the participants' feelings of importance promoted an understanding of the persistence to graduation. These revolved around the various relationships the participants embraced. In reference to teachers, Valentina shared that her confidence, linguistically, increased over time. This unmasked her abilities and influenced her future coursework at the university. Selena felt she was most pushed by her teachers, as long as she was personally accountable for seeking assistance when she struggled. She stated that she felt excitement over the encouragement that she experienced. Other caring staff also assisted, including case managers, administration, and monitors. Selena said, "having people in school who pushed you was a good thing. Actually, it is very important." Marisol noted that these school-based relationships were crucial for individuals. She also noted that friends are an influence on persistence in school. As Paloma explained, "I feel like having that one friend in high school

would help you out a lot . . . obviously, because you are not alone.” Ivan shared his experience of feeling that having at least one important friend in high school made a difference by providing a partner with whom to share school experiences. These school relationships all formulate feelings of importance that assist in persistence to graduation.

Another form of relationships that influenced persistence was family. In reference to guiding prosperity, Karina noted that her family encouraged her to “keep going with school and to never stop; to continue to gain knowledge.” Ivan had a similar experience in that his parents expected the same and he never wanted to disappoint his family: “They had hope for me and my future life.” For each of the participants, this level of family interaction, however, varied. Frederico and Naomi had fewer family influences, while Valentina and Paloma had stronger family influences. Regardless, Leo noted, “Family definitely plays a huge role on what track kids need to follow.” Overall, the consensus was that Latinos, “believed that with a diploma you can do whatever you want and get any kind of job,” expressed Frederico.

Most of the participants were first-generation high school graduates and a few were second-generation high school graduates. Karina’s biggest influence was her uncle, who was the second-born and the first to finish school. Valentina was also a second-generation graduate. Ivan and Naomi were first-generation graduates on the paternal side and second-generation graduates on the maternal side. The rest were first-generation graduates. Anthony noted, “I know that most Hispanics try to pursue their education. It is just a thing. However, sometimes life gets in the way. But they always wish for their kids to graduate, regardless.”

Research Question Responses: SQ3

The third research subquestion of the study was as follows: How do Latino high school graduates perceive that a feeling of marginalization impacted their persistence to high school

graduation? The major themes used to answer this question were feelings of marginalization (Theme 3) and persistence to graduation (Theme 4). The theme of marginalization served to explain the participants' descriptions of school and community culture, intimidation experiences, family and home life, and other experiences of adversity. The theme of persistence to graduation served to explain the participants' mutual roles of assistance. Schlossberg (1989) described the concept of marginalization as when individuals identify a feeling that they are of no significance to others, unaccepted, and/or excluded; while often, the individuals feel as though they are of an inferior social status.

Understanding how Latino high school students perceive marginalization promotes an understanding of the persistence to graduation. All participants experienced some form of marginalization at the high school level due to the community school culture. The ethos, or school culture, was different between McKinley and Kennedy High Schools; participants disclosed a greater support at McKinley than Kennedy. Leo summed up his experience: "I would say that being a minority in a school like that is so annoying because you are not expected to succeed. You are not pushed to succeed. You are treated very differently." Another factor of marginalization that influenced participants' perceptions was a comparison of the school environment to foreign education experiences. Anthony noted, "I just feel like they advanced studies here are way more advanced and they teach you more than they do over there." Yet, while every participant appreciated his or her learning experience, a few felt marginalized by the need to norm and struggled with language acquisition. Due to these differences, most participants felt marginalized by intimidation which fueled moments of dislike of school. Participants shared anecdotes regarding struggles with communication, racism, and harassment from students and sometimes staff, which put participants on the defensive. These items often

fueled a disconnect from school for participants and, for some, a sadness or feeling of inadequacy that further marginalized them from the process. At times, participants did not feel safe and had to learn to self-advocate to secure personal growth. This was Selena's experience: "I am the type of person that when things happen so often I just decide to do nothing about it. After 4 years, I just let it slide."

Understanding how Latino high school students persist to graduation with mutual respect promotes an understanding of the impact of mattering. As Anthony noted, "showing the respect you need gets you the respect you want." This was a need for Ivan and Karina, who noted anxiety and sadness at intervals in high school. The building of relationships through mutual respect allowed them to have a voice. Karina shared, "I love that connection that was formed with me. I'd love to form that with other people." Marisol noted that this build-up was key to moving past negative experiences at school. Naomi experienced that even though her teachers and administrators needed to redirect her behaviors and guide her with her studies, she could move past the harshness with those individuals with which she formulated a bond and trust.

Research Question Responses: SQ4

The fourth research subquestion of the study was as follows: How do Latino high school graduates perceive that persistence through challenges impacted their successful graduation from high school? The major themes used to answer this question were the impact of mattering (Theme 1) and persistence to graduation (Theme 4). The theme of the impact of mattering served to explain the participants' descriptions of educator interactions and motivations. The theme of persistence to graduation served to explain the participants' perceptions of educator roles and life strategies. Peterson and Seligman (2004) defined persistence as a "voluntary

continuation of a goal-oriented action in spite of obstacles, difficulties, or discouragement” (p. 229).

Understanding how Latino high school students perceive the impact of mattering assists with building self-efficacy, identity, and coping mechanisms promotes an understanding of persistence. Bonded relationships of these participants helped to formulate a set of strategies that each participant could utilize to navigate high school and beyond graduation. Anthony stated that he was encouraged to do better personally and academically. Karina shared that she learned that she was the key to her own prosperity and learned the importance of setting goals. Margarita shared that her biggest learning experiences involved time management and communication. Naomi expressed that she realized what she was capable of completing:

When you always have faith in somebody, when that person believes in you, you learn to believe in yourself. Even if you don't have faith, there comes a time when you realize that if someone believes in you, it is time to believe in yourself.

Understanding how the impact of mattering provides the skills to navigate adversity helps students persist to graduation promotes an understanding of the impact of mattering on persistence to graduation.

Each of the participants shared moments of struggle and persistence that made them resilient with a focus of graduation instilled via relationships and a good work ethic. Every participant understood the importance of a high school diploma. Leo shared that he knew at the start of high school that it would be a struggle: “I feel like living in an environment where I lived with such aspirations in life and no mentors, it was going to be difficult to succeed. However, I formulated relationships that carried me through.” Naomi's influence was the need to provide for her children. Frederico shared that the relationships were his saving grace at a time when he

might have otherwise been lost and abandoned his studies. Each had a story of persistence that propelled them through to graduation with the guidance of individuals with whom they formulated bonded relationships that influenced their futures.

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the impact of mattering on Latino high school student persistence to graduation. Chapter Four included thorough descriptions of the 11 participants of this study. The process used to develop the themes of this study included a modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method analysis for phenomenological data as developed by Moustakas (1994). Sources of data collection included transcribed individual interviews, a focus group interview, and journals. Analysis of these transcripts revealed four major themes, including (a) the impact of mattering, (b) feelings of importance, (c) feelings of marginalization, and (d) persistence to graduation. Manifested themes emerged from the review and categorization of direct quotes and summarized comments from the accumulated data. This chapter concluded with the narrative development of the four themes and subthemes as well as a response to the central and sub research questions.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The objective of this study was to fill the literature gap by researching the impact of mattering on Latino high school students. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the impact of mattering on Latino high school student persistence to graduation. This chapter includes detailed discussion explaining how the questions were answered. A summary of research findings is contained in this chapter, followed by a discussion of the results, implications of the study, and the limitations and delimitations of the study. Lastly, suggestions for future research are discussed.

Summary of Research Findings

The data were triangulated by collecting evidence from 11 participants in a variety of methods, including individual interviews, a focus group interview, and written journals. The preponderance of data was acquired from the individual interviews. The next greatest data source was the focus group interview. The journals duplicated much of the previous information and provided limited new information. However, this afforded the participants to further articulate their written reflections. These thoughts were included in the analysis of the data. Individual and focus group interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed. Journal entries were reviewed. Repeated terms and phrases were coded and conglomerated in a table with a count of frequency. The four major themes revealed included (a) impact of mattering, (b) feelings of importance, (c) feelings of marginalization, and (d) persistence to graduation.

The CRQ of this study was as follows: What are Latino students' perceptions of the ways the mattering experience impacts their persistence to high school graduation? This question addressed Latino high school students' perceptions of how their life experiences were impacted

by the mattering experience. The purpose of the CRQ was to prompt Latino high school graduates to share their experiences and their perceptions regarding how the mattering experience impacted their persistence to graduation, in order to foster a deeper understanding of the mattering phenomenon. Mattering, as a concept, has typically been accepted as a significant theory that motivates adolescent psychological and social wellness, which is essential for connectivity at school and positive academic achievement. The participants' answers were concentrated on how they perceived mattering and how the mattering experience motivated their persistence to graduation. The individual mattering experience narratives were unique to the participant. However, there was a comparative congruency in the reporting of a sense of belonging at school to a degree that it persuaded their overall academic persistence. One quote that resonated with me was from Valentina: "They made me feel important. They helped me navigate high school," Valentina used this statement, which referred to school staff, to describe how the relationships made her feel that she mattered and that this was key to maneuvering academic success. All participants identified at least two school staff members that impacted their persistence in a positive manner that created their personal sense of belonging. Of the 11 participants, 10 indicated that these relationships were strong and bonded.

SQ1 was, How do Latino high school graduates perceive that interdependent relationships impacted their persistence to high school graduation? The themes utilized to answer this question were the impact of mattering (Theme 1), feelings of importance (Theme 2), and persistence to graduation (Theme 4). In reference to the impact of mattering, reliable relationships provided a significant positive effect on individual participants. All participants shared that there was at least one educator with whom they connected throughout their school tenure. These relationships helped the participants to formulate strong bonds that led to mutual

reciprocation amongst the participants and educational staff. The long-term perceptions included feelings of affirmation, esteem, and importance. Additional motivations included feelings that “they always had my back,” as Abel noted. Additionally, individuals used these motivating relationships when they needed extra help and assistance to express the need for help within the classroom, during transitions, or after school. Participants expressed feelings of importance in relationships with teachers, other caring staff, school-based friendships. These relationships were purposeful opportunities to provide encouragement, support, and assistance. Lastly, participants expressed a consensus of educator and advisor roles as a positive force that fostered persistence to graduation. Over time, these roles became mutual; individuals felt a reciprocal effect including high levels of respect, understanding and connections.

SQ2 was, How do Latino high school graduates perceive that a feeling of importance impacted their persistence to high school graduation? The major themes used to answer this question were the impact of mattering (Theme 1) and the feelings of importance (Theme 2). The theme of the impact of mattering served to explain the perceived effect of educator interactions viewed by participants as caring relationships that provided a stimulus of continuous care to help them progress. Additionally, school-based relationships provided encouragement that built character, including self-efficacy and a passion to pursue positive relationships, an increased work ethic, and a sense of responsibility to assist others. The theme of the feelings of importance served to explain the participants’ descriptions of the perceived effect of school and home relationships that provided them with the confidence to continue studying regardless of adversity. Additionally, the theme addressed the positive feelings that fueled participants to like and participate in school.

