

WHAT MOTIVATES THEM TO GRADUATE? A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF
THE EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES WHO EARN A HIGH SCHOOL
DIPLOMA IN TITLE I SCHOOLS

by

Heather Steelman

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of students with disabilities in Title I schools that kept them motivated to earn a high school diploma. The central and sub questions explored factors associated with the attainment or fulfillment of basic psychological needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy, as well as intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors. Title One high school graduates with disabilities, or students who had an individualized education plan (IEP) when they entered high school and continued to have an IEP through graduation, were identified through snowball sampling and participated in this study through interviews, a focus group, and letter writing. The methodology used was a transcendental phenomenological design and data analysis followed procedural recommendations. The theory guiding this study was the self-determination theory (SDT), as it describes motivational factors that lead to success. The textural and structural descriptions were synthesized to form the essence of the phenomenon and answer the research question: What are the lived experiences in Title I schools of students with disabilities who stayed motivated to earn a traditional high school diploma? Participants all described factors that led to their successful completion of high school. They each told of people, both a teacher in school and a family member at home, who supported them and encouraged them to continue when challenges arose. They all set goals for themselves to graduate and had personal attributes that caused them to persist through those challenges.

Keywords: motivation, disability, poverty, graduate, self-determination

Dedication

I am so thankful for the support system I have had to complete this journey. Inspired by my grandfather, William Fertig, and supported by my mother, Christina Pruitt, I have finally reached the destination I sought so many years ago. In addition, my two daughters Macee and Rylee Tamminen, have been, and continue to be, my inspiration to better myself in every way to set the best example I can for them. Finally, my husband, Todd Steelman, has been by my side during the most challenging and frustrating times. He is my rock, and I would not have finished if it had not been for his encouragement and love.

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List of Abbreviations

Self Determination Theory (STD)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

Individual Education Plan (IEP)

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET)

Organismic Integration Theory (OIT)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe and understand the experiences of students with disabilities who attend Title I schools and earn a high school diploma. The population of focus was students with disabilities who attend these schools, as they have one of the highest dropout rates among subgroups (Hynes, 2014; U.S. Department of Education and National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2017). The targeted group of participants in this study exhibited resilience and persisted to earn a high school diploma despite the numerous obstacles they faced. The participants' ultimate success in terms of earning a high school diploma demonstrates that when motivated, they can be successful.

Research that examines the reasons students with disabilities who attend Title I schools drop out was reviewed, and a gap in the literature is revealed in Chapter One. This chapter will explain the literature regarding why some students are motivated to graduate when so many are dropping out. Additionally, the problem statement and purpose were provided based on the literature and self-determination theory (SDT) put forth by Deci and Ryan (2002, 2008, 2011). This theory steered the purpose of the study and helped create the research questions. Finally, the research methods that provided structure to this study are explored.

Background

Increasing graduation rates is a challenge for educators. Social and economic issues arise within communities when students drop out of high school. High school dropouts have a greater likelihood of becoming homeless, teenage parents, unemployed, and involved in the criminal justice system (Hynes, 2014; Nichols et al., 2015), which creates financial and other burdens to

both the individual and society. The high school dropout rate in the United States reached an all-time low in 2014-2015, with only 83% of students graduating (NCES, 2017); however, this average fluctuates, with an average of 75.5% of students graduating yearly (NCES, 2017).

Several sociodemographic factors directly impact graduation rates. Both having a disability and attending a Title I school directly affects whether a student drops out or earns a diploma.

Historical

Standards of education for students with disabilities in the public school setting have dramatically changed over the years due to helpful legislation. Most notably, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 was the first mandate that required schools serving students with disabilities to participate in all state and district assessments (Schifter, 2016). In 2001, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was enacted and mandated a higher level of accountability than had previously been enforced by requiring states to report graduation rates for all students (Schifter, 2016). The reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 instituted a requirement for states to create a state performance plan with 20 indicators for accountability for students with disabilities (Elbaum et al., 2014). Indicator number one is the graduation rate of students with disabilities, which increased the demands for accountability. The use of exit exams made earning a diploma more difficult for students with disabilities (Yell et al., 2012). While the changes in laws have increased accountability for schools serving students with disabilities, increased demands have also created new challenges for the students.

Improving high school success for all students was a priority under the Bush Administration, which led to the development of longitudinal data systems (Franklin & Trouard, 2016). The National Governors' Association cohort graduation rate and NCLB cemented the national dedication to improving graduation rates (Franklin & Trouard; 2016). The practice of

tracking students' movements through their educational careers has been ongoing since NCLB in 2000, and was continued by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 (Author, 2016). Trends established by NCLB have served as a bridge to new legislation, extending government legislation for tracking student achievement into the future (Jennings, 2018).

Additionally, students who live in socioeconomically disadvantaged homes have been the targets of legislation slated to improve funding and resources. Title I was enacted in 1965 under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to increase funding for schools with a high population of students living below the poverty line and at risk of school failure (Hirn et al., 2018). Funding is directed at schools with students who come from low-income homes to provide opportunities for academic improvement by equipping schools with more money (Bruce et al., 2018) to use in various ways, as determined by local politics (Yettick, 2015).

Social

The social impact of dropping out of school goes beyond the individual into society. The cost to the United States of students dropping out over the next decade is expected to be about three trillion dollars (Robertson et al., 2016). High school dropouts face more challenges than traditional graduates. A multitude of factors, including teenage pregnancy, incarceration, and lack of skills to enter the workforce put pressure on society to provide funding for high school dropouts (McKee & Caldarella, 2016; Robertson et al., 2016; Winding & Andersen, 2015).

Lack of education is related to “risky behavior and even early death” (Franklin & Trouard, 2016, p. 632). The likelihood of being incarcerated is greater for those who drop out of high school and higher than any other at-risk group. In fact, high school dropouts are five times more likely than graduates to be imprisoned by the age of 30 (Backman, 2017). Additionally, children whose parents are incarcerated are at a greater risk of dropping out of school during

adolescence, and female dropouts are more likely to become pregnant as teenagers (Backman, 2017). In fact, 33% of dropouts give birth as teenagers (Messacar & Oreopoulos, 2013; Nichols et al., 2015). Dropout rates for male teenage parents were also impacted, as males are expected to take on the role of provider. Males are encouraged more than their female counterparts to drop out of school early to seek work opportunities for their new families (Softas-Nall et al., 2015).

According to the NCES (2014), the employment rate for high school dropouts in 2016 was only 48%, compared to the 69% employment rate for those who graduated high school that same year. For dropouts who were able to obtain employment, the average income in 2015 was \$25,000 (NCES, 2014). That same year, the average income for a high school graduate was \$30,500 (NCES, 2014). There is a direct link between dropping out of high school and poverty (NCES, 2014). This means that approximately 32% of high school dropouts live below the poverty line (NCES, 2014).

Poverty's effect begins at birth and is evident in the earliest stages of educational experiences. The number of children living in poverty fluctuates but ranges from 10-33% nationally (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2015). A child living in poverty can have social/emotional skills and cognitive development that is impaired or delayed. Children growing up in disadvantaged homes "face major disparities in access to higher quality education," and research has indicated that children who spend their preschool years in low-income homes have a greater risk of "detrimental effects on long-term development" (Watts et al., 2018, p. 2). With fewer children attending preschool than ever before (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2015), early interventions are not used as frequently as necessary to encourage the closure of the achievement gap of children living in poverty.

In turn, poverty has a direct impact on academic success. Documentation of students who

face socioeconomic adversity is robust. In fact, poverty is a key factor among children with learning disparities (Dawson-McClure et al., 2015). In a study conducted by Elbaum et al. (2014) on how poverty impacts children's learning, it was revealed to be so significant that "for every 10% increase in students living in poverty, the graduation rate dropped by 3.8%" (p. 7). Students living below the poverty line underperform on almost every indicator of academic success, graduation rates included (Zhao, 2016). The Matthew effect, which states that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, can be used to describe the effects of poverty on educational success (Crampton & Hall, 2017). Furthermore, children exposed to socioeconomic risks at a young age experience a "less stimulating home environment," which has been associated with negative feelings of academic identity and poor reading skills (Crampton & Hall, 2017, p. 374). The link between socioeconomic risk during the preschool years and the academic identity of adolescents demonstrates how the trajectory toward educational success is altered at an early age.

Title I schools are identified by local systems as schools where at least 40% of the students qualify for free or reduced meals. Title I was enacted in 1965 under ESEA to close the achievement gap and provide supplemental funds to schools serving low-income students (Bruce, 2018). Title I funds generally target academic programs, specifically in reading and math, and are crucial to districts in poor neighborhoods. The New America Foundation (2018) stated that schools are mostly funded by local property revenue, which creates disparities among schools and districts because of its correlation to property values. However, even with additional funding afforded by Title I, the Education Law Center findings indicated, "[T]he highest poverty districts receive an average of \$1200 less per pupil than the lowest poverty districts" (New America Foundation, 2018, p.71).

In addition to low socioeconomic status, another factor affecting dropout rates is having a

disability. Students with disabilities graduate at a lower rate than the overall school population (Shifter, 2016). In fact, in 2012-2013, the overall graduation rate was 81.4%, but for students with disabilities, it was 61.9% (Shifter, 2016). However, students with disabilities who graduate with a diploma have higher rates of enrolling in higher education and being employed than students with disabilities who do not (Shifter, 2016). Although the dropout problem for students with disabilities is recognized as weighty, little has been successful in increasing graduation rates for these students.

A student's struggle is compounded when one has both a disability and attends a Title I school. Only about 50% of these students graduate high school with a traditional diploma (Flowers et al., 2017). Gaining an understanding of what makes the 50% graduate is key to improving graduation rates for students who live in poverty and have a disability.

Theoretical

The design that frames this study is Deci and Ryan's (2002) self-determination theory (SDT). Deci and Ryan (2002) postulated that when a student's basic psychological needs are met, they can achieve "healthy functioning" (p. 6). Competence, relatedness, and autonomy all must be fulfilled for an individual to persist (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Therefore, SDT is a match when seeking insight into the experiences of students who struggle in the academic arena. Achievement is linked to motivation, and when teachers support a student's autonomy instead of attempting to control their behavior, achievement is optimized (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Yadava and Yadava (2018) found a positive and significant correlation between motivation and academic achievement. Students who have a disability and attend a Title I school face greater adversity than typical high school students pursuing a diploma (Flowers et al., 2017; Shifter, 2016). When focused on the success of a vulnerable population, factors related to motivation should be

considered. SDT provides a strong foundation to determine the motivational factors that lead to the academic achievement of an extremely high-risk group of students, students with disabilities who attend Title I schools.

Situation to Self

My motivation for conducting this research started when I got a job in the inner city projects in a town with the highest murder rate per capita in the country. I taught first grade. As I made my observations of students, I began to wonder why some students were successful in the classroom and others were not. As I got to know the community and reasons for generational poverty, I became intrigued by a group of people whose lives were completely different than mine. I felt strangely connected to this population of students and have worked with them for most of my career.

Furthermore, I have been working with students with disabilities my entire career. It puzzles me why some make it through graduation and some do not. I have always wondered what I could do as an educator or what the system could do to ensure the success of all these students. As an educator, I understand that there are factors out of my control that contribute to students with disabilities who live in poor communities dropping out. However, I have never understood why those who succeed do so. Exploring the reasons some students persist to ultimately earn a traditional high school diploma has provided me an outlet for my passion and an avenue to grow both personally and professionally.

I will bring several philosophical assumptions to this research. I believe there is absolute truth revealed through the word of Jesus Christ. However, individuals attempt to understand truth through unique experiences. Through the research process, my goal is to rely heavily on participants' views of their situation. Social constructivist philosophy elicits the researcher to

“look for complexities of views” (Creswell, 2013, p. 20), which will be revealed as I report experiences vividly to make sense of everyone’s unique challenges and circumstances. Multiple realities exist among participants, and their views of these realities will be exposed through an ontological approach. In this transcendental phenomenological study, constructivism is a valuable way to approach discovering individual experiences that result in a degree of perspective, not necessarily absolute truth (Patton, 2015). I acknowledge that biases are present and will be transparent as I reveal my own.

Problem Statement

As published by the NCES (2017), U.S. graduation rates hover between 72.6-75.5% on average. The most recent data show the graduation rate in 2014-2015 was 83% (NCES, 2017). When one combines the graduation rates of students with disabilities who also attend Title I schools, the decline in graduation rate is drastic. In fact, “the magnitude of the negative impact of poverty is almost twice as great for students with disabilities as it is for the student population as a whole” (Elbaum et al., 2014, p. 8). Only about 50% of these students graduate (Flowers et al., 2017). Research from the last five years has indicated that students with disabilities who attend Title I schools graduate at a significantly decreased rate (Elbaum et al., 2014). For every 10% increase in free and reduced eligibility, there is an additional 6% drop in the graduation rate (Elbaum et al., 2014). An increase in accountability creates more obstacles for those already struggling (Yell et al., 2012). However, many students who face these adversities do graduate with traditional diplomas.

There are rich data about why students leave high school. Research conducted by Tufts University and their Center for Promise (2016) outlined key reasons students fail to graduate. Most students who fail to graduate come from toxic environments, yearn for connectedness, and

experience difficult circumstances (Flowers et al., 2017). Many have had multiple factors that contributed to their choice to leave school before graduation (Hynes, 2016). The problem is that students with disabilities who also attend Title I schools are dropping out at the highest rates. Although research is rich regarding why these students drop out, there is no research that gives a voice to students with disabilities who attended Title I schools, overcame adversity, and were motivated to earn a traditional high school diploma (Flowers et al., 2017).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the school experiences of students with disabilities in Title I schools who persisted in earning a high school diploma. High school graduates with disabilities are students who had an individualized education plan (IEP) when they entered high school and continued to have an IEP until they graduated. Graduation is understood as successful completion of high school with a standard high school diploma. Title I schools are identified as schools where 75% or more of the students receive free or reduced lunch.

The theory that guided this study was Deci and Ryan's (2002) SDT, which describes motivational factors that lead to success. Because students with disabilities who live in poverty face more challenges than the typical population, persistence could become a struggle and lack of motivation could contribute to dropping out. Gaining insight into what leads a student with so many struggles to stay motivated and ultimately earn a diploma can provide tools for educational entities to support this population more effectively. SDT provides a guide related to the psychological needs of individuals and what results when these needs are met.

Significance of the Study

While several studies have reported on students with disabilities or students eligible for

free or reduced lunch, none have examined students who fit both criteria (Flowers et al., 2017). There is significant research regarding students with disabilities who attend Title I schools and drop out (Hynes, 2014; Elbaum et al., 2014; NCES, 2017). However, no qualitative study has been found that considers what makes this population persist until they earn a high school diploma. This study contributes to a deeper understanding in the literature concerning students who both have a disability and attend a Title I school and persist to graduate with a traditional diploma.

The significance of the study has multiple components. First, it focused on the experiences of a group of students who have been underrepresented in research. Several empirical studies have examined dropout rates and reasons (Hynes, 2014; Elbaum et al., 2014; Flowers et al., 2017; NCES, 2017), but none have described the experiences of the students who graduate. Therefore, a gap in the literature is addressed through this research.

Second, this study informs those who work with this population in preservice education, teachers and administrators in Title I schools, and curriculum and program developers. These professionals will gain a deeper understanding of the essence of what it means to be a student with a disability from a poor community who earns a diploma. This research provides an opportunity for enhancements in the training of these professionals. While there have been efforts to understand why these students drop out (Hynes, 2016; Elbaum et al., 2014; Flowers et al., 2017; NCES, 2017), there is more to be learned regarding why some persist through graduation.

The last area of significance for this study was expansion of the application of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Deci and Ryan's (2002) SDT explains that people have three psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. When these needs are met, motivation and

mental health are maximized. Outputs are intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2008). SDT proposes that motivation has a key role in sustaining the “mindfulness, energy, and vitality” that bring about persistence in what matters to a person (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p.183). This study contributes to the body of theoretical knowledge and understanding of SDT as it applies to special education students who qualify for free or reduced lunch. Utilizing SDT as the theoretical framework for research into the field of students with disabilities in Title I schools demonstrated how this theory relates to the educational arena.

Students who qualify for free or reduced lunch and students who have disabilities are more likely to drop out of high school than any other population (Flowers et al., 2017). Schools are accountable for reaching all of these students and ensuring they are successful (Elbaum et al., 2014; Schifter, 2016; Yell et al., 2012). Local education agencies need to develop a better understanding of what motivates successful students in this demographic so they can better create structures to facilitate an increase in graduation rates.

Research Questions

One central question and three sub-questions guided this phenomenological study.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of students with disabilities who attended Title I schools and stayed motivated to earn a traditional high school diploma?

The central research question created a focus for this study. The goal was to arrive at “a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 81) they shared as Title I students with disabilities who stayed motivated to earn a high school diploma. The literature has confirmed that (a) the dropout rate for students with disabilities is high (Schifter, 2016), (b) dropout rates for students who come from poor communities are high (Flowers et al.,

2017), and (c) dropout rates are compounded when students with disabilities attend school in poor communities (Elbaum et al., 2014). Therefore, given that students with disabilities who attend Title I schools are at the highest risk for dropping out, the experiences of those who remained motivated to attain a diploma are important. Their answers provided insight into this issue.

Research sub-question one

How do participants describe their sources of motivation in their attainment of a high school diploma? Deci and Ryan (2002) indicated in SDT that intrinsic motivation is associated with a higher degree of well-being. Those who are extrinsically motivated are not as likely to obtain long-term success. Those who have their needs met, including autonomy, are more likely to display self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2002). One factor identified as increasing learning engagement is the relationship between student and teacher. Learning engagement “encompasses a set of behaviors that directly foster learning” (Lee & Bierman, 2015, p. 386). Following directions, compliance, and on-task behavior are improved when the student-teacher relationship is supportive. This, in turn, increases persistence and self-direction in at-risk students; therefore, self-determination is increased (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Overall, students who feel they are supported by their teachers are “more likely to perceive themselves as competent” and are motivated to learn and perform academically (Lee & Bierman, 2015, p.388). Sub-question one addresses sources of motivation.

