A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY EXPLORING THE FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE

TO PERSISTENCE IN ONLINE DOCTORAL PROGRAMS FOR STUDENTS WITH

LEARNING DISABILITIES OR ADHD

by

Jerry L. Pitts Jr.

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVED BY:

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Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to discover the factors that contributed to persistence in online doctoral programs for students with learning disabilities (LD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The theory guiding this study was Tinto's theory of student persistence, as it suggested the more students were academically and socially integrated into their institution, the more likely they were to persist in their studies. The Central research question of this study is, "What are the factors that contribute to persistence in online doctoral programs for students with LD and ADHD?" Participants in this study consisted of seven individuals with learning disabilities or ADHD who had completed all of their required coursework in their current online doctoral program and had started the dissertation phase of their program, and four who had graduated from their online doctoral programs within the last two years. Candidates were selected using purposive sampling. Perspectives of students with LD and ADHD as they related to their academic persistence were shared. The lived experiences of online doctoral students with LD and ADHD were studied using online discussion board prompts, individual interviews, and focus groups. The data were collected and analyzed using Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology approach and generated six themes and commonalities among the participants in this study. The themes were Overcoming Challenges and Barriers, Adaptation and Coping Strategies, Motivation, Self-Efficacy, Support Systems, and Personal Determination and Perseverance. The data analysis revealed empirical, practical, and theoretical implications along with recommendations for future research.

Keywords: learning disabilities, persistence, academic success, higher education, dyslexia, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyscalculia, dysgraphia

Copyright Page

Dedication

To my wife, Vicki Pitts, the anchor of my life and the wind beneath my wings. Your unwavering love, patience, and belief in me have been the driving force behind every page of this dissertation. This work is a testament to our shared journey and the dreams we have built together.

To my children, Garry, Jessica, Samantha, SaraBeth, and Justin, and grandchildren, Chloe, Austin, Emma, William, Bryce, Haddox, Harlow, and Brooks, the joy and promise of our family's future. May this work serve as a beacon, illuminating the importance of perseverance, dedication, and the pursuit of knowledge. I hope it inspires you to chase your dreams, just as you have inspired me every day.

To my extended family, whose unwavering support and belief in my capabilities have been a constant source of strength. This dissertation is a tribute to our shared values, memories, and the unbreakable bond that ties us together.

To my late parents, Jerry Pitts Sr., and Janice Sarrett Pitts. This work stands as a testament to the values you instilled in me, the sacrifices you made, and the dreams you had for our family. In your honor, I dedicate this dissertation, a culmination of a journey that began with your love and support.

A special dedication to my late wife, Janice Rutledge Pitts. Your memory lives on in every word and every page. Your spirit, love, and wisdom have been my guiding light, reminding me of the importance of this journey and the legacy we leave behind.

In life, every person is important, and these special mentions are just a simple way to show how much each of you has touched my life and helped with this project.

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To my co-workers at Liberty University, your camaraderie, encouragement, and shared wisdom have been a source of light during the challenging times. The collaborative spirit and the sense of community I experienced with you all have been truly uplifting. Thank you for being more than just colleagues; you have been a family.

Lastly, I would like to thank Liberty University as a whole. This esteemed institution has provided me with the resources, environment, and opportunities to pursue my academic dreams. I am proud to be a part of the Liberty family and am deeply grateful for the unwavering support and commitment to excellence that the university embodies.

In gratitude and with humility, I acknowledge that this journey would not have been possible without the collective efforts of all mentioned above. Thank you.

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List of Abbreviations

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA)

Attention-deficit disorder (ADD)

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

Communications and Video Accessibility Act (CVAA)

Disability Support Services (DSS)

Individualized Education Program (IEP)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Learning disabilities (LD)

Office of Disability Support Services (ODAS)

Protathlités Christian University (PCU)

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (504)

The Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA)

Communications and Video Accessibility Act (CVAA)

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Earning a doctoral degree can be challenging to complete with attrition rates of up to 50% for residential programs and 50-70% for online doctoral programs (Rigler et al., 2017). This challenge often intensifies for students with learning disabilities (LD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), as they frequently grapple with feelings of helplessness, stigmatization, inadequacy, and a lack of understanding and support (Clouder et al., 2020). Fortunately, the rising prevalence of online doctoral programs has opened new doors for these students to achieve their goals. The flexibility of online programs allows learners to progress at their own speed and on a timetable that suits them best, thereby accommodating various learning styles and individual circumstances (Ortagus, 2017). Online platforms offer enhanced accessibility, with software tools available that can provide text-to-speech or speech-to-text functionality and modify text presentation for easier reading (Bouck, 2015). Online learning includes the prolific use of digital resources that can be accessed whenever necessary. These tools can be advantageous for students LD and ADHD, as they can review these resources according to their learning needs (Kent, 2015).

This study used a transcendental phenomenological approach to determine the factors that contributed to persistence in online doctoral programs for students with LD and ADHD. The chapter provides the study's historical, social, and theoretical context. Additionally, a problem statement and purpose statement are included, followed by the study's theoretical, empirical, and practical significance. Finally, the research questions are stated, and terms related to the study are defined.

Background

Online learning has become a popular mode of education, particularly for students with LD and ADHD who face challenges attending traditional brick-and-mortar classrooms (Counselman-Carpenter & Redcay, 2019). Persistence among online doctoral students with LD and ADHD remains a critical yet understudied issue within higher education. Meeks and Jain (2018) estimate that 11.1% of undergraduate and 7.6% of graduate students enrolled in postsecondary education throughout the United States have a disability. However, the experiences and persistence rates of online doctoral students with LD and ADHD are infrequently documented in the research, contributing to a significant gap in the literature that needs to be explored (Lizotte & Simplican, 2017). Despite the prevalent barriers such as stigmatization, inadequate support, and the inherent challenges of LD and ADHD in academic settings, some students persist even to the doctoral level. Yet, the lack of extensive research focused on those who succeed at the doctoral level in an online learning environment leaves much to be discovered, signaling the need for further investigation into the factors contributing to their persistence (Lizotte & Simplican, 2017).

Historical Context

In the United States, the history of students with LD and ADHD in higher education can be traced back to the 1960s and 1970s. During this time, the Civil Rights movement brought attention to the discrimination and exclusion experienced by people with disabilities, including in the realm of education. In 1973, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (504) was passed, which prohibited discrimination against people with disabilities in programs and activities receiving federal funding. This legislation marked a turning point in the fight for equal access to education for students with disabilities (Watson et al., 2019).

Despite the progress made by legislation, students with LD and ADHD still face significant challenges in higher education. A major challenge at universities is the lack of understanding and awareness of learning disabilities among faculty and staff. Many educators are not trained to recognize or accommodate students with LD and ADHD, which can lead to academic struggles and poor outcomes (Hollins & Foley, 2013). Another challenge is the stigma surrounding learning disabilities. Students with LD and ADHD may be hesitant to disclose their disability due to fears of being stigmatized or viewed as less competent. This can make it difficult for students to access accommodations and support (Cole & Cawthon, 2015).

Despite these challenges, there has been significant progress in supporting students with LD and ADHD in higher education. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed which extended the protections of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (504) to all public and private entities, including higher education institutions. It served as a major piece of civil rights legislation for individuals with disabilities (Blanck & Flynn, 2017).

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (504) prohibited discrimination on the basis of disability in any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance. The ADA took these principles and expanded their applicability to ensure that individuals with disabilities received equal opportunities across a broad range of settings, including higher education institutions (Blanck & Flynn, 2017). Under the ADA, these institutions are required to provide reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities unless such accommodations would result in undue hardship (Blanck & Flynn, 2017). These accommodations may involve modifications to course formats, provision of auxiliary aids or services, alterations to institutional policies, or other changes that enable equal access to education (Blanck & Flynn, 2017).

Title II of the ADA applies to public colleges and universities, whereas Title III pertains to private institutions, excluding those controlled by religious organizations (Blanck & Flynn, 2017). Failure to comply with these requirements may result in enforcement actions by the Department of Justice or private lawsuits (Blanck & Flynn, 2017). The history of students with LD and ADHD in higher education is one of progress and challenges. While legislation has provided important protections and accommodations, students with LD and ADHD continue to face significant obstacles in accessing education. However, the growing awareness and understanding of LD and ADHD among educators offer hope for continued progress in supporting the success of these students in higher education.

Social Context

One major challenge faced by students with LD and ADHD is social isolation. These students may feel isolated from their peers and feel socially excluded due to the difficulties they face in academic settings (Bruefach & Reynolds, 2022). This can lead to feelings of loneliness, depression, and anxiety (Leigh-Hunt et al., 2017). Other challenges include the negative attitudes and stereotypes that some people hold towards individuals with LD and ADHD. These students may face discrimination or stigma from their peers, which can further contribute to social isolation and undermine their sense of belonging (Bruefach & Reynolds, 2022). Finally, students with LD and ADHD may struggle with self-advocacy and communicating their needs to others. This can make it difficult for them to access accommodations or seek support when needed (Carroll et al., 2016). The social context of higher education can present unique challenges for students with LD and ADHD. However, by promoting social connection, disability awareness, and self-advocacy, colleges can help these students thrive academically and socially by creating a more inclusive and supportive environment.

Theoretical Context

Throughout the last several decades, researchers have examined university students with LD and ADHD in an effort to determine the reasons that, despite the increasing number of students with LD and ADHD enrolling in higher education programs, graduation rates remain more stagnant and lower than for students without disabilities (Newman et al., 2019). Much of the current literature on college students with learning disabilities support Oliver's (1996) social model of disability, which is understood as a combination of social and environmental barriers that prevent people from fully participating in society. It differs from the medical model of disability, which views disability as a medical problem that must be remedied through medical interventions (Hogan, 2019). The social model of disability recognizes that disabilities are not just a matter of a person's impairments or medical conditions but also of the social and environmental barriers that society imposes (Hogan, 2019).

Another theory researchers have used to examine university students with learning disabilities is Knowles' adult learning theory. Knowles (1980) first developed his theory based on four assumptions about the characteristics of andragogy: self-concept, adult learning experience, readiness to learn, and orientation to learning. Knowles theorized that as a person matures, his/her self-concept shifts from one of dependence to one of self-direction. He found that an individual's experience becomes an increasingly valuable learning resource as he or she matures. When a person matures, his/her willingness to learn becomes increasingly geared toward the tasks of the social role that they play. During a person's development, their time perspective changes from postponed application to immediate application. Thus, his/her orientation toward learning shifts from subject-centeredness to problem-centeredness (Knowles, 1980).

Since this study focused on the factors that contributed to persistence in online doctoral programs for students with LD and ADHD, Tinto's theory of student persistence was used to guide this study. Unlike previous studies that focused on the reasons why students with LD and ADHD were underperforming, this study focused on students who have been successful at the highest level of academia to determine what helped them persevere and find academic success. The results should inspire hope for current and future students with LD and ADHD and reveal a roadmap for success for students brave enough to chase their dreams.

Problem Statement

The problem was that despite the increasing number of students with LD and ADHD enrolling in higher education programs, graduation rates remained more stagnant and lower than for students without disabilities (Newman et al., 2019). A number of factors had been identified in recent years that may have contributed to the low graduation rates of students with LD and ADHD, including inadequate support services, inadequate accommodations, ineffective teaching strategies, and insufficient communication among students, faculty, and disability services (Hansen & Dawson, 2020). While previous research had explored the reasons why college students with LD and ADHD often struggled academically, few research studies had examined the factors that contributed to persistence in online doctoral programs for this population of students (Lizotte & Simplican, 2017). This study aimed to address this gap in the literature by investigating this phenomenon. By gaining a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of online doctoral students with learning disabilities who had succeeded academically, educators could develop strategies to support their students' academic pursuits. Furthermore, sharing these success stories could inspire current students with LD to persevere in their studies and equip them with the tools necessary to achieve their academic goals.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to discover the factors that contributed to persistence in online doctoral programs for students with learning disabilities (LD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The study included current online doctoral students at a large private university located in the southeastern United States. Participants had reached their dissertation phase of their online doctoral program. Recent graduates from online doctoral programs were also included. Persistence was defined as a student's continued enrollment within an institution and having made it to the dissertation phase or graduated from their online doctoral program (Tinto, 1987, 1993). The theory guiding this study was Tinto's theory of student persistence, as it suggested the more students were academically and socially integrated into their institution, the more likely they were to persist in their studies. By exploring the experiences of these students, this research aimed to unveil the unique factors that contributed to their persistence. This study intended to fill the existing gap in the literature by providing insights into the personal, academic, and social factors that facilitated persistence, thus illuminating potential strategies for supporting the academic journey of students with LD and ADHD in online doctoral programs.

Significance of the Study

The participants of this study described the experiences that contributed to persistence in their online doctoral programs. Their feedback addressed a significant gap in the research on this topic, as there was a lack of research specifically focused on the persistence of online doctoral students with LD and ADHD. This study informed the development of interventions and supports that would facilitate the persistence and academic success for this population of students, which was an important step towards achieving greater equity and inclusion in

universities. This study also shed light on how online learning environments could be improved to support the academic success of individuals with LD and ADHD in higher education, which contributed to a broader understanding of their experiences. Finally, this study had practical implications for faculty, administrators, and policymakers who worked with online doctoral students with LD and ADHD by providing insights into the specific challenges these students faced and the strategies that could be employed to support their success.

Theoretical Significance

This study was guided by Tinto's (1987, 1993) model of student integration as it asserted that the higher the degree of integration of the individual into the college system—both academically and socially—the greater the individual's commitment would be to the specific institution and to the goal of college graduation. From a theoretical perspective, this study had the potential to highlight the role initial commitments, integration, and external attributes played in helping students with learning disabilities succeed at the highest level of academia. These factors worked together to influence a student's decision to stay or leave an institution (Tinto, 1987, 1993). This study refined and expanded Tinto's theory of student persistence by incorporating considerations for diverse learning needs and experiences. Additionally, it highlighted the specific systemic, personal, and academic interactions and interventions that fostered persistence among students with LD and ADHD, thereby adding a layer of complexity to Tinto's original concepts of social and academic integration.

Empirical Significance

This study aimed to fill a gap in the literature to address the problem that despite the increase in college enrollment for students with learning disabilities, the graduation rate remained more stagnant and lower than for students without disabilities (Newman et al., 2019).

The empirical significance of this study on the factors that contributed to persistence in online doctoral programs for students with LD and ADHD lay in its potential to add to the limited body of research on this topic. While there was a growing body of literature on the experiences of students with learning disabilities in higher education, there was a lack of research specifically focused on the persistence in online doctoral programs for students with LD and ADHD. This study contributed to the empirical understanding of this population's unique challenges and experiences and informed the development of evidence-based interventions and support to enhance their academic success. The results of this study also served as a foundation for future research in this area and helped to guide the development of future studies related to the persistence in online doctoral programs for students with LD and ADHD.

Practical Significance

This study had significant practical implications for enhancing the persistence of online doctoral students with LD and ADHD. By identifying specific strategies that faculty and administrators could use to create more inclusive and accessible online learning environments, the results of this study could be used to develop practical interventions and support to enhance the persistence and academic success of students with LD and ADHD. Additionally, this study had implications for the development of policies and practices related to disability accommodations in higher education. By providing insight into the factors that contributed to persistence in online doctoral programs for students with LD and ADHD, the results of this study provided insight into guidelines and best practices for supporting the persistence and academic success of online doctoral students with LD and ADHD.

Research Questions

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of doctoral students with LD and ADHD in a fully online setting. One central research question and three sub-questions were created to better understand this phenomenon.

Central Research Question

What are the factors that contribute to academic persistence in online doctoral programs for students with LD and ADHD?

Students with learning disabilities (LD) and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) often experience difficulties in areas such as organization, information retention, and time management, which can be particularly challenging in the context of an online doctoral program (DuPaul et al., 2013). Executive functioning deficits, commonly seen in individuals with LD and ADHD, can hinder their ability to meet deadlines and manage long-term projects, affecting behavior, emotions, and attention and leading to distractions and procrastination (Diamond, 2013). Providing accommodations such as extended time and assistive technology can be beneficial for students with LD and ADHD. Furthermore, the development of personal coping strategies and receiving additional support can be instrumental in mitigating these challenges (Fleming & Fairweather, 2012).

Sub-Question One

How do online doctoral students with LD and ADHD describe the influence of their learning disabilities on their academic persistence?

Online doctoral students with LD and ADHD often face challenges in processing information, reading comprehension, and executive functioning, which are critical skills for successful academic progress (Rabiner et al., 2016). The cognitive and executive functioning

challenges that online doctoral students with LD and ADHD face can complicate their

engagement with complex doctoral-level content and the high levels of self-direction required.

Difficulties in time management, organization, and prioritization associated with LD and ADHD

can influence academic persistence. However, coping strategies, accommodations, and support

can help mitigate these challenges (Weyandt et al., 2013).

Sub-Question Two

What strategies and accommodations are effective in supporting academic persistence for

online doctoral students with LD and ADHD?