SQ3 was, How do Latino high school graduates perceive that a feeling of marginalization impacted their persistence to high school graduation? The major themes used to answer this question was feelings of marginalization (Theme 3). The theme served to explain how participants were marginalized due to their community and school cultures, intimidation, disconnection from school, family and home-life issues, and other issues of adversity. In reference to school and community culture, participants noted that the school ethos made acclimation and assimilation a challenge. This made the participants defensive while navigating the educational expectations. A few participants further noted that they struggled through the process of acculturation after their experiences of being educated abroad. Intimidation and disconnect from school came from challenges caused by linguistic acquisition issues, not understanding cultural nuances, de jure and de facto racism, and a general disconnect with the learning environment. Further, individuals also noted feelings of not being safe or cared for in certain school environments as well as feelings of inadequacy. In reference to family and home life, individuals felt an additional set of encounters that affected their life experiences, including absentee parents, low socioeconomic housing communities, and home responsibilities. A few individuals noted experiences of not being cared for at home, while others noted a building of early-age independence and self-efficacy due to their environments. Lastly, most participants shared other aggregated life experiences of adversity, including attendance and behavior issues. Many participants also noted that a lack of friendships made socialization difficult. Some felt that educators behaved negatively toward them, leading to feelings of insignificance. A few also shared their personal failures and decisions that created hardship due to personal choice.

SQ4 was, How do Latino high school graduates perceive that persistence through challenges impacted their successful graduation from high school? The major themes used to

answer this question were the impact of mattering (Theme 1) and persistence to graduation (Theme 4). The theme of impact of mattering served to explain how educator interactions impacted participants in the areas of strong, bonded relationships and the long-term effects of these relationships on their current lives. Theme 1 also served to explore the motivations of the participants in the areas of goal-setting, personal responsibility, and the ability to identify and seek assistance from others. The theme of persistence to graduation served to explain the role of educators on the impact of mattering to the participants through staff-student interactions with a focus on mutually reciprocated positive relationships. Additionally, Theme 4 addressed extracurricular participation influences. Further, this theme conveyed information regarding the identification and utilization of established safe-spaces. The life strategies noted in this theme included the building of personal skills and accountability of personal choice.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand the impact of mattering on the persistence to graduation of Latino high school students. The findings of this research are closely related to the theoretical and empirical literature presented in Chapter Two. This study was guided by the theories of mattering, the need to belong, and marginalization. Mattering, as espoused by Rosenberg and McCullough (1981), occurs when individuals feel that they are in a reciprocal relationship of significance. In the original concept of mattering theory there are several components, including awareness and attention, feelings of importance, and reliance or dependency (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Dixon (2016) furthered the basic tenets of perceiving being wanted, ego-extension, affection, and appreciation as further enlightenments to the mattering experience. Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs included the ideology of belongingness, or the need to belong that is established when physiological, safety, and security

demands have been met. The need to belong has become a normed phrase for the desire to establish relationships (Lambert et al., 2013). In the ideology of the need to belong under Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs there are a number of factors of human motivation when individuals establish intimate relationships gratified via trusting attachments, acceptance, affection, and group membership. According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), the need to belong is fundamental to survival and can be best satisfied by affirmative interactions. These interactions should be part of committed, enduring relationships in which individuals are genuinely concerned about each other's continued health and well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Graham et al., 2016).

Empirical Literature

This research provided a confirmation and coordination of established empirical literature surrounding mattering, the need to belong, and marginalization cessation in which the orientations of practice of mattering become a feasible resource for supporting persistence to graduation. Cultural values have been associated with assistance seeking behavior of adolescents (Guo et al., 2015). When school personnel enhance mattering as a means to meet student needs, they provide a caring school environment which advances participation, opinion- and idea-sharing, and goal completion; and illustrate a mutual reliance on outcome accountability (Dixon & Tucker, 2008). School relationships based on perseverance, adaptability, relationships, time, and honesty establish more instances of resiliency (Sanders & Munford, 2016).

This study also affirmed that this Latino community valued education as well as the willingness to accept assistance when such assistance is genuine in nature and affirms them over the assimilation process. As a principle of mattering, the participants unanimously

communicated that caring school environments created avenues for involvement, discourse, and building purpose. This study also established that greater personal responsibility and perseverance led to resiliency, with which all participants persevered to graduation. Further, effective cultural-relational interventions in education impacts marginalized students most because these interventions sought to validate individuals (Cholewa et al., 2014). School engagement increases among minority adolescents when the student experiences promoted cultural attachment (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2013). When students in this study perceived that they were respected as an individual without having to relinquish their personal identities, they were able to formulate trusting relationships fostered in mutual respect. Of the participants, nine noted experiences in which they struggled with their cultural concept. All 11 participants embraced cultural efficacy by their senior year, which increased school attachment. As evident in previous studies, school attachment is hindered when demographic marginalization of socioeconomics and race are apparent and frequently proceeded by a deficiency in school performance (Benner & Wang, 2014). Marginalized youth, however, could “re-author their educational experiences” in a manner that replaced the sense of exclusion and alienation with caring, social sanctuaries. Thus, when students consider themselves important to the institution and authenticate their positive identities, they change the school ecology by establishing a constructive school ethos through intricate sociocultural aspects of relational assistance influence (Guo et al., 2015). For nine of the 11 current study participants, the line of marginalization was significantly diminished through caring staff and the feelings of mattering that cultivated authentic relationships. For all of the participants, mattering established a motivational disposition for both persistence to graduation and life goals.

The organic implementation of mattering in school relationships as a means to assist in persistence to graduation may be divergent of other mechanisms when compared to nonminority populations, but was not an emphasis in this study. However, this study does provide an extension to prior research whereas the novel contribution to educational literature is that purposeful mattering could provide a means for assistance in Latino student persistence to graduation. For Latinos, high school graduation has been commonly considered as a means for life success (Brietzke & Perriera, 2017). When schools provide idiosyncratic opportunities to advance student sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2018), they also establish supportive reciprocal relationships that encourage educational outcomes resulting high school graduation. This is especially evident in salubrious school climates that support racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds (Niehaus et al., 2016). Organically, educators replace authority with influence, relinquish control, and establish connectivity in order to foster reciprocal growth (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018). According to Watson (2017), the value of this paradigm shift is the encouragement of school connectivity through a practice of mattering that increases student wellness. Individuals in this present study each shared anecdotes in which one or a few specific educators moved from their established state of hierarchy as teachers to an equalized state most often characterized as an ethos indication of friendship in which mutual respect was key. Only one individual struggled with authority, yet still embraced the nature of his need to succeed over his need to be in control. The 10 other participants uniformly noted that the individualized attention and meeting of their unique needs created deeper connections and understandings of both themselves and their educators as essential players in the school environment.

Further, as an extension to mattering theory, this research on mattering in the educational environment may provide novel opportunities for understanding the issues of marginalization

whereas mattering considers that when individual is perceived as insignificant, they become marginalized (Prilleltensky, 2014; Schlossberg, 1989). When these participants related feelings of not feeling significant in the school environment, to educators or to peers, they equated this notion to not mattering. Thus, they became further marginalized beyond cultural and socioeconomic status. For some, this marginalization stimulated mental contradictions such as love and hate or pride and shame (Prilleltensky, 2014; Schlossberg, 1989). Although eight of the 11 participants showed levels of such contradiction, the most prevalent was from Ivan and Naomi. Ivan struggled heavily with depression. Although he welcomed the environmental change from a charter school, Ivan's internal struggles created dynamics for which the mattering experience influenced his "ability to wake up and face every day" as he learned to "take on the issues of being different and not knowing how I was going to feel from one day to the next," yet he knew learned to rely on safe places within the school. Naomi's mattering experience was heightened due to her marginalization skills as a single mother of two: "I know my family didn't believe in me. I know a lot of people at school didn't care. I am Latina. I am poor. And, I am a mom. But these teachers looked out for me. That means something."

For 10 of these 11 participants, the marginalization experience influenced their oppressed view of society in relation to their social condition as described by Diemer et al. (2016). Students who lack a feeling of relatedness reacted with avoidance to academic setbacks and display coping emotions of self-pity, while hiding difficulties and reluctance to seek assistance (Flett, 2018c). In the current study, nine of the 11 participants expressed varying levels of sensitivity to these difficulties, but all expressed that mattering relationships were a factor in resiliency-building and perseverance that cyclically solidified their mattering experiences. These experiences proved to be both permanent and temporary. In reference to marginality,

Schlossberg (1989) described permanent marginality as straddling two worlds (e.g., Latinos in American schools) and temporary marginality as a transition phase (e.g., Latinos acquiring a language). The mattering experience thus allowed most of these current participants to embrace their societal selves as Latinos while acclimating into American culture and, for some, learning to navigate the culture and building linguistic skills for marketable success, including high school graduation.

This navigation process was formulated through a process of resisting procured expectations of how urban Latinos should behave and move toward a truer sense of self-actualization to what urban Latinos could aspire to become through a process of persistence and resiliency. Encouraging adolescent resiliency teaches students how to overcome adversity by developing self-worth and identity while establishing relationships that assist with skills to build rebound capacity from life challenges and stress. Consistent connections with others, including caring adults is an influential factor in adolescent resiliency development (Flett, 2018b). Each of the participants noted situations in which their school mentors assisted them with defining, owning, and moving beyond their life conditions and challenges. Feelings of mattering emboldened these youth to build resilience through self-efficacy. Other factors of significance that fostered resilience included community involvement and cultural adherence (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2013).

The mattering principle as a cohesive factor in resiliency through life mitigation increases adaptive factors for success, such as cultivating ethnic pride and academic progress (Basáñez et al., 2014). Resiliency strengthens the feeling of purpose, which empowers the individual to feel that he or she is a positive change agent through mattering (Prilleltensky, 2014). Mattering became a mediation factor these participants and mitigated feelings of maltreatment, social

phobia, fear of failure and school stress. Interpersonal vulnerability acted as a function in mitigating psychological distress for adolescents when feelings of mattering were cultivated (Flett, 2018b). For these participants, this was because they established trusting relationships and safe places where the growth process and mentoring provided opportunities to recognize, implement, and evaluate decisions or soundboard experiences. Established resilience in Latino youth encouraged the skill of affectual change through meeting challenges with coping mechanisms that identified meaning and purpose as important developmental safeguard life challenges (Brietzky & Perriera, 2017). Each of the participants explained that their resilience was built over a series of years throughout high school with the mentorship of individuals with whom they had established resilient relationships. Individuals who experienced mattering tended to establish and utilize problem-focused coping skills that allowed them to be more stress resilient and circumstantially adaptive (Flett, 2018c), which the data indicate is a greater understanding of the value of mattering relationships.

Theoretical Literature

The current research provides a confirmation and coordination of scholarly theoretical literature surrounding mattering, the need to belong, and marginalization cessation in which the orientations of mattering are developed as a possible means to assist in persistence to graduation. This research on the impact of mattering on persistence to graduation of Latino high school students diverges from present theoretical research because it provides a specific lens into the minority population of Latino students and their lived experiences in high school. The study served to outline the specific nature of school-based relationships between students and staff to provide a greater understanding of the importance of interpersonal relationships, self-efficacy, and personal accountability while highlighting issues of marginalization of the Latino subgroup.