Research sub-question two

How do participants describe the role of goal setting in their attainment of a high school diploma? Intrinsic framing of goals is directly associated with goal persistence and attainment. Deci and Ryan’s SDT (2002) stated that intrinsic sources of motivation are related to a higher

degree of a person's well-being than extrinsic forms. A goal that is extrinsically framed may be associated with short-term persistence but not with long-term goal achievement (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Students may seek extrinsic motivation in the early stages of goal setting. SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2002) theorizes that persistence with and achievement of a goal are related to the psychological needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy being met. If these basic needs are met, an individual can set goals that are framed intrinsically (Deci & Ryan, 2002). This sub-question seeks to determine the source of goal setting.

Research sub-question three

How do participants describe environmental and contextual supports that were impactful in their attainment of a high school diploma? This sub-question is grounded in SDT as well. Autonomy is not the same as independence. Independence is defined as working alone without the support of another (Deci & Ryan, 2002). According to Deci and Ryan (2002), individuals “have a primary propensity to forge interconnections among aspects of their own psyches as well as with other individuals and groups in their social world” (p. 5). Environments that provide reinforcement for autonomy may support intrinsic motivation in students. Relationships are necessary to develop autonomy and connectedness. Positive student-teacher relationships have been connected to improved “social competence” (Lee & Bierman, 2015, p. 385). An individual may attain a goal, but unless they can be autonomous and connected, they may not achieve the well-being necessary for persistence (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Additionally, individuals need to feel competent to succeed.

When structure is in place, one has the potential to feel competent and engaged (Deci & Ryan, 2002). This allows individuals to cope and increases cognitive development. Skills linked to self-regulation, one's ability to “focus and maintain attention, regulate behavior to positively

interact with peers and adults, and regulate emotion in the face of stress and anxiety,” are crucial for success in school (Watts et al., 2018, p. 4). Not surprisingly, children exposed to poverty have a higher risk of struggling with self-regulation and feeling competent in the educational arena (Watts et al., 2018). Question three seeks to determine what conditions the participants view as conducive to persistence despite the many challenges they faced.

Definitions

The following are terms used throughout this dissertation, as well as their definitions:

- *Autonomy*—The perceived origin or source of one’s own behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2002)
- *Competence*—Feeling effective in one’s ongoing interactions with the social environment and experiencing opportunities to exercise and express one’s capacities (Deci & Ryan, 2002)
- *Extrinsic motivation*—Behaviors carried out to attain contingent outcomes driven by external factors (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Unlu & Dettweiler, 2015)
- *Intrinsic motivation*—Behaviors performed out of interest and enjoyment. Motivation comes from within (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Unlu & Dettweiler, 2015)
- *Relatedness*—Feeling connected to others, caring for and being cared for by others, and having a sense of belongingness both with other individuals and one’s community (Deci & Ryan, 2002)

Summary

Chapter One provided a synopsis of the impact having a disability and attending a Title I school can have on earning a high school diploma. This is an issue that goes beyond the school walls and has a long-term impact on the communities for generations. One possible way for schools to improve is to better understand what it takes to make students who have a disability

and attend a Title I school successful. Based on the literature, the reasons students with disabilities who attend Title I schools are not graduating at the national average are clear. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to gain insight into the experiences of those who struggle most but persist to earn a traditional high school diploma. The research questions were the basis for the study.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Through the years, much has changed in K-12 education and much remains the same. The federal government has sought to create legislation to improve schools for all students. Bipartisan agreement is the trend in education, and there is a focus on improving graduation rates. However, each time laws are created or amended, they fail to succeed at creating schools where all students are successful (Klein, 2014). This is demonstrated through historical trends in public education.

Academic success was defined by Yadava and Yadava (2018) as the extent to which short- and long-term goals are achieved by individuals. Graduation is the evidence of achieving a long-term educational goal. Two groups of students have struggled most to achieve this milestone: students with disabilities and students who come from poverty (Elbaum et al., 2014; Jennings, 2018; National Longitudinal Transitional Study [NLTS], 2012). Both minority groups have been the focus of much legislation. However, these students continue to drop out at the highest rates. The NLTS (2012) examined trends from 2003 through 2012 for special education students. The study indicated that students with IEPs are more likely to come from households that receive federal assistance for income, and the number continues to grow (Elbaum et al., 2014). In 2003, 15% of homes reported no adult with a paying job living in the home, resulting in federal financial aid provided to support the family. By 2013, this number had grown to 20% (NCES, 2017; Franklin & Trouard, 2016; NLTS, 2012). Many students who receive special education services also face struggles with poverty, which increases their risk of dropping out of high school prior to earning a diploma.

Graduating from high school has lifelong implications for individuals. Those without

high school diplomas are one and a half times more likely to be unemployed (Franklin & Trouard, 2016). For those employed, the median salary is \$14,400 less for those who fail to earn high school diplomas, as reported by the U.S. Department of Education in 2017. In addition, the probability of engaging in risky behaviors and incarceration are greater for dropouts (Franklin & Trouard, 2016). These struggles indicate a need to determine what makes a student who faces some of the greatest challenges succeed in an academic arena where so many do not.

This chapter will provide a synthesis of research regarding students with disabilities that attend Title I schools, and the statistics related to earning a high school diploma. Additionally, the literature review built a case for research that needs to be explored based on SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2002, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Existing research provided an understanding of why students with disabilities who qualify for free or reduced meals may drop out of school before graduation and exposed a gap in the research that supports the need for this study.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study was Deci and Ryan's SDT (2000,2002,2008). Deci and Ryan (2002, 2008) and Ryan and Deci (2000) proposed that individuals have three basic psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Research has supported this human motivation theory, explaining that although it may look different among individuals, all three needs must be met for well-being to occur (Unlu & Dettweiler, 2015). Autonomy is the "urge" individuals have to be the causal agent in their own lives, competency is the need to experience success, and relatedness is the desire to be connected to others (Unlu & Dettweiler, 2015, p. 675). When these needs are met, an individual will attain optimal outcomes. In addition to psychological needs, factors related to motivation form another foundation of SDT. In SDT, both intrinsic and extrinsic factors are described and explain how the two relate to success (Deci

& Ryan, 2002). Because special education students who come from families facing financial hardship are confronted with an abundance of obstacles on the journey to earn a high school diploma, it is important to understand how motivation and well-being can be optimized to encourage greater levels of achievement among this population.

SDT is comprised of mini-theories, all involving the idea that individuals have basic psychological needs. Each mini-theory is a component of SDT. Cognitive evaluation theory (CET), organismic integration theory (OIT), causality integration theory (CIT), and basic needs theory (BNT) integrate to form SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

Cognitive Evaluation Theory

CET was created to examine intrinsic motivation and how social contexts impact individuals. Intrinsically motivated behaviors are driven by satisfaction inherent to the individual rather than outside forces, and individuals participate in such activities because they are interested and enjoy them (Deci & Ryan, 2002). As defined by Deci and Ryan (2002), intrinsic motivation is not focused on an instrument. Instead, the value is internally driven satisfaction and is inherent in action. Conversely, extrinsic motivation is focused “toward and dependent on contingent outcomes that are separable from the action” (Deci & Ryan, 2002, p. 11).

CET goes on to provide a further distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. In the beginning, researchers examined how rewards impact intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2002). This was somewhat controversial because their findings opposed operant theory, which was a critical piece of the teachings of psychology (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Another major study on motivation occurred in 1950 when Harlow experimented with monkeys and found that, in the absence of external rewards, the monkeys would persist with puzzles (DiDomenico & Ryan, 2017). When rewards were introduced, the monkeys lessened their “spontaneous explorations”

(DiDomenico & Ryan, 2017, p. 2). Similarly, Deci and Ryan (2002) found that tangible rewards, such as money or awards, undermined intrinsic motivation, whereas verbal rewards, such as praise or verbal feedback, enhanced it (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

According to CET, two cognitive processes affect intrinsic motivation: perceived locus of causality and perceived competence (Deci, 1995). Perceived locus of causality is related to the need for autonomy, and perceived competence is associated with the need for competence. An event that shifts focus to a more external locus will undermine intrinsic motivation. Likewise, when there is an internal perceived focus, greater intrinsic motivation is present. When an event occurs to increase perceived competence, intrinsic motivation increases as well. Alternatively, when perceived competence is decreased, so is intrinsic motivation (Deci, 1995). People must feel autonomous regarding an activity in which they feel competent for verbal praise to increase intrinsic motivation. When an individual experiences autonomy, a feeling of competence, they also experience personal causation. They feel that their “behavior is chosen by them” (Deci, 1995, p. 30) as opposed to being imposed on them.

Organismic Integration Theory

Organismic integration theory (OIT) focuses on external motivation as it examines self-determination on a continuum. Amotivation is one extreme of the continuum, where one does not intend to act or is passive with their actions. People who are amotivated do not just go through the motions of a task. This results from feeling unable to achieve because of lack of contingency, lack of perceived competence, or not valuing the outcome or activity (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Intrinsic motivation is on the opposite side of the continuum and is the model of autonomous, self-determined behavior.

There are four types of regulation that flow along the continuum under extrinsic motivation: (a) external, (b) introjected, (c) identified, and (d) integrated. External regulation is doing things to get rewards or to avoid punishment and is the type of motivation that is the foundation of Skinner's operant theory of 1953. External motivation has been used to contrast intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2002). However, Deci and Ryan (2002) further explained extrinsic motivation. Introjected motivation is an external regulation that has been internalized but not accepted as one's own and consists of behaviors that control individuals because if they fail to do them, they will feel guilt or shame (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Additionally, these behaviors could build up ego or increase one's sense of self-worth. Previous research has indicated that if outcomes are based on ego, an example of introjected regulation, intrinsic motivation is lost (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

Moving closer to intrinsic motivation, regulation through identification is a form of extrinsic motivation where an individual values a goal and it is consequently important to them (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Identified regulation is associated with autonomy because the individual identifies with the action and owns it. Integrated regulation is the most autonomous type of extrinsic motivation and can be described as the behaviors in line with an individual's set of values, needs, and goals. They are fully integrated with the individual but are not done for interest or enjoyment. Instead, they are the attainment of "personally important outcomes" and are usually requested by a significant other in a situation where a reward is offered for the behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2002, p. 104). According to OTI, relatedness is essential for internalization to occur. Additionally, the competence of behaviors valued by a significant other is a component to internalization and self-regulation of extrinsically motivated activities (2002).

Causality Orientations Theory

Causality orientations theory (COT) was developed to describe inner resources that develop within individuals over time as a result of social interactions. Researchers Deci and Ryan (2002) created an individual measure, the General Causality Orientations Scale, to describe “individual differences in one’s motivational orientations toward the social world” (p. 21).

According to COT, three orientations represent self-determination: (a) autonomy, (b) controlled, and (c) impersonal. Autonomy, an individual’s regulation of behavior due to interests and values, indicates intrinsic motivation and integrated extrinsic motivation. This is most closely related to positive self-actualization, self-esteem, and overall indicators of well-being. Zaff et al. (2017) stated that students who believe they are in control of outcomes related to academics are more likely to persist in school and remain enrolled. Controlled and impersonal orientations move toward amotivation on the continuum described in OIT. Controlled orientation is linked to type-A behaviors, as well as being self-conscious in public. Impersonal orientation is associated with low self-esteem and depression (Zaff et al, 2017; Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Basic Needs Theory

Findings of basic needs theory (BNT) are implied throughout SDT, but in isolation were used for clarification purposes. Need satisfaction has been linked to well-being in SDT, and BNT has confirmed that an overall sense of well-being is reached when needs are met (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Researchers have treated well-being in different ways. One perspective is the focus on subjective well-being, which can be described as simply being happy (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Conversely, eudaimonic well-being is equated to being fully functioning and is the approach

Deci and Ryan (2002) endorsed, as it establishes a link between the satisfaction of the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, relatedness, and eudaimonic well-being.

Kasser and Ryan (2001) linked goal contents to well-being by evaluating the life goals of individuals and dividing them into two types: intrinsic aspirations and extrinsic aspirations. Intrinsic aspirations are more closely related to the satisfaction of needs and result in “self-actualization and vitality” (Kasser & Ryan, 2001, p. 121). Extrinsic aspirations are goals related to seeking external indicators of self-worth and have been linked to anxiety and depression (Kasser & Ryan, 2001; Deci & Ryan, 2002). Another review of literature seeking to identify factors leading to high school graduation found that students who had expectations of attending college doubled the probability of attending compared to low-income students graduating from high school (Zaff et al., 2017).

SDT ultimately unites the four mini-theories to explain how social environments either add to or detract from the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. SDT can be used to predict “conditions that promote optimal versus non-optimal outcomes” for experiences and behaviors in certain situations (Deci & Ryan, 2002, p. 6). SDT can be used to understand conditions associated with the motivation of students with disabilities in Title I schools who face many obstacles but achieve academic success.

Related Literature

Several topics are key to understanding this transcendental phenomenological study. The first is to understand the historical trail of legislation that first excluded students with disabilities from schools to the laws that followed, which ultimately required these same students to be included as much as possible. Additionally, reviewing past trends in education for students who attend schools that qualify for Title I funding is key to understanding the struggles this particular

student population has faced. Another crucial component for review is dropout trends and traits common to students who tend to be at risk. The school's part in contributing to a student's failure must be considered as well. Finally, SDT is relevant to understanding the proposed study because it provides an examination of how factors related to motivation can be applied in the school setting to achieve optimal levels of success for all students. These concepts are pertinent to the participants in the proposed study and will guide the examination of their perspective.

Historical Overview

The landscape of schooling has changed dramatically throughout history. While not without flaws, pioneers in the field have continually sought improvement to maximize opportunities so all students can achieve. In the most primitive foundations of education in America, the common school movement began in the early 1800s, and although schools were not new, this model was brought to the colonies as "a part of the growing globalization of education" and sought to transform the system to a larger model of an educational system (Spring, 2008, p. 79). Key proponents of the movement advocated for education and believed it could be influential to religious beliefs. Proponents also thought it would decrease tensions among social classes, lower crime rates, eliminate poverty, and provide political stability (Spring, 2008). This movement had a lasting impact on the public education system in place today. Pioneers such as Thomas Jefferson sought to provide learning for all children as a right for all people (Pulliam & Van Patten, 2007). Even though some local and private schools existed prior to the school movement, many states began to pass laws requiring provisions so more children could attend school, with the states dictating instructional time (Spring, 2008). Other goals of the common school movement were to allow all children the opportunity to attend a public school and to establish objectives to increase standardized testing (Spring, 2008, p. 80).

Another prominent face in the development of education is John Dewey. Dewey is known for his philosophy in pragmatism, the way people learn by experience (Webb, 2004). Dewey worked with high school students and conducted research on hands-on learning during the 1890s. Dewey used social imagination to help “students relate and understand isolated ideas to the actual conditions that have given them their original meaning” (Spring, 2008, p. 252). By doing this, Dewey hypothesized that students would better understand and acknowledge their habits. He believed that a school community had a major impact on an individual’s life and advocated for all students to be educated, or at least be provided the opportunity (Webb, 2004). One key factor in Dewey’s belief system that translates to present-day schooling is that some students would require, or benefit from, alternate types of learning through vocational training (Webb, 2004). Dewey remains an innovator in the field of education.

As the country developed, it became increasingly diverse and attention was focused on those with differing needs, which resulted in the evolution of the field of education. In 1965, the ESEA was established and continues to be influential in the field of education (McDonnell, 2005; Webb, 2004). Initially, the ESEA aimed to address poverty in public schools and led to free public education for all students (Webb, 2004). In addition to focusing on poverty, the regulation included providing grants to schools that provide services to the population with special needs, which was unheard of at the time. In fact, children with disabilities were essentially excluded from public education prior to 1970. A 1965 North Carolina mandate made it illegal to send children with disabilities to public schools (Webb, 2004).

However, the tables began to turn in the early 1960s when the Kennedy family brought private family matters to the forefront and established the President’s Panel on Mental Retardation in 1961 (Pratt & Spaulding, 2015). Funding for research and teacher training was

provided as a result, and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development was created in 1962 to continue this work (Pratt & Spaulding, 2015).

Change in the educational landscape came along the heels of the civil rights movement with the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which served as a catalyst for the public to begin advocating for those with disabilities (Koseki, 2017). The *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens v. Pennsylvania* and *Mills v. District of Columbia Board of Education* were decisions that caused a significant positive shift for students with disabilities when the courts mandated that Pennsylvanian students with disabilities be provided equal access to public education (Koseki, 2017). The latter ensured students with exceptionalities were not excluded due to suspension or being forced to transfer from general education classes (Koseki, 2017). These crucial rulings were the building blocks for federal legislation in 1975, now known as IDEA (Koseki, 2017).

Initially enacted as the Education of All Handicapped Children Act, this statute ensures that students with disabilities have a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) and that the education is geared toward their special needs (Koseki, 2017). High school graduation rates and college entrance rates for students protected under this law tripled after IDEA was enacted (Koseki, 2017). Even with the progress made since IDEA took effect, the distribution of rights still varies depending on multiple factors, including “socioeconomic status” (Koseki, 2017, p. 796).