Effective support for online doctoral students with LD and ADHD often involves

providing alternative course formats, such as audio recordings and visual aids (Heiman & Precel,

2019). Structured time management, clear instructions, and assistive technology can also be

beneficial for individuals with LD and ADHD as they often have difficulty with time

management due to impaired executive functions. Implementing structured time management

techniques can aid these students in organizing their tasks, managing deadlines, and maintaining

progress in their work (Clouder et al., 2020). Also, because students with LD and ADHD

struggle with working memory, providing clear, step-by-step instructions can make tasks more

manageable and understandable for these students, ultimately enhancing their learning outcomes

(Clouder et al., 2020). Finally, students with LD and ADHD who receive accommodations, such

as additional time for tests, reduced-distraction testing environments, and note-taking support,

result in better academic outcomes compared to students who do not receive accommodations

(Johnson et al., 2021).

Sub-Question Three

What role do individual factors, such as motivation, self-efficacy, and self-regulation skills play in the academic persistence of online doctoral students with LD and ADHD?

The motivation to achieve academically is a strong driver for persistence in doctoral studies. This applies even more to students with LD and ADHD who face additional challenges in their academic journeys. Motivation helps such students overcome obstacles and remain committed to their academic goals (Honicke & Broadbent, 2016). Self-efficacy can significantly influence the academic persistence of students with LD and ADHD. High self-efficacy can help students overcome difficulties, engage more deeply in their work, and exhibit greater persistence (D. R. Marshall et al., 2020). Self-regulation skills, which include goal setting, self-monitoring, and the use of effective learning strategies, play a crucial role in academic persistence. These skills are especially beneficial for online doctoral students with LD and ADHD as they navigate the demands of independent study (Broadbent & Poon, 2015).

Definitions

1. *Accommodations* – Modifications or adjustments to a task, environment, or ways of doing things normally to provide equal participation to a disabled individual (Druckman et al., 2021).

2. *Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)* – A civil rights law enacted in 1990 that prohibits discrimination against disabled people in all areas of public life and guarantees them equal opportunities (Murphy, 2021).

3. *Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act* (ADAAA) - A law passed in 2008 that expanded the definition of disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act (Keenan et al., 2019).

4. *Attention-Deficit Disorder* (ADD) - A neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with daily functioning and development (Fisher, 2013).

5. *Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder* (ADHD) – A chronic neurodevelopmental disorder that causes difficulties with concentration, hyperactivity, and impulse control (Ahlberg et al., 2023).

6. *Communications and Video Accessibility Act* (CVAA) - A law passed in 2010 that addresses access to modern communication technologies for individuals with disabilities (LaForce & Bright, 2022)

7. *Disability Support Services* (DSS)– Services and resources provided to individuals with disabilities to help them live independently, participate fully in their communities, and achieve their goals (Bigby et al., 2019).

8. *Dyscalculia* – A learning disorder that affects an individual's ability to understand and perform mathematical calculations and acquire arithmetic skills (Patil et al., 2022)

9. *Dysgraphia* – A learning disorder that affects an individual's ability to write legibly and fluently (Gary et al., 2023).

10. *Dyslexia* – A learning disorder that affects an individual's ability to read, spell, and write, despite their intelligence and motivation (Shaywitz et al., 2021).

11. *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)* – The governmental act that emphasizes access to general education curriculum, individualized education plans (IEPs), and support services for students with disabilities (Yang et al., 2021).

12. *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) – The governmental act that guarantees a free and appropriate public education to children with disabilities (Karanxha et al., 2022)

13. *Learning Disability* (LD) – A neurological disorder that affects an individual's ability to acquire, organize, retain, and use information (Lambert et al., 2019).

14. *Persistence* - A student's continued enrollment within an institution from one semester or year to the next, until the completion of a degree program. (Tinto, 1987, 1993).

15. *Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (504)* – A law that was passed in 1973 that prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in programs and activities receiving federal funding (Watson et al., 2019).

Summary

Investigating the problem that despite the increase in students with LD and ADHD enrolling in higher education programs, graduation rates remained more stagnant and lower than for students without disabilities (Newman et al., 2019) supported the purpose of examining the lived experiences of online doctoral students with LD and ADHD. This study's results described the factors that contributed to persistence in doctoral programs for students with LD and ADHD, highlighting commonalities from the participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research had a specific focus on persistence in online doctoral programs that influenced current and future students with LD and ADHD in persevering through the long doctoral journey to completing their degree programs. Studying this phenomenon sought to fill a gap in the research literature regarding the factors that contributed to persistence in online doctoral programs for students with LD and ADHD.

The purpose of the study was to describe the lived experiences of online doctoral students with LD in a fully online setting. This chapter outlined the background, situations to self, problem statement, purpose statement, significance of study, research questions, and definitions. Tinto's model of student integration was used as a guide to support the idea that the higher the degree of integration of the individual into the college system—both academically and socially— the greater the individual's commitment would be to the specific institution and to the goal of college graduation. Understanding the experiences of successful online doctoral students with LD and ADHD could help educators develop strategies to support their student's academic pursuits and inspire current students to persevere in their studies and fulfill their God-given dreams.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this literature review was to provide a theoretical understanding of Tinto's theory of student persistence (Tinto, 1975, 1993), which suggested that the more integrated students were into their institutions, the more likely they were to continue their education. A systematic approach was taken to review relevant research on this topic. The related literature first discussed doctoral education in the United States. This section began with a historical overview of doctoral education in the United States, followed by the current state of doctoral education in the U.S. Next, online education and online doctoral education were examined. Then, learning disabilities and ADHD were discussed, followed by how disabilities were managed in K-12, the transition from K-12 to college, then to graduate and doctorate programs. Next, a comparison of online and traditional doctoral programs was covered, followed by a historical timeline of disability legislation. Next, characteristics of adults with LD and ADHD were discussed both in general and in a higher education setting. This was followed by an extensive examination of the literature of doctoral students with learning disabilities. This section began by looking at how doctoral students were affected by dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, and ADHD. Finally, doctoral attrition rates were discussed, followed by the role self-efficacy and motivation played in the academic success of online doctoral students with LD and ADHD.

Theoretical Framework

Vincent Tinto's theory of student persistence is a widely recognized framework used to understand student retention and attrition in higher education. Tinto's model, first proposed in 1975 and refined over the decades, argues that students' persistence at a university is primarily a

function of their integration into the institution's academic and social systems. Social integration involves students feeling a sense of connection with their peers, faculty, and staff on campus. Joining clubs and organizations, participating in extracurricular activities, and forming meaningful relationships are all essential for establishing oneself in campus life. When students feel a sense of belonging and attachment to their institution, it enhances their overall satisfaction and commitment (Tinto, 1975, 1993).

Over the years, Tinto's theory of student persistence has evolved to incorporate new research findings and adapt to the changing landscape of higher education. Initially introduced in the early 1970s as the "Interactionalist Theory," Tinto emphasized the significance of social integration in a student's decision to persist. He highlighted the importance of a student's integration into both academic and social aspects of the institution for their success and graduation (Tinto, 1975, 1993).

As research progressed, Tinto expanded his theory by including additional factors that influence student persistence. He introduced the concept of academic integration, recognizing that a student's engagement with coursework and academic support programs played a crucial role in their persistence. This expansion broadened the theory's scope to encompass both social and academic dimensions of student life (Tinto, 1975, 1993).

In later years, Tinto further developed his theory by incorporating the notion of institutional commitment. He argued that a student's commitment to the institution's goals and values, along with the institution's commitment to supporting the student's success, significantly influenced their decision to persist. This shift emphasized the importance of aligning personal goals with institutional objectives and cultivating a supportive environment (Tinto, 1975, 1993).

Recognizing the influence of contextual factors, Tinto expanded his theory to encompass external circumstances. He acknowledged that socioeconomic status, family support, and personal situations could profoundly influence a student's ability to persist. This expansion underscored the need for institutions to address these contextual factors and support student success (Tinto, 1975, 1993).

In recent years, Tinto's theory has increasingly emphasized the role of student engagement. Research has demonstrated that active engagement in academic and social activities positively affects persistence and graduation rates. The current iteration of Tinto's theory highlights the importance of providing opportunities for students to engage with their studies, faculty, peers, and the broader campus community (Tinto, 1975, 1993).

With the advancement in understanding diversity and inclusivity in higher education, there has been a call to incorporate intersectionality into theories of student persistence. Tinto's theory has expanded further to address the intersectionality of factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. This extension provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding the persistence of students from various backgrounds and identities (Tinto, 1975, 1993).

Tinto's theory of student persistence has evolved to incorporate a broader range of factors, including social integration, academic engagement, institutional commitment, contextual influences, student engagement, and intersectionality. These refinements reflect ongoing research in higher education and the need to address the complex and diverse experiences of students in their pursuit of academic success.

Applying Tinto's theory to the persistence of online doctoral students with learning disabilities and ADHD requires considering their unique challenges and needs at each stage. By

addressing pre-entry factors, facilitating integration, fostering persistence, and providing appropriate support, it is possible to enhance their academic success and increase their likelihood of successfully completing their doctoral program.

Related Literature

Students with learning disabilities (LD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) face many barriers at the doctorate level. They have increased levels of academic stress and more significant difficulties with academic adjustment (Paucsik et al., 2022). Additionally, learning new information often takes more time for this population of students. They must apply greater effort to understand school projects and tend to engage in unconventional learning strategies that may take additional effort and time (O'Reilly, 2020). Rights and responsibilities for students with LD and ADHD at the higher education level differ significantly from students at the K-12 level, often leaving them unsure of appropriate and available resources (Weis & Bittner, 2022). This section covered the history and current state of doctoral education in the US, with an emphasis on online doctoral programs. It also explored how learning disabilities are addressed in K-12 and higher education, with a focus on how they could affect online doctoral students. Finally, it analyzed factors such as self-efficacy and motivation and the role they play in the academic success in online doctoral students with LD and ADHD.

Historical Overview of Doctoral Education in the United States

The history of doctoral education in the United States has a rich lineage tracing back to the late 1800s, with Yale University recognized as the first U.S. institution to award a Ph.D. degree (Hollis, 1945). The first Ph.Ds. were conferred upon James Morris Whiton in the Classics, Eugene Schuyler in Philosophy, and Arthur Williams Wright in Physics (Martin, 1981). While the initial awarding of doctoral degrees was confined to the fields of theology, law, and

medicine, the advent of the modern research university model, predominantly in Germany in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, signaled a pivotal transformation in doctoral education. These modern universities, including the University of Berlin, established in 1810, placed the emphasis on the creation and dissemination of knowledge via research, as opposed to merely transmitting existing knowledge (Levine, 2021).

This new model brought a significant transformation in doctoral education. It shifted the focus from rote memorization and mastery of existing knowledge to inquiry, research, and the generation of new knowledge. This transition profoundly influenced various academic disciplines, placing an increased emphasis on research skills and original scholarship. Presently, this model remains influential in shaping doctoral education in the United States. Most doctoral programs, particularly in the fields of sciences, social sciences, and humanities, require students to conduct original research and produce a dissertation (Levine, 2021).

The mid-20th century, particularly the period following World War II, was characterized by a substantial surge in demand for advanced education across a broad spectrum of fields. This period coincided with a time when economic prosperity increasingly depended on the production and use of knowledge. An important factor fueling this demand was the growing recognition of the crucial role that scientific research played in spurring innovation and societal progress. Many transformative technological advancements of the era, such as the advent of computers, space exploration, and breakthroughs in medicine and the sciences, were deeply rooted in scientific research (Gumport et al., 1997).

In the United States, federal investment in research and development increased dramatically in the post-war period. This was largely a response to the perceived role of science and technology in winning the war and the consequent recognition of its potential for future

economic and national security. Notably, the National Science Foundation was established in 1950 to support fundamental research and education in all non-medical fields of science and engineering (Gumport et al., 1997).

This increase in funding spurred a significant expansion of doctoral programs across the country, as universities sought to meet the rising demand for highly educated individuals capable of conducting advanced research. The growth in doctoral education was not only in terms of numbers but also in terms of diversity. New doctoral programs were established in emerging interdisciplinary fields, and existing programs were expanded and refined to reflect new scientific knowledge and methodologies. This trend of growth and diversification in doctoral education continued throughout the latter part of the 20th century, shaping the current landscape of doctoral programs in the United States and many other parts of the world (Gumport et al., 1997).

Current State of Doctoral Education in the United States

The United States is known for its highly esteemed doctoral education programs, which are considered the ultimate academic achievement. Between 2011 and 2021, the number of research doctorates earned in the U.S. rose from 48,909 to 52,250 (Kang & Falkenheim, 2022). While doctoral education in the U.S. has traditionally aimed to train researchers for faculty positions at academic institutions, the landscape has been shifting significantly in recent years due to a variety of factors. A key trend is the growing acknowledgment of the need for doctoral education to prepare graduates for a wider range of careers, not just academic roles. The modern job market often requires skills that transcend disciplinary boundaries, including leadership, project management, and science communication abilities (Sinche et al., 2017).

Another trend of growing concern is the mental health of doctoral students. High levels of stress, anxiety, and depression have been reported among doctoral students, attributed to factors like heavy workloads, poor work-life balance, financial worries, and the uncertain job market (Acharya et al., 2023). Initiatives to improve the mental well-being of doctoral students are becoming increasingly important (Levecque et al., 2017). Additionally, there are the changing demographics of doctoral education, which are presenting universities with opportunities and challenges. Doctoral education is becoming more diverse, with increasing participation from women and underrepresented minorities. While this diversity enriches the research environment, there is also a need to address the disparities and systemic barriers these groups often encounter in academia (Posselt, 2020).

Technology and learning management systems have become an integral part of doctoral education. These advancements enhance the learning experience and promote academic collaboration. Virtual collaboration and communication tools allow students to connect with peers, advisors, and experts from around the world (Lee et al., 2022). Learning Management Systems (LMS) provide a centralized hub for accessing course materials, submitting assignments, and receiving feedback from instructors (Studebaker & Curtis, 2021). Some doctoral programs offer online courses to provide flexibility in scheduling, allowing students to balance their academic pursuits with other responsibilities (Lambrev & Cruz, 2023). Technology also plays a crucial role in data collection and analysis for doctoral research. Remote access to university libraries and their extensive digital collections allows students to conduct comprehensive literature reviews and scholarly investigations from anywhere (Alhoori et al., 2019). The use of technology and learning management systems has revolutionized doctoral education, promoting collaboration, access to resources, and flexibility. As technology continues

to advance, it is likely to expand opportunities for learning, research, and global academic engagement.

The accessibility of doctoral education in the United States is an increasingly important topic, with efforts being made to ensure inclusivity and opportunities for a diverse range of individuals. To enhance accessibility, universities offer financial aid packages, scholarships, grants, and fellowships specifically tailored for doctoral students (Kim et al., 2022). Diversity and inclusion initiatives are also being implemented to attract students from underrepresented groups, while flexible program structures accommodate individuals who may have work or family commitments (Koury et al., 2019). While progress has been made, ongoing efforts are still needed to address financial barriers and promote diversity and inclusion, to ensure that all individuals, regardless of their background, have equitable access to these opportunities.

Ensuring the quality and standards of doctoral education in the United States is crucial, and accreditation plays a significant role in this process. Accrediting agencies evaluate institutions and programs through a rigorous evaluation to determine if they meet established criteria and standards of excellence (Kumar et al., 2020). Doctoral degrees are generally conferred by universities or colleges that have received institutional accreditation from regional accrediting bodies. These organizations are recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, with bodies such as the Higher Learning Commission and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. This evaluation considers factors such as faculty qualifications, resources, academic support services, and student outcomes (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

Some specialized fields of study have programmatic accreditation specific to their discipline, which assesses the quality and rigor of the doctoral program's curriculum, faculty

expertise, research opportunities, and other discipline-specific criteria (Parscale et al., 2022). Programmatic accreditation is an important facet of higher education quality assurance, particularly for specific fields of study. This form of accreditation is designed for specialized programs, departments, or schools within a university or college that are recognized for their excellence in a particular discipline or field. For example, doctoral programs in psychology can seek accreditation from the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, 2023). This accreditation verifies that the program meets the APA's standards for a high-quality education in psychology. Similarly, doctoral programs in business, such as Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) or Ph.D. in Business, can seek programmatic accreditation from bodies like the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB, 2023). AACSB accreditation signifies that the program meets globally recognized standards in business education.

Online Education

The evolution of distance learning has a rich history, from correspondence courses through the mail to educational television and, ultimately, the internet. The roots of distance learning date back to the 19th century with the advent of correspondence courses. Sir Isaac Pitman initiated the first correspondence course in the 1840s in the United Kingdom, teaching shorthand via mailed postcards (Kentnor, 2015). In the U.S., the University of Chicago established the first major correspondence study program in 1890, an endeavor that dramatically increased access to higher education (Goldin & Katz, 1999). By the mid-20th century, new technology had begun to shape distance learning. Educational television emerged as a prominent medium for instruction. A prominent example is the University of Iowa's television station, which started broadcasting courses in 1932 (Kentnor, 2015).