The research also provides an extension of existing research whereas mattering, sense of belonging, and marginalization are addressed specifically in regard to the lived experience of Latino high school students. Further, the research provides an understanding of this impact on persistence to graduation.

High school completion for Latinos has been perceived as an indication of life success (Brietzke & Perriera, 2017). Educational institutions have generally supported the development of students' sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2016). Compassionate student-teacher relationships are vital stimuli for positive educational outcomes that advance high school graduation in positive school environments that reinforced racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural experiences (Niehaus et al., 2016). All the participants expressed a connection with their educational institutions based on connectivity. Each shared examples of particular relationships that displayed caring and compassion that had an influence on their connectivity. Of the participants, eight directly correlated these relationships to their persistence to graduation, and nine made the distinctive correlation to the translanguaging concept and cultural-capacity awareness and respect of their Latino culture. In order for these affiliations to take place organically, educators had to relinquish their authority to establish effectual influence. When educators let go of authority to establish connected relationships, they cultivate communal growth (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018). Watson (2017) found that there was a benefit to nurturing school attachment through a personal procedure of building mattering reciprocity as it augmented student wellness. Examples from this present research were that the participants' self-advocacy for their academic development, cultural capacity, language development, and accountability process at varying levels. Specifically, Federico, who struggled with authority, was able to formulate relationships with encouraging adults who refused to "fight" him, but instead chose to engage him in order to

assist his process of persistence. Ivan found relationships key to moving through his physiological and mental challenges that solidified his desire to stay in school. Naomi formulated trusts where barriers had previously hindered her ability to move efficiently through her learning process. Abel, Leo, Margarita, and Marisol each expressed that empathy in linguistic acquisition were key to their success. All of the participants noted, in some fashion, a strong connection to their mattering mentors due to the caring, compassionate climates that were provided and the careful considerations of their needs.

Expanding upon the understanding of mattering theory on building reciprocal relationships, meeting student needs, and disempowering marginalization is integral to extending mattering theory as a tool in educational philosophy. The practice of established resiliency relationships creates an instinctive yearning for the need to matter and feel significant to others (Dixon, 2016). The designation of significant others (Sullivan, 2012), endorses an awareness that individuals matter to others at adaptable degrees. Mattering theory stemmed from this genuine significance and the awareness of the importance of its reciprocity. The theory espoused by Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) explains this significance as the idea that individuals were in a direct, reciprocal relationship of significance, in which the individual with a sense of mattering feels safe, significant, social bonds (Flett, 2018c). All the participants in this current study confirmed the above notions of mattering theory as relevant to their persistence to graduation. The expansion of information promotion in this study includes a greater understanding of the effects of the importance of mattering in the school environment and on the Latino student population subgroup. Further, this study provided an advancement in understanding of the long-term positive effects of mattering theory on individuals such as goal setting, personal accountability, and perseverance. Additionally, the enduring effects of

implementation of mattering theory for high school persistence to graduation had a post high school effect of college matriculation for nine of the participants and an increase of standard-of-living expectations for all participants. The general confidence of the student participants that they were the focus of attention of school personnel was significant in authenticating their interdependent relationships. In order for individuals to feel as though they mattered, they had to perceive importance, attachment, longing, dependence, and mutual interest (Sheard, 2013). The interest-based concepts of attention, importance, and dependence were evident at some level for each of the participants. These concepts were integral to their social integration in the school environment and provided a perception where mattering provided a protection against school anxiety and life stressors for these participants. Mattering also acted as a motivator for school and life persistence.

This persistence with a mattering experience occurs because individuals perceive a sense of belonging (Maslow, 1970). When the individual perceives mattering, they believe that they have valuable relationships of importance (Dixon, 2011). Maslow (1970) espoused that individuals were motivated by psychological needs such as belonging that could lead to self-actualization. Mattering has been found to be significant in understanding the psychosocial and cultural attitudes of school relationships that bond individuals with a sense of belonging (Dueñas & Gloria, 2017). Thus, people are resolutely inclined to desire to have their lives matter to society (George & Park, 2014). In the present study, there was an apparent connection between the participants and their mattering mentors in which the participants found places where they felt safe and belonged to the institution. The relationships created both a barrier from harm and an opportunity to navigate the realm of high school experiences in the social and academic realms. All participants expressed their connection to the school environment where they could

securely achieve their ambition to graduation. Of the participants, 10 felt their environment and experience was innocuous to social hurts or academic failure by their senior year. In addition, nine of the participants experienced mid- to high-levels of disparity throughout their school tenure and needed to learn coping skills in order to increase their sense of belonging over time. Finally, one participant had a low level of disparity, but still created a high level of belonging while another participant had a high level of disparity and a low level of belonging. However, all participants overcame whatever social and academic barriers to education, partly due to safe spaces and reciprocal relationships, that moved them toward a persistence to graduation.

The novel contribution to the empirical literature is that in comparison to mattering as a generalized concept, mattering in the area of education may have an innate effect on persistence to graduation for Latino high school students. The impact of genuine mattering relationships on individual students, as displayed in this study, supports the advocacy of purposeful mattering programs and mentorships that guide students toward prosperity. As a mechanism for sense of belonging and relational reciprocation, mattering could be utilized as an effective tool for self-evaluation for the individual and the educator, as well as an instrument of determining school ethos through which social, academic, and systematic issues could be evaluated. Finally, the understanding of the impact of mattering could provide opportunities to create a model cosmos of organic mentoring that is replicated into a purposeful resource for students from various social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds. Theoretically, the novel contribution to mattering theory is the deeper understanding of the reciprocal relationships of individuals with a focus on the subgroups of relationships between teachers and students, Latino adolescents, and individuals of socioeconomically disadvantaged youth. Further, the affirmation of mattering theory as a positive impact on high school fruition provides confirmation of the correlation of the impact of

matter on long-term life successes with a direct focus on bridging achievement gaps for Latino learners.

Implications

The study was a vehicle for important discoveries with several implications for mattering relationships with Latino high school students. The results of this examination of the lived experiences of Latino high school graduates provides educational practitioners an understanding of mattering and belonging of high school students. Additionally, the results can provide current and aspiring teachers, advisors, coaches, and administrative leaders a better understanding of the importance of mattering as it plays a key role in developing and leading the Latino high school student to persistence to graduation. Educators can also advance their knowledge in practical ways by awareness, mitigation, and advocacy for marginalized Latino high school students. This study demonstrates how mattering theory extends into practice. Thus, the findings of this study can provide educational practitioners with a practical basis on which to consider how to deal with Latino high school students in a manner that can impact their persistence to graduation and reduce the overall Latino drop-out rate.

Theoretical Implications

The study findings served to identify numerous theoretical implications that contribute to the literature on mattering theory and the need to belong. People who perceive mattering with others or an institution are in a reciprocal relationship of significance and importance with other people (Fleet, 2018a; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Mattering is deemed to be an essential human need that correlates to human development in a sense of belonging that establishes stronger social supports for personal growth (Dixon, 2011). The theoretical framework guiding this study was mattering theory and the concepts of the need to belong. This research confirms

and contributes to the understanding of Rosenberg and McCullough's (1981) mattering theory and Maslow's (1970) need to belong. Specifically, the data analysis supports the ideology that positive, bonded relationships assist in persistence. Additionally, the data suggested how marginalized participants had a greater need to belong.

A sense of belonging is a subjective experience in which there is mutual reciprocation within a relationship that establishes a sense of security (Lambert et al., 2013). Within these relationships, individuals feel significant to others (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). All 11 participants had established good relationships with caring school staff and friends at school. The level of influence was personally noted as high by 10 of the 11 participants, with one outlier: Frederico, who experienced a greater amount of aggregated life experiences than the other student participants of this study.

Life conditions of potential dropouts provide an avenue for understanding the mattering experience when it is considered that mattering is a proactive means to dropout deterrence because school-based relationships are of significance to students (Johnston & Moody, 2013). As noted by Fleet (2018b), these individuals perceived a feeling of significance and worth from their relationships. This study showed such a confluence between the study subjects, teachers, caring staff, and friends. Of the 11 participants, nine noted a strong correlation between their decision to stay in school and their teacher-based relationships. Leo noted that interacting with teachers in safe space helped him "get through and complete high school." Margarita shared that her very close relationship with an instructor made her feel as if she had another parent, and noted that teacher "was the number one person to help me with everything. She would always find a way to help me out and this made a big impact on me." Paloma shared that she felt lucky to have a teacher that understood her life out of school. This relationship of understanding, for

Paloma, helped her to prosper. Although the level of influence for each participant varied, most noted that their teacher-student relationships were a vital part of their learning. Again, Frederico noted less influence from instructors than the other participants, but admitted to other factors that limited his interactions in his senior year. Of the 11 participants, eight noted that other caring, school-based mattering relationships influenced their persistence. These included friends, counselors, administrators, advisors, cafeteria workers, and school monitors. Valentina felt her principal was very motivating. Karina noted that her counselors made her feel heard and were motivated her to continue. Paloma, who enjoyed both the breakfast and lunch programs, formulated check-ins with the ladies in the lunch room and Ivan shared that he appreciated the bonds he created with his activity advisors. Both Abel and Valentina felt a similar level of influence with their coaches as with their teacher-student relationships. This was also noted by Ivan, Paloma, Karina, Naomi, and Valentina; all of whom felt that their activity advisors had an increasingly major influence in their school experience in a positive manner. Of the 11 participants, eight also noted that strong peer friendships had an influence on their view of good relationships that personified the mattering experience. Even Frederico, who struggled at times with friends, noted that he appreciated his peer-relationships because he “just wanted to be in the presence of others.” He thrived on relationships of “mutual respect and understanding associated with sports.” Valentina’s closest peer friendships came out of her need to succeed academically. This notion was shared by Paloma, who realized in sophomore year that she needed to be around like-minded individuals and not necessarily the most exciting peers.

Regardless of the strong relationships of mattering, there were instances of marginalization that made six of the 11 participants express moments of perceived inadequacy. Initially, Abel believed that his purpose was to graduate high school and go to work without any

other set goals. He once believed that “Latinos think they are better off going to work instead of going to school and they just drop out. So, I didn’t consider college. I just wanted to graduate.” Abel further noted that “Latinos do want to do more, but I feel like we don’t have the encouragement because of all the people who knock us down because we are different.” By senior year, however, Abel’s school-based relationships helped to change his personal views and inspire him to advocate for others. Leo felt a similar sentiment as Abel’s, noting that he resented being overlooked for higher-level classes. Leo sensed that as a Latino and minority he was “put in all the classes where they put the ‘ghetto kids’ [and] was never encouraged to take advanced or AP classes.” Again, like Abel, Leo sensed, “I was not pushed to go as far as I could. I was only pushed to get a high school diploma. I feel that it was expected that I would just get some sort of factory-type of job.” This was a sentiment shared by Selena, who remarked that she “got used to the racism.” She shared that she felt that she did not have a voice in most situations while at Kennedy. Marisol also shared her experience of discrimination and struggle at McKinley. “I wanted to leave school because I didn’t think I was meant to be the person that graduated in 2018,” she shared.