After IDEA was enacted, students with disabilities had greater access to public education but began to face a new type of isolation (Pratt & Spaulding, 2015). Special education classes were in areas of the school that were separate from the main areas of the school building. To address these issues, further legislation was enacted when *Board of Education v. Rowley*

provided a more clear definition of what “appropriate education” is (Koseki, 2017). The standard set by the Rowley case is that “appropriate education is satisfied when the state provides a child with personalized instruction with sufficient support services to permit the disabled child to benefit educationally” (Koseki, 2017, p. 803), but this does not necessarily amount to the best possible education. States are only required to provide basic access to education for students with disabilities while working with parents to define methods required for the education of each individual child.

The law currently addresses where services for students with disabilities should take place (Koseki, 2017). Each student identified as eligible to receive an IEP is entitled to a FAPE that must take place in the least restrictive environment. In summary, students must receive services in a setting with their non-disabled peers and be removed only when the disability is so severe that they cannot access an education (Koseki, 2017).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was an education act signed into law in 2001 that triggered the concept of high-stakes testing, greater accountability for schools/teachers, more unified rigorous standards, and reporting of data for special education students and other subgroups, including students from low-income families (Jennings, 2018). NCLB put pressure on schools to improve achievement by improving instruction as measured by these tests (Jennings, 2018). ESSA was developed in 2015 to replace NCLB but still required the same rigorous standards, testing, reporting, targeted intervention, and accountability (Jennings, 2018). ESSA served as a bridge from NCLB to new legislation geared at closing the achievement gap. Although much legislation has been enacted to hold schools accountable and close the achievement gap to remove inequality in education, factors within the home are still a stronger predictor of a child’s future in education than factors within the school (Zhao, 2016).

Paralleling reform for students with disabilities, poor students also witnessed shifts in mandates. In 1965, when President Johnson signed into effect the ESEA, it became “the most sweeping educational bill ever to come before congress” (Nelson, 2016, p. 358), as it changed the face of public education and created federal policies that required federal, state, and local districts to pay closer attention to certain populations (McDonnell, 2005). Title I created a focus on schools with a high concentration of students living in poverty. In the early stages of ESEA, there was little to no oversight of the new requirements, but by 1969, in the heat of the civil rights movement, organizations began to note that funding was being misused (Nelson, 2016; McDonnell, 2005).

During this time, the Martin-McClure report brought attention to shortcomings related to Title I funding, and a comparability regulation was added to be sure students were receiving programs in addition to, and not in lieu of, the core curriculum (McDonnell, 2005). The “supplement, not supplant provision” clarified that services federally funded by Title I could not replace services provided by state and local funds (McDonnell, 2005). The original ESEA was amended numerous times over the next few years, and each time became more precise.

By 1980, Title I funding, as with most educational programs, was reduced, but regulations remained the same (McDonnell, 2005). At this time, the federal role in education was lessened and the national discourse shifted from “equity to excellence,” as President Reagan’s “A Nation At Risk” speech sparked a shift in education policy (McDonnell, 2005, p. 378). A reauthorization of ESEA occurred in 1988 and required states to disclose academic achievement levels that students who receive support through Title I funding should reach. In 1994, the update established content and performance standards in reading and math. At this time, to receive funds through Title I, students had to be taught according to the standards established by states and

meet grade-level requirements. Therefore, goals, curriculum, and expectations were the same for Title I and all other students. Instruction paid for by Title I funds could be supplemental in nature, but students were required to be a part of the core program (McDonnell, 2005).

Today, trends in education still focus on closing achievement gaps for students most at risk and on increasing graduation rates. Legislation has provided a framework for a means to this end, but has not hit the mark, as a substantial population still does not make it to graduation (NCES, 2017; Franklin & Trouard, 2016; Klein, 2014; McDonnell, 2005; NLTS, 2012; Webb, 2004).

Who is Dropping Out and Why

Students drop out of school for a multitude of reasons. They can be related directly to school factors, to life outside of school, or a combination. A review of the literature revealed factors such as demographics, familial responsibilities, course failure and retention, attendance, academic achievement, mobility, self-perception, relationships with teachers and peers, and behavior in school as leading causes (Berg & Nelson, 2015; Hynes, 2014; Franklin & Trouard, 2016; Wilkins & Bost, 2016). According to Franklin and Trouard (2016), “[D]ropping out of high school is the outcome of a disengagement process that occurs over time” (p. 635). Cumulative factors increase risk and are more indicative than singular factors (Zaff et al., 2017). The sooner issues can be addressed and remediated, the more likely dropping out will be postponed or avoided (Messacar & Oreopoulos, 2013). Often, such issues do not begin in high school and must be identified and attended to before high school for optimal success.

Numerous studies revealed indicators related to dropping out of high school. The Center for Promise released survey results for young people across the country who left school before graduating (Hynes, 2014). The reasons these young people identified as leading them to drop out

of school prematurely include issues they were navigating at home, relationships (or lack thereof), and an overall sense of being overwhelmed (Center for Promise, 2014). Both Cassel (2003) and McKee (2012) concurred and added that retention and a lack of personal development play key roles in leading students to drop out before earning a diploma. Hynes (2014) reported that most students had experienced difficult circumstances until they reached a breaking point, thus causing them to drop out after struggling for a long time.

Another study examined indicators at two points in participants' lives: sixth and eighth grades (Wilkins & Bost, 2016). This research revealed that being overage because of retention or a disability negatively impacted high school graduation. There was a greater impact in eighth grade than in sixth, but at either age, being overage was the most significant indicator of dropping out, with poverty being second (Wilkins & Bost, 2016). Because more than half of public school students live in poverty (Jennings, 2018), and because students with IEPs tend to come from homes that rely on federal assistance for income (NLTS, 2012), identifying ways to reduce the dropout rate for this population is paramount. Children who live in poverty often come from generations who faced similar struggles. Zhao (2016) indicated that home life is the greatest predictor of a child's future. If family members were involved and valued education, as indicated by Flores de Apoaca et al. (2015), students' grades were higher and they experienced greater school success. Families who experience generational poverty may not value education and are less likely to be overt regarding high expectations for academic success (Jennings, 2018).

Students who come from families facing economic challenges and those with disabilities are dropping out of school at an alarming rate. When combined, these students yield the highest dropout rate of any subgroup (Elbaum et al., 2014). Students who come from low-income homes and those with disabilities struggle the most to perform on standardized tests. With the

implementation of NCLB and later ESSA, passing standardized tests is a requirement for graduation (Jennings, 2018), making earning a diploma even more challenging. Although there are indicators based on longitudinal data, dropping out is personalized and based on multiple factors that are cumulative and impactful over extended periods (Wilkins & Bost, 2016).

Failure of Educational Practices

Schools play a role in students' academic success or failure, and situations occur within the school setting that play a part in graduation rates. Examining these situations can provide insight into what has helped or hindered the graduation rate of participants. There is ample research suggesting dropout identifiers in students (NCES, 2017; Franklin & Trouard, 2016; Klein, 2014; McDonnell, 2005; NLTS, 2012; Webb, 2004). Schools can use research to target specific factors in their control that contribute to a student's failure to graduate. With increased funding, Title I schools can seek to improve in these areas to reduce the number of students with disabilities who drop out. Some identified reasons associated with high dropout rates at the school level are budget constraints, lack of teacher training, and the absence of early intervention (Iadarola et al., 2015; Jozsa & Barrett, 2019; Shin et al., 2016).

Budget

Budgetary restraints can impact a school's ability to provide services and supports necessary to meet student needs. In a study seeking parents' and educators' perspectives regarding special education services in urban school districts, teachers expressed their frustration with the lack of support from both local and district administration regarding available resources for special education (Iadarola et al., 2015). High school dropouts are expected to cost the United States about three trillion dollars over the next 10 years (Robertson et al., 2016). Therefore, efforts should be made to proactively invest funds into the education system to reduce dropout

rates. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development noted that the funding system for schools is dysfunctional at best and needs to be overhauled to provide greater funding for under-resourced schools to meet constitutional obligations to provide all students “adequate opportunities to learn” (Jennings, 2018, p. 12). The federal government does not currently provide suitable funding to ensure all students receive the best learning opportunities (Jennings, 2018).

Title I schools receive federal funding in excess of what is provided to all schools to close the achievement gaps of students living in poverty. However, these schools still maintain some of the highest dropout rates in the country. One issue associated with the extra monies is related to a lack of evidence that additional funds are having a positive impact on student achievement and consequently reducing the dropout rate (Yettick, 2015). There has not been a major evaluation of Title I in close to 30 years, when a national evaluation and reporting system for Title I ended. Instead, results are reported through state standards and the overall movement of a school toward mastery of these standards (McDonnell, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Because Title I is not associated with a particular program and schools do not have direct control over the use of Title I funds, an added challenge is filtering out results based solely on Title I initiatives. Instead, decisions on how to use funds are often politically driven by localities and do not allow schools to target their specific needs, which can lead to at-risk populations being overlooked (Yettick, 2015).

Through Title I, additional funds are provided to schools for students who face socioeconomic struggles. Another at-risk population with targeted funding is special education. IDEA was the first provision to establish the rights of students with disabilities to free and appropriate education. Funding was tied to this legislation and required states to create systems

to provide additional financial support to students with disabilities (Conlin & Jalilevand, 2018). IDEA directs schools to use 15% of funds to meet the needs of students with disabilities, and schools have the flexibility to decide how these monies are spent (Dewey et al., 2017). In addition, districts often use unrestricted funds to cover costs associated with students with disabilities, but the amount a district has in overage is linked directly to the wealth of the district and can vary greatly across districts and states (Conlin & Jalilevand, 2019). Furthermore, census-based funding, which began in the early 1990s, created further disparity by basing funding on some measure of total enrollment instead of on need (Hartman, 2001). The amount of special education funds allocated is not linked to the number of services provided or to the level of need but on the total number of students enrolled.

Special education funding equity has been researched, with the Special Education Expenditure Project (SEEP) leading the way (Conlin & Jailevand, 2019). This report identified disparities in funding and demonstrated a difference in funding for special education students based on district wealth, which creates a disparity in resources allocated to this at-risk population. Additionally, the project revealed incentives for schools for non-identifying students requiring special education services. In a nine-state study conducted by Dhuey and Lipcomb (2019), a link between a 10% reduction in special education identification and census-based funding was revealed. Moreover, changes to student placement and differing exit rates were found through SEEP. Although schools have flexibility regarding how to spend special education funds, they often face a battle between supporting programs for all students and allocating funds for students with disabilities.

Teacher Training

Another issue identified by the research is the increased time special education students spend in the care of general education teachers who are not trained to handle the specialized needs of this population. Special education students make up 13% of the population (Shin et al., 2016), and 60% of them receive at least 80% of their instruction in general education classrooms (Alfaro et al., 2015). General education teachers are required to teach grade-level standards to all students, including those with IEPs. Numerous factors are associated with creating access to grade-level standards for this population (Shin et al., 2016). Graduation requirements have become more exhaustive since the implementation of high stakes testing and the rigorous curriculum associated with these assessments (Jennings, 2018). Exit examinations are not required in some states, and end of course assessments are required to earn credits. Based on feedback from employers and other stakeholders, these requirements were put in place to ensure students graduate ready to enter the workforce or college (Hickox, 2015).

When inclusion was first discussed, it resulted in students with disabilities being placed in the general setting without concern for providing support to teachers to overcome challenges associated with supporting special education students in their classrooms (Shin et al., 2016). A major concern among general education teachers providing instruction to special education students is being prepared to support the varying needs of this population. It requires being proficient in teaching the standards to all students while offering specialized instruction to students with a multitude of needs (Alfaro et al., 2015).

General education teachers identify the need for focused training and note that this lack of training can actually escalate behavior and learning struggles of the special education students for whom they are responsible (Iadarola et al., 2015). It also can impact how these teachers perceive students with disabilities (Alfaro et al., 2015). Special education teachers recognize that

general education teachers do not have the foundational understandings of special education, and this can lead to a lack of acceptance of special education students or the lowering of standards in the classroom. The more education teachers receive regarding students with special needs, the more positive an attitude general education teachers will have toward special education students (Alfaro et al., 2015).

Better training of general education teachers is necessary because as revealed by Reddick et al. (2011), low standards and subpar curricula create a culture where students place similar expectations on themselves. Special education students believe that they cannot achieve because of the perceptions of the school or of their teachers and administrators. According to Fredricks et al. (2019), academic rigor leads to increased student engagement and motivation, which ultimately leads to greater teacher/student connectedness. One study demonstrated that when there are more opportunities for higher-level thinking and problem-solving activities, the result is fewer discipline referrals and greater student engagement (Fredericks et al., 2019). Equal access to quality courses that lead to graduation attainment is crucial for students attending high poverty schools. Special education teachers are growing concerned that this population is especially in need of quality instruction (Kauffman, 2015).

In this environment, “differences are treated as deficits,” and misunderstood behaviors can lead to the exclusion of individuals with disabilities (Iadarola et al., 2015, p. 701). This is significant because numerous studies have made a connection between student-teacher relationships and high school graduation (Reddick et al., 2011; Zaff et al., 2017). When students are engaged in mutually respectful relationships with teachers they feel are caring and competent, students are more likely to remain engaged in school. The influence of supportive

and respectful relationships with teachers with whom they could talk about personal or academic issues is magnified for high-risk students (Zaff et al., 2017).

According to a literature review of factors that lead to high school graduation, teacher quality and student-teacher relationships are school-level factors related to graduation attainment (Iadarola et al., 2015; Reddick et al., 2011; Zaff et al., 2017). Reddick et al. (2011) revealed that in one school, a single teacher impacted six students in such a profound way that the students indicated the relationship had a significant role in their graduating because of the teacher's "authentic care and high expectations" (p. 605). Effective teachers increase student achievement and decrease achievement gaps (Fusarelli & Militello, 2012). School leadership is key in developing and guiding quality instruction. Principals or school leaders who are equipped with "requisite knowledge, skills, beliefs, and dispositions" help to grow teachers who work with at-risk populations and are not trained to do so (Fusarelli & Militello, 2012, p. 46).

However, schools with high-risk populations, such as Title I schools, find it difficult to find and retain staff (Fusarelli & Militello, 2012). Teacher burnout is an issue in these schools and can impact efficiency (Shen et al., 2015). In addition to the loss of effectiveness, other issues associated with burnout are teacher apathy, cynicism, and being emotionally unavailable to students. Reasons for burnout are complex, but often a lack of resources and feelings of ineffectiveness are present (Shen et al., 2015). Teachers are absent more or leave the profession when this occurs, leading to high teacher turnover in schools where quality, consistent teaching is crucial to student achievement.

Early Intervention

Another factor to consider is early intervention. Birth to age five is a critical period in child development, and experts in the field suggest "linguistic, cognitive, social, emotional, and

regulatory skills” are developed during this time (Bakken et al., 2017, p. 253). These skills are predictors of future functioning (Bakken et al., 2017), and those who begin school “without basic skills often in these areas continue to show lower achievement throughout schooling” (Jozsa & Barrett, 2018, p. 81). Children obtain various supports during these early years, but students from economically disadvantaged homes have the fewest resources. Limitations in access to literature, language, and educational toys and games, as well as educational experiences outside of the home, are present for economically disadvantaged children and impact their future academic success (Bakken et al., 2017). Early intervention has been a long-standing discussion in education and was catapulted with the 2013 State of the Union address when President Obama announced that he was calling for “high-quality preschool available to every child in the United States” (Karoly, 2016, p. 38). By 2017, almost 70% of children were attending center-based preschool programs (Bierman et al., 2016). With so many children now enrolled in these types of programs, it is crucial to determine what works and implement it effectively.

Ullery and Katz (2016) associated early intervention with the lessened need for support at a later age and greater overall academic success. Several early intervention programs have been in place and have been tracked along the way. For instance, the Perry Preschool project, along with the Chicago CPC program, can provide long-term follow-up results (Karoly, 2016; Samuels et al., 2017), and these studies have indicated that students who attend these programs demonstrate less need for special education and have increased rates of high school graduation. In an analysis of the effects of more than 60 studies of early intervention programs, Samuels et al. (2017) consistently found improved effects on the reduction of special education placement and increased graduation rates. Overall, there was an 8.1% reduction in placement in special education and an 11.4% increase in high school graduation rates when early intervention

programs were used. These findings indicate a need for early learning programs among children with risk factors such as low socioeconomic status.

There is a discrepancy between those who receive targeted early childhood programs and the number of students placed in special education programs. In addition, children who attend early intervention programs during crucial stages of development have higher graduation rates (Jennings, 2018; Karoly, 2016; Samuels et al., 2017; Ullery & Katz, 2016). Studies have revealed that those who participated in early programs were less likely to be placed in special education and more likely to graduate (Karoly, 2016; Samuels et al., 2017; Ullery & Katz, 2016). Providing high-risk groups specialized instruction from the ages of birth to five has been shown “to change their trajectories” (Ullery & Katz, 2016, p. 2). Several other bodies of research have shown that preschool programs, not readily available to students living in homes where socioeconomic status is below the middle class, have a great effect in preparing children for kindergarten (Jennings, 2018). However, more needs to be done to make preschool and early intervention programs available to children living in financial duress.

Motivation

Students who face the greatest obstacles and still succeed use motivation to persist in times of struggle. Lazowski and Hulleman (1996) defined motivation as a driving force for human behavior that influences actions (Petri, 1996). Academic achievement, the extent to which students have reached their educational goals, is formed by numerous cognitive, behavioral, and motivational variables (Yadava & Yadava, 2018). SDT explains motivational factors that allow one to continue to pursue goals in the face of a struggle (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Theories of motivation are significant in clarifying why some succeed while others fail to reach academic milestones (Miserandino, 1996; Ormond, 2003; Pintrich, 2003). Although research is readily

available, it is evident that schools are still challenged to find ways to provoke motivation in some of the most at-risk students (Deci, 2009; Tollefson, 2000).