The rise of the internet in the late 20th century dramatically reshaped distance learning. Online learning in higher education began in the 1960s when the University of Illinois launched the first computer-based learning program, the PLATO system. PLATO was a computer terminal-based program that provided access to resources and facilitated interaction between students and instructors (Cope & Kalantzis, 2023). In 1989, the University of Phoenix became the first-ever institution to create a fully online university, where it offered both bachelor's and master's degrees (OnlineSchools, 2020). However, it was only in the late 1990s that online learning gained significant traction when learning management systems (LMS) enabled the widespread adoption of online learning in higher education (Ghapanchi et al., 2020). Through learning management systems (LMSs) such as Blackboard and Moodle, instructors could create and deliver online course content and assessments, track student progress, and facilitate online discussions (Turnbull et al., 2020).

In recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic has upended many aspects of life as we know it, causing a dramatic change in the field of education. In a matter of weeks, schools worldwide transitioned from traditional, face-to-face instruction to fully remote learning models, marking an unprecedented shift to online education (Walke et al., 2020). In response to the pandemic, educational institutions were compelled to quickly shift their instructional methods to prevent the virus's spread. As a result, millions of students began participating in online learning, many for the first time. This abrupt transition highlighted the importance of online education as a flexible and viable educational approach during crises (Karakose, 2021).

Despite the necessity of the shift, the rapid transition to online learning revealed the digital divide's stark reality. Disparities in access to reliable internet and appropriate technology created significant challenges for many students, illuminating the urgent need for initiatives to

address these inequalities (Dow-Fleisner et al., 2022). COVID-19 also triggered pedagogical shifts. Teachers have had to adapt their instructional practices to engage students remotely effectively, prompting increased use of digital tools and innovative teaching methods (Asare et al., 2021).

The effect of COVID-19 on online education will likely have lasting implications. The pandemic has accelerated the development and acceptance of online learning, which may continue to be an integral part of education for the foreseeable future (García-Morales et al., 2021). Online education has been shown to offer a level of flexibility and accessibility that traditional education cannot, opening the door to possibilities for its continued expansion and integration into mainstream education systems (Veletsianos et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed the landscape of online education, emphasizing its importance and potential while revealing areas for growth and development. The lessons learned during this period of rapid transition will undoubtedly shape the future of education.

Online Doctoral Education

The growth of online education has significantly transformed the higher education landscape, expanding access to a wide range of degree programs, including doctorates. Online doctoral education is a byproduct of technological advancement and a rising demand for flexible, accessible higher education opportunities; online doctoral education is a relatively new yet rapidly growing field (McPherson & Bacow, 2015). The beginnings of online doctoral education can be traced back to the late 20th century when advancements in information and communication technology facilitated the delivery of distance learning programs (Kentnor, 2015). Although initially met with skepticism due to concerns about quality and rigor, the advent

of innovative online learning management systems and the increasing need for lifelong learning opportunities fostered the acceptance of online doctoral education (Palvia et al., 2018).

Over the past decade, online doctoral education has experienced significant evolution, bolstered by numerous factors. Advances in technology have played a significant role, with improved bandwidth, the development of advanced online learning platforms, and the incorporation of multimedia and interactive content, enhancing the learning experience (Lee et al., 2022). The growing acceptance of online learning in the academic community has further fueled the development of online doctoral programs. An increasing number of higher education institutions have embraced online doctoral education, recognizing its potential to provide flexible, high-quality, and accessible learning experiences for a diverse student body (Karakose, 2021).

The future of online doctoral education seems promising, with continued growth anticipated. Advancements in adaptive learning technologies, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality are expected to further enrich online doctoral education, creating more immersive and personalized learning experiences (Chen et al., 2020). Online doctoral education has come a long way since its inception, evolving into a mainstream option within the higher education landscape. As we move forward, ensuring quality and equity will be pivotal to the continued growth and success of online doctoral education.

Comparison of Online Doctoral Education with Traditional Doctoral Education

Online doctoral instruction, in contrast to conventional classroom teaching, poses a number of hurdles. The primary limitation of asynchronous online classes is the absence of a physical presence of both the instructor and students, resulting in students navigating their learning through textual content on a screen or pre-recorded videos, a stark contrast to the human

interaction they are accustomed to in traditional classrooms. As a result of these restrained social exchanges, asynchronous online learning is often perceived as impersonal and devoid of warmth (Darby & Lang, 2019).

A significant obstacle to online education is inadequate technology proficiency. Unlike traditional classroom education, online learning requires students to possess advanced technology and collaboration skills. Consequently, this can leave learners uncertain about interacting with online course materials and asynchronous courses often lack the kind of support needed. Online learners who lack technological skills, coupled with a lack of social support, can get frustrated, demotivated, and discouraged. This can severely impede learners' sense of competence and results in poor performance and inferior outcomes (Darby & Lang, 2019). A student's readiness for online learning also requires robust motivation and self-regulation capabilities (Mishra et al., 2020; Osman, 2020). Among traditional students, a lack of motivation for online learning and self-regulation skills can lead to feelings of anxiety and disorientation, negatively affecting their academic performance (Darby & Lang, 2019).

Accreditation in Online Doctoral Programs

Ensuring the quality and credibility of online doctoral programs is crucial for maintaining academic integrity, and fostering trust among students, educators, and prospective employers. Accreditation involves an independent accrediting body evaluating educational institutions and programs voluntarily to ensure they meet established standards of quality and effectiveness (Paquibut & Naamany, 2020). Accreditation guarantees that an institution or program has met specific criteria for academic excellence and integrity, providing assurance to students, employers, and the public (Mattar, 2022).

Online doctoral programs undergo the same accreditation process as traditional face-to-face programs, with accrediting bodies scrutinizing the program's curriculum, faculty qualifications, student support services, educational resources, and learning outcomes. The accreditation process involves a comprehensive review, site visits, and ongoing monitoring to maintain quality standards (Distance Education Accrediting Commission, 2022).

Accreditation serves several purposes in online doctoral programs, including quality assurance, transferability of credits, financial aid eligibility, and professional licensure and certification of faculty (Distance Education Accrediting Commission, 2022). To ensure the program's quality, credibility, and acceptance in academic and professional spheres, program and institution are accredited by recognized accrediting bodies such as the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), and Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) in the United States (Kumar et al., 2020).

Learning Disabilities

Learning disabilities are a group of neurological disorders characterized by difficulties in acquiring and using skills such as reading, writing, and calculating. They are not a reflection of intelligence but are distinct conditions that affect how individuals process, store, or express information. It is estimated that LD affect between 5% to 15% of children. Learning disabilities affect academic achievement, daily life functions, and often persist into adulthood. The prevalence of adults is unknown but believed to be around 4%. The main types of LD include dyslexia, affecting reading abilities; dysgraphia, causing difficulties in writing; and dyscalculia, leading to struggles with mathematical concepts (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Learning disabilities are often not identified until the postsecondary educational level. This delay in identification can hamper the timely initiation of needed interventions and

supports, contributing to academic struggles and reducing self-esteem in affected individuals. Contrary to prevailing misconceptions, individuals with LD often exhibit average or above-average intelligence. The challenges they experience stem from differences in how their brains process information, not from a lack of intelligence or effort (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

It is also important to note that LD frequently co-occur with other conditions like Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), adding complexity to the diagnostic and management process. Supporting students with LD requires implementing evidence-based interventions, including personalized instruction, use of a specialized curriculum, and deployment of assistive technology (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Navigating the challenges of learning disabilities necessitates a deep understanding, early identification, and implementation of targeted interventions. With the right support, individuals with LD can successfully engage in their educational journey, realizing their full potential and opening doors to future successes.

Historical Timeline of Disability Legislation

Throughout history, several important acts and legislations have been passed to protect the rights of individuals with disabilities in the United States. One notable case is Brown v. Board of Education, which was a landmark Supreme Court case addressing racial segregation in public schools (Welsh, 2019). The case began in Topeka, Kansas in the 1950s, when Linda Brown, an African American student, was denied entry to the all-white Sumner Elementary School. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) filed a lawsuit on behalf of several African American families, arguing that segregated schools violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment (Griffen, 2019). In 1954, the Supreme

Court unanimously ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, overturning the "separate but equal" doctrine established by Plessy v. Ferguson (Nichols, 2019). The Brown decision marked a turning point in the fight against racial segregation and set a precedent that "separate" could never be "equal." Despite the ruling, desegregation faced significant resistance and challenges. Brown v. Board of Education remains an important milestone in the ongoing struggle for racial equality in the United States (Love, 2020).

In subsequent years, several other important decisions have changed the landscape of education for individuals with disabilities. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prohibits disability-based discrimination in federally funded programs and activities. Similarly, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in employment, public accommodations, transportation, and telecommunications (Murphy, 2021). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) guarantees a free and appropriate public education to children with disabilities (Karanxha et al., 2022). The ADA Amendments Act (ADAAA) expanded the definition of disability to make it easier for individuals to establish their rights under the law (Keenan et al., 2019).

The Communications and Video Accessibility Act (CVAA) addresses access to modern communication technologies for individuals with disabilities (LaForce & Bright, 2022), while Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) emphasizes access to general education curriculum, individualized education plans (IEPs), and support services for students with disabilities (Yang et al., 2021). These acts and legislations have shaped the legal landscape and promoted inclusion for individuals with disabilities in various areas of life, such as education, employment, and accessibility.

Learning Disabilities in K-12

In K-12 education, a comprehensive approach is taken to address learning disabilities, which includes identification, intervention, and support. Early screening and assessments are conducted by schools and educators to identify students who may be at risk of learning disabilities. This involves evaluating academic performance, observing behavior, and conducting specific assessments to measure skills in reading, writing, and math (Gartland & Strosnider, 2020). If a student is identified with learning disabilities, they may be eligible for an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which is a legally binding document that outlines specific accommodations, modifications, and goals tailored to meet their unique needs (Gartland & Strosnider, 2020). Accommodations and modifications may include extended time on assignments or tests, preferential seating, assistive technology, and access to note-taking support. Specialized instruction is also provided by special education teachers or intervention specialists, who use research-based strategies and instructional methods to address the student's learning needs (Johnson et al., 2021).

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a framework that provides targeted interventions to students who struggle with learning. It aims to identify students who may require additional support and provide targeted interventions before considering special education services (Gartland & Strosnider, 2020). Collaboration among educators, parents, and other professionals is essential to addressing learning disabilities. Regular communication and meetings ensure that the student's needs are understood, and appropriate strategies are implemented consistently across settings (Gartland & Strosnider, 2020). Social-emotional support is also provided to address any emotional or behavioral challenges associated with learning difficulties. The specific strategies used to address learning disabilities can vary based on the individual needs of each student and the resources available in the school or district. The goal is to create an

inclusive and supportive learning environment where students with learning disabilities can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally (Gartland & Strosnider, 2020).

Learning Disabilities Transition from K-12 to College

Many students struggle with the transition to college life. The transition can be especially troublesome for students with disabilities who may not be accustomed to dealing with adversity on their own. In high school, the focus on early intervention reduces the likelihood of failure, providing students with assistance before they fail. This is not the case in post-secondary institutions; students must be able to recognize and admit when they are having trouble and to seek out their own assistance.

Once students enter post-secondary education, they transition to the services provided by Section 504 and the ADA, which ensure equal access to post-secondary programs for qualified students with disabilities and prohibit discrimination. Students with disabilities must meet the same admission requirements as their non-disabled peers. As a result, Section 504 prohibits a college from inquiring as to whether an applicant for admission had a disability. If a student with disabilities is accepted by a post-secondary institution, the student then becomes responsible for acquiring services through self-advocacy (Blanck & Flynn, 2017).

Learning Disabilities in Graduate and Doctoral Programs

In order to address learning disabilities in graduate and doctoral education, similar principles to those in K-12 and undergraduate education must be applied, but with additional considerations. It is important for students with learning disabilities to disclose their condition to the appropriate office or personnel at their institution, such as the disability services office or a designated office for graduate student support (Johnson et al., 2021; S. A. Smith et al., 2021). Providing recent documentation of the disability from a qualified professional is necessary to

establish eligibility for accommodations (S. A. Smith et al., 2021). Accommodations can vary depending on the specific needs of the student and program requirements, but may include extended time for exams, assistive technology, note-taking support, accessible materials, and flexibility in meeting program requirements (Johnson et al., 2021). Graduate and doctoral programs may also develop individualized support plans to address the unique needs of students with learning disabilities (S. A. Smith et al., 2021).

Effective communication between the student, faculty, and support staff is essential, with students initiating open and ongoing discussions with their faculty and advisors regarding their learning needs and any necessary accommodations (Johnson et al., 2021). Additionally, institutions can provide faculty training and resources on supporting students with learning disabilities in graduate and doctoral programs (S. A. Smith et al., 2021). By working collaboratively with faculty and support services, students can successfully navigate their programs and achieve their academic goals. Students with learning disabilities in graduate and doctoral education should be proactive in seeking support, communicating their needs, and utilizing available resources (Johnson et al., 2021).

Adults with Learning Disabilities

Individuals with learning disabilities may face challenges throughout their lives, even into adulthood. The prevalence of adults with learning disabilities is unknown but believed to be around 4% (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). It is beneficial for adults with learning disabilities to develop self-awareness about their strengths, weaknesses, and learning styles (Elmi, 2020). Understanding their learning needs helps them advocate for themselves in different settings, including the workplace, educational institutions, or personal relationships. Effective self-advocacy involves expressing their needs, seeking accommodations, and communicating

with others about their learning disability (Pfeifer et al., 2021). Access to appropriate accommodations and support services is crucial for adults with learning disabilities. This may include specialized programs, tutors, assistive technology, or extended time for exams in educational settings (Lowenthal et al., 2020). It is essential for individuals to understand their rights and seek out resources and services available to them.

Adults with LD in Higher Education

Adults with learning disabilities (LD) who pursue higher education face both challenges and opportunities. Fortunately, many colleges and universities offer special transition programs and support services tailored to students with LD. These services may include academic advising, disability support offices, specialized tutoring, study skills workshops, assistive technology resources, and access to note-taking assistance (Clouder et al., 2020). By utilizing these services, students can better navigate academic demands and transition smoothly into higher education. However, to receive these types of services, self-advocacy is crucial for adults with LD in higher education. Students should familiarize themselves with their rights, understand their learning needs, and effectively communicate with professors, advisors, and disability support staff (Pfeifer et al., 2020). Disclosing their LD to relevant individuals allows for the provision of appropriate accommodations and support.

Doctoral Students with Learning Disabilities

Thanks in large part to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), there has been a steady increase in the number of students with learning disabilities enrolling in higher education institutions (Bellacicco & Parisi, 2021). Unfortunately, some studies have shown the drop-out rate for this population of students to be high (Theobald et al., 2019). However, other studies have found no differences in drop-out rates between students with LD and their non-LD peers.

(Knight et al., 2018). This suggests that when institutions understand how to meet the needs of students with LD, these students can succeed in higher education, even at the doctoral level.

Self-determination, self-efficacy, and self-advocacy have been identified as particularly important for students with learning disabilities in postsecondary settings (Kutscher & Tuckwiller, 2019). At the doctoral level, self-determination is a must. The process can be long and rigorous, and when personal struggles happen, it is easy to get discouraged and want to give up (C. A. Nelson, 2021). Believing in one's ability to get through the struggles and be successful is of utmost importance. Unfortunately, studies often report that students with LD have lower academic self-efficacy than their non-LD classmates (DuPaul et al., 2017; Yu et al., 2022). However, given the proper accommodations, students with LD can be successful. It is a matter of learning the skill of self-advocacy. While advocating for proper accommodations is a skill lacking in most undergraduate students (Jacques & Abel, 2020), by the time they get to graduate school, students with LD have learned what accommodations are needed to help them succeed in graduate-level courses.

Doctoral Students with Dyslexia. Doctoral students with dyslexia face unique challenges in their pursuit of academic success. Dyslexia affects their ability to read, spell, and write, despite their intelligence and motivation. This specific learning disorder affects about 20% of the population, making it one of the most common learning disabilities (Shaywitz et al., 2021). Dyslexia is associated with abnormalities in brain regions involved in language processing, including the left inferior parietal lobule, the left occipitotemporal cortex, and the left superior temporal gyrus (Richlan, 2019). Furthermore, dyslexia is also linked to deficits in phonological processing, rapid automatized naming, and working memory (Peters et al., 2020).

Research suggests that dyslexia is caused by deficits in various cognitive and neurobiological mechanisms (Almahrag, 2022). Dyslexic students may struggle with online coursework that requires extensive reading, writing, and spelling tasks. To support these students, several interventions and strategies have been developed. One effective intervention is phonics instruction, which teaches the relationship between sounds and letters to improve phonological processing skills (Fletcher et al., 2021). Online doctoral students with dyslexia may benefit from using assistive technology, such as text-to-speech software, to access written material (Bonifacci et al., 2022). Additionally, explicit instruction that includes multisensory and structured approaches is beneficial for students with dyslexia. Multisensory instruction involves using multiple senses, such as sight, sound, and touch, to teach reading and writing skills (Boardman, 2020). Online doctoral programs can provide flexibility and accessibility to students with dyslexia. However, it is essential to provide appropriate accommodations and support to ensure their academic success.