Discrimination was not the only area of strife for the participants. While 10 of the 11 shared varied levels of aggregated life experiences, five shared examples of trauma. As far as absentee parents, Frederico seemed to be the most affected by an absentee father and a mother with housing and addiction issues. Frederico noted that “school became an escape from all the other issues” he experienced. Leo “came out” to his parents, which proved to be “really tough” and he was afraid he would not be supported. Naomi experienced regular tumultuous arguments in the home. In her senior year she suffered the loss of a close friend. Selena felt that her traumas made her increasingly sensitive and extremely insecure. For those living on the

southside of town, the community factored into their aggregated life experiences. Leo noted that he was “constantly surrounded by people doing drugs, in gangs, and of lower income status.”

This made him feel like an outcast because he knew he wanted something different, yet he did not feel equal to his peers on the other side of town. Naomi shared that in this community, drugs and fighting were the norm. Selena shared her struggle as individuals at school talked about her neighborhood as a “ghetto,” although she considered it a culturally rich community. Still, she was made to feel embarrassed of where she lived. Attendance and home responsibilities played a factor for some of the participants, but not most. However, some experienced other troubles such as fighting, teacher conflicts, inability to effectively communicate, and a general negative concept of self. This affected friendships, whether through transiency, language skill, or feigned support. For Naomi, some of these issues were intensified by being a teen parent.

Empirical Implications

The majority of mattering research is focused primarily on the reciprocal significance to others as explained in mattering theory by Rosenberg and McCollough (1981). This present study was conducted to understand the impact that mattering theory had on Latino high school students’ persistence to graduation. The literature is saturated with research explaining dropout rationale and factors affecting dropout rates. However, there was no research found addressing the lived experience of Latino persistence to graduation as impacted by the lived mattering experience. This study was an effort to understand how the lived mattering experience and student persistence of Latino high school students to graduation were related and provide empirical implications for mattering theory and the need to belong.

Mattering, when individuals feel that they are in a reciprocal relationship of significance, may be the ego-extension motivator of persistence (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981).

Existential mattering is the degree to which individuals perceive significance and value. When individuals perceive existential mattering, they experience appreciation and pertinence (George & Park, 2011). Each of the participants shared that their mattering experiences had an immediate effect during their school tenures and long-term influences on their life decisions. Leo appreciated the positive interactions that the last relationships provided. Abel expressed that the notion of having someone present affected his daily choices: “I felt a safe protection during a big transition that made me feel comfortable and encouraged me to do better.” Similarly, Ivan shared that having someone there helped ease the school transition process. Karina noted that those teachers who made her feel like she mattered also helped her to increase her personal potential into eventual leadership. Leo appreciated even the smallest interactions and Margarita enjoyed the daily interactions and anecdotes that strengthened her towards school persistence. All participants spoke of how they looked forward to the school interactions and most shared stories of confidence-building. In some cases, participants stated that these teachers became mentors and helped them navigate difficult times. They mattered to the staff and they mattered to themselves. They learned purpose and perseverance. Karina most appreciated the independence she gained from the reciprocal relationship. Paloma said, “If it wasn’t for that teacher or it wasn’t for those students, for those couple of years . . . I probably wouldn’t have graduated.”

Belonging, or psychological membership, is the degree to which people feel included and supported (Goodenow, 1993). The need to belong is fundamental to one’s physiological and psychological sense of security. Individuals seek this sense of belonging within a social group (Maslow, 1970). The need to belong is a normed phrase for the desire to formulate relationships (Lambert et al., 2013). When students feel they belong, they are in relationships that are

reciprocally beneficial (Finn, 1989). Marisol spoke about the strengthening of bonds and how “through little steps [she] made big progress in life.” Naomi felt that the teachers with whom she had a mattering relationship became her friend and were vested in her future. Several participants, such as Abel, Ivan, and Selena stated that the bonds established with various teachers felt like those with family members. “I felt like knowing her was like I was a part of her family. The way she helped me was like an aunt would help a nephew,” shared Abel. Abel also noted that these relationships grew firm through, what he believes, were purposeful actions by educators to find similarities and connections to their students: “If you like something and the other person likes it too, it makes it easier to have a good bond.” Karina appreciated that she could reach out after class or school to her teachers: “I was able to have conversations with these teachers, personal conversations. This is where we learned about each other. We discovered our preferences and opened communication.” Paloma and Ivan both shared that the bonded relationships with their teachers has guided them through present-day friendships with these educators.

These bonded friendships made it easier for participants to seek assistance from school staff because of the trusting ethos that was established. According to Cholewa et al. (2014), when educators seek to understand their student’s experiences, they are better equipped to supply culturally responsive assistance that promotes culturally relevant, positive supports, which promote psychological health (Cholewa et al., 2014). Individuals are better able to articulate their needs in this place of interdependency where the social selves are united in salient relationship of mutual understanding (Hattie, 2003). As Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) explained, the individuals become interdependent in their relationships. Each of the 11 participants shared an anecdote about an experience when the staff member created dependable

situations in which they felt secure in seeking help. According to Ivan, not only were his teachers “on top of” him, but he also began to take advantage of after-class and after-school times as well as e-mailing without feeling like he was a burden. Karina joked that at first, she “felt like sometimes they were too on top of us,” but over time she realized, “they were just so excited to see us succeed.” Leo was surprised at how quickly doors opened for him when he sought assistance. He realized that educators could provide a service beyond merely teaching a skill: “All of the teachers that I had were always there for me when I needed somebody.” Naomi expressed that the more she sought assistance, the more her teachers were willing to offer. This helped build her confidence in the material and in formulating positive relationships. Selena shared that a staff member who consistently checked in on her, at school, found out about her family’s needs: “He simply asked about me and my family and I broke down. I just needed to vent. But, later that week, he came to the house with groceries . . . it was the sweetest gesture.” Selena noted that this was the moment when she learned to swallow her pride for the betterment of her future. Overall, the participants felt supported with their experiences.

This coincides with the research by Knight (2014) who noted that students were more successful at overcoming adversity when they sought to manage stressors with the assistance of school personnel. The assistance needed to persevere included the antecedent to mattering, which occurs by establishing interpersonal relationships of significance (Schieferecke & Card, 2013). One of the outcomes of such relational opportunities for 10 of the 11 participants was a switch from feeling despair in attending school to an overwhelming enjoyment. “I actually started to like school,” noted Abel, “it became a fun place to go to.” Similarly, Leo shared, “I enjoyed the classes and the friends I made along the way and the confidence that I built with them.” This was shared by Ivan, who struggled to go to school, but “eventually I liked school so

much I started to wake up early, I really wanted to be there.” This desire, for Marisol, was because “the relationships [she] had in high school became mostly positive and since the relationships and experience became good, everything eventually turned out good.”

However, many Latinos struggle with marginality, and do not like school. In many cases, as found by Jordan and Schwartz (2018), marginality occurs in seemingly innocuous moments or situations when individuals sensed they were not understood. Research on physical, social, and economic marginality unearthed the notion students repeatedly withdrew, demonstrated behavioral issues, or rebuffed feedback in order to cope with perceived rejection (Basáñez et al., 2013). For Latinos, an inability to cope due to not being understood showed an increase of stress, recognizable rejection, lowered academic success and higher incidences of depression (Basáñez et al., 2013). Of the 11 participants, seven shared experiences in which they could pinpoint misunderstandings that had lasting effects on their progression. Naomi shared that “some teachers had certain ways to speak that students could not understand. This wasn’t only about language, this was about them not understanding me, who I am.” Selena’s experience was further perplexing to her because when she felt other Latinos should be supportive, they were not. She disclosed,

I don’t know why they called me a guala. What is a guala? I know the point was to hurt me because of my accent and that I was not as American as them. But I really felt ashamed. I knew I wasn’t American enough for everyone else, but I didn’t know how to be American enough for other Hispanics.

The misunderstandings related by most of the participants seemed to be isolated around the areas of language, ethnicity, and area of town where these participants lived.

Another way in which marginalized student participants tended to feel disempowered was their disconnect with school. Marginalized students manifest an increased risk of failure and powerlessness due to inadequate coping skills and other disproportionate social conditions of the classroom (Diemer et al., 2016). Over time, feelings that were fostered included isolation, disconnection, and disempowerment (Jordan, 2017). Abel noted that initially he “did what [he] needed to do and go home to get everything done.” Of the 11 participants, at varying levels, 10 each noted that at some point or another in their school tenure they did not want to go to school. Leo noted that although he struggled at times to show up, he knew it was important to progress. Yet, he stated,

to this day I have a biased perspective of how they work at Kennedy. I was lucky to find safe places. But, how about those who didn’t get help with their school transitions into the world. If they weren’t connected to someone, they were just disconnected.

Marisol shared her disconnection experience with a particular teacher with whom she thought she had a relationship. There was an incident when she was asked to present a programming initiative for the early childhood education curriculum but her research and plan was publicly discounted by the instructor in a manner that made Marisol feel disenfranchised.

I couldn’t believe, after everything I did for her and the kids in this class. I worked my butt off. I shared my skills and my advice. Yet, when it came to the final presentation to the administration, I was stripped of my voice.

She did continue in the course and progress to graduation, despite her disappointment. That same level of frustration was shared by Naomi, who felt so disconnected at several points that she seriously considered quitting and getting a GED: “I did not like it. I felt very disconnected.

I felt sad. I was planning on saying f-it and take the test.” Eventually she sought out safe spaces, which were few to be found, so valued all the more.

Educators who provide safe spaces and supports appropriately recognize and enrich students’ needs (Göppert & Springirth, 2016). These efforts to provide support buffered adversity (Center for Promise, 2015). Mattering has been shown to offer a protective element by increasing self-esteem and established personal safeguards from challenges and stressors (Flett, 2018a). Maslow (1970) espoused that individuals were motivated by physiological and psychological needs such as safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Thus, to be functional and prosper in society, individuals need to feel both secure and accepted. Abel appreciated his relationship with his administrator after experiencing a run-in with law enforcement:

Being alone with a policeman would have made me scared. I did not know if I was going to jail or if I was going to have a record. But being in school with someone I trusted allowed me to be honest and face my bad decisions.

Marisol also shared an experience when she felt that a specific teacher was always there to help regardless of her life condition, “no matter what.” Naomi, too, felt she had such support: “I was getting bullied in school, but I knew I had someone to turn to.” Ivan was also bullied, but in moments when he felt he did not belong he knew he had safe spaces to go to and people to whom he could turn.