Because schools are accountable for closing achievement gaps, they seek to answer questions related to motivation to help students succeed (Elbaum et al., 2014; Franklin & Trouard, 2016; Jennings, 2018; Yell et al., 2012). The question of what makes some students fail while others are successful has been longstanding in education. Understanding the role of motivation in the outcome of a students' education is helpful to guide decision making and programming at the school level. Since schools are provided additional funding for students with disabilities and those who live in areas with many families meeting requirements for free and reduced lunch (Elbaum et al., 2014; Franklin & Trouard, 2016; Jennings, 2018; Yell et al., 2012), facilitation of increased support, education, or training in this area could prove to be beneficial for these targeted populations.

The literature revealed that motivation plays a role in academic achievement. Researchers have agreed that motivation improved effort levels, cognitive processing, and the overall academic achievement of students (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ormond, 2003). Evidence exists that individuals who are highly motivated tend to persist through challenges (Maehr & Midgley, 1999), and there is a positive correlation between motivation and grades, standardized tests, and extracurricular involvement (Miserandino, 1996; Yadava & Yadava, 2018). Conversely, students with low motivation or a lack of motivation have a propensity toward poor academic achievement, absenteeism, and dropping out (Grolnick et al., 1991; Miserandino, 1996).

Motivation is dynamic and displayed when physiological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Therefore, aspects of motivation beyond academic achievement are crucial to schools that seek to reap the greatest benefits.

Students who display intrinsic motivation have greater feelings of competence, are more likely to participate in goal-setting activities that challenge them, and report greater levels of self-efficacy (Grolnick et al., 1991). Additionally, they are more likely to be engaged in social and extracurricular activities, have more friends, and develop strong relationships with teachers, which leads to feelings of relatedness and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Furrer & Skinner, 2003). These relationships and activities can enhance students' educational experiences and improve motivation to remain engaged.

To further understand motivation, the needs-based theory, SDT, stipulates that autonomy is how an individual engages with and sets goals. Those who are purposeful in participation demonstrate greater motivation and success because they are owning it (Deci, 1971; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Middle school is when engagement is in the greatest decline for students (Fredricks et al., 2019). Theorists Midgley et al. (1989) used the person-environment perspective to explain a "mismatch between developmental needs for autonomy and opportunities to explore identity" during the middle school years (p. 251). These classrooms have "greater emphasis on teacher control and discipline, less positive teacher-student relationships, and practices that emphasize social comparison and competition" (Fredricks et al., 2019, p. 4). This can lead to disengagement, which can result in leaving school before earning a diploma (Fredericks et al., 2019). When an individual does not value a goal, which in the case of this research is graduation, they will be unlikely to participate fully. When individuals can position themselves in the driver's seat and move toward the goals they have set, they are more likely to reach them.

Finally, relatedness is another need identified by Deci and Ryan (2002) as a component of SDT and includes physical and emotional closeness with others. Those with positive relationships feel supported, will be more motivated, and will obtain greater success than those

who are disconnected from their peers and teachers in the school environment. Marginalized populations, such as those living in homes that qualify for reduced or free meals and special education students, have less access to supportive and engaging classes. Exclusionary discipline practices are higher across these groups as well. Students in schools with punitive disciplinary practices reported feeling less connected, resulting in an increase in disengagement and disciplinary incidents, which leads to lower academic achievement overall (Fredricks et al., 2019). Marginalized populations get caught in this cycle that leads to higher dropout rates.

Conversely, when interventions focus on promoting school completion by reducing exclusionary discipline practices, students with disabilities feel more cared about and connected, and the result is greater engagement (Fredricks et al., 2019). Relatedness is also improved when teaching is relevant and meaningful to individual students. By recognizing differences and intentionally including in their lessons topics or issues relevant to what students face, teachers begin to create an environment where learning becomes personal and students are naturally more likely to engage (Fredricks et al., 2019). SDT has provided evidence that students who are more connected at school will be more likely to persist through completion.

Finally, according to SDT, competence is the need to not only experience success or obtain mastery of a skill but is also an individual's belief or positive feeling about their own abilities. In education, motivation is increased when a student is a participant in the process because they want to be and not because it is required of them (Deci & Ryan, 2002). SDT proposed that "providing optimal challenges through differentiated instruction strategies would foster perceived competence" (Guay et al., 2017, p. 226). To stay on task and remain engaged, students need challenges aligned with their abilities. Classrooms are heterogenous, and

instruction cannot be one-size-fits-all when the goal is to move toward an increased graduation rate for at-risk students.

Classroom structure is another predictor of students' perceived competence that leads to autonomous motivation (Guay et al., 2017). Structure in the classroom provides students a learning environment to aid in the development of feelings of competence. Structured classrooms are not teacher controlled. Instead, the teacher "makes the learning environment consistent and predictable such that students know what is expected of them and the consequences for ignoring expectations" (Guay et al., 2017, p. 225). This affords students opportunities to self-regulate their behavior, which leads to autonomous learning and perceived competence, both of which are related to motivation to remain engaged in school despite challenges or the presence of obstacles (Guan et al., 2017). Research has provided evidence that autonomous motivation is associated with structured classrooms when differentiation of instruction is frequently used (Guay et al., 2017).

Because an individual's need for autonomy, relatedness, and competence is critical to motivation, schools are not able to capitalize on the benefits of programs and systems designed to improve motivation because they are often linked to extrinsic rewards. Numerous programs are in place to increase motivation but fail to hit the mark in upholding long-term benefits. Incentive-based programs, which are abundant in schools and put in place to improve motivation, actually undermine the intrinsic drive students need to obtain long-term achievement (Kohn, 1993). A review of the literature has identified that intrinsic motivation is a valuable piece that affords students the ability to overcome challenges to achieve academic success (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Miserandino, 1996; Tollefson, 2000).

Behaviors in which individuals participate for simple enjoyment value are intrinsic in nature, whereas extrinsically motivated behaviors are prompted by outside influences (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Extrinsically motivated behavior is created by stimulus from outside forces. When individuals remain motivated by choice instead of a promise for reward, they are intrinsically or self-motivated (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Intrinsic motivation is linked to the greatest sense of well-being and academic achievement. In fact, studies have connected greater academic performance, positive social interactions, enjoyment, success in school, persistence, and coping skills to those individuals who are intrinsically motivated (Grolnick et al., 1991; Ryan et al., 1989; Ryan & Frederick, 1997; Vallerand & Bissonnette, 1992).

Often, schools focus on external reward systems to motivate students. Skinner (1957) postulated that when an individual receives a desirable reward after a specific behavior, which is called positive reinforcement, the student is motivated to repeat the behavior. So when a student does something well in school, they are often rewarded in hopes of continued success on that task. In contrast, negative reinforcements occur to reduce or avoid unfavorable stimuli (Skinner, 1957). In this case, the student does the task to avoid negative behavior, such as punishment.

By shifting the focus of rewards-based, extrinsically-focused motivation practices to teaching competencies directly linked to meeting the physiological needs identified in SDT, schools can capitalize on the research and improve overall school success for at-risk populations. Self-regulation is a skill that can purposefully be taught and practiced and can benefit all students who struggle with motivation or overall success in school. By demonstrating self-regulation, a specific and observable skill, students move toward autonomy (Wehmeyer et al., 2012; Cho et al., 2012; Ursache et al., 2012). Teachers can facilitate self-regulation by designing instruction to give students perceived control over their learning. An example would be a choice board for

activities related to a specific goal instead of a specific assignment given by the teacher to all students (Wehmeyer et al., 2012). Classroom systems designed similarly to the RISE model (i.e., relevant subject matter, interesting instruction, satisfied learner, expectations for success) allow for student-driven decision making, which leads to a greater sense of autonomy. A secondary benefit of this type of instruction is relatedness because students have a sense the teacher trusts them, and the relationship is more of a partnership (Wehmeyer et al., 2012). Ultimately, students feel more competent when they have a sense of control, and increased motivation is a result.

Several studies specifically identified the benefits of aligning classroom practice with SDT (Bevill & Glasgow, 2009; Cummings, 2012; Koka & Hagger, 2010; Lawrence, 2011). Bevill and Glasgow (2009) examined the interest of at-risk students in entrepreneurship. They observed a higher interest level when students had control over choices for a project. Students were able to make decisions based on how they related to individual interests and competency. Similarly, Cummings (2012) identified the need for choice in learning to keep students engaged and active in classroom-based decisions. Even something as simple as allowing students to choose a book gave a sense of ownership, which led to persistence in tasks that initially were overwhelming (Cummings, 2012). Shifting the locus of control in the classroom from the teacher to the student can impart the skills necessary to develop the autonomy, relatedness, and competency required for increased motivation.

Koka and Hagger (2010) researched how perceived teaching behaviors related to motivation impacted students' feelings of competence and autonomy. Students ages 12 to 17 were surveyed on specific teaching behaviors and their frequency, including democratic behavior, autocratic behavior, teaching and instruction, situational considerations, positive general feedback, and both positive and negative nonverbal feedback (Koka & Hagger, 2010).

Democratic behaviors demonstrated by the teacher would suggest the teacher advocates for student participation and opinions in decision-making, whereas autocratic behaviors would indicate more rigid, teacher-centered decision-making (Koka & Hagger, 2010). Teachers making situational considerations would likely consider individual and varying abilities of students within the class (Koka & Hagger, 2010). Statistically significant results indicated that when students perceived teachers to have frequent democratic behaviors, their feelings of autonomy increased. Additionally, negative nonverbal feedback had significant negative effects on feelings of competence and motivation (Koka & Hagger, 2010). The study also revealed that when students had perceived competence and relatedness, motivation was significantly positively affected (Koka & Hagger, 2010).

Lawrence (2011) exposed motivational strategies identified by student participants that supported autonomy and relatedness. Four themes were evident in this study: (a) teacher disposition, (b) endorsement of student contributions, (c) avoidance of artificial incentives, and (d) level of teacher passion. According to Lawrence, to increase relatedness and autonomy, teachers need to use effective strategies to connect to students. Something as simple as inquiring about student preferences or telling personal stories is impactful. When teachable moments arise, teachers who are successful in improving relationships and creating an environment that supports autonomy “go off script” and “take detours” instead of keeping to a predetermined plan (Lawrence, 2011, p. 2). Other motivational items revealed were a focus on learning instead of discipline and using humor during lessons (Lawrence, 2011).

Previous studies have identified factors that lead to dropping out of high school for the most at-risk populations (Elbaum et al., 2014; Jennings, 2018; NLTS, 2012). These factors are cumulative in nature and can impact a student’s motivation, which is the driving force for

behavior, to continue to persist through the challenges they face (Lazowski & Hulleman, 2016). Given the significance of motivation related to persistence in academic settings, STD is an appropriate lens through which to view further research. SDT explains how motivational factors align with the continued pursual of goals when individuals, in this case, students, face obstacles (Deci & Ryan, 2002) and can explain why some students succeed at reaching set goals while others do not (Miserandino, 1996; Ormond, 2003; Pintrich, 2003).

Summary

Chapter Two provided a synthesis of the literature related to how students with disabilities who attend Title I schools stay motivated to earn a high school diploma. An overview of alarming statistics related to the number of these students who drop out before graduation and why was presented. A review of the research indicated a need to better understand what keeps the students who achieve this academic milestone motivated to do so. Framed in Deci and Ryan's SDT, (2002) motivation is explicitly outlined related to the targeted population. A substantial amount of research has identified factors that lead to dropping out of school prior to graduation. Additionally, numerous studies have indicated factors that lead students toward improved motivation. Gaps in the literature were present concerning the question of what makes those who are successful persist to earn a diploma. There is no phenomenological research examining the experiences of students with disabilities who persist to graduate from Title I schools.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of students with disabilities who attend Title I schools and stay motivated to graduate with a traditional high school diploma. According to the literature, this population has one of the highest dropout rates (NCES, 2017). Poverty and learning struggles are among the most common risk factors associated with failure to complete high school. Deci and Ryan's SDT (2002) provided the framework for this proposed research. Motivational factors associated with persistence were used to develop interview questions to answer the research questions.

Chapter Three provides a rationale and description of the qualitative methods in this study, beginning with the design and research questions. After that, the site, participants, and procedures will be described, as well as the role of the researcher. Next, the data collection methods and the approach to data analysis are described. The chapter finishes with procedures to establish trustworthiness, and ethical considerations will be explained.

Design

The purpose of the qualitative methodology was to capture the perspectives and lived experiences of the participants being researched (Patton, 2015). A transcendental phenomenological design was selected as the method because it provides depth to understanding that cannot be measured by quantitative designs. It allows students' voices to be heard. It is the "transformation of individual or empirical experience into essential insights" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 27). This study used the transcendental phenomenological data collection and analysis methods to gain insight into the experiences of special education students in Title I schools and sought to explain how they stay motivated to graduate from high school despite the adversity

they face.

A phenomenological design is in pursuit of the essence of the lived experiences of participants (Moustakas, 1994). For this study, the essence was shared experiences of high school graduates who had IEPs for the duration of high school. The researcher explored the stories of individuals who successfully earned a high school diploma, had a disability, and attended a Title I school. Because the researcher's role in the experience could influence or create bias in the findings, a transcendental approach, different from a hermeneutical approach where the researcher becomes part of the research, provided the researcher the opportunity to bracket personal experiences and opinions (Creswell, 2013).

Epoche, or the systematic and intentional effort to set aside prejudgment regarding the phenomena being researched exclusive to transcendental phenomenology, allowed the researcher to remove assumptions prior to beginning the data collection phase (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) indicated that the researcher should conduct research by first intentionally removing personal bias. The purpose is to allow the researcher to clearly hear the voices of participants without clouding them with personal bias. Moustakas advised the researcher to "see what is, just as it is, and to explicate what is in its own terms" (p. 41). As the researcher, I want to hear the participants' voices to gain insight into the challenges participants overcame and factors that kept participants motivated and allowed them to complete high school successfully, as measured by earning a traditional diploma.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences in Title I schools of students with disabilities who stayed motivated to earn a traditional high school diploma?

Research sub-question one

How do participants describe their sources of motivation in their attainment of a high school diploma?

Research sub-question two

How do participants describe the role of goal setting in their attainment of a high school diploma?

Research sub-question three

How do participants describe environmental and contextual supports that are impactful in their attainment of a high school diploma?

Setting

The setting for this research study was Title I high schools in the southeast region of the United States. The targeted area of study was a more suburban location because previous studies have been conducted in urban and rural schools (Flowers et al., 2017). Title I is a federal program that provides financial support to schools with a high population of students who live in poverty. It is the largest federal education program and supplements state and local funding (NCES, 2017). Because students living in poverty enter school with fewer skills to be successful than students who come from middle-class homes, funds provide academic support and learning opportunities to make adequate progress (NCES, 2017). Schools with at least 40% of students receiving free and reduced lunches qualify as Title I schools (NCES, 2017).

Participants

Purposeful and criterion techniques targeted students from Title I schools with IEPs who have graduated high school with traditional diplomas (Creswell, 2013). Students were selected who have graduated from high school with a traditional diploma within the last three years until the optimal sample size of 10-15, or data saturation, was reached (Moustakas, 1994). All

participants were at least 18 years old and needed to have earned their diploma from a Title I high school in the targeted area. Individuals selected as participants were former students who had IEPs as they entered high school and through graduation. In addition, they needed to have been in traditional classes to earn credits and ultimately earned a traditional diploma. Snowball sampling was utilized once initial participants were selected. This was to obtain new participants referred or recruited by those already in place as participants (Creswell, 2013).

Once chosen, participants were interested in the phenomenon and were willing to participate in the interview, focus group, and letter writing requirements associated with the study. Moustakas (1994) outlined essential criteria to identify the participants and grant the researcher the right to conduct the interview, including creating a tape recording of the session and publishing data related to the dissertation.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Race	Parent Status	School Setting	Parent Graduated
Sandy	White	Married	Virtual	No
Jessica	Black	Not Married	Virtual	Yes

Allie	White	Married	Virtual	Yes
Joseph	White	Married	Virtual	Yes
Philip	White	Not Married	Virtual	Yes
Randy	White	Not Married	Virtual	Yes
Paul	White	Married	Virtual	Yes
William	Black	Not Married	B/M	Yes
Jennifer	Black	Not Married	B/M	No
Annie	White	Married	B/M	Yes

Procedures

The procedures for this study began with obtaining approval at the sites and from the institutional review board through the procedures defined by the school. Once approval was obtained, I conducted a snowball sampling beginning with a graduate with whom I have contact. I then examined students' educational backgrounds to ensure only students meeting the outlined criteria were sought. I selected two participants for a pilot to refine the process.

Once the participant pool was complete, I began the interview process. Focus groups followed the interviews. In some cases, follow-up interviews were necessary. Both interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded, as suggested by Creswell (2013). The purpose of the interviews and focus groups was to obtain descriptions of each participant's experiences (Patton, 2015) both in and out of school that led them to obtain diplomas.

Finally, participants wrote letters to future students who will be experiencing similar challenges and gave them advice about how to overcome obstacles to earn a high school diploma. Participants were provided with a gift card to Walmart upon completion of the study. Data analysis was then utilized to determine the essence and create findings.

The Researcher's Role

My role in this proposed study was the human instrument, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985), because "the human instrument is capable of grasping and evaluating the meaning of . . . interaction" (p. 39). Because I am a teacher who has worked my entire career with students who live in poor communities and have disabilities, I chose a transcendental approach to remove my bias to hear the participants' voices clearly and with a fresh perspective. One assumption I brought is that participants have an inherent resiliency that led them to graduate from high school despite obstacles that caused many to drop out. Using journaling prior to and during research, I documented my thoughts to put them aside. I also sought participants whom I do not know and used settings of which I was not a part. The data analysis process, bracketing specifically, provided a safety net to ensure personal bias and assumptions did not interfere with obtaining the essence of the study.