Doctoral Students with Dyscalculia. Dyscalculia is a learning disorder that affects an individual's ability to understand and perform mathematical calculations and acquire arithmetic skills (Patil et al., 2022). It is a prevalent condition, affecting 3-6% of the population, and is more common in individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders (De Visscher et al., 2018). For online doctoral students with dyscalculia, the challenges may be particularly acute given the heavy emphasis on quantitative research methods in many doctoral programs. Research suggests that dyscalculia is caused by deficits in various cognitive and neurobiological mechanisms (Kaufmann et al., 2020), including abnormalities in brain regions involved in numerical processing (Michels et al., 2022). Furthermore, dyscalculia is also linked to deficits in working memory, spatial reasoning, and visuospatial processing (Cardenas et al., 2021).

Several interventions and strategies have been developed to support individuals with dyscalculia. One effective intervention is cognitive training, which involves targeted exercises aimed at improving specific cognitive processes such as working memory, attention, and executive functions (Layes et al., 2018). Another effective strategy is the use of assistive technology, such as digital tools that help individuals visualize mathematical concepts and solve mathematical problems (Miundy et al., 2019). In addition, research suggests that providing explicit instruction, including systematic and structured instruction, is beneficial for individuals with dyscalculia (G. Nelson & Powell, 2018). For online doctoral students with dyscalculia, it may also be helpful to work with faculty or advisors to develop individualized accommodations or modifications to coursework or assessments to help mitigate the effect of their dyscalculia.

Doctoral Students with Dysgraphia. Dysgraphia is a specific learning disorder that affects an individual's ability to write legibly and fluently. It is a common learning disorder that can affect individuals of all ages, including online doctoral students (Döhla et al., 2018). Research suggests that dysgraphia is caused by a combination of genetic, neurobiological, and environmental factors, and is associated with abnormalities in brain regions involved in motor control, working memory, and attention (Berninger et al., 2008). Furthermore, dysgraphia is also linked to deficits in fine motor skills, letter formation, spelling, and written expression (McBride, 2019)

Several interventions and strategies have been developed to support individuals with dysgraphia. One effective intervention is explicit handwriting instruction, which involves teaching proper letter formation, spacing, and grip techniques (de Sousa & Silveira, 2019). Furthermore, online doctoral students who struggle with the physical act of writing might benefit from using assistive technology, such as word processors, dictation software, or digital pens (J.

Marshall et al., 2019). In addition, research suggests that providing explicit instruction in the writing process can improve the written expression of individuals with dysgraphia. This includes teaching planning, revising, and editing strategies, and the use of graphic organizers (Dunn, 2021). Working with a tutor or a writing center can also provide individualized support for online doctoral students with dysgraphia.

Accommodations for Doctoral Students with Learning Disabilities

Accommodations for doctoral students with learning disabilities are available in all major universities (Hansen & Dawson, 2020). However, students only sometimes use these services, either because for personal reasons or because of their unfamiliarity with disability support services. To use disability support services, one must first disclose they have a disability—and fairly or not—disabilities come with a certain stigma (Grimes et al., 2021). Many doctoral students with LD are trying to advance their careers and may not want to make themselves appear inferior to their fellow classmates (Gignac et al., 2021). Also, many doctoral students are older and may have never used disability support services in the past. Students who attended school before the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed may have never been tested in school, therefore, would have never received an individual education plan (IEP), which is required to receive disability support services (Aquino, 2021).

The primary purpose of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is to provide reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities, which in turn can help level the playing field (Horkey, 2019). The law allows students to request technologies and special allowances that help them overcome their specific academic challenges. Students can request audiobooks, text-to-speech software, lecture notes, and additional time on exams (O'Reilly, 2020). However, the law also allows for some exceptions. If an accommodation would impose

an undue hardship on the operation of the institution, the institution might not be required to provide that accommodation.

According to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), an undue hardship is defined as "an action requiring significant difficulty or expense" when considering several factors. These factors can include the nature and cost of the accommodation in relation to the size, resources, nature, and structure of the institution's operation. Thus, while the ADA requires universities to provide accommodations, it does not require them to provide accommodations that are unduly burdensome or excessively costly. Each situation is evaluated on a case-by-case basis, considering the specific circumstances of each request for accommodations.

Students with learning disabilities can succeed academically at the highest levels when provided with the proper accommodations. However, unlike primary and secondary schools—where learning disabilities are identified, and special services provided—receiving disability support services (DSS) at the college level is different. While most major universities have DSS offices on campus, students must disclose their disability and request the appropriate support services (Pfeifer et al., 2020).

Attrition for Doctoral Students with Learning Disabilities

It is estimated that the attrition rate for doctoral students in the United States is between 40 and 50%, and 50 to 70% for online doctoral programs (Rigler et al., 2017). While these numbers are not specific to students with LD and ADHD, the attrition rates could be even higher due to the unique struggles they face. Feelings of helplessness, stigmatization, inadequacy, and a lack of understanding and support are common challenges experienced by these students (Clouder et al., 2020). Consequently, these factors may contribute to increased attrition rates among students with LD and ADHD.

Another possible reasons why doctoral students with LD might struggle are mental health issues which are among the most significant determiners of students with LD successfully completing their programs (Larcombe et al., 2022). It is especially troubling for doctoral students with LD since many of the struggles they deal with—like depression, stress, and anxiety—are mental in nature (Paucsik et al., 2022) and prevalent in doctoral study programs (Barry et al., 2018).

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a common neurodevelopmental disorder that can impact both children and adults. It occurs in about 5% percent of children and 2.5% in adults. ADHD is characterized by persistent patterns of inattention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity that can interfere with day-to-day functioning and development. It is important to note that ADHD is not a one-size-fits-all condition. ADHD can present itself in three primary ways, each with its own unique set of characteristics (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

The first type is the Predominantly Inattentive presentation. Individuals with this form of ADHD often struggle with staying focused and paying attention to details. They are frequently forgetful and easily distracted. Completing tasks and staying organized can also pose significant challenges. These individuals might seem to be daydreaming, not listening, or not following instructions, but the reality is that they are wrestling with inattention (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

A second type of ADHD is Predominantly Hyperactive-Impulsive presentation. It is characterized by ongoing patterns of impulsivity and hyperactivity. People with this presentation often seem to be in constant motion. They may appear restless, have difficulty staying seated, frequently interrupt others, and struggle with self-control. They also often talk excessively and

have trouble waiting their turn in social or academic settings (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

The third type of ADHD, the Combined presentation, is the most common presentation of ADHD. It is characterized by significant symptoms from both of the other types. Individuals with the Combined presentation struggle with inattention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity alike. It is important to note that these presentations are not static, and an individual's presentation can change over time. Understanding the different presentations of ADHD is critical for tailoring treatment plans to meet the unique needs of each individual, thereby increasing the effectiveness of interventions and enhancing quality of life for people with this condition (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Adults with ADHD

Adults who have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) face distinct challenges and opportunities across various aspects of their lives. It is important for them to gain an understanding of ADHD through education and self-awareness in order to comprehend how it affects their daily life. Learning about the symptoms of ADHD, as well as their personal strengths, challenges, and strategies, can aid in developing a better understanding of themselves and their needs (Butzbach et al., 2021).

Time management and organization can be particularly challenging for adults with ADHD. To improve these skills, individuals can create schedules, utilize visual reminders, break tasks into smaller, more manageable steps, and use technology tools or apps (Ramsay, 2021). Some adults with ADHD may also benefit from medication prescribed by a healthcare professional. ADHD medication has proven to be effective in treating ADHD symptoms (Courtenay & Perera, 2022). In addition, therapy, coaching, or counseling can offer valuable

support and guidance in managing ADHD symptoms and related challenges (Cherkasova et al., 2020).

Prioritizing self-care is crucial for adults with ADHD, including maintaining a healthy lifestyle, regular exercise, stress management, relaxation techniques, and adequate sleep (Adamou et al., 2021). Developing strategies to improve attention and focus, such as minimizing distractions, and utilizing noise-cancelling headphones, can be beneficial (Kulawiak, 2021). By understanding their unique needs, utilizing effective strategies, seeking support, and advocating for themselves, adults with ADHD can navigate challenges, harness their strengths, and lead fulfilling lives.

Adults with ADHD in Online Higher Education

In the last twenty years, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of adult learners with ADHD in higher education. According to the American College Health Association (2023), 11.7 % of graduate/professional students were diagnosed with ADHD. Online higher education can be highly beneficial for adults with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) due to its flexible and accessible nature. Individuals with ADHD can create personalized schedules that cater to their needs, allowing them to choose the optimal time and location for studying and minimizing distractions (Reyes et al., 2022). Additionally, accommodations, such as extended time for exams and assignments, access to assistive technology, and flexible deadlines, are also available to students with ADHD (Lowenthal et al., 2020). Despite the fact that adult learners with ADHD may benefit from on-campus resources and support, Gormley et al. (2019) found that less than twenty-five percent of students with ADHD use disability services and only about a third have used tutoring services.

Doctoral Students with ADHD

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a chronic neuropsychiatric disorder that causes difficulties with concentration, hyperactivity, and impulse control (Kellow et al., 2018). It is a common disorder that affects both children and adults, with prevalence rates of around 5.9% and 2.5%, respectively (Wilde & Welch, 2022). ADHD is caused by a combination of genetic and environmental factors (Faraone et al., 2021), and can lead to a range of negative outcomes if left untreated, such as low self-esteem and difficulties functioning in work and school environments (Wang et al., 2019). Individuals with ADHD exhibit dysfunctions in brain regions involved in executive functions, such as the prefrontal cortex and basal ganglia (Sekaninová et al., 2019), and often experience deficits in working memory, attention, and inhibitory control (Chang et al., 2020).

There are several interventions and strategies available to support individuals with ADHD. One effective intervention is medication, particularly stimulants such as methylphenidate and amphetamines (Faraone, 2018). Stimulants can improve attention, reduce impulsivity, and enhance working memory, but they may not work for everyone with ADHD, and their use should be monitored carefully (Caye et al., 2019). Behavior therapy, such as parent training and classroom-based interventions, can also be effective in reducing ADHD symptoms (Daley et al., 2018). Parent training involves teaching parents strategies for managing their child's behavior, such as positive reinforcement and clear expectations (Hornstra et al., 2021), while classroom-based interventions involve modifying the classroom environment and teaching strategies to help students with ADHD manage their behavior and improve their academic performance (Harrison et al., 2019). Additionally, exercise and physical activity have been shown to be effective in reducing ADHD symptoms and can improve attention, working

memory, and cognitive control. Exercise may be particularly beneficial for individuals who do not respond well to medication (Christiansen et al., 2019).

Self-Efficacy of Doctoral Students with LD and ADHD

The journey towards acquiring an online doctoral degree is challenging, even more so for students who have to learn to navigate LD and ADHD. However, against the odds, many of these students navigate the complex terrain of online doctoral programs and attain their degrees, often demonstrating remarkable self-efficacy. This self-belief in their capabilities to execute tasks and achieve goals is a critical aspect of their academic journey.

According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy refers to one's belief in his or her capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations. It is a powerful predictor of motivation, learning, and academic achievement. For students with LD and ADHD, self-efficacy can play a crucial role in their academic persistence, shaping their approach to challenges, level of effort, and resilience to setbacks.

Online doctoral programs, with their inherent demand for self-directed learning, can pose substantial challenges for students with LD and ADHD, who may struggle with time management, organization, attention, and other academic tasks (Clouder et al., 2020). However, a strong sense of academic self-efficacy can bolster these students' confidence in their abilities to manage their coursework and research effectively, even when faced with obstacles (Meng & Zhang, 2023). Students with high self-efficacy often exhibit a more proactive approach to learning, utilizing various strategies such as active engagement with course material, seeking help when necessary, and applying effective time management techniques. They demonstrate an unwavering belief in their potential, thus mitigating the risk of academic failure, enhancing motivation, and promoting persistence (Stephen & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2021).

Building self-efficacy among students with LD and ADHD requires concerted efforts from educators, administrators, and students themselves. Successful experiences, known as mastery experiences, are among the most effective ways to build self-efficacy. As students overcome challenges and meet their academic goals, their belief in their capabilities strengthens (Bandura, 1977). Verbal persuasion, including positive feedback and encouragement from instructors and peers, can also enhance self-efficacy by instilling a belief in students' abilities (Shehzad et al., 2019).

Institutional support services play a vital role in nurturing self-efficacy among students with LD and ADHD (Grimes et al., 2019). Academic support, such as tutoring, writing centers, and disability services, can provide valuable resources (Lipka et al., 2019). Self-efficacy stands as a critical element in the successful academic journey of students with LD and ADHD in online doctoral programs. Cultivating this self-belief necessitates an understanding and supportive academic environment where these students can thrive, bolstering their confidence to overcome challenges and reach their doctoral goals.

Summary

The purpose of the study was to describe the lived experiences of online doctoral students with LD and ADHD. This chapter discussed doctoral education in the United States, giving a historical overview, followed by the current state of doctoral education in the U.S. Next, online education and online doctoral education were examined. Then, learning disabilities and ADHD were discussed, followed by an examination of how disabilities were handled in K-12, the transition from K-12 to college, then to graduate and doctorate programs. This section ended by giving a comparison of online and traditional doctoral programs, followed by a historical timeline of disability legislation. Next, adults with LD and ADHD were discussed both in

general and in a higher education setting. This was followed by an extensive examination of doctoral students with learning disabilities. This section began by looking at how doctoral students were affected by dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, and ADHD. Next, doctoral attrition rates were discussed, followed by the role self-efficacy and motivation played in the academic success of online doctoral students with LD and ADHD.

By exploring the lived experiences of students with LD and ADHD who had persisted to the doctorate level, this study shed light on coping strategies, technological resources, and other factors that supported persistence in online doctoral programs. This knowledge also informed the development of interventions and support services tailored to the unique needs of online doctoral students with LD and ADHD, resulting in improved retention and graduation rates. Students with LD and ADHD were a growing population in higher education but continued to face significant barriers to academic success. By identifying the factors that contributed to persistence in online doctoral programs for students with LD and ADHD, educators could develop strategies and support services that promoted academic success for all students. Furthermore, by sharing the success stories of students with LD and ADHD, educators could inspire current and future students to persevere in their studies and provide them with the tools necessary to achieve their academic goals. Ultimately, this could lead to a more diverse and inclusive academic environment that supports the success of all students.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

This transcendental phenomenology study examined the lived experiences of doctoral students with LD and ADHD in a fully online setting. Online doctoral programs had become increasingly popular in recent years due to their convenience and flexibility (Studebaker & Curtis, 2021). They offered opportunities for students with LD and ADHD to pursue their academic goals despite their learning challenges (McClurg et al., 2021). However, more information was needed about the experiences of this population of students, and the factors that contributed to academic persistence in their online doctoral programs. Understanding the lived experiences of successful online doctoral students with LD and ADHD provided insight to better understand what helped these students overcome their learning challenges and persist to the highest level of academia. This study addressed this gap in the literature and provided a deeper understanding of the academic journey of successful online doctoral students with LD and ADHD. Chapter three addressed the research design, research questions, setting and participants, researcher positionality, procedures, data collection plan, and trustworthiness of the study. The purpose of this chapter was to provide descriptive details that allowed for replication.

Research Design

In order to describe the experiences of online doctoral students with learning disabilities, a transcendental phenomenology approach was used. A transcendental phenomenology is a philosophical approach developed by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl in the early 20th century (Beck, 2021). This type of research design examined human consciousness and its relation to the world systematically, with an emphasis on identifying the essential structures that support those experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019). Husserl's view was that knowledge was not

something we discover in the world, but something created through intentional acts of consciousness. He believed a fundamental principle that governs all cognition was revealed by studying the structure of one's experiences (Husserl, 2013). Phenomenology entails a rigorous process of reflection and analysis to uncover the essence of one's experiences (Frechette et al., 2020).

Husserl's transcendental phenomenology has received some criticism. Among the skeptics, Martin Heidegger, one of Husserl's most famous students, diverged significantly from his teacher's views. Heidegger argued that Husserl's phenomenology was overly focused on consciousness and overlooked the importance of being-in-the-world. Heidegger developed his own approach, known as existential phenomenology, which emphasized the existential and ontological aspects of human experience (Heidegger, 1962). Another critic, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, also proposed an alternative approach to phenomenology. He critiqued Husserl's notion of a transcendental ego and argued for the importance of embodiment and perception (Morris, 2012). Despite his critics, Husserl's transcendental phenomenology remained an important and influential philosophical approach.