This, however, has not been a universal narrative for many Latino students. Many students, including 10 of these study participants, experience various moments of marginalization directly connected to their social and economic background. Marginalization occurs when individuals believe they estranged from or are of less or no significance to the

institution (Cheng, 1999; Schlossberg, 1989). Schlossberg (1989) explained that marginalized people establish unhealthy levels of self-consciousness. They have a desire to acquire normative experiences of caring and hope from others (Chhuon & Wallace, 2012). Further, this ego-extension leads to a belief that others could minister to their needs (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). This vital facet of human nature is critical in pedagogy that is culturally relevant and provides environments and relationships full of care that formulate mutual trust (Jackson et al., 2014). Of the participants, eight noted situations in which family members did not care about their experiences and sought stabilization in the school environment. Naomi noted, “I wouldn’t say that my whole family even cared . . . they were family and would say, ‘You are not going to make it.’” Selena also recognized her family was less than supportive: “I don’t feel they supported me. It was me and my mom. That’s it.” Although generally supported, there were instances when this discouragement was evident beyond home. As Frederico remarked, “I had a teacher in my senior year who made me feel less than, academically. I tried to formulate a relationship with him, but he always found fault in all I did.” Frederico shared that other students of color shared a similar experience with this instructor. Although Ivan also experienced moments of marginalization in the classroom, he stated that he felt it was likely cultural miscommunication that fueled his feeling of “being picked on.” Leo felt, strongly, that his marginalization experience had a lot to do with his ethnic background, but was adamant in his belief that growing up on the other side of town created a rift in equality and level of respect. “It was annoying . . . it felt like they didn’t look at me personally, but rather at my race and zip code” said Leo.” Naomi felt that, except for the few teachers with whom she had a bond, she was excluded from the norm. She experienced teachers that she described as mean or not willing to understand her life situation: “Ya know, instead of asking me what I needed or providing

programs that I knew existed, the first thing they wanted to do was kick me out of school, as if suspension or expulsion would make me a better student or mother.”

Marginalized students tend to display a depressed awareness of critical consciousness and an increased exposure to disappointment and vulnerability. They demonstrate deficiencies in coping skills in dealing with racism, discipline, and school social conditions (Diemer et al., 2016). Over time, unmitigated marginalization cultivates isolation, disconnection, and disempowerment (Jordan, 2017). Students often feel repudiated due to their interests, ethnicity, or being remiss of societal or organizational norms (Schieferecke & Card, 2013). Ivan noted that his transition from charter to public school and being Latino was a struggle that caused him anxiety and depression. Abel felt that his negative experiences were not just tied to the environment, but also to specific teachers and their practices. Margarita took responsibility for part of this as she “slacked in freshman year.” She noted that she “failed class and had to retake it in summer school.” Yet, she learned a lesson from that experience to be a good student and to “not rely on teachers to fix you like they did in middle school.” From ninth grade to junior year, Marisol did not focus on her future success because the social and organizational dynamics of her schooling required her day-to-day focus on the tasks at hand: “I didn’t really want to do this anymore. I used to like studying. I wasn’t lazy. I just did the minimum. Until senior year when I realized this safety net was going to end.” Marisol managed to raise her grades between junior and senior year as reality set in and she recognized that she needed to prepare to move on, so she sought help from teachers she trusted to create a plan. A plan is also what Selena needed. Her failures also stemmed from grades in classes where she was disconnected. Her counselor reminded her that she needed to pass to graduate if she wanted a good future. Although all 11 participants noted failures along the way, only four noted that language was part of their set-

backs. They shared that personal decisions and school ethos were greater contributors to both their failures and successes.

Healthy relationships are prescribed for nurturing environments that sustain mentoring with empathy (Dixon & Tucker, 2008) because the Latino culture traditionally holds communistic ambitions of success (Ramirez et al., 2014). Advancing culture in the classroom and in relationships leads to relational connectivity, which provides mutual growth while disempowering marginalization affects by disintegrating authoritarianism and subordination (Jordan, 2017). Marisol valued these healthy relationships because they helped her learn to discount antagonism surrounding her language skills and ethnicity:

I worked my way around that, just trying to ignore every negativity. I needed help to learn how to not let it take me down. Instead, I learned how to hold my head high, even if it meant not saying anything.

Karina, too shared her experience with disempowering negativity that moved her because “bad things in school happened, but I was going to graduate. It was basic. No questions asked. But, being demeaned made me want to fight harder to succeed.” This attitude was mirrored by Abel, who shared that because of his Latin culture and a desire for a better life, he needed to prove dissenters wrong.

Thus, when students perceived that others cared about them, they were more likely to be productively engaged in the educational process, including establishing trust and being accountable. Latino students desire to be given similar supports afforded other students (Knight, 2014). Healthy relationships demand nurturing environments that support empathetic mentoring (Dixon & Tucker, 2008) because the Latino culture supports communal goals for success (Ramirez et al., 2014). Mattering relationships at school are vital variables in a student’s positive

perception of self-efficacy and ambition (Chhuon & Wallace, 2012). For example, Frederico understood the importance of a high school diploma, regardless of his home difficulties. He stated that although, over time, he lost school connectivity, it was important to him to persevere, even if it was

to be able to just not be noticed and to have other people around me. It was safe to be alone in the crowded room. It actually helped me to know they cared, even if I didn't want them to.

Like all the other participants, Frederico held up the notion that mentoring in mattering relationships was key to fostering accountability. Abel realized that he “did a lot of stupid things that I needed to turn around.” Similarly, Ivan’s experiences included “learning to embrace challenges that overwhelmed” him. Karina improved her grades and reignited her interest in school: “I feel like, for a while, I wasn’t necessarily thinking about graduation. But, in junior year, the heaviness hit me and I’m glad I could reach out and be supported.”

Leo also expressed a greater understanding regarding personal accountability through mattering by overcoming his community environment where he aspired for more, “but the people around me didn’t even have goals.” He utilized his learned skills as a student to advocate for his sister’s education, once he had learned how to navigate the social and academic environment of Kennedy High School. Margarita also learned to navigate school, but her biggest challenge was the college matriculation process, as a first-generation high school graduate. Marisol had similar, but further, concerns of financing such an endeavor. For Naomi, though, it was a more fundamental process of learning to navigate graduating high school as a mother with two children. She noted that her parents and close teachers, “wanted me to prove everybody wrong,

like I'm going to walk that stage and show everybody that I could do it . . . I had a reason: for me and for my kids." She also shared that her realization about mentorship:

You can get a lot, you can get somewhere with a diploma. Maybe you will be a doctor or a nurse. I can be that. I can provide for my kids. But I couldn't be a doctor, or a teacher, or a nurse, or any type of provider if I didn't have a diploma.

Paloma expressed how her personal accountability that she learned from mentoring motivated her to graduation and included being timely, keeping away from drama, taking school seriously, and looking ahead to the potential of college:

I learned that it was okay if I sat by myself. Where I once felt lonely, I soon didn't care because if sitting by myself meant I could focus on what the teacher said and I could focus on my work, then that was worth it.

The general consensus of the participants was that although marginalization plays a major role in the establishment of personal accountability, the catalyst to continuing education surrounds the mattering relationships that motivated persistence and malleability.

Educator interactions provided for long-lasting, positive life effects, strong bonds, and a willingness to accept extra help. Additionally, mattering relationships provided positive school outlooks and perseverance that disempowered school intimidation, a general dislike of the school environment, feelings of not being cared for, existential negativity from others, feelings of insignificance, and personal failures. These empirical results clearly display how mattering in the educational environment influences life strategies such as cultural continuity, personal accountability, and resiliency.

Practical Implications

Specifically, for educational practitioners, the study provided empirical data regarding the mattering concept for teachers, school psychologists, paraprofessionals, administrators, district decision makers, advisors of clubs and activities, program directors, secretarial staff, cafeteria personnel, bus drivers, custodial workers, and any other individuals who come into contact with and who are willing to establish bonded relationships with students. Additionally, the college student in the field of education may find these data useful in establishing a philosophy of education during their fieldwork and through practicum experiences. Students who are actively involved in the school environment may be directly impacted through current and future mentor relationships, while students who are distant from school involvement may find inspiration through influential school personnel. In reference to community members, coaches, adolescent instructors, community center personnel, school of education professors and parents may benefit from a better understanding of how mattering impacts relationships and persistence. This study identified a number of practical implications for mattering theory and the need to belong and the implications that assist Latino students' persistence to graduation. Academics have indicated that a preventative mechanism for dropouts should include school-based mattering relationships (Johnston & Moody, 2013).

Mattering and basic human need has practical implications in the lives of many successful students. Mattering occurs when the person perceives a relationship is reciprocal and significant. Mattering, as an ego-extension, may be a persistence motivator. When others feel this significance or importance to others, they experience a confidence that others are interested in their desires, thoughts, actions, and future (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). This does not necessarily imply approval, but rather importance (Schlossberg, 1989). As mattering has been

connected to Maslow's (1970) philosophy of sense of belonging, the individual who perceived mattering believes they have relationships of value and importance (Dixon, 2011). These relationships fill the psychological needs of safety, love, belonging, and esteem, and foster self-actualization. When not met, the person aspires to fulfill these psychological and emotional needs (Maslow, 1970). Thus, mattering and the feeling of belonging has been a contributor to psychosocial functioning and academic prosperity (Allen et al., 2018).

Several of the participants noted their responsibility in seeking relationships that mattered. Abel realized that being stubborn or needing to "get it done and over with" was not conducive to his own success: "I learned that if you don't take time to allow people in and learn, I would only go so far. I had to stop just doing the minimum and let people help me push my limits." Similarly, Ivan noted that he had to allow others to guide him and remove that "chip on my shoulder and do what I need to do. People care if you let them care. And, it worked out because I ended up enjoying going to school more often." This was a sentiment echoed by Margarita, who had to learn to get items submitted on time or to communicate her struggles with the realization that it gave her a voice and commanded understanding from her instructors. For Marisol, completing high school was her top goal, but she had to humble herself to her struggles with the realization that teachers actually cared. She explained, "When I finally allowed conversations to happen, it helped me get my act together. My grades got better, I started working harder, I finally saw a 4.0 in my senior year; they helped me succeed."

Beyond educators, policymakers should understand the essential nature of mattering relationships in education. Practitioners and policymakers should move beyond generic approaches to considering the inequalities experienced by the racial and linguistic minority groups who are consistently marginalized (Kim et al., 2015). Individuals have an innate desire to

establish reciprocal relevance as mattering induces greater self-esteem, social support, and school success while decreasing anxiety and depression (Dixon, 2011). Therefore, mattering advances psycho-social prosperity and overall health (Dixon, 2011). As a social constructivist, I sought to determine how mattering influenced the population of urban, Latino, high school graduates and gained a greater understanding of the overall connection of school and community culture to school ethos (Creswell, 2013).

The traditional approach to high school dropouts has been focused on dysfunction, but advances in research challenged academics and practitioners to view high school dropout as both a personal and academic factor that should be addressed intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally (Lemon & Watson, 2011). Students who are minoritized are marginalized in underrepresented communities (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). An example is when native speakers' language is racialized, which affirms cultural dominance, thus challenging native speakers to deny their cultural and linguistic backgrounds and other censorship microaggressions (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Such situations have flourished in institutions because schools have normed monolingualism and American assimilation as part of a monoglossic ideology (Fuller & Hosemann, 2015). Leo struggled with this:

I know for me and the people like me, in my neighborhood, we were made to feel different because of our mannerisms or our accents. . . . Being a minority in a school like that was annoying because you were not expected to succeed. You were treated differently.