Data Collection

Before any data are collected, IRB approval was obtained. The main method of data

collection was interviews, as described by Moustakas (1994). According to Moustakas, phenomenology intends to “determine what experience means for the persons who have had the experience and can provide a comprehensive description of it” (p. 13). Additionally, focus groups followed the individual interviews and letter writing was also utilized. A triangulation of data established the credibility of the findings and validity of the results. This was a necessary step because “the probability that findings and interpretations will be found credible” was improved using this method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 305).

Interviews

Interviews were the primary method of data collection, as described through phenomenological research (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Interviews were semi-structured using guided questioning. Each participant was interviewed face-to-face at the beginning of the study to capture experiences that led them to graduate high school with a traditional diploma. Interviews were audio recorded with two devices and notes were taken by the researcher to document incidental happenings. They were then transcribed by the researcher immediately following each interview, as recommended by Moustakas (1994).

Interview prompts were:

1. When did you graduate from high school?
2. What was high school like for you?
3. Describe the type of classes you had and any extra support you received to be successful.
4. Describe your family.
5. What are their thoughts/opinions about school/education?
6. What value do they place on graduating from high school?
7. Describe family members who contributed to or held you back from achieving your

goals.

8. Describe these relationships.
9. Describe your friends.
10. Describe friends who you feel stunted or supported your academic success.
11. Describe your high school experiences (related to academics and social situations) in school.
12. Describe your teachers.
13. Describe any teachers who stood out as being most influential.
14. What made them so important to you?
15. Describe any teachers who hindered your progress or achievement in school.
16. What did they do to impact you in this way?
17. What predetermined goals did you have related to school?
18. Describe a time you wavered.
19. What made you refocus on attaining the goal you set for yourself?
20. What were some things that happened in school to help you keep going if you were struggling?
21. What were some things that happened out of school to help you keep going when things got tough?
22. What is your best quality?
23. How did that help you in your pursuit of a diploma?
24. What else do you wish to share before we close the interview?

The questions chosen were grounded in the literature following Moustakas's (1994) guidelines. Questions were free of bias and are closely connected to the four research questions. I

worded the prompts to be easily understood by the participants. In addition to seeking to hear about details pertaining to participants' lived experiences, questions also sought to glean details about perceived supports or the contrary in students' efforts to persist and graduate. The questions focused on both home and school environments and external and internal resources, which created the motivation to overcome obstacles and adversities. The focus on attempting to reveal the experiences that allowed students who face great adversity to remain in school and ultimately earn traditional diplomas will be at the forefront throughout the interview process.

Questions one through three are general questions to obtain background information and allow the participants to become comfortable with the interview setting. They also provided the basis for understanding the type of high school classes the student took and whether they can identify that they had a disability and received support stemming from an IEP. Question 25 is an open-ended question to wrap up the interview and allow participants to share anything elicited through direct questioning.

Prompts four through 17 are focused on relationships that impact participants. Prompts four through nine target familial relationships and beliefs about education. Prompts 10 through 12 inquire about friendships, and prompts 13 through 17 provoke reflection about relationships with teachers. Relatedness was identified as a need by Deci and Ryan (2002), and positive relationships can lead to greater success. The more connected an individual feels, the greater success they achieve (Deci & Ryan, 2002). When a student feels connected and cared about, the result is greater engagement. When students are engaged in the academic setting, they are more likely to graduate (Fredricks et al., 2019). Because factors leading to a student dropping out prior to graduation are cumulative, the researcher must identify situations in all areas of the participants' lives that have an impact on their pursuit and ultimate success with completion

(Lazowski & Hulleman, 2016). These questions are framed to create a dialogue about intrinsic and extrinsic factors that influence an individual's academic success.

Prompts 18 through 20 are meant to identify whether participants have set goals related to their education. Deci and Ryan (2002) postulated that intrinsically-set goals relate to persistence with and achievement of goals set by individuals. Conversely, extrinsically-framed goals are linked to short-term, not long-term, achievement (Deci & Ryan, 2002). The questions help identify the types of goals, if any, the participant set related to the educational setting.

Research sub-questions one and two relate to motivation, and questions 21 through 24 address this topic. Studies have shown that motivation is related to academic achievement, especially when students struggle (Maehr & Midgley, 1999; Ormond, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2000). These interview prompts attempt to identify how participants respond to challenges and reveal a participant's belief about their individual strengths. Deci and Ryan (2006) identified competence as a need that can impact academic motivation or lack thereof. When an individual has a feeling of effectiveness, they feel competent and motivation is improved (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

Focus Groups

Focus groups, the second step in the data collection phase of the study, were utilized once interviews were complete. Creswell (2013) and Patton (2002) suggested focus group interviews to help ensure the validity of the data analysis. Patton further described the ideal size of a group as limited to no more than eight people. One focus group of five will be created based on location so as not to require too much extra time from participants. Groups met for discussions on an app or face-to-face and allowed the researcher to gather information on a specific topic (Creswell, 2013). Definitive attempts were made to make the group setting comfortable and

enjoyable to elicit responses from all participants. The researcher was the facilitator of the interviews and prepared participants in advance to ensure confidentiality (Patton, 2002).

Questions were asked of the group to elicit responses to the themes that emerged during the interview phase and are associated with the research question and sub-questions grounded in SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2002). The prompts served the purpose of refining the themes, adding texture to the descriptions and a deeper, more multi-faceted description of the common experiences of participants. They were as follows:

1. Describe your thoughts on the importance of graduating from high school.
2. Explain how you made the decision to graduate.
3. Describe what motivated you. Tell me the outside sources of motivation for you and what you felt inside that pushed you to graduate.
4. Tell me about the people in your life who made a difference for you concerning earning your diploma.

The Center for Promise (Hynes, 2016) identified reasons students fail to graduate with a diploma, including toxic home environments, lack of connectedness, academic struggles, or a combination of these obstacles. Students who face challenges both at home and at school have the highest dropout rate at 50% (Flowers et al., 2017). The focus group follow-up questions seek to gain deeper insight into the relationships and motivation that caused participants to succeed when so many do not. Prompts one and two are designed to begin the group discussion on the importance of graduation for participants. They are meant to allow and establish a level of comfort for participants based on commonalities within the group.

There is a positive and significant correlation between motivation and academic achievement (Yadava & Yadava, 2018). SDT notes motivation as key to persisting through

challenges (Deci & Ryan, 2002, 2008, 2013). Prompt three elicits greater details about motivation's role in the participants' achievement. Positive relationships can lead to a greater sense of autonomy and competence (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Motivation is greater when individuals forge relationships. Prompt four focuses on the people and relationships that made a difference in the participants' educational journeys.

Letter Writing

At the end of the focus group session, participants wrote letters to younger students outlining what they need to do and what it will take to persist in school to earn a high school diploma and avoid dropping out. Participants were provided with a writing prompt that guided their responses. The prompt was as follows: Provide any detail you can think of to these young students who are facing similar struggles that you did when you were in school. Give them advice on overcoming the obstacles they face so they may be as successful as you in persisting to earn a high school diploma. Now that you have already reached that milestone, describe to them how it feels to have the struggles behind you and the success of a diploma. Parameters for length were no less than one page, and participants were provided with stamped envelopes to return the letters via mail. Participants also had an option to email letters if they had the technology to do so.

Deci and Ryan (2002) provided the framework of how success is achieved when the psychological needs of individuals are met and how this relates to motivational factors. The letter writing process allowed the successful student who earned a diploma to encourage those struggling to stay motivated. This relates to organismic integration theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002), a component of SDT, and explains how the values of a group or culture can be taken on by an individual. If younger students in this same culture take on the values of those who are

successful, their motivation could be impacted. Additionally, the letters will provide insight into the motivational factors that led to participants' success and further cement the themes that have emerged.

Data Analysis

Epoche, reduction, and synthesis are all key components of data analysis in phenomenological research (Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas (1994), bracketing is the practice of setting aside, or putting into brackets, assumptions that obstruct eliciting access to the meaning of an experience. Setting aside prejudgments, preconceived thoughts, and any bias allows for exposure of a "purified consciousness" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 86). No position was taken, and "every quality has equal value" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 87). Reduction, which includes horizontalization, leads to textural descriptions of external and internal experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, a synthesis of the descriptions allowed themes to emerge and experiences to be integrated, leading to the essence of the experience. These steps were followed to analyze the data collected.

Bracketing

According to Moustakas (1994), the first step for the researcher is to bracket out personal thoughts and bias about the experience to "enter anew into consciousness, and look and see them again, as in for the first time" (p. 85). This allowed the research to be approached with an open state of consciousness to enable the researcher to determine what is there and allowing it to be what it is (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas suggested that "no position whatsoever is taken...nothing is determined in advance... By returning to whatever is there in...memory, perception, judgment, feeling, whatever is actually there" (p. 84), the researcher is focused and present on uncovering the epoche. Epoche provides "an original vantage point, clearing of mind,

space, and time” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 86). No position was taken, nothing was determined in advance, and everything was equal as a result. Through journaling, as the researcher, I described my personal experiences with students with disabilities who attend Title I schools and earned a diploma. This allowed me to focus on the personal experiences of participants (Moustakas, 1994).

Reduction

To begin the analysis process, interviews were transcribed for each participant by the researcher (Saldaña, 2013). Each piece of data was analyzed as it was received, beginning with the first completed interview (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This continued through all interviews and focus groups. Because more than one participant was interviewed, Saldaña’s (2013) approach was utilized to code one participant’s data at a time. A code, in qualitative analysis, is “most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing” attribute (Saldaña, 2011, p. 96). Each time new participant data was coded, previous data could be influenced. Using NVivo, I followed Saldaña’s (2013) directions for “circling, highlighting, bolding, underlining, or coloring rich or significant participant quotes or passages” that stood out through transcription (p. 19). Codes were then sorted, through Nvivo, into clusters with labels to identify the category (Saldaña, 2011).

Horizontalization is a critical component of the reduction process and creates a reflection of data and significant statements made by participants (Moustakas, 1994). Each statement was equally significant and valuable. A list of significant statements was made during transcription in NVivo. According to Moustakas (1994), the preliminary grouping was the first step when organizing data from the interviews. Anything relevant to the experience was noted, and initial codes were created. Overlapping, repeating, and vague expressions were reduced or eliminated.

Focus group interviews were transcribed to further examine findings using the same method as the individual interviews.

Synthesis

Finally, themes and subthemes were clustered and categorized as they emerged by using NVivo. This led to revisiting transcriptions and letters to verify and elaborate. Saldaña (2013) suggested that themes are extended phrases or sentences that identify “what a unit of data is about and/or what it means” and can be identified at the manifest or latent level (Saldaña, 2013, p. 175). For this study, I identified themes at the manifest level because they were “directly observable in the information” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 175). Construction of a textural description, what happened, and a structural description of how the phenomenon was experienced took place to synthesize the data to develop the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness can be explained as the factors that provide value for research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). There are four components of trustworthiness: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. I established trustworthiness in this research by following the criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Credibility

For research to have value, it must be credible. Credibility can be achieved with an accurate description of reality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation of data, peer review, and member checks aided in adding credibility to findings. For this study, I used three forms of data collection to triangulate data: interviews, focus groups, and letter writing. Finally, member checking allowed participants to read the transcripts of their interviews. If quotes were used, I received verification from participants to ensure proper explanation and understanding. When

necessary, I sought clarification from participants regarding content from interviews to provide an accurate depiction of individual stories.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability is established through consistency (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This research used clear descriptions of interviews, focus groups, and letter writing to create dependability. This triangulation of data not only improved credibility but also served to increase dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 2015). All interview recordings, notes, and transcriptions were documented and remain available for audit. An audit trail made clear the process through which data were collected, analyzed, and interpreted and improved both confirmability and dependability (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability gives value to the data and provides objectivity similar to quantitative research (Creswell, 2013). In addition to triangulation, bracketing out experiences of the researcher through journaling alleviated bias and promoted confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1985).

Transferability

Transferability denotes the degree to which the information can be transferred to other settings (Creswell, 2013). Thick and rich descriptions allowed the lived experiences of participants to be compared and generalized. Sufficient details were provided to maximize the transferability to other researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Details provided the procedures, theoretical foundations, and analysis to inform future research.

Ethical Considerations

IRB approval from the institution was obtained prior to any data collection. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study prior to participation. They could withdraw from the study at any time, and any records would be destroyed. Pseudonyms were assigned to all

participants in every instance to maintain confidentiality. All data collected during the research will be saved for one year following publication in a password-protected folder and backed up on a password-protected external hard drive. It will be deleted from all areas after three years.

Summary

Chapter Three outlined methods that were used to obtain the structural and textural descriptions to extract the essence of the lived experiences of the participants. A transcendental phenomenological design was used for this study. Data collection methods and analyses aligned with Creswell's (2013) and Moustakas's (1994) methods. How trustworthiness was established was also described.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

As stated in Chapter One, this study sought to describe and understand the experiences of students with disabilities who attend Title I schools and earned a high school diploma. The population of focus was students with disabilities who attend these schools, as they have one of the highest dropout rates among subgroups (Hynes, 2014; U.S. Department of Education and National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2017). The results explained in this chapter are a culmination of the individual voices of students who experienced this phenomenon. This research is based on the central research question: What are the lived experiences of students with disabilities in Title I schools who stayed motivated to earn a traditional high school diploma? The following three sub-questions were also addressed: How do participants describe their sources of motivation in their attainment of a high school diploma? How do participants describe the role of goal setting in their attainment of a high school diploma? How do participants describe environmental and contextual supports that are impactful in their attainment of a high school diploma?

This chapter is divided into three sections: participants, themes, and summary. Participant interviews were summarized first to provide rich descriptions of their individual experiences related to the phenomenon. The narratives also provide a reflection of observations and my perceptions. According to Moustakas (1994), in phenomenological research, perception is regarded as the predominant source of understanding. Direct quotes from the participants were also used to ensure the description was genuine. During the data collection process, the researcher gathered and analyzed responses from participants and looked for similarities in experiences, patterns, and connections, as well as emerging themes. As themes emerged, they

were listed and identified in the second part of this chapter. Finally, a summary of the results of this phenomenological research data analysis was presented.

Participants

Participant names, as well as any individual named by participants, were pseudonyms to protect identities. Demographic information varied slightly since participants attended schools in different locations and settings. There were a total of 10 participants, five females and five males. Six participants were white and four were black. Five were from homes with parents who are still married and five participants were raised by single parents. All participants attended Title One schools in the southeast United States, graduated with a traditional diploma, and had an IEP for the duration of their time in high school.

Sandy

Sandy was homeschooled for most of her education but transitioned to a virtual setting her sophomore year in high school. She comes from a home where her parents are married and her siblings are close. Sandy said that without her siblings she would “go crazy.” They appear to be a genuine support for her. None of her family members have graduated from high school. When asked a follow-up question about why she graduated when others in her family did not, Sandy’s reply was, “[T]he school...my teachers were always reaching out, willing to help.”

Interestingly, however, Sandy left her supportive home to live with her boyfriend when she moved to the new school setting. Her family did not help financially. Sandy “made ends meet” by working two jobs while attending high school. Sandy was not willing to elaborate on what caused her to leave her seemingly positive home life to live on her own, but her demeanor suggested that was not a negative experience. She was very upbeat and happy about her

circumstances. Although she wasn't living under the same roof as her family, they remained a strong support system for Sandy.

Sandy noted that she did not struggle until her senior year. Sandy said, "The reading got harder, and the math got harder, so I started to say I can't make it". Clearly, Sandy had another major supporter, her teacher Ms. G. When she was on the verge of giving up, she thought of her teacher and did not want to let her down. "Ms. G put too much into me and I can't quit, I looked at the calendar and knew I could make it since it was close". Sandy also had another reason to persevere when things got tough. Her career goal was to be a cosmetologist and she knew that she had to get her high school diploma to reach this goal.

Sandy described her best quality as being a determined, hard worker. When asked what she did to keep going when things got tough, she said, "[W]hen I get stressed out, I know that is just life. I take a break and step back and I look and I'm like we're doing this and get back up."

Jessica

Jessica is a twin and lived at home during high school with her twin, her mother, and her little sister. She beamed with pride as she described the struggles her mom faced raising her and her siblings. Her mom went back to college to get her teaching degree but had to stop because of family issues. Jessica noted finances as being the biggest issue she faced during high school. Jessica's mom made the importance of graduating abundantly clear to her daughters, and Jessica knew there was no other choice but to do so. She also noted her twin sister as a significant support regarding her academic success. "My sister helped me, my mom helped me, my friends helped me. Everyone helped me. Nobody held me back."

Jessica did not have a large friend group, but she often talked about one friend who was always there and helped her when the work was difficult. When asked about teachers, she did

mention two specifically who had a direct impact on her. She described the way they delivered instruction as meeting her needs as a learner; the others, who Jessica discussed as hindrances to her in school, did not matching up with her learning style. Jessica said, “[T]he way they taught didn’t fit me.” Outside of academics, Jessica had only positive relationships with peers and participated in both band and athletics at one time or another.

Jessica’s mother was not the only one who wanted Jessica to graduate. Jessica had that goal for herself as well. She knew she wanted to go to college and spoke about how she knew she had to get a good grade point average to earn scholarships because her mom could not pay for her to attend college. Jessica had some slip ups along the way but went to her teachers or family for help to get back on track.

Jessica noted her best quality as getting joy from helping others. She said that she struggled and likes to help those in similar situations. Another quality that emerged from our discussions was that she was determined. Jessica described how she would look up other ways to learn something if a teacher’s instruction was not clear. She said that she knew what worked for her and would often teach herself the content.