A transcendental phenomenological approach was appropriate for this study because its aim was to construct meaning from experience by focusing less on the researcher's interpretation and more on the participants' descriptions (Meihami & Rashidi, 2022). This approach allowed me to identify with the participants on a personal level since I also have a learning disability. I knew the factors that had contributed to persistence in my own doctoral program, but I needed to allow the descriptive data provided by the participants to speak their truths and not let my preconceived ideas influence the results. Husserl believed the human experience is more than just individual perceptions and sensations but rather a unified set of interrelated experiences.

Transcendental phenomenology aims to uncover the fundamental characteristics of experience that are often overlooked in everyday life (Husserl , 2013).

Two key concepts in Husserl's transcendental phenomenology were intentionality and epoché (D. W. Smith, 2021). Intentionality refers to the way in which our experiences are directed toward objects in the world. Intentionality is at the core of all experience, and through intentionality, people are able to make sense of their surroundings (Wehrle, 2020). Another important concept in transcendental phenomenology is the notion of the epoché. This concept involved bracketing our assumptions about the world in order to examine our experiences more closely. By bracketing my assumptions, I gained a deeper understanding of the underlying structures of experiences without being influenced by my own preconceived ideas or biases (Stolz, 2020).

A phenomenological approach was valid for this research design because the study focused on the lived experiences of online doctoral students with LD and ADHD (Moustakas, 1994). Despite the dismal graduation rates for students with learning disabilities (Newman et al., 2019), recent studies had focused primarily on why this population of students was underperforming instead of examining the students who had been successful. A qualitative method of asking open-ended questions provided insight into the participants' lived experiences and revealed the factors that contributed to persistence in online doctoral programs for students with LD and ADHD (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Questions

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of doctoral students with LD and ADHD in a fully online, asynchronous setting. One

central research question and three sub-questions were created to better understand this phenomenon.

Central Research Question

What are the factors that contribute to academic persistence in online doctoral programs for students with LD and ADHD?

Sub-Question One

How do online doctoral students with LD and ADHD describe the influence of their learning disabilities on their academic persistence?

Sub-Question Two

What strategies and accommodations are effective in supporting academic persistence for online doctoral students with LD and ADHD?

Sub-Question Three

What role do individual factors, such as motivation, self-efficacy, and self-regulation skills play in the academic persistence of online doctoral students with LD and ADHD?

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted fully online, where participants were asked to engage in online discussion board prompts, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups. Conducting the study fully online was necessary due to online students being located throughout the United States. The participants were online doctoral students with LD and ADHD enrolled at Protathlités Christian University and recent graduates from online doctoral programs. All but one of the graduates earned their degrees from PCU. The other earned his degree at a University in the same state. PCU was a convenient site because I was both a faculty trainer in the Center for Teaching Excellence on campus and an online doctoral candidate in the School of Education. Additionally,

PCU had well-established online doctoral programs, and an Office of Disability and Support (ODAS) service office dedicated to online students. I recruited participants through word of mouth and in an online doctoral cohort group on Facebook. Purposive sampling was utilized to select participants for this study. This method allowed participants to be randomly selected in a non-random manner based on specific inclusion criteria relevant to the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Setting

Protathlités Christian University (PCU) was a large private university located in the southeastern part of the United States. The university had over 130,000 students, including 40,000 military and 700 internationals. There were 94,709 students enrolled in online programs in 2022 (47,696 undergraduates and 47,013 graduate students). PCU offered over 700 unique programs of study, with more than 450 offered online. The college had 15 different colleges and schools, offering nearly 300 graduate programs, 16 postgraduates, and overed 75 doctoral. Online programs at this university were offered most often in an eight-week format. PCU utilized a learning **m**anagement system (LMS) called Canvas to provide course content and materials online. Students communicated with faculty online via email, phone, or virtual conferencing software (e.g., Microsoft Teams or Zoom). The university was accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges.

Participants

There was a total of 11 participants for this study. The participants were current online doctoral students at PCU with a confirmed diagnosis of a LD or ADHD. The breakdown was as follows: ADHD (6) and Dyslexia (1). There were also four participants who had more than one diagnosis: Dyslexia/ADHD (1), ADHD/Dysgraphia (1), Dyslexia/Dysgraphia (1), and

ADHD/Dyscalculia (1). Seven of the participants had completed all of their required coursework in their current online doctoral program and started the dissertation phase of their program. Four of the participants had graduated from their online doctoral program within the last two years. The study consisted of six female and five males. The ages were 30-39 (4), 40-49 (2), 50-59 (4), and 60+ (1). The aim of this study was to recruit participants from diverse backgrounds, and efforts were made to ensure that participants from different ethnicities, gender, and socioeconomic status were represented in the study. The study explored the factors that contributed to persistence in online doctoral programs for students with LD and ADHD. The study's findings can inform universities and academic institutions on how to support and accommodate this population of students to ensure timely completion in their online doctoral programs.

Researcher Positionality

This study was motivated by my experiences as a student with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and having a daughter with dyslexia. Additionally, I worked for an organization for many years that had a student body consisting of approximately 40 percent of its students with learning disabilities. I developed a passion for helping students who struggle with academics and want to instill hope in students who have allowed their disability to keep them from fulfilling their dreams. As a former high school dropout who has made it to the highest level of academia, this study allowed me an opportunity for fill a gap in the literature that focused on the academic successes of online doctoral students with learning disabilities and ADHD. By examining the factors that helped these students persist in their doctoral programs, this study can help educators better understanding how to help students with LD and ADHD and provide struggling students with a roadmap to help them overcome their learning challenges and

reach their full potential.

Interpretive Framework

The interpretive framework for this study was grounded in the principles of social

constructivism, a perspective widely recognized for its significant influence in the realm of

education. Social constructivism suggests that knowledge and reality are not just absorbed as

fixed entities. Instead, they are co-created through individuals' interactions with others and their

surroundings (Berger & Luckmann, 2011). This framework, drawing from the ideas of scholars

such as Vygotsky and Cole (1978), Piaget (1963), and Bruner (1966), offered valuable insights

into the experiences of students with LD and ADHD in online doctoral programs.

Students with LD and ADHD often encounter specific challenges in education. Struggles

with comprehension and information processing, maintaining focus, and managing behavior can

affect their learning experience (DuPaul et al., 2013). However, when these issues are viewed

through the lens of Social Constructivism, they can be transformed into opportunities for

individualized learning and growth.

Vygotsky's social development theory suggests that social interaction precedes cognitive

development and learning, with consciousness and cognition seen as the outcomes of

socialization and social behavior (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). This viewpoint is instrumental in

understanding how online educational environments can be structured to enhance social

interactions, and consequently, improve the learning experiences of students with LD and

ADHD.

Online doctoral programs offer a flexible learning environment. These can be adapted to

cater to the unique needs of students with LD and ADHD. Their academic experiences are

significantly influenced by their interactions with peers, faculty members, and the learning

management system. Through the implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, educators can provide a multitude of engagement, representation, and expression methods, fostering an interactive, flexible, and accessible learning experience for students with LD and ADHD (Rao & Tanners, 2011).

In line with Piaget's theory, knowledge expands as individuals adapt to and organize their experiences with the environment (Piaget, 1963). In online doctoral programs, students with LD and ADHD can utilize the virtual learning environment to adapt their learning strategies and organize information in a manner that meets their unique learning requirements. Bruner's theory of instruction underscores the importance of collaborative learning experiences, positing that learning is an active, social process (Bruner, 1966).

By recognizing the power of social interaction and collaborative learning environments, educators and policy makers can tailor online doctoral programs to become more inclusive and effective for students with LD and ADHD. Through a social constructivist approach, these students' unique strengths can be harnessed, transforming their learning challenges into catalysts for innovation and personal growth in the academic journey.

Philosophical Assumptions

A researcher's choice of methodology is driven by their philosophical viewpoints (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My perspectives on ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions are outlined in the following sections. These assumptions served as guiding principles for the investigation of my topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ontological Assumptions

The ontological assumption deals with the fundamental nature of reality and suggests that it exists regardless of one's personal interpretations or perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This assumption suggests that there is an objective reality beyond one's personal experiences. Researchers who acknowledge multiple realities examine diverse forms of evidence from various perspectives and encounters. When studying successful online doctoral students with LD and ADHD, it becomes evident that there are numerous types of learning disabilities, each presenting its unique set of challenges. It is essential to recognize these differences and understand how each participant overcame their specific difficulties. The objective is to identify commonalities among this student population to enhance educators' understanding of the most effective learning methods. Once these strategies are identified, they can be integrated into the curriculum to promote academic success for future students.

Epistemological Assumptions

The epistemological assumption focuses on the nature of knowledge and proposes that human perception and understanding play a crucial role in its construction (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to this perspective, knowledge is subjective and is shaped by individuals through their observations, experiences, and interpretations. In order to establish a personal connection with the participants of the study, my approach will involve immersing myself in their perspectives. To achieve this, I openly discussed my own academic challenges and the strategies I have employed over time to achieve success. Additionally, I shared my experiences as a parent of a daughter with dyslexia, highlighting the various difficulties she faced. By revealing my own obstacles and determination, it created a sense of empathy and understanding, encouraging participants to share their personal experiences and challenges.

Axiological Assumptions

The axiological assumption addresses the aspects of value and worth (Gupta et al., 2022). This assumption proposes that values are subjective and influenced by individuals' beliefs,

experiences, and preferences. Consequently, the researcher's own value system, theories, and paradigms are integrated into the research process, as well as the social and cultural norms of both the researcher and the respondents (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, the researcher openly acknowledges and discusses these values within the study. In this research project, it was crucial for participants to comprehend my motivation and the purpose of the study. They were encouraged to share their personal struggles, emphasizing the significance of their participation. By sharing their experiences of learning challenges and personal achievements, they had the potential to inspire others with similar learning disabilities and served as valuable examples for individuals considering furthering their education.

Researcher's Role

My role as a qualitative researcher was extensive, involving a variety of responsibilities and duties throughout the study. I served as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis in qualitative research. This implies that I engaged deeply in every phase of the research, from the inception of the research questions to the interpretation of the findings (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). As an interpreter, I analyzed and gained meaning from the collected data. My objective was to comprehend the experiences of the participants and the significance they assigned to these experiences (Patton, 2015). My role not only revolved around gathering unrefined data or objective facts but also involved investigating the subjective realities of the participants. Within this setting, I refined and interpreted the patterns, themes, and insights that surfaced from the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

I often adopted the role of an advocate, highlighting issues that may have been unnoticed or marginalized (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In advocating for these underrepresented areas, I underscored the need for further research and potential policy adjustments. Arguably, the most

pivotal role I played was that of a reflexive researcher, a process involving critical reflection on myself as a researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reflexivity required consciousness of my own biases, values, and experiences that might influence the research process. This demanded me to be consistently self-aware and self-critical about my position and how it might influence the research process and outcomes. I needed to balance these diverse roles while maintaining a sense of objectivity and ethical responsibility. It was a delicate balance between immersing myself in the data and stepping back for analysis, between advocacy and neutrality, and between personal and professional realms (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016).

My purpose for this study came from my personal experiences as a student with attention deficit disorder (ADD) and as a parent of a child with dyslexia. Having encountered a series of academic challenges and supporting my daughter through her individual struggles, I was committed to assisting educators in understanding the hurdles faced by students with LD and ADHD. Although many studies emphasize the struggles these students face, only a few had explored the experiences of students who had risen to the highest levels of academia. By identifying the factors that had facilitated these doctoral students' success, it could guide educators and administrators in the implementation of supportive policies and provide essential services for future students. I acknowledge that I may introduce potential bias into this study based on my experiences as a student and parent of a child with a learning disability. Additionally, I am a staff member at the university where the study was conducted. However, in my role as a faculty trainer, I had no direct interactions with students and did not exercise any authority over any of the chosen participants. However, due to these interactions, I frequently exercised reflexivity. This practice ensured that I was not just gathering unbiased data, but also

interpreting and analyzing it from a neutral standpoint, allowing the evidence to steer the reporting process (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016).

Procedures

This transcendental phenomenology study on the factors that contribute to persistence in online doctoral programs for students with LD and ADHD used a qualitative research approach to explore the participants' experiences and perspectives. The study involved participant selection, data collection, data analysis, and data trustworthiness.

Permissions

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) permissions process is a formal process that researchers must follow to obtain approval to conduct research involving human subjects. The IRB was responsible for reviewing and approving research proposals to ensure that they meet ethical guidelines and do not pose any risks to the participants. This IRB process involved me developing a proposal that describes the purpose of the study, the research design, the sample size, the data collection methods, and the procedures for protecting participants' confidentiality and privacy.

Once my committee and SOE approved my proposal, I submitted my application to the IRB for approval on July 28, 2023. My study was approved on September 6, 2023. My study was given an exemption and did not require an informed consent form to be completed. In its place, all participants were provided via email an information sheet which gave participants the details of the studies and their rights and responsibilities.

Recruitment Plan

I recruited 11 participants selected through purposive sampling, by promoting my study in person and in an online doctoral cohort group on Facebook. Purposive sampling involved

selecting participants who possessed specific characteristics or experiences that aligned with the research objective and provided valuable insights into the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Unlike random sampling, purposive sampling focused on deliberately selecting individuals who could provide rich and meaningful data relevant to the research topic. This approach allowed me to target specific populations or individuals who possessed the desired knowledge, expertise, or experiences necessary to address the research objectives effectively (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Since my goal was to recruit current online doctoral students or recent graduates with LD and ADHD, I had originally planned to reach out to the Office of Disability and Support Services (ODAS) office at Protathlités Christian University (PCU) to request assistance in identifying potential candidates. Unfortunately, due to recent policy changes, ODAS was not able to assist me. I was able to get enough participants by promoting my study in person and posting my IRB approved recruiting message in a doctoral cohort group on Facebook where I am a member. Participants who met the inclusion criteria were invited to participate in the study. The participants' were sent an information sheet that explained the purpose of the study, the study procedures, the potential risks and benefits of participation, and the participants' rights to confidentiality and anonymity (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Collection Plan

Before collecting any data, I obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board at Protathlités Christian University (PCU). A triangulation method was used to collect data, as it provided both credibility and transferability (Cypress, 2018). Specifically, data was collected through an online discussion board prompt, individual online interviews, and online focus groups. Beginning with online discussion board prompts, I assessed overarching trends and

gathered diverse insights from the participants. These prompts provided a platform for participants to engage in conversation around the research topic, supplying initial data for me to scrutinize and refine the research direction further (Hew & Cheung, 2008).

Upon analyzing responses from the discussion boards, I then conducted individual online interviews. This approach enabled me to deeply understand the experiences, perspectives, and attitudes of each participant. The individual interviews allowed me to explore in greater detail specific themes or topics that arose during the discussion board phase (Opdenakker, 2006).

Finally, I carried out online focus groups. These groups offered participants a chance to interact and discuss their experiences and perspectives in a more cooperative environment. The focus groups facilitate the extended exploration of the themes and patterns discovered during the individual interviews, as the collective dialogue among participants revealed more insights or inconsistencies, which was vital for the study's outcomes (Stewart et al., 2014). By collecting data from varied sources such as online discussion board prompts, individual interviews, and focus groups, I was able to cross-verify the findings, thereby increasing the credibility and validity of the study (Flick, 2018). These methods were further explained below.

Online Discussion Boards

Qualitative research frequently involves the use of online forums, which are discussion websites where users can post messages and engage with others on specific topics. This type of forums offered a safe space for my study's participants to discuss their disabilities and share their opinions and experiences. Online forums offered unique characteristics that influenced the researcher-participant relationship. Non-face-to-face interactions are particularly important for qualitative online forums, as they rely on building trust and intense interactions with participants to gain in-depth data about their experiences and opinions.

The process began with me creating a discussion board prompt using my personal Canvas.com account. A course specifically designed for my study was created where the discussion board prompt was set up as a complete/incomplete assignment. Subsequently, participants were asked to formulate a non-identifiable username for a free Gmail account. Following this, invitations were sent to the participants to join the course along with instructions on completing the discussion board assignment. I kept the discussion open for a duration of two weeks. After this period, participants should have completed sharing their experiences, thoughts, and perspectives, at which point, the data were downloaded for my analysis.

Online Discussion Board Prompt

Topic: Factors Influencing Academic Persistence in Online Doctoral Students with Learning Disabilities and ADHD

Background: This qualitative research study aims to investigate the factors that contribute to academic persistence in online doctoral programs for students with learning disabilities (LD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Your insights will provide valuable perspectives on the challenges and strategies related to academic persistence in this specific population.

Prompt: Please reflect on your experiences as an online doctoral student with LD or ADHD, and share your perspectives on the following questions:

1. What personal factors have influenced your persistence in your online doctoral program? Consider aspects such as motivation, self-efficacy, self-regulation skills, or other relevant factors. How have these factors affected your ability to persist in your studies despite the challenges associated with LD or ADHD?

2. Based on your experiences or observations, what external factors, such as support

    systems, accommodations, or resources, have contributed to your academic persistence as

    an online doctoral student with LD and/or ADHD? Are there any specific strategies,

    interventions, or resources that you have found effective in supporting your persistence?

    Please provide examples or instances where these factors or strategies have been

    particularly influential.