Leo's struggles were shared by 10 of the 11 participants who each noted that the school and community ethos played a role in their distrust of institutions because they felt they were not represented. Even Valentina, who, as a bi-racial Latina from a middle-class home, felt the

struggle of intimidation in her freshman year as she attempted to navigate a large school environment and cultural nuances she had not previously experienced.

This intimidation was evident in those populations for which language was a factor. Specific to the Latino population, a lack of language mastery leading to school aversion was a factor in Latino student success in mathematics and reading (Pew Research Center, 2009). For many, translanguaging—the ability for the speaker to comprehensively utilize a linguistic catalogue without consideration of socio-political limitations of the normed language (Otheguy et al., 2015)—has proved to be a challenge for those in low-income and Latino subgroups (Stetser et al., 2014). This has been of concern as Latino ELLs are higher dropout risks than are White students (Kim et al., 2015). Specifically, many of these students decide to drop out in their junior or senior year, due to feelings of disengagement and lack of connection (Kim et al., 2015). When Abel first arrived from Puerto Rico, he felt the differences in culture immediately. His awareness allowed him to find common places of norming, but he felt he was never truly assimilated because of his accent and grammar: “Many times, I felt the teachers were frustrated with me. It was a bad time. I had a hard time with speaking and understanding.” Often, Abel would not speak for fear of being judged. Margarita also struggled with cultural and language disparity in the form of overt racism: “It hurt when people were racist towards us, they would reject us as a group or call us names such as ‘guala’ and confused me because sometimes it was my own Hispanic people that would do it.” She said she felt a mixture of hurt, sad, and mad.

Marisol, who was born and raised in Puerto Rico, learned English starting at the age of 9. She had a specific situation with a teacher who discouraged her habit of seeking peer assistance with words or explanations of tasks. “I could speak English,” shared Marisol, “but sometimes I’d forget the words. We helped each other, but the teacher would constantly say ‘I don’t want

you speaking Spanish. We speak English in America.” Marisol averted any interaction with this teacher because she felt rejected and hurt, and became disengaged. Four other participants shared similar stories of specific teachers expressing similar notions. Naomi became frustrated and angry when teachers refused to reexplain concepts because she did not understand: “I could understand the words, I could read, but sometimes I got lost in the concepts. If I would say I needed help, but couldn’t communicate exactly what help, they gave up on me.” Selena experienced Naomi’s situation and initially felt as Marisol did, but in engaging with caring staff, she felt increasingly empowered and rejected complete acculturation to say, “I am Hispanic and I speak Spanish! I can’t change my accent or how others feel about me. But I can embrace who I am as a Hispanic American.”

Language discrimination and disenfranchisement is just one form of racism and enhances discrimination. Overt racism toward these Latino participants was also a hindrance to their success. When dominant power structures challenge minorities to deny their heritage and cultural experiences, it causes situations of hostility (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Schools foster minoritization by undermining cultural competence and favoring American acculturation values. This monoglossic and mono-linguistic ideology supports acculturation and assimilation as sovereign (Fuller & Hosemann, 2015). Many Latino students reported institutional barriers to their sense of belonging and a hindrance of academic success through discriminatory practices (Martinez et al., 2004). As previously shared, Margarita experienced levels of racism even amongst fellow Hispanic students. She shared that she “used to get really mad” and that sometimes she “would flip on them when they said ‘guala.’” These instances initially made her feel insecure, but eventually they fueled dissent and anger that compelled her to seek safe spaces with teachers and like-minded students. Margarita shared her experience with a teacher, a school

counselor, and an administrator, but to no avail. She shut down in the class and did the minimum: “I just wanted to make it through. I wanted out of that class. I did what I could, but never wanting to be there.” Selena noted that she experienced and witnessed considerable racism toward Hispanics: “It felt so wrong what people would say. They would make comments. I didn’t understand why or what we did to them. But, worst of all, I didn’t know what or how to make it stop.” She shared an incident at lunch where she was called a “nigger.” She was perplexed by the situation as Latinos are typically not categorized as such, but felt enough acrimony to defend herself. “There is no need for that. Why are you acting like this?” she questioned. But the only response she received from the peer was ““because I can do what I want and you can’t do nothing about it.”” She sought assistance from administration which, in essence, told her there was nothing they could do and to do her best to ignore it. Leo noted that in his experience,

We Hispanics pay the consequences for small things while White kids don’t get any punishments for the same situation. If I’m late for class, I have a detention. If a White kid skips class, he’s told not to do it again.

Several other participants noted similar instances of unfairness. Frederico explained,

Hispanics and African American students aren’t given the same benefit of a doubt. . . . Even the White kids from the southside are treated with more respect. They get to explain themselves . . . we are just slapped with consequences, detentions, suspensions, and expulsions. Our stories don’t matter.

Paloma shared a nervous laugh in describing a type of conversation:

They always called us “you people.” I was always like, “you people who?” because I wanted to know who was “you people.” I knew they meant Hispanics, but there are White kids who do bad things too. It isn’t fair.

Marisol, like Abel, believed that the racism was not only cultural, but also due to socioeconomic status: “It was because we lived on southside that we were treated like we were nothing. We were poor and our parents had no jobs or education. But my parents had jobs and they pushed us for an education.” Of the 11 participants, nine shared a form of racist experience, with each noting that by the time they reached graduation, they had learned to adequately navigate the school setting to disempower racists, rude comments and hurtful experiences.

As practitioners seek to assist students to persist to graduation, they must consider how these types of distressful situations full of malicious intent and harmful to the psyche and educational progress of all students. Participants acknowledged the importance of attuned adults on their academic and social achievement. They welcomed adults who listened and adapted to their needs. These students appreciated educator support, which often involved concern, praise, and sincerity (Drolet & Arcand, 2013; Watson et al., 2017). Individuals desire reciprocal relevance and mattering that promotes self-esteem and social support, which advances comprehensive wellness (Dixon, 2011). When educators understand the complexity of students, they are more adept at providing social supports to assist students in graduation persistence (Center for Promise, 2015). This is when students feel they matter and acquire constructive critical awareness (Gosine & Islam, 2014) for which the implications of teacher and peer supports included motivation, engagement, and a sense of belonging that promote persistence (Kiefer et al., 2015).

Each of the 11 participants expressed a notion that educators played a facilitating role in their persistence to graduation. Abel specifically noted that, overall, he “had a good positive relationship” with his teachers and this is made him persevere: “The more interaction, the greater the bonds. If more teachers would reach out, our dropout rates would be lower, in my opinion.” Frederico shared the same mindset:

I know if someone needs help, I am going to help them the best I can, no matter if they know a little or a lot of stuff. If I can help I can. I feel teachers should too. That’s their job.

Ivan explained, “Even when I wanted to give up. I stopped showing up. And, two of my teachers were constantly on me. They were annoying that way. But they wanted me to always do my best.” He shared a specific situation in which he feared he would not graduate due to a lack of credits: “They took me to guidance and helped me create a plan to get those credits into my schedule. They stayed with me through it. They could have just handed me over. It was like they were invested.”

Karina also felt specifically supported through her principal because from the beginning, he reminded her that she had a purpose and needed to find her passion. She regarded his anecdotes, as a Black man speaking to other Black and Brown students, as personal stories of resiliency that fostered his success and provided an avenue for their future: “He had these stories of struggle that definitely encouraged me to keep trying, to keep going. I know there were moments when his positive support helped keep me on my path.” Marisol’s counselor had to help her recalibrate when she wanted to quit and go to work; she said her counselor advised her of her life decision in the long-run with real-life examples such as limited employment opportunities and income potential. The counselor laid out statistics and included a map of what

Marisol had completed and a trajectory profile of her future. For Marisol, this was eye-opening: “That’s what I needed. I didn’t need someone sugarcoating my future . . . I needed her to be honest. It is what made me care. To see what I have accomplished and know there was more ahead.” Naomi recalled a teacher who was observant of her needs: “If everyone was ahead of the game, she would stop, just for me. She would break it down until I understood. But she never made me feel dumb.” Once this teacher figured out how to meet her needs, Naomi’s educational team got on board with a learning plan that helped her succeed: “It started with one teacher, then the others. Eventually they were all supporting me in the same way. I started to trust them. And, I think, they started to respect me.”

Frederico also struggled in the learning environment, but this was mainly due to truancy more than concepts:

I had to suffer the consequences of in-school suspension for skipping class. But my teachers would visit me, my counselors would check in on me, and my principal would remind me that I could do better. I should have done better.

I had become a trouble maker. I think anybody in my life situation would have.

But they still kept me moving. I’ll value that for the rest of my life.

Paloma believed that her IEP was the reason she was supported academically and socially: “I had a teacher, a case manager, whose job, I think, was to keep up with me. She made sure I kept up in class and stayed out of trouble.” This case manager assisted Paloma with academic support as well as with social skills. Selena had a teacher who motivated her by helping her navigate the nuances of the school environment and providing safe places to discuss her frustrations, including finding a voice to the esoteric feelings of racism and classism.

It is in these environments where safe spaces arise. Educators who implemented a climate of safety and support adapt environments where language and culture are explored and enriched (Göppert & Springirth, 2016). These safe spaces encourage positive values and self-evaluation, and develop both academic and cultural competencies. Most provide channels to acquire needed goods and services such as bus passes, babysitting, and other security safeguards. In addition to educators, parents, peers, and other community members provide supportive relationships that may have similarly buffered adversity (Center for Promise, 2015). Leo shared that “interacting with these teachers in safe spots that they provided helped me to get through and complete high school.” He shared an episode from the day he disclosed to his parents that he identified as homosexual. The declaration did not go well and he found himself feeling broken and distraught. Facing school that following day was a challenge for Leo:

I showed up, knowing I had that one spot, that one safe place. . . . She took the time to talk to me, to calm me down. And, every time I needed her, she was there. It was helpful. I think it might have even saved my life.

Ivan also found teachers with whom he could vent or seek advice, noting that they knew when to listen, when to advise, and when to intervene. Karina shared that these teachers were available, even if she got in trouble:

Even when I got in trouble, they were still there. They addressed my behavior, I got consequences, but they never stayed mad. I didn’t want to disappoint them. Whatever my problem, they had my back. I knew we’d figure things out together.

Marisol also felt a connection with her Spanish teacher in a moment when she felt lost: “In high school, you spend too much time trying to find who you are. But this relationship made me feel safe, not judged. I could talk about anything and she cared. She helped.” Naomi also

formulated bonds in a safe space where caring helped her “even on [the] worse days,” especially when she was highly upset with school or home and needed to cry, complain, or laugh.

Paloma’s connection to her safe spaces helped her rebuild her desire to graduate after a friend’s suicide: “I got to a point where I didn’t care. Nothing made sense. So, quitting was the easiest option. I guess we all grieve in our own way, but they helped me to re-channel my hurt and supported me academically.” Selena, too, had a safe space where her previous teacher had become a consistent counselor:

I didn’t trust many people, but I trusted her. She made me feel that she was there for me, regardless of what was going on. In moments when my emotions were greater than my schooling, she motivated me to do my best. . . . It made me feel like I was wanted, in a time when I didn’t think I was wanted.