Allie

Allie spent a good amount of time talking about her family. She lived with her parents and two brothers and mentioned an older half-sister that she does not have a relationship with because “she don’t really come around.” She also has two dogs and mentioned that she is the “oldest of the pack,” indicating a close bond with the family members living in the home. They encouraged her to try her best every day even though she faced many struggles.

Graduating from high school was an important milestone for both Allie and her family. Her brother experienced ease regarding academics, and he helped her when she needed it, as did her parents. Allie said:

My brother would help me out. He would be like I took this class before, so he knew what I needed to know. He would be up late with my parents helping me with my homework to get the things done and for test time.

When the conversation shifted to friendships, Allie had a lot to talk about. Most of her experiences with peer relationships were rocky at best, and Allie compared them to a roller coaster ride. Allie noted:

In high school we had our ups and downs like a roller coaster. She took my boyfriend, and I was like that's not the way to go and why would I want to be friends with you and she was rubbing it in my face because she wanted to. It was terrible.

This seemed typical among all of Allie's relationships based on her notation of several experiences like this.

Conversely, all of Allie's teachers were "nice" and "helpful." Although they annoyed her at the time because they frequently pulled her aside to ask if she needed extra help, upon reflection, Allie realized how important it was for them to reach out to her. She noted her most impactful teachers as going above academics by teaching respect and making students feel good about themselves by building students up.

Allie said that she always had a goal to graduate and that her family instilled that in her. She just did not realize how difficult achieving that goal would be:

I don't know what teacher pulled my mom into the conference room and told my mom that I wasn't going to make it in high school, and it just broke her heart and made her cry.

She was walking me to the car and told me I had to prove them wrong.

This specific memory brought back emotions for Allie and she broke down. It was very evident that letting her parents down was not something she ever wanted to do. She described this experience as a motivating one. "I thought, I'm going to push myself ten times harder just to make it. I had to work harder than other people to be where I am today."

Allie played sports and this caused her to arrive home late on many nights. But it also helped her focus because she knew she had to schedule her work time in so she could get it done. She said the running helped her focus and remain composed when she felt overwhelmed or stressed. Another analogy Allie used compared crossing the finish line in a race with overcoming challenges and achieving the goals she sets for herself. Allie said that she lights up a room when she walks in and always looks for the positives in life. Allie said:

I had a lot of positive people on my side. I was at home and would get depressed in knowing that am I going to make the grade and it's like ok I have positive people they can help me out ...it was that type of thing like I could achieve I just had to go to the right people. I was a hard worker and I never backed down from an assignment. Most teachers would let you retake your work to bring up your grade and that was a positive outlook. I was willing to do it. My parents brought me that quality. You don't know something until you try it ...easy or hard....if it's easy you got it but if it's hard you have to work at it a little harder before you get it.

This confidence and optimism led to Allie overcoming the challenges she faced to graduate.

Joseph

Joseph started high school in a brick and mortar setting and switched to a virtual school for his junior and senior year. When asked a follow-up question about why he made the move, he indicated that he was struggling to be successful in that setting. “I wasn’t doing good at school. I was just there, and I was not paying attention. There was a lot of distractions, and I was like ok I need to try something different.” Even though Joseph was receiving extra support in his classes and the teachers took their time to help him with his work, he still found it difficult to get his work done and pass his classes.

Joseph is the youngest of four siblings. His “almost twin,” as he describes her, was an adopted sibling who was the same age and celebrates a birthday the same month as his. Joseph spoke with great pride about his family and said they always stick together. When he waivered or struggled, Joseph said his family would push him to keep going and to “get done with it.”

Joseph had friends he made in the brick and mortar setting when teachers placed them in work groups together. He remains friends with them today. Outside of academics, Joseph played the piano and was very talented but stopped because he got bored with it. Joseph did not participate in out of school functions when he was in the brick and mortar setting or the virtual setting.

When Joseph described his teachers, he noted that they all really helped him except one, who fed into the distractions by bringing her personal life into the classroom. He had to study books online and talk to others who had the class in the past to get through it. Joseph mentioned one teacher who really knew what he needed. When asked for clarification, he noted that they sat down and talked to him about how he was approaching assignments. “I see you are doing it this

way, but if you try this it may work better for you” is how this teacher would approach him when he was struggling.

Joseph knew he was going to graduate from high school but wavered a bit from time to time. When it became too much, he would think about what his sister said to him and that would get him back on track. When asked what she said to him, Joseph replied, “[D]on’t quit or I’ll beat you up.” This motivated him to get back on track along with a friend who also had a goal to graduate. They held each other accountable.

When talking about his teachers, Joseph believed it was his good nature that made his teachers want to help him. He described himself as well-mannered and believed that he was nice to the teachers when other students were not. “It made a difference in how they helped me.”

Philip

Philip made the move from a brick and mortar high school to a virtual school midway through his sophomore year of high school. He was having a difficult time keeping up with the deadlines in the brick and mortar setting and attributes the flexibility of the virtual setting as a key factor in his ability to earn a diploma.

Philip had both challenges and successes in each setting. He had a hard time during the transition with figuring out how to access the material and resources in the virtual setting but found more diverse class options. In addition to the timelines being an issue in the brick and mortar setting, Philip also mentioned that there was no access to teacher support outside the typical school day. Contrastingly, the virtual setting provided more flexible access to teachers or online resources provided to him as a student.

Family was a major support for Philip. He lived at home with his mom and step-dad, along with two younger siblings. His parents expected him to graduate and pushed him when he

was struggling. Most of the friends he had in high school were older and had already graduated. Philip mentioned that it was difficult to make new friends in the virtual setting. In terms of friendships, they neither held him back nor helped him.

The teacher who stood out the most to Philip as being supportive of him was an economics teacher his sophomore year and a math teacher his junior year. There was not a specific reason that Philip gave, but he generalized that the teachers were clear with their requirements, had optional sessions outside the required class times, and that the teachers were available for him to come and get one-on-one or small group help with specific questions. These were also described by Philip as sessions that were open to any students and not related to the resource classes he had as part of his IEP requirements.

Randy

Randy attended a virtual school for high school. He was visibly shaken when he described the bullying that he endured up until that point. He was having a hard time focusing on school because the treatment he endured by his peers was distracting and made it difficult for him to learn. “I was bullied and it distracted me. Picking on me and stuff like that...calling me names. It is hard to focus on learning when you’re getting bullied. Especially when your teachers don’t give a crap about you.” Randy noted that he was “socially awkward” and didn’t really have friends even in the virtual setting. Even though Randy did not feel supported in the brick and mortar setting he attended in middle school, he truly believed that the teachers cared about him in high school.

Randy noted that he received extra support in school for his disability. “The teachers in high school believed in me and were extremely helpful. Ones that were most helpful were the teachers that are assigned to me for my add.” This support allowed Randy to focus on his studies

and ultimately graduate despite his struggles. In contrast, there were teachers who seemingly did not care. Randy noted that he was given the wrong grade numerous times, and several teachers seemed like they did not know what they were doing. But Randy, elaborating on his best quality of being a hard-worker, kept pushing for help and continued to do the work over until he earned a passing grade.

On the home front, Randy experienced disparities of support from family. He did not have a relationship with his mother's side of the family and has not had contact with his mom since he was three. This was an abusive relationship and Randy believes it was best that she was not in his life. He does get much support and encouragement from his father's family either. Randy was extremely close with his paternal grandparents and credited them with getting him where he is now.

Randy knew he wanted to graduate when he changed school settings and the goal seemed attainable. He had a big push from his great-grandfather. Randy said:

My great grandfather was actually the one I got it from (wanting to graduate). He was the big person in my life cheering me on to graduate. He sadly died 4 years ago. He was the one that was really believed in me out of all my family members. He would be so proud of me.

Paul

High school was pretty easy for Paul. He only struggled one or two times and never considered dropping out. Paul described himself as intelligent and appeared confident. He said that the few times he struggled, he just pushed through and knew he would overcome the obstacles he was facing. When he came to a challenge he would think, "Like ok I might not make it; but with a little bit of hope within me, something good will happen...maybe something

good will happen if I try a little harder.” This hope was a factor in why he graduated, according to Paul.

Paul is the eldest of five boys. He sees himself as a role model for the younger children in his family. His parents are married and both value education and instill that in all their children. His mom really helps with schoolwork at home and makes sure everyone is doing well; if they aren't, Paul's mother will help them. Paul noted that it is very important to his mom that everyone is successful in school.

Paul was reserved during the interview process. However, his demeanor changed when he talked about a very frustrating situation he encountered with one of his teachers. The teacher required a code to take a test. Students had to pass a warmup drill to get the password. He struggled with the warmups and could not get the password to take the test, so his grade was impacted negatively. Paul, who otherwise was quiet and composed with his responses, became physically agitated while responding to this question. Yet he quickly got back on track talking about the teachers whose classes he enjoyed. His music teacher made class fun and Paul really enjoyed that class even though he was not really “into music.”

William

William grew up in a home with his mother, brother, and grandmother. He talked frequently about the struggles his brother had when he was in school and how he almost did not graduate. William could not pass the assessment required at the end of high school to earn a diploma. The assessment was something above and beyond the credits he earned. According to William, the school district required this exam in addition to state requirements. William's brother fought the requirement so he could earn a diploma and won the battle with the school

board. This fight left a mark on William and would be the biggest motivator for him through his struggles.

He also credited his mom for being a strong advocate for William with his teachers when he was having a hard time with classes in high school. “My momma was always going up to the school and talking to the teachers.” He said he did not mind and knew it was because she wanted him to graduate like his brother. William did not know or have a relationship with his father.

In school, William struggled all along and “had a really hard time reading.” William did not like school for a while because it was so difficult for him. His mother encouraged him every day and got him extra help in addition to the help he was receiving in school. She made sure he did his work and helped him when she could. William noted that his mom often had to work and when she was not there his grandmother helped the boys with homework and getting what they needed at home.

William spoke highly of his teachers and school. He participated in sports, which helped him to stay focused on grades so he could participate. Throughout the years with an IEP, he had numerous teachers help him with extra support and instruction, but two teachers he had in high school were the most impactful. Ms. B. always went above and beyond to make sure William was getting the accommodations from his general education teachers. In William’s words, “[S]he was always talking to the teachers and making sure they were doing things right for me.” He recognized that the accommodations on his IEP, like reading material for him in class, helped him pass his classes and believes that without those accommodations he would not have been able to pass.

On the contrary, another special education teacher was noted by William as one who hindered his progress. He recalls his mother having to talk to officials at the school about this

teacher because she was not providing the resources William really needed. “She didn’t help me get my grades where they needed to be.” William’s voice became shaky when he talked about the struggles he faced with reading and how he wanted to graduate to become a welder like his older brother. William knew that would not be possible without a diploma.

William had a goal to graduate throughout high school. When things got difficult, William would call his brother to get encouragement. He also credited his stubbornness and determination as factors for his success in achieving a high school diploma. “I’m as stubborn as my momma for sure. I was just going to keep at it until I got it.”

Jennifer

Jennifer was raised in a home with her two siblings and divorced parents. Her primary residence was with her mother, but she and her siblings would go to her father’s house on the weekends. Both parents supported Jennifer with her school work, which she noted was a struggle for her. When asked about struggles she faced in high school, Jennifer said, “[I]t got really hard...like all the math for example...I didn’t understand it...I told my parents I was going to quit...it was hard.”

But her parents were not in support of her dropping out and encouraged her to keep working. They followed the words of support with actions. When Jennifer was at her mother’s house, her mom would try and help with her work at home; and her father did the same when she was with him. The work was hard for them, too. Neither of them graduated from high school. But they found resources on the internet to help with understanding of the work and did not let their struggles stop them from helping their daughter reach her goal of graduating.

In times of struggle, Jennifer also turned to her resource teacher who would “break the problems apart” and showed Jennifer strategies for how to simplify the difficult problems so she

could understand and be more successful. Unlike other teachers who frustrated Jennifer by their instructional approach, the resource teacher took the time to push Jennifer when she felt like quitting. “I told her I was doing to quit, and she broke it down for me and told me to take a deep breath and keep on going.”

Jennifer had supports in place to push her when she felt like giving up. In addition to her parents and resource teacher, Jennifer also had a good friend, M, who would help her if she could. “We would just work together on it or talk on the phone about it.” Jennifer was also that support for her friend, M, in the areas where she could help

Jennifer described herself as a hard worker. “It’s like, I’m always on task. Even when I wasn’t going to give up I just keep trying.” This trait contributed to her goal attainment. Jennifer noted that her struggles were persistent throughout high school, but about midway through she realized that graduation was attainable. “I’m going to graduate,” she realized, and you could see her face light up when she talked about this moment in her high school academic career.

Annie

Annie had an overall positive experience in high school. She noted that she had a large group of friends she primarily socialized with at school. They did not often hang out outside of school, other than occasional texting or face calls, but they were reliable and helped her academically. Annie spoke highly of her school, pointing out the many clubs and groups offered to students. Annie herself did not participate in any of the clubs or activities, outside of playing soccer her sophomore year.

Teachers were high on Annie’s list of positive memories of high school. She even made the comment that “they were like a second mother to me,” tending to both her academic and emotional needs. Annie did not mention one teacher as being a significant influence, but rather

that all the teachers at her school would go above and beyond to make sure each student was getting what they needed. She did not point out a particular teacher as holding her back or being unwilling to help. She did have a math class that was very difficult, and Annie said that she really struggled in that class. When describing the teacher, Annie mentioned she was nice and caring and blamed her learning disability for her struggles and not her teacher's instruction.

Annie came from a large family and had a difficult time describing who in her family was most influential. They are a tight knit family, always looking out for each other. Annie is the eldest of the siblings. She has a younger brother and sister for whom she aims to be a good role model. Annie's parents held education in high regard and Annie knew her parents wanted her to graduate. Annie's mom was a high school graduate, but her dad left high school in his junior year. Annie's grandmother was a big influence on her remaining persistent when times got tough. Even though she passed away when Annie was 14, Annie still replayed her grandmother's words to not be discouraged when things were challenging and to never give up.

One of the qualities that Annie thought helped her forge ahead was that she never gave up and kept on working when things got hard. Annie's overall attitude about every challenge that presented in her life was positive. She had a way of spinning negative experiences into positive ones and this, coupled with teacher and familial support, led to her overall academic success.

Results

To begin the process of analysis, interviews were transcribed for each participant (Saldaña, 2013). Every piece of data was analyzed as it was received and data continued be added until the focus group was complete and all letters were received (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). NVivo was used as codes were identified and sorted into clusters to assign "a summative, salient, essence-capturing" attribute (Saldaña, 2011, p. 96). Saldaña's (2013) directions for "circling,

highlighting, bolding, underlining, or coloring rich or significant participant quotes or passages” that stand out through transcription were used (p. 19) in NVivo. Through the process of analyses, 25 statements significant to this study were identified. The review and revision of the first grouping continued and clusters of meaning were created through the lens of the participant’s complete responses as they related to the research questions. This provided a good framework to cross reference overall meaning with the developing clusters. Through NVivo these groupings were originally organized into eight coded clusters:

- school setting
- positive interactions
- negative interactions
- family
- internal motivating factors
- external motivating factors
- challenges
- extracurricular activities

Themes and sub-themes were compared to the theoretical framework and reviewed to find patterns and repetitions. Finally, themes and sub-themes emerged and tied the participants together, as described by Moustakas (1994). The themes and subthemes are listed below. For a table of codes, see Appendix C—Table of Codes.

Table 2*Themes and Sub-themes*

Theme	Subtheme
Challenges	Academic challenges
	Social/emotional challenges
	School setting
Supports	Supports at home
	Supports at school
	School setting
Personal Attributes	Internal motivating factors

Theme Development

Three major themes emerged from eight clusters regarding the graduation of students with IEPs who attended Title One schools. They are as follows: challenges, support, and personal attributes. The five clusters became sub-themes, as they were incorporated into the three themes. These sub-themes were helpful in answering the research questions and sub-questions. The researcher considered various ways in which the codes could be grouped and determined three themes with sub-themes that allowed for the participants' experiences with the phenomenon to be organized and explained.

All participants identified academic challenges associated with school. While the challenges themselves varied, each participant struggled while in high school. In addition, every

participant had a solid support system that kept pushing them to help them overcome the challenges. And finally, each participant had a commonality in their personal attributes. They all faced challenges but communicated an internal drive to persevere when they faced obstacles in their lives. All sub-themes neatly fit under each theme.

Challenges

No question in either the interview or focus group directly asked participants to identify whether or not they faced challenges. It was assumed, based on the qualifier that each participant must have a disability and an IEP, indicating that their disability was impacting them academically. Additionally, Title I schools were chosen as the location from which the sample was drawn, so it was also assumed that each student faced economic challenges due to demographic data on the area in which they lived. Even though participants were not directly asked to describe challenges, they each did. While the challenges varied, all were identified as impacting their schoolwork. Several students noted that the work was hard, and these codes fell under the sub-category of academic challenges. The experiences got so hard that several students wanted to give up. In the words of one participant, “I kept having problems. The reading got harder and the math got harder. The geometry was hard. So I started to say I can’t make it.”

Another sub-theme, social/emotional challenges, revealed the non-academic struggles that participants faced that took place both at school and at home. One participant worked two jobs and lived on her own during her last two years of high school. Another participant discussed his struggles with feeling that he had no friends and how he was bullied extensively throughout his school career, which caused his schoolwork to suffer because he could not focus. At least three participants had no contact with one parent and one participant has suffered abuse at the hands of his mother. Familial challenges were first a sub-group within the theme of challenges

but were removed because there was too much overlap with social/emotional challenges. All 10 participants noted that the social/emotional challenges they faced had an impact on their academic struggles.