Guidelines:

-   Your initial post should be between 250-500 words in length.

-   Share your experiences and insights in a clear and concise manner, focusing on the

    factors that have influenced your academic persistence.

-   Feel free to draw on specific examples or situations from your online doctoral journey to

    illustrate your points.

-   Respectfully engage with a minimum of two of your peers by asking questions, providing

    feedback or sharing related experiences.

Please note that your participation in this discussion is voluntary, and all information you

provide will be treated with strict confidentiality. Your responses will be used solely for research

purposes and will be anonymized in the final study report.

Online Discussion Board Data Analysis Plan

This data analysis plan aims to examine online discussion board data to understand the

personal and external factors influencing the academic persistence of online doctoral students

with LD and ADHD. I collected data from online discussion boards where participants

responded to the above-mentioned questions. Ensuring to maintain user anonymity and

complying with ethical guidelines for online research was a priority during data collection

(Roberts, 2015). I cleansed the data, eliminating irrelevant posts, spam, and redundant information that did not contribute to the research questions. Techniques such as text normalization, stop-word removal, and tokenization were employed as needed (Kwartler, 2017).

Following Moustakas' phenomenological data analysis, I engaged in epoché or bracketing. Here, I consciously set aside my assumptions and experiences about the research topic, ensuring an unbiased perspective when encountering the data. Next, I undertook the process of horizontalization, where every statement was valued equally, preventing premature focusing on specific narratives. I thoroughly documented and reflected upon each response, without judging its relevance or significance at this stage. Then, I grouped similar responses into clusters. From these clusters, I extracted overarching themes (Moustakas, 1994).

Next, I generated individual textural descriptions to understand the unique experiences of each participant, followed by composite textural descriptions that highlighted the common experiences among the participants. Structural descriptions were then formulated to explain the context or setting that influenced these experiences. The combination of both then allowed me to understand the true essence of participants experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Once the invariant components were placed into themes and the textural and structural descriptions formulated, I synthesized the essence of the data, creating a holistic picture of the factors influencing academic persistence in online doctoral students with LD and/or ADHD (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, I used peer debriefing and member checking to ensure validity of my findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Individual Interviews

Interviews are a common data collection approach in qualitative research, where researchers conduct in-depth, open-ended conversations with individuals to gather information

and understand their perspectives, experiences, and beliefs (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study utilized semi-structured interviews, combining elements of structured and unstructured interviews. I chose to use semi-structured interviews because they are flexible and allowed me to ask a set of predetermined questions, with the flexibility to follow up on interesting responses and ask additional questions to explore further the participant's experiences, thoughts, and perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

I set up individual interviews to explore their experiences more deeply. The interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams. I chose Teams because it gave me the option to record the interviews and also provided a transcript for the interviews. I also used the Otter AI app on my iPhone as a backup of the conversation in the event there were technical issues with the recordings. Once each interview was concluded, I downloaded the recordings and transcripts. I then listened to the audio, verified the transcript, and made corrections as needed. I then emailed corrected transcripts to participants to verify each of the transcript's for accuracy.

Individual Interview Questions

Icebreaker Question

1. Can you share a little bit about your background and what motivated you to participate in this research study? Ice Breaker

2. In your experience as an online doctoral student with LD or ADHD, what personal factors have played a significant role in your academic persistence? CRQ

3. How would you describe any particular strengths or attributes that have helped you overcome challenges and persist in your studies despite the presence of LD or ADHD? CRQ

4. In your opinion, how do external factors, such as support systems, accommodations, and resources provided by the university, contribute to the academic persistence of online doctoral students with LD or ADHD? CRQ

5. How would you describe any challenges you have encountered that are related to your LD or ADHD, and how have they influenced your ability to persist in your studies? SQ1

6. In your experience, how do the symptoms of LD or ADHD affect your engagement and focus in the online learning environment and how have these factors influenced your academic persistence? SQ1

7. From your perspective, how do the unique demands of online doctoral programs interact with the challenges posed by LD and ADHD? SQ1

8. Based on your experience as an online doctoral student with LD or ADHD, what strategies or accommodations have you found to be most effective in supporting your academic persistence and how have these strategies or accommodations positively affected your ability to persist in your studies? SQ2

9. How do you feel assistive technologies and tools have affected your academic persistence? SQ2

10. Please share any specific instances where the use of assistive technology or tools has helped you overcome challenges due to your LD or ADHD. SQ2

11. How would you describe your personal experiences with motivation in your online doctoral program? SQ3

12. Please share some specific strategies you have used to stay motivated in your studies despite the challenges associated with LD and ADHD. SQ3

13. How do you perceive your self-efficacy in relation to your academic abilities and success in your online doctoral program? SQ3

The initial question served a key function in establishing a friendly and conducive atmosphere for participants, which enhance their comfort and willingness to share their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The second and third questions were intended to explore the central research question by gathering detailed insights regarding the factors influencing academic persistence among online doctoral students with LD and ADHD. Questions four and five were designed to deepen the understanding of the first sub-question, focusing on how LD and ADHD symptoms influenced the academic persistence of these students in an online learning environment. Questions six and seven concentrated on the second sub-question, exploring the strategies and accommodations that these students found most effective in supporting their academic persistence. Finally, the closing questions eight and nine aimed to address the third sub-question by investigating the role individual factors like motivation, self-efficacy, and self-regulation skills played in influencing the academic persistence of online doctoral students with LD and ADHD.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

I conducted and recorded the online interviews using Microsoft Teams, making sure to accurately capture the responses to the specific questions. Post data collection, I downloaded the transcripts from Microsoft Teams and listened to the recordings carefully, ensuring that the transcriptions were a verbatim representation, thereby preserving the authenticity and depth of the responses (Bird, 2005). I also submitted individual transcripts to participants for verification (member checking).

Following Moustakas' methodology, my data analysis commenced with epoché or bracketing, adhering to a deliberate process of setting aside any preconceived notions, biases, or assumptions associated with the research topic. This ensured an impartial interpretation of the data. Subsequently, I progressed to the horizontalization step, wherein I treated each response equally, refraining from prematurely emphasizing specific patterns. Each response was meticulously documented and reflected upon, with no initial judgment of its relevance or importance (Moustakas, 1994).

In my next step I identified similar data points from the data, and clustered them together. This process involved an in-depth review and arrangement of the responses to each question into common themes. I then developed individual textural descriptions to capture unique experiences and generated composite textural descriptions to depict shared experiences among the participants. Structural descriptions were then formulated to detail the context or settings that influenced the experiences. The combination of these descriptions provided a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). To guarantee the validity of my findings, I used peer debriefing and member checking as the final steps in my data analysis plan (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Focus Groups

Focus groups remain an effective method for data collection in qualitative research, providing a vibrant environment that allows for the capture of diverse perspectives and nuanced conversations. Their strength lies in fostering interactive discussions, which can unveil complex social and personal experiences, enhancing the data collected (Krueger & Casey, 2015). For my study, they represented a particularly viable approach due to the interactive exploration of experiences and perceptions of online doctoral students with LD or ADHD.

I chose to leverage the benefits of online focus groups due to their increased accessibility, flexibility, anonymity, reduced costs, and convenience (Flayelle et al., 2022). These benefits aligned perfectly with the nature of my study. For instance, online focus groups enabled broader participation by overcoming geographic or time zone constraints. They catered to the often-hectic schedules of online doctoral students, many of whom were working professionals juggling their studies and professional commitments (Ortagus, 2017).

I set up two focus groups, with six members in the first and five in the second. This group size is often seen as optimal, as it is small enough to ensure everyone gets a chance to express their views and large enough to provide a range of different perspectives (Stewart et al., 2014). After the focus groups were formed, I scheduled the focus group sessions, considering the availability and time zones of the participants to ensure maximal participation. I then facilitated the focus group discussions following a semi-structured guide aligned with the research questions.

I used Microsoft Teams, a reliable platform for conducting and recording the sessions, with the added benefit of auto-generating transcripts. As a backup, I also used Otter AI to ensure the audio and transcripts were well-documented. In the interest of maintaining participant anonymity, I assigned different names to participants for use during the meetings, known only to me. I also requested that participants turn off their cameras during the meeting. This level of anonymity can often encourage more open and honest feedback, particularly when discussing sensitive or personal topics (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Focus Group Questions

1. What inspired you to pursue your online doctoral degree, and how has the journey been for you so far? Ice breaker

2. What are some specific challenges you have personally faced that influenced your academic persistence? CRQ

3. Based on your personal experience, which factors have been particularly influential in supporting your academic persistence? CRQ

4. From your own experiences, how does having LD or ADHD affect your academic persistence? SQ1

5. What specific challenges have you personally encountered in maintaining your motivation, engagement, and focus in an online learning environment due to your LD or ADHD? SQ1

6. In your personal experience, what strategies or accommodations have been effective in supporting your academic persistence? SQ2

7. Can you share any specific examples or success stories from your own experience where the implementation of certain strategies or accommodations have helped you? SQ2

8. Based on your own experiences, how do individual factors such as motivation, self-efficacy, and self-regulation skills contribute to your academic persistence as an online doctoral student with LD or ADHD? SQ3

9. From your personal perspective, what strategies or interventions do you believe could enhance your motivation, self-efficacy, and self-regulation skills, thereby promoting your academic persistence as an online doctoral student with LD or ADHD? SQ3

The primary purpose of question one was to initiate social interaction and establish a friendly and inviting atmosphere within a group setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Questions two and three were directly relevant to the central research question and aimed to investigate the influence of self-efficacy on students' academic achievements. Questions four and five focused

specifically on exploring the correlation between self-efficacy and academic success among students with learning disabilities enrolled in online doctoral programs. Questions six and seven were designed to gain insights into how self-efficacy influenced the motivation and perseverance of online doctoral students with LD and ADHD when faced with academic challenges. Finally, questions eight and nine explored the role that individual factors, such as motivation, self-efficacy, and self-regulation skills played in the academic persistence of online doctoral students with LD and ADHD?

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

I utilized Microsoft Teams to facilitate and document the online focus groups, ensuring accurate capture of the participants' responses to specific questions. After collecting the data, I downloaded the transcripts from Microsoft Teams and thoroughly reviewed the recordings, ensuring that the transcriptions faithfully represented the original conversations. This approach preserved the authenticity and depth of the responses (Bird, 2005). Additionally, I provided individual transcripts to participants for verification through member checking.

In alignment with Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological approach, I started the data analysis by implementing epoché or bracketing. During this phase, I set aside any preconceived ideas, biases, or assumptions that I might have regarding the topic. This practice assisted me in objectively interpreting the data derived from the focus groups (Moustakas, 1994). Next, I started the horizontalization phase, treating every response from the participants as equally valuable, thus ensuring I avoided premature focus on particular patterns. Every sentiment, every piece of shared experience, was documented and considered, thereby assuring that all voices were heard and no significant information was overlooked. Following horizontalization, common themes were identified from the data. These were formed by grouping similar data points that emerged

from the focus group responses. The aim was to categorize individual experiences into shared themes that reflected common factors influencing academic persistence among online doctoral students with LD or ADHD (Moustakas, 1994).

I then created individual textural descriptions capturing unique experiences shared by the participants, followed by composite textural descriptions that represented shared experiences among the group. Alongside these, I also generated structural descriptions that provided the context or settings that influenced these experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The final product was a comprehensive portrayal of the experiences of online doctoral students with LD or ADHD. To ensure the trustworthiness and validity of my findings, I employed member checking and peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Synthesis

This qualitative dissertation synthesized data by using Moustakas' (1994) modified Van Kaam method. The Van Kaam method was a comprehensive and systematic approach to data synthesis that involved six stages: experiencing, identifying themes, clustering themes, abstraction, creating a synthesis, and verifying the synthesis. Moustakas modified this method by adding two additional stages: intuiting and describing the essence. I began synthesizing the data by immersing myself in the data to gain a deep understanding of the experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994).

Once I understood the participant's experience, I reviewed the notes I took during the experience stage and identified themes that emerged from the data. I used an inductive approach to identify themes, allowing the themes to emerge directly from the data rather than imposing preconceived ideas on the data. Next, I reviewed the themes and grouped them into clusters based on their similarity and relatedness. Then, I reviewed the clusters of themes and identified

their essential characteristics, creating a general summary of the data. I then reviewed and created a synthesis statement that captured the data's essence (Moustakas, 1994).

Once I captured the essence of the data, I verified the synthesis by checking the synthesis statement against the data to ensure that it accurately reflected the experiences and perspectives of the participants. To gain a deeper understanding of the data, I reviewed the data and allowed my intuition to guide me in gaining a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of the participants. Finally, I reviewed the data and created a descriptive statement that captured the essence of the experiences and perspectives of the participants. This method provided a comprehensive and systematic approach to data synthesis. Furthermore, it allowed me to immerse myself in the data, resulting in synthesis and descriptive statements that accurately captured the essence of the data. This provided valuable insight into the perspectives and experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994).

<div align="center">**Trustworthiness**</div>

An important component of qualitative research studies is establishing trustworthiness, and I accomplished this by employing strategies to ensure the collected data were valid and reliable. The strategies I used to establish trustworthiness were credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and ethical considerations (Shenton, 2004). As a whole, these strategies demonstrated the rigor of the research methods and the reliability, credibility, and transferability of the results.

Credibility

An important component of the trustworthiness section of a qualitative study is credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Research credibility refers to how trustworthy and believable the findings are. Credibility was essential to ensure that the study's findings were meaningful and

useful to others. The first step I used to establish credibility was to triangulate data from the participants' online discussion board prompts, semi-structured interviews, and online focus groups. Obtaining data from multiple sources allowed multiple perspectives on the same phenomenon to emerge. This increased the reliability and validity of my study and instilled confidence in the results (Shenton, 2004). As a next step, I used a strategy called member checking: I shared the research findings with the participants so they could confirm the accuracy of the findings. As a result, I strengthened the validity of my study and increased confidence in its results. To implement this strategy, I provided participants with transcripts of the data to review and provide feedback on. This method allowed the participants to check the accuracy of the data and identify any discrepancies or errors through this process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Peer debriefing was another strategy for establishing credibility. This strategy involved my requesting feedback from experts in the field. As part of this process, I sought input from experts in the field (Shenton, 2004). I presented my findings to my Chair and my methodologist for discussion and feedback. Doing this ensured that the data analysis and interpretation were unbiased and valid. As a final step in establishing credibility, I relied on reflexivity. During this process, I reflected on my role and any biases I may have had in the study. It involved my acknowledging and describing my personal views and biases and how they had been addressed during my research (Moustakas, 1994). By using these strategies, I increased the credibility of my research and the likelihood that others would embrace and use my findings.

Transferability

Transferability in qualitative research refers to the extent to which findings from one context can be transferred or applied to another context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This qualitative study provided an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the unique experiences and

challenges faced by online doctoral students with LD and ADHD. The study's findings offered valuable insights into the various factors that contributed to academic persistence within this specific population. However, it was essential to understand that the results were intrinsically linked to the specific circumstances, individual characteristics of the participants, and the nature of their respective online doctoral programs.

While the anticipated results of this study were expected to be rich, context-specific, and illuminative, they may not be directly transferable to all students with LD and ADHD enrolled in diverse types of programs or educational contexts. Nevertheless, the detailed descriptions that I provided concerning the study's context, participants, data collection, and analysis processes, should enable readers, especially educators, academic counselors, and administrators in similar contexts, to make informed judgments about the potential applicability of these findings to their situations.

This research is intended to serve as a catalyst for future investigations involving different student cohorts in a variety of contexts. Such subsequent studies could help broaden the understanding of persistence factors in online doctoral programs and expand the potential for the transferability of these findings. The ultimate goal is to leverage the insights gained from this study to inform future policies, strategies, and practices that foster the academic success of students with LD and ADHD across a range of online doctoral programs.

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research pertains to the consistency and repeatability of the research procedures and findings, and how well the study accounts for changing contexts and conditions over time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study on the factors that contribute to the persistence of online doctoral students with LD and ADHD, I took deliberate measures to ensure

dependability. To do this, I maintained a thorough record of the research process, including how decisions were made throughout the study. This audit trail included the original research proposal, the selection and description of participants, the field notes, the transcription of interviews and focus group discussions, data analysis documentation, and the final research report. This comprehensive record keeping allowed others to understand and potentially replicate the research process, adding to the dependability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Furthermore, I used peer debriefing, involving the use of a disinterested peer to review and question the research process and findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This process provided an external check on the research process, enhancing the reliability and trustworthiness of the findings.

Finally, I ensured that the methods chosen to collect and analyze data were well suited to the research questions, and that they were applied consistently throughout the study. This methodological consistency further contributed to the dependability of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These measures, taken together, helped establish the dependability of the study's procedures and findings, adding to its overall quality and credibility.