Valentina felt welcomed in most of her school environments, but formulated a bonded relationship and safe place with a team of teachers and peers: “I never felt alone, there. There were so many people in this school. It was easy to get lost. But I was never just a number in that room.” Valentina also noted that her coaches provided a supportive environment, a sentiment shared by Frederico: “Okay, sometimes I skipped school, but would show up to practice. Sometimes I’d show up to school and focus my day on the fact that there was practice. I just needed to get to the end of my day.” For him, the safe place was on the field or the court with like-minded people: “We didn’t even have to talk . . . we just needed to be. My coaches knew how to redirect my anger or if I was cool. They just knew.” Each of the participants shared anecdotes and experiences of times when their safe spaces assisted them move through the day or through a season. As Ivan discovered, “Although you do have to be responsible, show up, and

do your work, at times it got kind of hard. Having some place and somebody to fall back on in case something happens is what everyone needs.”

Safe spaces work because there is an understanding of mutuality. The ability of school personnel to culturally and situationally respond appropriately to the life of an adolescent influences behaviors in both school and home communities by reducing individual vulnerabilities (Sanders & Munford, 2016). This type of infrastructure has been shown to create community trust by acknowledging and enhancing mutual relationships that are objective, appealing, humanizing, and devoted (Watson, 2017). The connection between student engagement and teacher support is a tenacious motivator for student success (Conner & Pope, 2013). Engagement includes influencing student acumen toward a perception of mattering through relationships (Dueñas & Gloria, 2017). Further, for Latinos, behavioral engagement is a solid beacon of affectual mattering and academic success (Niehaus et al., 2016). This engagement ritualizes cultural competency as an essential component to building empathetic, mattering relationships in which mutual mattering built stronger relationships and connections (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018).

Abel noted that his core school relationships displayed a high level of mutual respect. This thought was shared by Ivan, who added that these mutual relationships were key to assisting him in dealing with anxiety and depression because he felt understood: “*Mamita* [Mom] always said ‘respect your teachers’ and I learned that respect goes both ways, but so does caring and understanding.” Karina appreciated that interconnection and sought to formulate relationships that mirrored those connections. Marisol noted that mutual relationships created trust and made it easier to assist each other: “I had a teacher in ninth grade, that’s all, ninth grade. But our bond was so good that she let me do community service with her. When I finished my hours, I still

would help her after school.” Margarita shared a similar notion, “If you show an interest, they are going to build you up. But you needing them helps them fulfil their purpose. They will hype you because it is important to them.” Naomi noted that part of that purpose was guiding her in the right direction: “We had a relationship. If anyone else told me I was wrong, I didn’t handle it right. But if these two told me I was wrong, I sat and listened because I respected them. We built a positive relationship.”

All the participants also shared that these relationships assisted in helping them to set life goals. When individuals establish relationships that foster a sense of belonging, they acquire critical life skills at a higher level than do those without meaningful mentorship (Lambert et al., 2013). Students that perceive belonging display academic and social mastery goals that are cultivated and supported by educators (Walker & Greene, 2009). Often, these students develop a need to belong through consistent, active interactions which build bonded relationships (Bronfennbrenner & Morris, 2006). Additionally, these students want to build a quasi-family academic environment which validates their existence and purpose (Dueñas & Gloria, 2017). When school personnel reinforce mattering by being attentive to student needs, they provide a caring environment, encourage participation, value varied ideologies, encourage ambition, and illustrate accountability and responsibility (Dixon & Tucker, 2008.). As a result, meaning becomes a motivation that influences goals (Frankl, 2006). Further, when Latino students perceive connection and value at school, the liability of dropping out decreases (Niehaus et al., 2016).

Valentina was motivated to succeed and complete high school by her solid relationships at home, which were reinforced by school relationships with teachers and peers. Selena was motivated to graduate by family, but was urged to pursue college by her teachers. Paloma

realized that graduation was not a choice, but that college was her choice and considered not matriculating due to finances. However, her school mentorships helped her discover there were ways to finance her education and that to achieve her life purpose, she needed to pursue all opportunities for future advancement. Karina became increasingly excited about the opportunities presented to her: “I was not only the first to graduate high school, but that I could also graduate college. My teachers made me pursue more than I ever thought I could handle.” She added that her teachers were, “always excited to hear what was next to me, what I discovered. They wanted to dive into whatever I was diving into. Sometimes they seemed more passionate than me. It made me feel important to them.” Ivan also felt the excitement from his teachers in pursuing goals beyond high school graduation: “I just thought my main goal was graduating high school. I would have never pursued college if they didn’t pursue me. It made me see that I can do anything. If I struggle, someone will support me.” Abel shared that these mentorships also helped him discover goals for college through encouragement. Each participant shared stories and teacher anecdotes of their life experiences in setting goals and taking opportunities. They expressed a sense of confidence in their futures that emanated from their mattering relationships.

Fundamentally, these bonded, mutual relationships of mattering build student character. Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) found that mattering compelled social responsibility and connectivity that fosters social assimilation through bonding, which builds interdependence. Supportive teachers display attributes that promote school belonging (Allen et al., 2018). Maslow (1970) espoused the need to belong that is satisfied through effectual relationships that sustain assent and assistance through motivation to achieve self-actualization. Students, whose mattering needs are not met elsewhere, seek to satisfy the inclination to belong within the school

setting (Martin & Joomis, 2007). As students feel accepted, there is greater academic engagement and educational commitment, which influences high school retention (Osterman, 2000). When individuals with an innate desire to establish reciprocal relevance establish mattering, it leads to higher self-esteem, social support, and academic success (Dixon, 2011). In order for individuals to fulfill their maximum capacity of life purpose, they must achieve a high level of self-actualization (Martin & Joomis, 2007). Self-actualization organically occurs when the individual's physiological, safety, security, love, and belonging needs are sustained. Other required self-actualization needs include knowledge growth, understanding capacity, and aesthetic needs (Maslow, 1970).

Abel stated that his teachers helped him to connect with peers and make friends: "The personality traits I acquired helped me to learn how to talk to people that were different from me. Those friendships allowed me to have a voice on my team and, at times, provided a voice for me." Margarita shared that her teacher guided her into pushing her limits by guiding her to compete. She realized it was about the perseverance experience, not that actual prize. Naomi used her skills when dealing with family members that were moving from a positive trajectory: "I have cousins that are younger than me. I am the first in this family to graduate high school. When I see them messing up, I feel I have a responsibility to set them straight." Paloma realized that she needed to hold two groups of friends: the ones you "hang with" and the ones you "prosper with." She clarified, "My teachers talked about your personal responsibility. At some point, I got tired of getting in trouble and upsetting my dad. I stopped hanging around with the clowns and started to hang out with people more advanced than me." For Valentina, this character-building was how she learned to truly appreciate diversity, not only in name, but also in depth: "I used to think diversity was about different cultures. But I learned there were

subcultures, too. And that where people lived or what they were involved with or their level of understanding were all forms of diversity.”

Part of character building is embracing personal responsibility. Support systems move individuals to prosperity through personal growth. Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) stated that mattering compelled social responsibility and connection in social assimilation because people are bound to society. Thus, mattering is a social responsibility and an ego-extension (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Therefore, relationships built with a mattering condition serve as a mediator to personal growth (Schlossberg, 1989). Research has also linked relational mattering to personal well-being (Raque-Bogdan et al., 2011), since much of the teaching experience involves responsive interactions with students (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018). Educators can provide interventions to improve student efficacy and success (Legters et al., 2016). The establishment of personal accountability and responsibility legitimately increases self-efficacy.

As Abel explained, “If you can do more with yourself you can be a better person to do more with others. Building relationships allows you to learn from and teach others.” Ivan shared that his personal accountability increased exponentially from first taking accountability for his mental health to following through on his goals. Karina also learned how to channel teacher motivation into changing her behaviors, putting her on a trajectory to college. According to Marisol, few teachers were concerned for her future, but because of those individuals who cared, she had valuable experiences and is able to use them to fuel how she establishes close connections with others. Marisol, like Karina, stated that these relationships were cornerstones in learning to establish boundaries. Naomi conveyed that even in times when she would verbalize that she struggled, she knew, deep down that she would make it because she had the concept of success engrained in her through these relationships. Paloma shared that these

relationships taught her how to not only find trusting relationships outside of her normed group that fostered success, but also that they were essential in her leadership skills as a team captain. These skills also assisted Selena with leading her school group by making her a stronger guide for the group. Valentina also guided her group and sports team based on organizational and speaking skills established through these relationships. This establishment of personal accountability and the use of skills learned in mattering mentorships assisted the participants in personal prosperity and peer coaching.

Personal accountability and prosperity offered participants opportunities to build upon other personal skill sets. Within the mattering principle, a cohesive factor to resiliency is the ability to mitigate life effects through adaptability, such as cultivating ethnic pride while achieving academic success (Basáñez et al., 2013). For Latinos, this adaptability is a resiliency skill that promotes self-efficacy, purpose, external influence, life skills, and external influence, which creates a feeling that the individual could be a positive change agent (Prilleltensky, 2014). Sheard (2013) determined that individuals who establish the skill of mattering as a community increase positive personal identity and the ability to competently explore and practice positive life skills.

Frederico explained that he appreciated the community of mattering because although he was not social, he valued the idea of being present and known: “Being in a crowded room was always better than being alone. I learned to be more social because I allowed myself to be in the presence of others.” For Frederico, it was an organically nuclear experience in which he felt safe and had a small group of trusted relationships with peers, teachers, counselors, and coaches. Other participants expressed a more profound experience. Abel shared that one of the biggest things he learned was that as the smartest person in his peer group, he did not have to be

ashamed of his intellect. His friends supported him and he was able to assist them in their academics. Ivan learned to embrace challenges because he would not be allowed to fail. Karina shared the same concept, expressing that “you have to work together. People will help you if you help yourself. They will respect you and let you help them.” She expanded her boundaries by getting involved and formulating strong peer relationships that, in turn, built her life skill sets of communication and collaboration. Leo learned that “living in an environment with so many aspirations but few others had any goals at all, made you appreciate the few people that ran like you. We impacted each other. We became personally accountable to each other.” Leo also learned to be an academic advocate for students whom he felt were not being serviced academically by providing them ways to articulate their needs. Specifically, having learned to navigate the school system, he helped to define his sister’s academic path when he believed she was passed over for challenging courses.

Margarita too had advocates and learned to self-support through teachers who guided her into more challenging classes that afforded her college-bound opportunities. “If you want to go to college, you have to allow positive people around you to guide you, but then you have to guide yourself,” voiced Margarita. “It helps a lot that they want the best for you, but it helps best if you want it for yourself,” she continued. This collective appreciation for learning and sharing with others was key to Naomi’s engagement: “In the end, I walked the stage with both my kids . . . I proved a lot of people wrong that I wouldn’t make it. My kids became my reason for my diploma. But I realize I am worth it irregardless [*sic*].” Paloma also looked to her family who immigrated here for a prosperous life:

I couldn't fool around. I owed my dad in a way. But eventually I realized that although I owed him and my family, I needed to do this for myself and to be someone my cousins and brother could look up to.