At school, all 10 participants struggled with schoolwork and had a teacher who caused them to struggle even more as a result of their interactions. These interactions also fell into the sub-group of social/emotional challenges. The obstacles created by teachers who were put in place to provide support took a toll on several participants in their academic journey. One participant recalled a teacher who “talked negatively about me to my parents,” causing additional stress for him. Another student felt a certain teacher gave up on her and even “told my mom that I wasn’t going to make it in high school.” Remaining conversations about teachers who caused participants additional challenges centered around lack of quality instruction and care for their needs as related to their academic struggles.

School setting emerged as a theme that impacted several participants by creating challenges for them. Four noted that the brick and mortar setting created an environment where they could not focus or concentrate on the academic portion of their day. One participant said that they could not get the help they needed for academics in the confines of the school day and believed that if they stayed in the brick and mortar setting they would not have graduated. In the words of one participant, “In brick and mortar I don’t think I could’ve gotten it together.” Another participant noted, “I wasn’t doing too good at school ...I was just saying there I was not paying attention....there was a lot of distractions...and I was like ok I need to try something different.”

Two participants had difficulty when forced to attend school virtually due to schools shutting down unexpectedly. One participant shared that she felt isolated in the virtual setting

and had a difficult time learning when she did not have direct access to the teacher in class. She was concerned she would not graduate because her grades slipped significantly during the months she spent learning through a computer screen. The impact of the virtual setting had a social impact for one participant, creating a sense of isolation from her peers. She missed the emotional and social connection to peers, which impaired her motivation.

Supports

The second major theme that emerged was support systems. Despite the challenges that participants faced, they each had a support system to encourage them when these challenges occurred. Every participant had someone in their family who provided some level of support, either academically, emotionally, or both. “Good support at home got me here. My mom and dad helped,” noted one participant. Another shared, “[I]f it wasn’t for my dad’s side of the family I wouldn’t be here.” Family was noted as a factor of support for all 10 participants. Three participants have at least one parent who did not graduate and two were the first in their family to graduate, however these family members wanted them to graduate and helped them as best they could to reach that milestone. The sub-theme of supports at home emerged from these findings.

A second sub-theme aligned with supports was in the school setting. Six participants actually described the school setting as a support. Four of them noted that in the brick and mortar setting, they faced numerous distractions both academically and socially. That all changed when they attended school virtually. The schedule allowed them flexibility and time to focus on their learning and to get help from teachers when they needed it instead of the traditional schedule set in the typical school setting. In contrast, two participants struggled when they were forced to go to school virtually and identified the brick and mortar setting as a support. They needed to be in school to feel engaged in learning and get the support necessary for them to be successful.

In addition to supports at home, another sub-theme became supports at school. All 10 participants noted specific teachers to whom they could go for academic support or emotional encouragement when they were struggling. One participant recounted her experience and shared:

My teachers were nice. They pretty much pulled me aside and asked me if I ever needed help to ask them. They knew I had trouble with reading, so it was for my best interest that they held me out to get me to understand what things were being said. I used to hate that so much, but it was the benefit of me to know what the words were saying and what they were talking about. At the time I didn't like it, but looking back it was really helpful.

Another participant shared that the teacher who was most impactful “knew what I needed, and he helped me.” Several participants shared the emotional support they received from teachers who were a good support system for them at school. “They were encouraging. Like my other mother. They were supportive of me academically and emotionally when I needed it the most,” one participant recalled about teachers who helped her get through the tough times at school.

The sub-theme of external motivating factors was considered but rejected because it overlapped with all sub-themes previously identified in this category. People, both at home and at school, as well as in the school setting, served as externally motivating factors that led to participants ultimately graduating with a traditional diploma from a Title I school. Goal setting was revealed as a factor in each participants' success and was considered for this theme, but after reflecting on the theoretical framework it aligned more with the sub-theme of intrinsic factors in the personal attributes theme.

Personal Attributes

The final theme to emerge from participants was personal attributes. Based on responses to the question asking participants to describe their best quality, students described themselves as

persistent. They used different ways to express this, but the quality that was described by each participant was persistence. One participant described herself as “the type of person who pushes myself and just keeps going.” Another stated, “I was a hard worker, and I never backed down from an assignment.” More comments demonstrating this quality in participants were “I have a never give up attitude,” “I just told myself to keep going and not give up,” and “I usually keep trying to do it until I get it done.” All made it clear that no matter the difficulty they faced, they would persist to overcome and achieve.

The concept of intrinsic motivation emerged as a sub-theme. Each participant revealed they had internalized the goal of graduation. This goal was instilled in them by their family and eventually became a goal they had for themselves. Internal motivating factors was considered as a theme but fit more neatly as a sub-theme within the personal attributes theme because it related back to the character trait of persistence that each participant revealed. In the words of one participant, “Sometimes I get stressed out but that’s just life. I take a break and step back and I look and I’m like we’re doing this and get back up.” Instances when one faced adversity but continued anyway can be linked to motivation. But in this case, each participant specifically spoke on the targeted goal of graduating, and this linked goal-setting with motivation, suggesting that participants were internally driven towards achieving the goal.

Research Question Responses

This study sought to answer one research question and three sub-questions. Themes and sub-themes that emerged through the data analysis process were used to answer the four questions. The central question was grounded in the research literature in an effort to better understand what caused participants in this study, from a demographic with the highest dropout

rates in the country, to earning a traditional high school diploma despite the numerous challenges they faced.

Central Question: What are the lived experiences of students with disabilities in Title I schools who stayed motivated to earn a traditional high school diploma?

The graduates in this study explained the experiences throughout high school that ultimately led to successful completion of a goal—in this case, a diploma. The first theme was challenges and all participants described the challenges they faced. Participants described their academic struggles related to their disability, but also faced struggles caused by teachers who should have been in support of their goal but actually worked against their academic achievement and in some cases, their social/emotional well-being. Most participants also faced struggles at home and described these experiences. Although none of them indicated financial barriers, they were chosen due to socio-economic status, which further impacted them socially, emotionally, and academically. Six participants also described the school setting as a challenge, creating the third and final sub-theme. However, all overcame these challenges because of supports and personal attributes.

The second theme of supports revealed that each participant had supports at home. They each had a family member, parent, grandparent, or sibling, who they turned to during challenging times. These support systems provided the strength to persevere when they felt like giving up. And all participants felt like giving up at least once during high school. In addition to the supports at home, they all had supports at school in the form of teachers who went out of their way to give them time. It was not one method of teaching or one program. Often, it was not even related to academics. These teachers provided the support each participant needed at any given time, which created motivation and a sense of competency in participants and gave them the

strength to continue in pursuit of their goal to graduate. Finally, the school setting was addressed as a support for six participants. The virtual setting allowed for flexibility for some and the availability of teachers in this setting was beneficial as well. For others, the brick and mortar setting created a more supportive environment conducive for optimal learning.

The last theme of personal attributes emerged because each participant described themselves as persistent. They were internally driven to achieve the goal they had set and were not going to let the challenges, described in the first theme, deter them. Instead, they focused on what they could do and refused to give in to the negative experiences they had. They remained motivated despite the adversity they faced.

Textural and Structural Descriptions. Moustakas (1994) defined textural descriptions as what happened, and structural descriptions as how the phenomenon was experienced. Horizontalization was used to reduce and reflect on statements made by participants (Moustakas, 1994). From this, the textural description was formed. Results from themes and sub-themes were used to create the description of the lived experiences of students with a disability who earned a traditional high school diploma from a Title I school. The participants spoke of their challenges, both academically and socially/emotionally. They described factors at home, at school, and within them as being impactful in the achievement of their goal.

The structural description was formed from the textural description and created a vivid account of the dynamics connecting feelings and thoughts of participants (Moustakas, 1994). The underlying dynamic is motivation through challenges. All participants remained motivated when they faced challenges at home and at school, both academically, socially, and emotionally. Motivation was a chief factor in the ultimate success of participants and was supported both

externally, through supports at home and school, as well as internally, through goal setting and personal attributes.

Synthesis. Textural and structural descriptions were then used to synthesize the data and form the essence (Moustakas, 1994). To answer the central question, “What are the lived experiences of students with disabilities in Title I schools who stayed motivated to earn a traditional high school diploma?,” the final synthesis was formed. At the center of each of their lives there was a significant challenge. All participants had a disability that impaired and interfered academically. In addition to academic challenges, participants’ families also faced financial struggles that trickled down to impact the participants both socially and emotionally. Participants did not emphasize these struggles, but instead focused on the supports they had and their internal drive towards success.

Sub-Question 1: How do participants describe their sources of motivation in their attainment of a high school diploma?

Each participant described their main source of motivation as themselves. They described the personality trait that kept them working towards graduation, even when faced with seemingly insurmountable challenges, as persistence. Each indicated that they were the biggest cheerleader for themselves. “I just told myself to keep going and not give up,” one participant stated, and all others shook their heads in agreement during the focus group interview. “Positive self-talk and a lot of prayer” was noted by another participant. Family support and teacher support were also noted by participants as factors connected to their motivation.

Each participant described the people in their lives who made a difference for them. Each noted both a family member and someone at school who supported them when they struggled. All had a powerful figure in the home, mostly parents, siblings, or a grandparent, who picked

them up when they were down and reminded them of the goal they had set. Additionally, every participant had a teacher who they could go to for support either academically emotionally, or both. The message revealed through the interviews, focus group discussion, and letter writing was that they needed support in both places. “But my mom wasn’t at school so I needed my teachers when I was there,” one participant pointed out. Motivation came both internally and externally.

Sub-Question 2: How do participants describe the role of goal setting in their attainment of a high school diploma?

Every participant had a goal to graduate. Every participant believed that graduating from high school was important to them and their family. The decision to graduate was partly theirs and partly the family members’ who communicated the expectation to them through words or actions. One participant noted that it was important for her to graduate to further her career. She had a love for animals and said, “I wanted to further my love for animals so I needed to have my high school diploma to do the job I wanted.” A second participant agreed and expanded the statement to include her own experience with the comment, “[I]t helps you get a head start on your career and future and my parents expected me to,” confirming that parental influence was strong.

Sub-Question 3: How do participants describe environmental and contextual supports that were impactful in their attainment of a high school diploma?

Participants revealed that environmental supports related to the school setting were a key factor in their attainment of a diploma. The flexibility of the virtual setting made a positive difference for four participants by enabling them to complete assignments when they needed to. In addition to work completion, participants also noted the availability of teachers during

extended times when compared to the brick and mortar setting. The brick and mortar setting was a factor for two participants who struggled in the virtual setting. They relied on the in-person relationship and instruction from teachers to be successful. In addition, participants noted that they performed best for teachers who “taught how they learned” and took the time for them when they needed extra support. This support was in addition to the scheduled support classes that were a part of each participant’s IEP.

Summary

For this phenomenological study, students who had a disability and graduated high school with a traditional diploma from a Title I school shared their experiences through interviews, a focus group, and letter writing. In this chapter, these experiences were described using data obtained through interviews, a focus group, and the letter writing process. The three themes of challenges, supports, and personal attributes, which emerged through this process, were presented. Additionally, the research questions were answered as a result of the data collection process.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of students with disabilities in Title I schools who stayed motivated to graduate with a traditional high school diploma. Previous research presented a great deal of data as to why students in this demographic dropout. However, a gap was found in the literature regarding why the ones who are successful overcome the same challenges to earn a diploma.

Presented in this chapter are a summary of findings and a brief response to the research questions. Next, discussions regarding a relationship between findings from this study, Deci and Ryan;s (200, 2002, 2008) self determination theory, and existing literature are discussed. Implications, delimitations, and limitations are reviewed and recommendations for future research are included.

Summary of Findings

Three themes were uncovered using Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenological research methods. These themes were challenges, supports, and personality traits. The central research question and three sub-questions in this study using data collected from participant interviews, a participant focus group interview, and letters written by the participants are addressed briefly here.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of students with disabilities in Title I schools who stayed motivated to earn a traditional high school diploma? To answer this question, themes, sub-themes, and sub-questions were used to form a textural-structural synthesis identified by Moustakas (1994) as the essence of the study. The essence of the lived experiences of students

with disabilities who earned a traditional high school diploma from a Title I school was overcoming challenges through both internal and external supports to obtain a diploma. These tied into the predetermined goal that participants had to graduate, along with the personality traits that helped them persist to achieve their goal.

Research Sub-Question One

How do participants describe their sources of motivation in their attainment of a high school diploma? Participants all described the personal attributes that helped them overcome the challenges they faced to earn a high school diploma. Every participant was intrinsically motivated and described themselves as persistent. Each time they faced a difficulty in their home life or at school, they never gave up and looked inward for motivation. In addition to internal motivating factors, each participant described outside sources of support and motivation when challenges arose. All participants noted both teachers and family members that encouraged and supported them through struggles they faced in school and at home.

Research Sub-Question Two

How do participants describe the role of goal setting in their attainment of a high school diploma? Each participant specifically said that graduating from high school was a goal that they set for themselves stemming from the familial importance placed on education in the home. Family members communicated the importance of graduating to participants and made it clear that they would be there to support them through the challenges. Participants internalized the desire to graduate and established the goal for themselves, refusing to give up on it when challenges arose.

Research Sub-Question Three

How do participants describe environmental and contextual supports that are impactful in their attainment of a high school diploma? Environmental supports identified as impactful were related to setting. Flexibility of the setting emerged as being critical for participation and access to supports was determined by participants as crucial to their success. One setting did not meet the needs of all and having options for where instruction occurred allowed participants to graduate. Participants graduated as a result of having a person both at home and at school who supported them academically and emotionally when they needed it. Teachers “taught the way they needed” and were there to listen when participants were overwhelmed. Family members helped with work at home and pushed them to continue when they felt like giving up. Relationships were critical both at home and school to that attainment of a diploma for participants.

Discussion

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of students with disabilities in Title I schools who stay motivated to graduate with a traditional high school diploma. This phenomenon was investigated to understand what circumstances allowed these students to continue to attend high school, and ultimately graduate, when they face so many struggles. The theory guiding this study was Deci and Ryan’s self determination theory (2000, 2002, 2008) as it identifies factors, both intrinsic and extrinsic, that lead to individual success. The forthcoming sections will provide information regarding empirical and theoretical findings. The three themes derived from interviews, a focus group, and letter writing are included in the discussion.

Empirical Findings

Research identified students with disabilities and those who face economic challenges as yielding the highest dropout rate of any group when factors are combined (Elbaum et al., 2014; Floweres et al., 2017). Poverty is a factor in academic success (Dawson-McClure et al., 2015), as is having a disability (Shifter, 2016). All 10 participants of this study fit in both categories but were able to achieve success atypical of their peers by graduating with a traditional diploma. The following is an explanation of why they succeeded when so many others failed based on triangulation of data from three data collection methods outlined previously and connected with previous research.

Coming from a toxic environment at home, yearning for connectedness, and being in general difficult circumstances were all identified as reasons why students leave high school, according to Tufts University and their Center for Promise (2016). These were factors for all participants but even in these circumstances, all participants remained motivated. Sources of motivation for all participants were very similar. They described both internal and external motivating factors in their success. All 10 participants also described the personal attributes that helped them overcome the challenges they faced to earn a high school diploma. Each depicted themselves as persistent because during times of difficulty either at home or in school, they continued to work towards their goal.

Research was in alignment in the area of motivation and the role it plays in academic achievement. Evidence reveals a positive correlation between motivation and success in school (Miserandino, 1996; Yadava & Yadava, 2018; Maehr & Midgley, 1999; Grolnick et al., 1991; Deci & Ryan, 2002, 2008; Ormond, 2003). Students who were intrinsically motivated felt competent, participated more often in challenging activities (Grolnick et al., 1991), and had

strong relationships with teachers (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Teacher disposition, passion, and endorsement of student contributions while avoiding artificial incentives all led these students to be motivated and are in alignment with Lawrence's (2011) study that revealed teachers who successfully improve feelings of autonomy and connectedness with students use teachable moments as they arise and "go off script" instead of being inflexible and set on a predetermined plan. Participants noted that the teachers who supported them the most taught them according to their learning styles and provided encouragement when they faced times of doubt and felt like giving up.

Goal setting occurred with each participant and included their family with similar expectations. Greater motivation and success comes from "owning it" as related to goals that have been set by an individual (Deci, 1971; Ryan & Deci, 2000). All 10 participants specifically said that graduating from high school was a goal that they had for themselves when they entered high school. And each participant also had families who communicated their desire for the participant to graduate from high school.

Every participant had someone they could go to when they faced struggles. They each identified adults at both school and home who helped them when they were facing difficulty with academics. There was at least one teacher who participants could turn to when they needed more help than what the typical student would. Because they each have a disability, challenges are expected and it would seem that teachers would all be supportive and helpful. This wasn't the case for participants, so they relied on certain teachers to help in these instances.

Previous research noted lack of training for general education teachers, leading to hindered learning and escalated academic struggles for special education students (Iadarola et al., 2015). General education teachers indicated that they are not proficient in providing instruction

to special education students and that it is a major concern for them (Alfaro et al., 2015). A significant factor in learning engagement, behaviors which foster learning directly, was identified by Lee and Bierman (2015) as student and teacher relationships. This lack of confidence due to lack of training can cause stress for the teacher, impacting student-teacher relationships negatively. Participants each identified teachers who did not teach in a way they could understand as a challenge they faced in high school.

Environmental and contextual supports were also in place for each participant. All 10 participants had a teacher whom they could go to when they faced a challenge. But it was more than just being there for the participant to lean on or to get help with academics. Title I schools receive additional funding because the dropout rates at these schools are typically higher (Hirn et al., 2018). Factors identified by participants related to programming or additional resources for them were never brought up. Instead, it was the teachers who took the time and went above and beyond the class expectations to help them succeed that was noted as a factor by all 10 participants.