Confirmability

In this qualitative study on the factors that influence persistence in online doctoral programs among students with LD and ADHD, I meticulously address confirmability to ensure the research findings genuinely represented the participants' perspectives rather than any potential bias on my part. To achieve this, an audit trail, which is a transparent and traceable documentation of the research steps taken from the start to the end of the project, was maintained. This included a detailed record of all research activities, decisions, and changes in the course of the study, along with the reasons for those decisions and changes. By providing this

information, other researchers would be able to trace the course of the research and see how conclusions were derived, ensuring the study's confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Furthermore, I employed reflexivity throughout the study, engaging in continuous self-appraisal and clarification of my own beliefs, biases, and assumptions, documenting these reflections, and making conscious efforts to set them aside during data collection and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through diligent documentation, reflexivity, and an ongoing commitment to objectivity, I strived to ensure that this study's findings were confirmable and truly reflective of the participants' experiences and perspectives, thereby enhancing the study's credibility and overall quality.

Ethical Considerations

I obtained approval from the appropriate Institutional Review Board (IRB) before conducting any research. In conducting this research, I observed the highest ethical standards. The first ethical consideration was obtaining informed consent to protect the participant's rights and welfare. This study received an exemption from the IRB, so participants were not required to sign an informed consent form. An information sheet describing the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits was provided to participants prior to participation in the study. Before the study began, participants were given ample time to review the information sheet and ask questions. The participant's information sheet will be kept confidential and secure to protect their privacy (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The second ethical consideration was confidentiality. I ensured that the participants' confidentiality was protected throughout the study. I accomplished this by assigning pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity. Additionally, I removed all identifiable information from the data analysis. A third ethical consideration involved my debriefing participants at the end of the

study. I gave participants a debriefing form outlining the study's purpose and results. Participants were also to ask questions and provide feedback about the study. A final ethical consideration was data storage and disposal; I securely stored all data from my study and complied with regulations. The data will be kept for the duration of the study and for a period of five years after the study's completion. After this time, the data will be securely destroyed (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

<h2 style="text-align:center">Summary</h2>

This research study sought to explore and understand the real-life experiences of online doctoral students living with learning disabilities (LD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). In this chapter, the research design and key questions that guided this study were detailed. Additionally, an overview of the study's setting and participants was provided. The researcher's positionality, the interpretive framework employed in the study, philosophical assumptions, and the researcher's role were also explained. The chapter then discussed the procedures that were used to obtain permissions and recruit participants. The data collection plan was outlined, including the utilization of online discussion board prompts, online individual interviews, and online focus groups. The measures that were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the study, including aspects such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confidentiality, were also explained, alongside ethical considerations. The findings of this study shed light on the experiences of online doctoral students with LD and ADHD, emphasizing the key factors that contribute to persistence in online doctoral programs. The outcomes have the potential to contribute to the development of effective programs and support systems for educators and administrators to better serve these students. Finally, this study can serve as a

valuable resource for students with LD and ADHD, equipping them with knowledge and insights

necessary to achieve academic success at the highest level of academia.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of current and former online doctoral students with learning disabilities and ADHD to determine the factors that contribute to persistence in online doctoral programs. The study was done through data collection of 11 participants consisting of discussion board prompts, individual interviews, and focus groups. Participants were either currently in the dissertation phase of their current online doctoral program or had graduated from an online doctoral program within the last two years. This chapter presents themes and sub-themes identified through the analysis of the data for each participant (using pseudonyms). Additionally, this chapter discusses the research questions related to the themed data.

Participants

The participants were carefully chosen based on specific eligibility requirements. The participants were required to have a formal diagnosis of a learning disability or ADHD and be in the dissertation phase on an online doctoral program or had graduated within the last two years. Four participants had finished their online doctorate degrees, earning the title of Doctor. The other seven were in the dissertation phase of their online doctoral programs. The participants for the study were recruited by word of mouth and posting an official recruitment letter approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) on social media. When people showed interest in joining the study, eligibility was verified before adding them to the study. Since the study did not require a signed consent form, eligible participants were provided an information sheet explaining their rights and responsibilities in the study. Once officially accepted to participate in the study, participants were then enrolled in the Canvas course where they completed the discussion

prompts. Once they made their discussion board posts, participants were scheduled for their individual interviews. At the conclusion of each individual interview, participants were scheduled to participate in the focus groups. There were two focus groups: Five participated in the first focus group and six in the second. Demographic information for the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Participants

Participants	Age	Gender	Region of Institution	ABD/Graduate and Program of Study	Disability Type(s)	Age of Diagnosis
Daryl	58	M	Southeastern	ABD - Christian Worship	Dysgraphia	48
Marie	35	F	Southeastern	ABD - Curriculum & Instruction	ADHD	23
Kate	36	F	Southeastern	ABD - Curriculum & Instruction	ADHD, Dyslexia	12
James	35	M	Southeastern	Graduate Communication	ADHD	27
Minerva	40	F	Southeastern	Graduate - Curriculum & Instruction and Advanced Educational Studies: Special Ed.	ADHD	37
Rick	42	M	Southeastern	Graduate - Curriculum & Instruction	Dyslexia	5
Wesley	60+	M	Southeastern	Graduate - Strategic Leadership	ADHD	40s
Murph	52	F	Southeastern	ABD - Public Policy	ADHD, Dysgraphia	7
Anthony	52	M	Southeastern	ABD - Public Administration	ADHD	12
Jolene	53	F	Southeastern	ABD - Community Care & Counseling	ADHD, Dyscalculia	12
Lane	31	F	Southeastern	ABD - Curriculum & Instruction	ADHD	18

Note: The Participants column indicates the pseudonyms for each person. The Age column was the age of the participants at the time of the study. The Gender column indicates the sex of the participants. The Region of Institution is the geographical location in the U.S. of the universities.

The ABD/Graduate and Program of Study column indicates the candidates current status in their online doctoral program and their field of study. ABD indicates the participants have completed all but their dissertation and graduated indicates they completed their online doctoral program within the last two years (see candidate descriptions below for further details). The Disability Type(s) column indicates the participants reported disabilities. The Age at Time of Diagnosis column indicates the age the participants were when they were diagnosed with their disabilities.

The following is a detailed description of each participant and a short biography of how they persisted in their online doctoral programs.

Daryl

Daryl is a 58-year-old online doctoral student pursuing a Ph.D. in Christian Worship. He was diagnosed with disorder of written expression (also known as dysgraphia) when he was 48 years old. Daryl, influenced by his Apostolic Pentecostal upbringing, served in the U.S. Navy for 23 years and has a deep passion for singing. Daryl faced unique challenges throughout his life but drew strength from his wife of 37 years, three children, and five grandchildren. It was during Daryl's discharge from the Navy that he was diagnosed with dysgraphia. This diagnosis led him to academic research on his disorders, which led to a unique opportunity to pursue a Ph.D. with financial support from his university. He attributes his academic success to the Office of Disability Accommodation Support (ODAS), which improved his grades, and to various resources and assistive technologies. While Daryl has battled depression and self-doubt, his determination, faith, and resilience have seen him through. Now in an online doctoral program, he aims to expand knowledge on his learning disability, inspiring others with similar challenges.

Marie

Marie is a 35-year-old online doctoral student pursuing an Ed.D. in Curriculum and Instruction. She was diagnosed with ADHD when she was 23 years old. Marie comes from a large family of four siblings, rooted in ambitions and academic aspirations. Marie always had the desire to earn a Ph.D. She is not an average online doctoral student. Marie is a woman on a mission: to confront the societal stigmas that surround learning disabilities (LD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), issues close to her heart. Marie's journey as an online doctoral student is a blend of both triumphs and challenges. When facing external doubt or her own challenges, Marie uses them as fuel for her resilience. Far from being deterred by others' opinions, Marie embraces them to strengthen her resolve further, continuing her academic journey with unwavering determination.

Kate

Kate is a 36-year-old online doctoral student pursuing an Ed.D. in Curriculum and Instruction. She was diagnosed with ADHD and dyslexia when she was 12 years old. Three years ago, Kate joined her university with a clear goal to deepen her expertise in curriculum and instruction. As an online doctoral student, Kate has found the flexibility of the platform extremely beneficial. It allows her to work according to her schedule, particularly during nights and weekends when she has the most time. Kate is driven by a high level of intrinsic motivation, and a desire to positively influence her students and show that challenges can be overcome. Kate emphasizes the role of positive inner dialogue in her journey, constantly reminding herself of her capabilities to complete her doctoral program successfully. Kate's story serves as an inspiration to anyone who faces significant challenges in their academic journey and has proven that obstacles can indeed become opportunities for growth.

James

James is a 35-year-old graduate of an online doctoral program where he completed his

Ph.D. in Communication in December 2021. James was diagnosed with ADHD when he was 27

years old. James was raised in a blue-collar community and believes in hard work and

perseverance, drawing inspiration from Vince Lombardi's teachings. Faith is central to James,

guiding him through his academic journey and preventing him from giving up. James' resilience,

rooted in his upbringing and faith, helped him tackle ADHD challenges, even though he admits

they are still evolving. He never sought university accommodations, instead relying on his wife

for understanding and his medical doctor for comprehensive solutions. James faced difficulties in

reading and online discussions due to ADHD but found help with assistive technologies. His

motivation came from his research goals, a supportive academic community, and an

understanding of his pace. James sees ADHD as a blessing, pushing him to excel and understand

his learning better. His journey stands as a beacon of hope and inspiration for others facing

similar challenges.

Minerva

Minerva is a 40-year-old graduate of an online doctoral program where she completed

her Ed.D. in Curriculum and Instruction in 2019, followed by a Ph.D. in Advanced Educational

Studies with a cognate in Special Education in April 2022. Minerva was diagnosed with ADHD

when she was 37 years old. Minerva, hailing from rural Arkansas, defied all odds to earn two

doctoral degrees despite grappling with ADHD. Facing discouragement and challenges,

Minerva's resilience only grew stronger. Her "twice-exceptional" status—being gifted with a

learning disability—became her strength, driving her to significant academic contributions,

including research on gifted and twice-exceptional children. Driven by a desire to prove her

worth and answer pressing research questions, Minerva's journey is a story of determination and

resilience. With two doctorates under her belt, Minerva's story is a powerful testament to the human spirit's ability to turn challenges into triumphs.

Rick

Rick is a 42-year-old graduate of an online doctoral program where he completed his Ed.D. in Curriculum and Instruction in August 2023. He was diagnosed with dyslexia when he was five years old. Rick's academic journey, shaped by ambition and the challenges of a learning disability, was driven by a desire to foster inclusivity in education. He believes in the power of education, a value deeply rooted in his family, where pursuing advanced degrees was a tradition. Rick's strength in writing allowed him to excel, especially during the dissertation phase, which favored his abilities over traditional testing. Rick surrounded himself with a supportive community, including mentors with doctorates, who provided guidance and emotional support. Proactively tackling coursework and utilizing university accommodations, Rick also embraced assistive technologies to aid his studies. His motivation fluctuated but was anchored by his deep sense of purpose, the support of online communities, and a friendly rivalry with his doctorate-holding brother. Rick's story stands as a testament to resilience, faith, and the power of community, inspiring others facing similar challenges.

Wesley

Wesley is a 60+-year-old graduate of an online doctoral program where he completed his Ph.D. in Strategic Leadership. Wesley was diagnosed with ADHD in his 40s. Wesley's journey to a doctoral degree is a testament to determination and adaptability. Despite struggling through high school due to ADHD and a lack of academic guidance, Wesley found direction in the Air Force's technical school. It was there he realized his potential, leading him to pursue higher education. Achieving a bachelor's degree with a commendable GPA, he was inspired to aim for a

master's and eventually a doctorate. Technology was key for Wesley's success, with computers allowing him to refine his thoughts and tools like Grammarly enhancing his writing. Wesley's self-awareness about his ADHD symptoms helped him optimize his workflow. He often took short breaks to maintain focus and submitted assignments ahead of time. Keeping his doctoral studies a secret until completion, Wesley's achievement silenced doubters and showcased the power of self-belief and persistence. His story underscores that with determination and the right tools, success is attainable, regardless of the challenges faced.

Murph

Murph is a 52-year-old online doctoral student currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Public Policy. Murph was diagnosed with ADHD and dysgraphia at the age of seven. Murph's journey is a testament to resilience and determination. As a licensed physical therapist and online doctoral student, she has faced both professional and academic challenges with learning disabilities. Murph's stubbornness, rooted in her upbringing, has been her driving force, pushing her to overcome challenges and harness her intelligence. While fiercely private about her academic endeavors, Murph leans on her husband and children for support. Murph values the flexibility online courses offer. She has crafted personalized strategies, such as a 3:00 a.m. study routine, sticker rewards, and coloring charts, to stay motivated. While not using specialized assistive technologies, she acknowledges the benefits of modern tools like laptops, which allow her to study effectively. Murph's story showcases the power of perseverance, adaptability, and self-reliance. Her success serves as an inspiration to students with learning disabilities and ADHD, proving that with determination and the right strategies, anyone can achieve their goals.

Anthony

Anthony is a 52-year-old online doctoral student currently in the dissertation phase of his online doctoral program. He is pursuing a Ph.D. in Public Administration. Anthony was diagnosed with ADHD at the age of 12. Anthony's journey is a testament to determination and resilience in the face of learning disabilities. He was supported by parents who went the extra mile to ensure his academic success, even learning material themselves to assist him. Despite challenges and doubters, including a professor who suggested he quit law school, Anthony's persistence saw him graduate high school early, earn a bachelor's degree in just three years, and later attend law school. His unique "triple systems strategy" for managing tasks—digital, paper, and physical reminders—along with his ability to adapt to online learning, showcases his resourcefulness. While he views himself as "below average" due to early struggles, this perception has fueled his determination to excel. Anthony's story serves as an inspiration for students with learning disabilities and ADHD, emphasizing that with persistence, commitment, and support, success is attainable.

Jolene

Jolene is a 53-year-old online doctoral student currently pursuing an Ed.D. in Community Care in Counseling. Jolene was diagnosed with ADHD and Dyscalculia at the age of 12. Jolene's educational journey, marked by challenges from learning disabilities and ADHD, showcases her resilience and adaptability. After leaving high school, she returned to college in her 30s and is now pursuing her doctorate in her 50s. Despite facing setbacks, including dropping out of classes due to her ADHD, Jolene's determination, and desire to prove doubters wrong kept her going. Her dissertation on veterans serves as a driving force, turning her academic pursuits into a mission. While reading and concentration pose challenges, Jolene excels in research and writing. She finds unwavering support in her family, especially her husband. Jolene's journey, filled with

challenges, adaptations, and an instinct to survive, serves as an inspiration for those facing similar obstacles in their academic paths.

Lane

Lane is a 31-year-old online doctoral student currently pursuing an Ed.D. in Curriculum and Instruction. Lane was diagnosed with ADHD at the age of 18. Lane, with a master's in instructional technology and twins at home, is a testament to determination and intrinsic motivation. Despite the challenges of ADHD, she is on a mission to earn her doctoral degree and help others with similar struggles. Lane's academic journey, though marked by feelings of being "lost and overwhelmed," is fueled by an internal drive and a refusal to quit. Her family, especially her husband, provides essential support, helping her balance family, work, and studies. Lane's story, characterized by resilience, adaptability, and strong intrinsic motivation, shows that with the right mindset and support, academic success is attainable.

Results

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of current and former online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD to explore the factors that contribute to persistence in online doctoral programs. Participant demographics were collected and placed in Table 1. The data were organized by participants' age, gender, region of institution, program of study, disability type, and age of diagnosis. Participant data included transcripts of discussion board posts, individual one-on-one interviews, and collaborative focus groups. Transcripts were reviewed and all participant statements relevant to the research were coded using open coding. Throughout the transcripts, statements were coded based on repetition, and the codes were then organized into themes and sub-themes. As three data collection methods

were used, triangulation of the data was possible, and Moustakas' (1994) method was used for the analysis of the data.

Overcoming Challenges and Barriers

There are many challenges and barriers these online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD face as they pursue their degrees online. These challenges ranged from managing distractions in an online learning environment to struggling with reading and comprehension. However, despite these hurdles, many of these students found ways to adapt and persevere. In navigating the academic world with a learning disability or ADHD, these individuals demonstrated remarkable resilience and determination.

Balancing Work and Studies

Online doctoral students with learning disabilities and ADHD often find themselves in a balancing act between their work and academic responsibilities. Lane emphasized the importance of utilizing mornings effectively for her studies. Lane mentioned that she often wakes up around 4:00 a.m. to complete her schoolwork. This early schedule has been beneficial for her, especially after a day of work and attending to her children. She also highlighted the significance of creating a separate space for her schoolwork, away from her children, to maintain focus and avoid distractions. Anthony discussed the challenges of time commitment and the ability to focus. Anthony mentioned that he preferred shorter durations for his courses, like 8 weeks, as it required less time to stay focused on a specific topic.

Jolene mentioned challenges with staying focused and the distractions that arise when balancing family life with studies. She emphasized the importance of writing down parts of questions to avoid forgetting them and the need to manage distractions effectively. Marie mentioned the challenges she faced in her studies, particularly in ensuring a distraction-free

workspace. Marie emphasized the importance of maintaining a work area free from distractions, which has allowed her to persist effectively in her studies. She also discussed the demanding nature of her doctoral program and the challenge of balancing academic responsibilities with personal life. Marie strives to keep her personal challenges, including her learning disability, from interfering with her academic pursuits.