Each of the participants learned how channel their success because of the mattering relationships established in the school environment. Much of the motivation that came from mattering experiences influenced their ability to set and fulfil goals, built character, and increased personal and shared responsibility and accountability. Although, at times, the participants were marginalized through the school ethos and due to language issues and racism, each persevered to establish a high level self-efficacy due to educational supports. Lastly, each participant shared experiences in which educational relationships that mattered provided safe spaces, reciprocation and validation, and assisted in building personal skills. Based on the many growth opportunities for Latino high school students as explained, the practical implications for practitioners would be the consideration to establish bonded, reciprocal relationships of mattering with students as a mechanism for persistence to graduation.

Delimitations and Limitations

As the researcher, purposeful decisions to limit the boundaries of this study were made. The qualitative phenomenological study included a transcendental approach as the research design (Moustakas, 1994). This approach allowed for researching the phenomenon via rich descriptions from individual interviews, a focus group interview, and journaling in order to ascertain an understanding of the essence of the mattering experience. This approach also afforded me the liberty to explore my phenomenological experience of mattering to expose or realize research bias. The data collection was delimited to 11 Latino high school graduates in Mannaton County, Pennsylvania. The on-time graduates were specifically selected as former

students of either Lincoln or Kennedy High Schools. Each participant self-identified as Latino. The study was further delimited by individuals who had an experience of mattering as defined in this study. Each of the participants was between the ages of 18 and 22 years of age. Thus, these were the delimitations of the study because no current, non-Latino students were selected and no non-Latino graduates were selected. Additionally, no individuals outside of the two stated high schools were considered for the study. The purpose of this delimitation was to determine the impact of mattering on Latino high school persistence to graduation.

Limitations explore the potential weaknesses of the study that were beyond the control of the researcher. The sample of this study had several weaknesses. The study was limited by the number of participants as one potential participant was unable to complete the data collection activity. I did not delimitate for gender, thus limiting the study by four participants being male and seven being female. Although 22 Spanish-speaking countries exist, the Latino backgrounds of the participants only represented Puerto Rico, Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico; with six of the participants identifying as Puerto Rican. Of the 11 participants, five were native-Spanish speakers who participated in English language acquisition. The site location was a limitation because Lincoln and Kennedy High Schools had the highest population of Latino students in Mannaton County. In a greater geographical consideration, various areas of the United States could possibly foster a different ethnic populous.

Recommendations for Future Research

While the study resulted in important discoveries into the impact of mattering on the persistence to graduation of Latino high school students, there are recommendations for future research which should be considered in understanding the impact of mattering on high school graduation based on the study findings, limitations, and delimitations placed on the study. First,

the impact of mattering could be reviewed for the general populous of students as a factor in reducing the dropout rate of all students. A follow-up study on the impact of mattering on the student population, as a whole, could shed light on the importance of relationship-building and mentorship. Additionally, it may be valuable to study the impact of mattering on the general population with a focus on both urban and rural communities without delimiting for race or ethnicity, as these populations can provide detailed descriptions of the mattering experience in underserved or socially and economically disadvantaged communities. The future replication research with a focus on general student populations and urban or rural students could both be qualitative designs with a transcendental phenomenological approach in order to better understand the essence of the mattering experience on various population. A focused study on the impact of mattering on ELLs could be considered. The mattering impact on ELLs should be carefully considered with an understanding of the various cultural backgrounds, which may be a limitation, as many cultural nuances may factor into data collection and interpretation. This could provide a deeper understanding into the implications of mattering on ELLs and cultural nuances. This could also be a qualitative study with a case study approach in order to get a greater understanding of an explainable event.

A longitudinal study may be considered in learning how mattering impacts graduation over a period of time when purposeful mattering relationships have been implemented. This longitudinal study may shed light on the effectiveness of the implementation of mattering in social programming at school and the possible influence of such programming on future graduation trajectories in vulnerable populations.

A mixed method approach could include implementation of purposeful mattering theory in social school programming. The mixed method could include a qualitative design which may

provide a greater explanation of mattering through grounded theory as well as a quantitative design with an experimental approach. Since most of the participants matriculated into college, it would be interesting to consider whether mattering factors into attrition and college graduation. An evaluation of the influence of mattering on college consideration and completion may produce evidence to communicate the importance of mattering in long-term student and life success. This study could also be a qualitative design with a transcendental phenomenological approach to understand the essence of the influence of mattering on the matriculation process and the impact on college retention to graduation.

Lastly, a study on the impact of mattering on teacher retention could shed light on the reciprocal significance of relationships in the educational environment amongst staff with students. This could influence the implementation of programs that could assist in the preservation and stress reduction of teachers. This study could be a qualitative design encompassing a narrative approach with segmented analysis including surveys and interviews to obtain a clearer view of the impact of mattering on teacher retention.

Summary

Studies show that mattering relationships and meeting the need to belong are valuable in achieving academic success. Students who establish reciprocal relationships have better long-term learning outcomes. These factors have a positive effect on the impact to persist to graduation for Latino high school students. Specifically, the impact of mattering on the persistence to graduation for Latino high school students are generally positive due to educator interactions and mutual motivations; feelings of belonging through interpersonal relationships and a general satisfaction with school; the ability to overcome issues of marginalization of the

school ethos, language intimidation, racism, and home or community life; and the specific guidance of educator roles and the building of life strategies.

The implications of this study are that individuals who perceived they matter to and are in reciprocal relationships with others feel a higher sense of importance in their school environment. Theoretically, mattering meets the general need to belong, it correlates adolescent development, and fosters personal growth. This research confirms the belief that positive, bonded relations assist resiliency, establish persistence, and may factor into the success of Latino high school students in their journey to graduation. Empirically, mattering relationships formulate a barrier of supports that play a major role in insulating students against issues of marginalization. When students feel sheltered or secure within safe spaces, they are better able to focus on education, as their personal and social needs are met through interactions that promote persistence and resilience. The mattering relationships yield long-lasting life effects, connection and acceptance while disempowering the negative effects of intimidation, disengagement, dissatisfaction with school, insignificance, and disappointments. The findings indicate that mattering in the educational environment is an influential factor in fostering life strategies for success, such as persistence. The practical implications suggest this factor as individuals who experience organic mattering relationships learned to translate life experiences into academic agency. Motivational influences instrumental to the mattering experience include relationships that encourage goal setting, character building, shared responsibility, and personal accountability. Students are better equipped to persevere through negative school experiences with the assistance of mattering relationships because of high level self-efficacy built through educational supports. The reciprocal relationships of mattering provide validation and life skills. Based on these skills, resiliency is built through mattering relationships for Latino high school

students with the greatest implication being that establishing bonded, reciprocal relationships of mattering serve as a mechanism that impacts persistence to graduation.

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APPENDIX A: LIBERTY UNIVERSITY IRB APPROVAL

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

January 23, 2019

Paulina Lee Collazo Navarro

IRB Approval 3621.012319: How the Maturing Experience of Latino High School Students Impacts Persistence to Graduation: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study

Dear Paulina Lee Collazo Navarro,

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.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.
7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. [45 CFR 46.101\(b\)\(2\)](#) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

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
Research Ethics Office

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APPENDIX B: LIBERTY UNIVERSITY CONSENT

Research Participant Consent Form

Community Center Consent Form: Impact of Mattering on Latino Persistence to Graduation

Primary Investigator: Paulina L. Collazo Navarro, Ed.D. Candidate - Liberty University

I. Purpose of Research

Community graduates from Bethlehem Area School District are invited to participate in a study. The purpose is to investigate the feeling of mattering on the participants and how this impacts graduation. A total of 12-15 participants will be recruited for this study. Participants will be interviewed once individually, invited to a focus group and requested to complete a journal writing submission.

II. Specific Procedures to Be Used

Parents will meet with the investigator to complete face-to-face interviews and a focus group. Individuals will also be requested to complete a journal. All participants will receive a consent form for observations and interviews. We will ask about background information and feelings of the mattering experience.

III. Risks

In this study, you will not have any more risks than you would have in a normal day of community service.

IV. Benefits

Participation in this study may not benefit you personally. However, the study will help us learn how to better service students in a manner that moves them to graduation.

V. Compensation

There is no compensation for participating in this study.

VI. Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

Participation in research is voluntary. Participants have the right to choose not to be in this study. If you decide to participate in this study and change your mind, you may drop out at any time. You may skip questions.

VII. Confidentiality

We will keep all records private to the extent of the law. Only Paulina L. Collazo Navarro and her research team will view the information collected. I also understand pseudonyms will be used for this study.

VIII. Copy of Consent Form to Subject

You will receive a copy of this consent form to keep. If you are willing to volunteer for this research, please sign below. Thank you for your time.

_____	_____	_____
Printed Name	Signature	Date

APPENDIX C: INFORMATIONAL FLYER

Research Participants Needed

Impact of Mattering on Latino Graduates

- Are you between the ages of 18 and 23?
 - Do you self-identify as Latino?
- Are you a graduate of Liberty or Freedom High Schools between 2014 and 2018?
- Did you have significant relationships with high school staff while in school?

If you answered **yes** to all of these questions, you may be eligible to participate in a mattering research study.

The purpose of this research study is to understand the impact of mattering on Latino student persistence to high school graduation. Participants will be asked to participate in an individual interview, focus group interview, and/or reflective journaling activity. Benefits of the study include an opportunity to give voice to your experience and provide an understanding of the phenomenon for school practitioners. Participants will receive no compensation.

Participants will meet either in the Bethlehem, PA community or at the
Lynfield Community Center
1889 Lynfield Drive
Bethlehem, PA 18015

Paulina Lee Collazo Navarro a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.
Please contact Paulina Collazo at (484) 951-3731 or plcollazonavarro@liberty.edu for more information.

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Please introduce yourself to me as if we just met.
2. From what school did you graduate?
3. What year did you graduate?
4. How important do you perceive high school completion is to your family?
5. How important did you perceive high school completion was important to you in ninth grade?
6. How did the level of perceived importance of high school completion change over the next three years?
7. Please describe school-based relationships you perceived to be positive during your high school years.
8. How did these perceived positive relationships make you feel?
9. How do you perceive these positive relationships assisted you with perseverance to graduation?
10. Please describe any perceived negative experiences you had during your high school years either school, home or community based.
11. How did you navigate through these negative experiences?
12. What impact do you perceive school relationships have on your path to graduation?
13. What else would you like me to know about your high school experience?

APPENDIX E: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Please describe your overall feelings about your high school experience.
2. Please provide a description of the positive relationships you had in high school.
3. How did these positive relationships help you navigate high school?
4. How did your mattering experience impact your decision to stay in school?

APPENDIX F: REFLECTIVE JOURNAL QUESTIONS

1. Please provide details regarding an example in high school where you believed you mattered or not. Include who, what happened and your feelings.
2. Please provide details regarding an individual that you perceive had a major impact on your persistence to graduation. Include a specific scenario of reflection.
3. Please explain how mattering relationships from high school have influenced your ability to navigate your current life situation.