Key skills for academic achievement are following directions, compliance, and on-task behavior and these are maximized when the student-teacher relationship is supportive. This, in turn, increases persistence in the struggling student and increases self-determination. Students view themselves as competent when they feel supported by their teachers and are more motivated to continue even when they face academic challenges (Lee & Bierman, 2015). Participants in this study were confident and expressed feelings of competence despite academic struggles related to a disability. Additionally, all participants were able to find at least one teacher they could rely on to provide an additional avenue of help to overcome these challenges.

This relates to studies by Reddick et al. (2011) and Zaff et al. (2017) that identified positive student-teacher relationships as factors that contribute to high school graduation.

Beyond the people in school, the physical place made a difference for six participants. When structures are in place, self-regulation and cognitive development are maximized (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Self-regulation, according to Watts et al. (2018), was linked to focus and attention to task, as well as regulating emotions when faced with stress. Four participants attributed their success to the virtual model and two said being virtual almost caused them to give up on graduating. For those who wanted the virtual option, they appreciated the flexibility of scheduling and deadlines, as well as the availability of teachers and resources outside the typical school day. However, the brick and mortar setting offered the dynamic needed for two participants who failed to thrive in the online setting. The structures in place for these participants allowed for maximized engagement and cognitive development, which ultimately lead them to successful completion and graduation with a traditional diploma.

Academic success, or lack of, is not solely dependent on school experiences. All participants had at least one family member who also supported them by encouraging them when they were struggling, helping with work, or advocating for their needs. Relatedness, according to Deci and Ryan (2002), includes physical and emotional closeness with others. Those with positive relationships felt supported and were more motivated. Several participants had multiple people at home to push them to succeed. And all participants came from homes where family members had high expectations for them to graduate and did not see the IEP as a factor that would eliminate that option. At home, each participant had at least one family member who provided guidance and took the time to work with them through their academic struggles, even though they had a hard time with the work too. Studies have shown that young people who left

school before graduating faced issues related to negative relationships at home (Hynes, 2014; Cassel, 2003; McKee 2012). These participants indicated stressors at home but had at least one person who supported and encouraged them. Many high school dropouts leave because of reaching a breaking point (Hynes, 2014) but these students were able to persist during challenging times because they had someone to support them.

What are the lived experiences of students with disabilities in Title I schools who stayed motivated to earn a traditional high school diploma? Through extensive interviews, focus groups, and letter writing, the participants, students with disabilities in Title I schools, revealed what led them to stay motivated to earn a traditional high school diploma when so many others fail to do so. All participants acknowledged the struggles they faced, including social, emotional, and academic obstacles along their paths to graduation. However, all participants remained motivated by both internal factors (personal attributes) and external factors (supports). They each had a predetermined goal to graduate and followed through. Environmental and contextual supports all played a crucial role in the ultimate success of participants.

Theoretical Findings

Self determination theory (SDT) identifies three needs that individuals must have met to achieve well-being. Unlu and Dettweiler (2015) noted that this may look different among individuals, but when the psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness are met, an individual obtains optimal results. In these circumstances, motivation and mental health are maximized and outputs of intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, and well-being are increased, (Deci & Ryan, 2002, 2008). For the sake of this research, optimal results is an earned high school diploma. This study was connected to SDT with the essence of overcoming challenges to

obtain an intrinsically-developed goal with both internal and external supports. All participants achieved this and examples of SDT can be linked to results of this study.

Motivation was a factor in why these at-risk students graduated with a traditional diploma. They remained persistent even when they faced challenges. Each student noted their personal attributes and identified that they continued to work even when times were difficult. They also revealed that teachers and family members were a source of motivation as well. Results of the research revealed that all 10 participants were both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to graduate.

Intrinsic motivation, as defined by Deci and Ryan (2002), is internally-driven satisfaction and inherent in action. Participants believed that the goal to graduate was set by them, and they were very much a part of why they overcame challenges. Deci (1995) described a feeling of competence as when an individual is in control of a behavior instead of one being imposed on them. This related to two components of SDT, as all participants expressed the feeling of competence to graduate even though they struggled academically. This competence led to autonomy, which is defined as the causal agent in one's life (Unlu & Dettweiler, 2015).

Extrinsic motivation, contrasting intrinsic motivation, is linked to contingent outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Although participants did not mention rewards or awards, which have been linked to undermining intrinsic motivation and viewed negatively by SDT, they did receive positive feedback and encouragement from teachers and family members. In SDT, Deci and Ryan (2002) identified verbal rewards, praise, or feedback as enhancing intrinsic motivation. Ultimately, the feedback participants received from their teachers and family members identified as being supportive deepened their intrinsic motivation to graduate.

Goal-setting is another component of SDT found in the responses from participants. All participants set the goal to graduate from high school and all noted that it was also a goal of their family members. Deci and Ryan (2002) identified goal setting in two ways: extrinsic and intrinsic. Participants displayed both types of motivation.

Early in their lives, family members helped participants understand the importance of earning a diploma and the value it had for the family. Deci and Ryan (2002) identified this as an extrinsically-framed goal, because it is the goal of someone else and is not correlated with long-term persistence of the goal. However, SDT asserts that extrinsically-formed goals in early stages of goal-setting are typical and help to transition goals to intrinsically-framed when the three psychological needs are met (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

All participants thrived in an environment where their needs of autonomy and competence were met. For some, an online was preferable, and for others the brick and mortar setting was where they thrived. Another major component from SDT found throughout the data collection was relationships. According to SDT, relationships are necessary to develop both autonomy and connectedness. An individual must be autonomous and connected to achieve what is necessary to persist (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

All 10 participants in this study had the three psychological needs identified in Deci and Ryan's SDT (200, 2002, & 2008) met. They were able to achieve optimal results and earn a high school diploma despite the numerous challenges they faced as a student with a disability in a Title I school. Each remained motivated and identified both intrinsic and extrinsic factors related to persistence toward the goal they set for themselves, initially introduced by family members, and graduated. They all noted key relationships, both in and out of school, which helped them through the difficult times. Finally, all participants felt competent in their ability to achieve their

goal. Therefore, the theory guiding this study was evident in the results of the interviews, the focus group interview, and letter writing.

Implications

Previous research provides extensive data as to why certain populations fail to graduate. Academic failure, having a disability, negative self-perception, and poor relationships with teachers and peers, in addition to home life and demographics, are all named as reasons why students drop out of high school (Berg & Nelson, 2015; Hynes, 2014; Franklin & Trouard, 2016; Wilkins & Bost, 2016). This study was focused on students who have disabilities and attend Title I schools, making up the largest group of high school dropouts (Elbaum et al., 2014). These students also have other factors that put them even more at risk, and cumulative factors increase the risk of dropout, which is a process that occurs over time (Franklin & Trouard, 2016; Zaff et al., 2017). Three participants have parents who are incarcerated. According to Backman (2017), children who have incarcerated parents are at an increased risk for leaving school before graduation. Being overage was the most significant indicator that a student would leave high school before graduation and all participants in this study were overage when they entered high school (Wilkes & Bost, 2016). In addition to having a disability and attending a Title I school, all participants had at least one other indicator for being at risk for dropping out.

Empirical Implications

Empirical implications were evident through the voices of those who experienced the phenomenon of graduating with a high school diploma when so many who are in the same subgroup do not. They were able to paint a picture of what they needed to be successful when others were not. This study discovered the factors that led them to earn a diploma—motivation (both

intrinsic and extrinsic) towards a predetermined goal and internal and external support systems both in the home and at school—thus addressing a gap in the literature.

Schools spend a great deal of resources to understand the role of motivation to help reduce the dropout rate because motivation has been identified through research to improve effort levels and overall academic achievement (Ormond, 2003) and highly-motivated individuals persist through challenges (Ormond, 2003; Maehr & Midgley, 1999). However, schools often focus on external reward and punishment systems to motivate students (Ormond, 2003).

None of these systems were noted by participants as being a factor in their goal attainment. No participant named any type of token reward or promise of one as to why they continued to persist and stay motivated. The only external motivating factor was support from teachers and family members. All participants had support in both areas. Having support systems in place both in the home and at school came to the surface as being key factors in goal attainment.

Title I schools receive additional funding and students with disabilities receive even more funding because of the need for specialization of faculty and equipment (Yettick, 2015; Conlin & Jalilevand, 2018). However, extra money associated with programs and training has yet to be effective in reducing the dropout rate. One factor impacting the academic success of participants, and potentially minimizing students with disabilities in Title I schools leaving before graduation, was the mode of access to school. Choice in where students were able to have their educational needs met revealed itself as a factor in achievement of six participants but was not present in the literature.

Participants in this study indicated that a system, program, or teacher methodology did not help them. The factor they indicated as being a direct impact on their academic success was a teacher or teachers who cared about them. Participants noted instances where they were struggling emotionally because of their academic difficulties. What the teacher did to help cost nothing other than time. They lent an ear to listen and a word of encouragement. Some stayed after class or created a special session to provide general support, not specialized instruction or specific accommodations.

One final factor for students not identified in previous research was the goal setting prior to attainment. Each participant had a goal to graduate, likely instilled at home, and refused to give up on that goal because they ultimately owned it. Aligned with Deci and Ryan's SDT (2002), the goal that was once extrinsically created by a family member became intrinsic because the participant's needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence were met. Many of these factors are outside of the control of the school. However, there was no research indicating programs or targets to help at-risk students set goals for graduation early in their high school career so they could ultimately internalize this goal as their own.

Theoretical Implications

The self determination theory of Deci and Ryan (year) aligned with this study very well. The participant group faced challenges because of their socioeconomic status and disabilities, which impacted their academic achievement. Naturally, motivation would need to be high for these students to overcome these challenges to meet academic success. Several components within SDT were in sync with this study. Deci and Ryan (2002, 2008) and Ryan and Deci (2000) proposed that individuals have three basic psychological needs that, when met, foster well-being. These needs appeared to be met in each participant, resulting in optimized outcomes in the

academic setting. In addition, all participants described both internal and external factors related to their continued motivation when challenges came up. These motivating factors are described as indicators of success in the SDT.

Indications from this study connect SDT with motivating factors for academic achievement. First, each student set a goal to graduate based on a familial precedence being set for educational importance. Deci and Ryan (2002) suggested that intrinsically-set goals lead to persistence and ultimate achievement. Additionally, participants described themselves as key factors in staying motivated. According to Deci and Ryan (2002, 2006), when an individual feels competent, motivation is improved. This feeling of being a causal agent in one's life was described by each participant and led to the need of autonomy being met (Unlu & Dettweiler, 2015). Positive relationships were another indicator of high motivation and all participants had them both at home and at school, which led to the need for relatedness being met as well.

Practical Implications

This study revealed several practical implications for students with a disability who want to graduate, as well as teachers, parents, and schools. Participants revealed the importance of support in school by a teacher willing to go above and beyond both academically and emotionally. Teachers who are concerned that they have not been properly trained should be relieved to know that it is more about the relationship than the program; this may allow them to engage more impactfully with this group of students. Flexibility on the school's part is another way that students with high indicators of exiting before graduation can be supported to stay. Technology allows many new avenues for delivery of instruction and should be considered to maximize successful completion of high school for students with disabilities and those in Title I schools.

It became apparent through the participants' own voices that having someone at home who holds education in high regard was critical in helping them to form goals for success. Even simple discussions were impactful. Families should not be deterred if they struggled with academics or dropped out. They should, instead, be encouraged by the school to make their goals for their child known to the child from an early age.

Finally, those charged with ensuring the academic success of students with disabilities in Title I schools should realize that students do not need the newest and best of anything. Participants revealed that what they really need was someone to show that they are valued and worth the extra time. Teachers know more than they give themselves credit for based on the responses of participants. Students need teachers to be partners in their learning and open to communication with them enough to listen to what is presenting the challenge. Sometimes a teacher's method is not working, and that teacher can easily identify the struggling student. That teacher can recognize the student's struggle and their own limitations and propose a different strategy or teacher to assist so that the student may understand.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations for this study are described first. Ten participants were recent high school graduates from Title I schools in the southeastern United States who had an IEP in high school. The purpose of selecting this demographic was based on the literature that identified these students as the population having the highest dropout rate (Elbaum et al., 2014). Recent graduates, in the last three years, were selected because it was important to obtain experiences that were fresh as to understand the greatest emotional connection with the phenomenon. This location was chosen due to the proximity of the researcher and the opportunity to secure participants.

The first limitation in the study was that the participant group emerged from only two schools. Even though this may be a less diverse group, the experiences of participants can still be voiced through their interviews, journals, and responses. I worked to develop as much diversity as possible in the sampling process (Creswell, 2013). The experiences and backgrounds of individuals are diverse despite attending the same two schools. The second limitation was the size of the sample. Significant data was gathered from the 10 participants, but a larger and more diverse participant group could have elicited more data and enhanced the findings. Finally, all interviews, including the focus group, were conducted online. Being face-to-face or in person may have elicited greater detail or more rich descriptions of experiences by participants.

Recommendations for Future Research

In consideration of the study's findings, limitations, and the delimitations placed on the study, recommendations for future research can be identified. The results have expanded the literature but faced limitations. Further research should focus on goal setting early in a student's life if they are at a high risk for dropping out. Individuals may need to realize that the goal is attainable, despite their struggles, and not all students have family members who impart graduation as a priority at home. This study revealed the importance of goal setting in the attainment of a high school diploma. The internalized goal, presented at an early age by family members, was a key finding. However, the results were limited to the questions asked about goal setting and could be expanded on to advance the literature further.

In addition, more research should be conducted to solidify the results from this study around the area of personal attributes and their connection to graduation rates. This study could be used as a baseline for a quantitative study related to how successful graduates in this

targeted population describe themselves. Expanded and quantitative data could be used to further the empirical data supporting this study.

In reference to the setting, which was revealed in this study as a key factor for the success of six participants, expanded research in flexibility of the mode of delivery of instruction would also add to the literature. Greater understanding of the impact of allowing different forms of presentation would be gained if further research focused on the options available due to changes in technology. The recent forced virtual learning environment exposed many more students to this type of education who may have never experienced it. At least two participants in this study stated that the virtual setting option was the main reason they graduated. This study was limited to 10 participants and having a larger sample with research questions focused on setting would add to the literature.

Summary

This transcendental phenomenological study gave a voice to students with an IEP throughout high school who also earned a traditional diploma from a Title I school when so many of their peers failed to do so. A review of the literature revealed abundant research on why students drop out. However, a gap in the literature was found regarding why the students who overcome the odds to graduate do so. This study provided a picture, painted by participants, of what it took for them to graduate, thus contributing to closing the gap in the literature. Participants revealed key factors in their success: They all faced challenges, they all had a strong support system both at home and at school, and they all had personality traits that caused them to persist. It is my hope that the findings of this study will provide teachers and at-risk students an additional tool to help reduce the dropout rate for students with IEPs attending Title I schools.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval Letter

Date: 12-11-2021

IRB #: IRB-FY20-21-386

Title: WHAT MOTIVATES THEM TO GRADUATE? A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF STUDENT WITH DISABILITIES WHO EARN A HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA IN TITLE I SCHOOLS

Creation Date: 11-20-2020

End Date:

Status: Approved

Principal Investigator: Heather Tamminen

Review Board: Research Ethics Office

Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Limited	Decision	Exempt - Limited IRB
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Key Study Contacts

Member	Sarah Pannone	Role	Co-Principal Investigator	Contact	sjpannone@liberty.edu
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Appendix B
Informed Consent Form

Consent

Title of the Project: What Motivates Them To Graduate? A Phenomenological Study of the Experiences of Students with Disabilities Who Earn a High School Diploma in Title I Schools

Principal Investigator: Heather Tamminen, Liberty University, Doctoral Candidate

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be 18 years of age or older and have graduated from a Title I high school with a traditional diploma within the past 5 years. In addition, you should have had an individualized education plan (IEP) from the start date of high school through graduation. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to examine the experiences of students who had an IEP and graduated with a traditional diploma from a Title I school.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

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

1. Participate in either a Zoom or an in-person interview. The interview will also be either video- or audio-recorded. The interview will take about 30 minutes to complete.
2. Review the interview transcript for accuracy. The interviewer will email the transcript to you within one week of the interview. You will be asked to review the document for accuracy and return it by email to the interviewer within one week. This should take you 30 minutes to review.
3. Write a letter to future students. You will be asked to write one letter to future students who will be experiencing similar challenges and give them advice about how to overcome the obstacles to earn a high school diploma. Directions will be given at the conclusion of the interview. The letter is requested to be sent to the interviewer within one week of the interview by email. This should take about 30 minutes to complete.
4. Participate in a Zoom focus group if you are available on the day it is held. The session will be audio- or video-recorded. The focus group will take 60 minutes to complete.
5. Review the focus group transcript for accuracy. The interviewer will email the transcript within one week of the focus group to you. You will be asked to review the document for accuracy and return by email to the interviewer within one week. This should take you 30 minutes to complete.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include helping to improve the graduation rate of students with disabilities.

Liberty University
IRB-FY20-21-386
Approved on 2-15-2021

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

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

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

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Liberty University
IRB-FY20-21-386
Approved on 2-15-2021

Appendix C

Table of Codes

Interview, Focus Group, and Letter Writing

Theme: Challenges

High school was challenging

Extracurriculars interfering with schoolwork

Family relationships

Peer relationships

Teacher relationships

School setting

Theme: Supports

Extracurriculars

Family attitude about school

Parent involvement or help

Parents were a motivation to graduate

Sibling involvement or help

Teacher relationships

Good friends

School setting

Theme: Personal Attributes

Internal motivation

Goal to graduate