Kate highlighted the challenges of timing and balancing personal and professional aspirations. Kate mentioned that staying on track with tasks can be difficult for her, especially when she gets distracted or interrupted. She also discussed the challenges she faced with typing and writing assignments. James expressed that the deadlines in his program were brutal and difficult to meet. The looming deadlines caused him a tremendous amount of stress, and he often found himself submitting assignments past the due date. For these students to achieve a manageable work-life balance, it is crucial to find personal strategies and routines that work well for them.

Setting Aside Time for Breaks

For online doctoral students with learning disabilities and ADHD, the strategy of setting aside time for breaks has been instrumental in maintaining their academic persistence. Murph emphasized the benefits of online learning, particularly the flexibility it offers. She mentioned that online learning allows her to build breaks between tasks, such as taking a break between writing paragraphs if needed. She said that this approach helps with managing her focus and attention, especially given her learning challenges. Similarly, Kate discussed the challenges of managing time effectively and maintaining a clear and focused train of thought, especially in an online setting where distractions are plentiful. Kate found that the ability to step away from other activities and adapt to a conducive learning environment has significantly impacted her learning

journey. She also emphasized the importance of allocating specific times to focus on her studies and breaking tasks into smaller, more manageable segments. She finds that this strategy helps her mitigate issues with inattention and enhance the quality of her writing.

Setting aside time for breaks serve as vital opportunities to decompress, recharge, and prepare for further intellectual engagement. Wesley discussed his experiences in terms of managing his time and focus. He mentioned that his experiences were "seasonal." He would wake up early in the morning to get work done because that was when he could focus best. In the afternoon, he would switch to other tasks. He did not have a set schedule but relied on a sense of when he needed to change gears. He emphasized the importance of understanding when to shift focus and when to take breaks. Additionally, Lane mentioned the importance of giving herself days off from schoolwork to rest and recharge. She emphasized how knowing that she has allocated time later in the week to rest makes the hard work more manageable for her. These participants' insights show the significance of recognizing one's unique needs and adapting study practices to ensure sustained attention and productivity, ultimately creating a more manageable and successful academic experience.

External Stressors

There are a number of external stressors that can negatively affect the academic experiences of online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD. These stressors, which can range from personal challenges to environmental factors, can sometimes seem like significant barriers to the students' academic persistence. For example, Marie discussed the challenges of not having enough support from other family members, being the first one in her family to pursue a Ph.D. Additionally, she mentioned the responsibility of taking care of a sick family member, which has been and continues to be very difficult. Then, Daryl discussed the

feelings of depression and a lack of motivation he often faced. Daryl mentioned that he sometimes felt like he could not accomplish what he set out to do, leading to negative self-talk and self-doubt. This was particularly prominent when he started his master's degree, where the sight of assignments filled him with fear.

To overcome these stressors, these participants have developed resilience and coping strategies to navigate these challenges effectively. Minerva shared how the week she defended her dissertation her dad was in the hospital. Then, the day after her defended, her mom called and said she needed to come home. During the final editing process and submission to the library, she lost her dad. Despite this unfortunate chain of events, Minerva found ways to refocus. She shared how reading a Bible verse or an interaction with a friend helped her overcome her challenges and she was able to finish strong. These story's illustrate how external stressors can influence students in difficult ways and why support and understanding when facing these challenges is essential to their academic persistence.

Using eBooks and Audiobooks

For several of the participants, eBooks and audiobooks proved to be essential tools in their academic journey. These resources have been a game-changer in the way these tools access and interact with educational content, helping with the students' diverse learning needs and preferences. Anthony shared that given his struggle with maintaining focus on reading, switching to audiobooks whenever possible was a substantial game-changer for him. He described it as a small, practical adjustment but it made a significant difference in his learning experience. Similarly, Lane highlighted the convenience of eBooks, as they allowed her to search for specific terms. This capability has been beneficial in her studies.

The participants also found innovative strategies to utilize digital texts to assist with reading comprehension. Jolene, for example, expressed that she does not enjoy reading, especially academic texts. She uses the speak function on her computer to read along. Next, James found apps like Audible and Specify to be particularly useful. Additionally, the Kindle app on his smartphone had a text-to-speech function that was very helpful. He also mentioned Microsoft Word's text-to-speech function, which read his paper back to him, aiding him significantly during his dissertation review. Then, Rick emphasized the value of his iPad, particularly an app called Good Reader. With this app, he could download articles electronically, make notes directly on the document, highlight points, and organize the documents to suit his needs. The app allowed him to focus on one page at a time, which was crucial for him, especially when dealing with lengthy documents. The transition to digital formats not only accommodates the unique challenges of these students but also empowers them with the flexibility to learn at their own pace and in their preferred learning environments.

Use of Mornings for Effective Work

Early mornings can be a time for online doctoral students with learning disabilities and ADHD to do their schoolwork without interruptions. Mornings are often quiet and calm, creating an ideal environment for these students to focus on their work and minimize distractions. Lane said the biggest thing for her was utilizing the mornings effectively. Despite the possibility of having very long days, Lane has found that her frustration often stems from attempting to accomplish tasks too late in the day, possibly due to her medication wearing off or simply being tired after a day of work and attending to her children. Setting aside time in the mornings to focus on tasks has been hugely beneficial for her.

Similarly, Murph has a routine where she wakes up every day at 3:00 o'clock in the morning every day, including weekends and holidays. She mentioned that the early morning hours offer a quiet atmosphere, and it is also the time when her brain is fresh. This routine has become an integral part of her daily life, helping her stay on track with her studies. Likewise, Wesley mentioned waking up early in the morning to get work done because that is when he could focus best. In the afternoon, he would switch to other tasks. Using mornings for effective work shows not only the importance of recognizing one's own optimal working times but also the adaptive strategies these students use to achieve academic success.

Having an Accountability Partner

For online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD, having an accountability partner has proven to be crucial for their academic success. These accountability partners, whether fellow students, professors, or family members, provide a necessary structure of support, motivation, and accountability. James highlighted the importance of accountability in his academic journey. He found community among other doctoral students in his program, which was instrumental in keeping him on track. Additionally, he intentionally built relationships with his professors, as he felt it was challenging to disappoint someone he knew and respected. This approach helped him remain accountable, motivated, and focused on his academic goals.

While James found his accountability partners in an academic setting, for Minerva, it was in her personal relationships. Minerva was determined to complete her Ph.D. before her husband returned from his deployment. Her husband, even from afar, would ask about her weekly goals and check in on her progress. This provided a sense of accountability for her. She also mentioned friends who would call to remind her to take breaks and set aside personal time, further emphasizing the importance of having a support system that holds her accountable. By building

these connections, students are not only encouraged to stay on course, but they also find a sense of belonging and understanding, which are essential for successfully completing an online doctoral program.

Adaptation & Coping Strategies

There are many challenges students with learning disabilities or ADHD face when pursuing an online doctoral degree. However, many of these students have developed coping strategies that have helped them overcome these challenges. Students have been able to cope with the complexity of their studies by understanding their own needs and creating strategies to address them. It is these adaptation and coping strategies that help students maintain focus and stay on track. When faced with adversity, their experiences emphasize the importance of resilience and the ability to adapt.

Use of Assistive Technology

For all of the participants in this study, the use of technology has revolutionized their learning process, offering tailored solutions in order to meet their specific needs. The use of technology not only provides them with tools to overcome their challenges but also empowers them to excel in their studies. Murph highlighted the difference in assistive technology now compared to her earlier college days in the late '80s and early '90s. The advent of laptops and the ability to type and carry work provided flexibility and efficiency, enhancing her ability to work more adaptable. Marie emphasized the importance of assistive technologies, particularly tools like online citation generators and templates provided by the university's library. These tools made a significant impact on her academic journey, making the learning process more accessible and manageable.

Daryl mentioned the use of the audible review tool in Word, which allowed him to listen to what he had written, aiding in the refining process. This tool was beneficial for both review and dictation purposes. James discussed the app on his smartphone that converted PDFs into audio format, allowing him to listen through car or home speakers. Minerva relied on Microsoft Word's voice-to-text feature, especially during late nights. This feature allowed her to talk while the software transcribed her words. Additionally, she used MaxQDA for coding tasks, which, while not strictly assistive technology, offered detailed capabilities compared to other coding software.

Rick emphasized the usefulness of his iPad and the Good Reader app, which allowed him to download articles, make notes directly on the document, and organize the documents in a beneficial manner. Jolene mentioned using the speech feature on her computer to read along. She also discussed the ability to adjust the voice, accent, and speed of speech technology. Lane highlighted the Livescribe smart pen, which allowed her to take notes and record lectures. Later, she could access these recordings on her computer and click on any part of her notes with the pen to play the corresponding part of the lecture. She also mentioned color-coding her notes and the tactile sensation of pens built in a specific way. Anthony mentioned pasting text into a Word document and then turning on the Word reader to have it read to him as he read along.

Wesley mentioned the usefulness of tools like cut and paste, Word, and Grammarly. These tools helped him efficiently manage his work, especially when dealing with articles, quotes, and references. Kate used a dictation device during her dissertation, which significantly facilitated her process of articulating insights. This tool allowed her to verbalize her thoughts directly onto the paper and also enabled her to have the text read back to her. She also emphasized the importance of technology in her studies. She mentioned that the utilization of technology empowered her to

engage in higher-level discourse, reading, and writing than she believed would have been possible in a traditional classroom setting. Through the use of assistive technologies, these students can not only gain access to a more accessible learning environment but also excel academically, illustrating the critical role of technological innovation in inclusive education.

Time Management

Online doctoral students with learning disabilities and ADHD often struggle with managing their time effectively to meet academic demands. Time management becomes a crucial skill for these students, helping them balance their studies with other responsibilities and ensuring they stay on track. Consequently, Jolene discussed the challenge of managing time, especially when procrastinating throughout the week and then trying to complete all the work in one day. She expressed the need to figure out how to manage her time better. She also discussed facing similar issues with staying focused. She mentioned being absent-minded and the challenge of balancing family life with studying, which requires effective time management.

Similar to Jolene, Anthony highlighted the challenges of time commitment and the ability to focus. Carving out significant time for research and writing was a major challenge for him, especially when dealing with different course durations. He also discussed the importance of triple systems for time management, which includes using a computer-based system, a paper organizer, and post-its. He emphasized that the annoyance of having reminders everywhere helps him get things done. Moreover, Lane discussed the importance of utilizing mornings effectively. She found that her frustration often stemmed from attempting to accomplish tasks too late in the day. Setting aside time in the mornings to focus on tasks has been beneficial for her. Kate echoed these sentiments, discussing the challenges of managing time effectively and maintaining a clear and focused train of thought. She learned the importance of time management, especially when

faced with a substantial amount of coursework. By allocating specific times to focus on her studies and breaking tasks into smaller segments, she became more successful.

Murph mentioned her routine of waking up at 3:00 o'clock in the morning every day, emphasizing that the early morning hours offer a quiet atmosphere and are the ideal time to focus on homework. She also talked about the challenge of sitting down for extended periods and the struggle with time management. She mentioned getting up frequently due to boredom and the need to manage her time better. Finally, Minerva discussed the importance of timers in managing her time, especially given her ADHD. She would set a timer and focus intensely for an hour. Additionally, she utilized iPhone calendar features with linked family calendars to plan her schedule effectively. As these reflections illustrate, proactive planning is crucial to student success and academic persistence.

Routine & Structure

For online doctoral students with learning disabilities and ADHD, maintaining a routine and structure is often needed for academic success. Accordingly, establishing a consistent schedule and adhering to it can foster a sense of stability and predictability, thereby aiding in the effective management of time and tasks. Specifically, Murph has highlighted the significance of a strict schedule, committing to rising at 3:00 AM every morning. Moreover, this routine is maintained even when traveling. She mentioned setting non-negotiable rules for herself, such as invariably submitting homework by noon on Sunday. Indeed, establishing a particular routine and enacting steadfast rules has been immensely helpful for her.

Additionally, Wesley talked about dedicating time every Monday to address his coursework. While he did not strictly adhere to a rigid schedule, he maintained a consistent one. Sticking to a routine helped him get things done. He would lay out his syllabus, identify due

dates, and ensure he started early. Furthermore, Lane emphasized the importance of organization in addition to routine. She mentioned the need to have items color-coded, placed in electronic folders, and named in a specific way. She also emphasized the importance of having a routine, especially in the mornings. She mentioned waking up around 4:00 a.m. to complete her schoolwork. Adapting to this early morning routine has been beneficial for her, allowing her to work effectively in a quiet environment.

Marie touched upon the importance of structuring her study routines within specific time frames to optimize her productivity. This structured approach has helped her manage her symptoms related to her learning disability. Jolene discussed the challenges of staying focused and the importance of writing down parts of questions to avoid forgetting them. Balancing family life with studying requires a structured approach, as she can get easily distracted. Anthony, in turn, mentioned the use of a "triple system" for time management, which includes a computer-based system, a paper organizer, and post-its. This structured approach, combined with his slight OCD tendencies, helps him stay on track. The annoyance of having reminders everywhere aids in his focus. These collective reflections highlight the importance of routine and structure for supporting students with disabilities to succeed in their academic pursuits.

Medication and Treatment

For some online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD, the use of medication and treatment becomes an essential tool in managing their symptoms, allowing them to focus and excel in their studies. These interventions can provide the necessary support to navigate the demands of online doctoral programs. Specifically, Marie emphasized that without medication, she would likely struggle to maintain the necessary focus to excel in her program. Ensuring that her symptoms are well-managed has been a key factor in her academic journey.

Managing her symptoms related to her learning disability has been crucial for her academic success. Additionally, James emphasized the transformative impact of medicinal treatment. Finding the right medication and dosage was crucial for him. Furthermore, Lane mentioned medication in the context of her daily routine. After working all day and with her medication out of her system, she found it challenging to focus. The experiences of these participants demonstrate how medical intervention can make a significant difference in the academic success of some students with learning disabilities or ADHD.

Motivation

Motivation is an essential part of the academic journey of online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD. For these students, motivation is shaped by success, supportive feedback, and a desire to motivate others. Throughout their stories, they describe being held accountable by a community, setting clear goals, and remaining resilient. Motivation comes in many forms; for some, it is a spiritual calling; for others, it is the need to prove their worth. No matter what the reason may be, motivation is essential to maintaining academic persistence in higher education for students with learning disabilities or ADHD.

Internal Motivation

In order to succeed in an online doctorate program, students with learning disabilities and ADHD typically face unique challenges that require a strong sense of dedication and commitment on their part. For example, Marie emphasized that her belief in her own abilities has been a driving force in her academic journey. She also mentioned the effort she has been putting into cultivating a positive inner dialogue, constantly reminding herself of her capabilities. Similarly, Lane described her intrinsic motivation as one of her strengths. She talked about how she becomes somewhat obsessed with things and finds it hard to shake off certain thoughts. This

intense focus serves as a powerful driver, compelling her to persistently pursue his goals. Moreover, Kate highlighted the necessity of a significant amount of internal or self-motivation for pursuing and completing the program. She has been dedicating effort towards cultivating a positive inner dialogue, constantly reminding herself of her capabilities.

Wesley mentioned his reliance on personal motivation. He had insecurities about pursuing his academic journey and kept it to himself for a long time. As he gained confidence, he started sharing his journey with a few people, but his self-motivation was the primary driving force. In parallel, Murph described her motivation as being very internally driven. She emphasized that academics is where she feels confident, knowing she is intelligent and has a good brain. This area is where she feels that she can excel and at her own pace. Meanwhile, Jolene described her motivation as coming specifically at the last minute. She emphasized that her dedication is somewhat of an "I told you so" to those who assumed she would fail. Her commitment to making a significant difference for a particular population (veterans) serves as a constant reminder and motivator for her.

Daryl mentioned that he possesses a remarkably high level of intrinsic motivation. His drive is not only due to personal desire but also his commitment to positively impact the students he currently works with. He emphasized the importance of demonstrating that despite challenges, achieving an advanced level of education is feasible. Conversely, James highlighted that one of his biggest challenges was maintaining motivation. He emphasized the importance of intrinsic motivation and how it is pivotal for him to set up a rigid schedule and routine to stay on track. Understanding how his brain works has been the driving force behind his decision to return to school and complete his education. These stories illustrate that internal motivation goes beyond

ambition; it involves resilience, self-awareness, and a dedicated commitment to achieve one's goals.

Rewards and Meeting Deadlines

Keeping up with deadlines and strategically using rewards are important factors in maintaining academic persistence for online doctoral students with learning disabilities and ADHD. Through positive reinforcement and structured time management, these students are able to navigate their doctoral programs successfully. For instance, Murph mentioned using calendars where she places stickers as a form of a reward system. She also maintains a chart where she colors in sections each time that she finishes a class. She described this method as being similar to a kindergartener's sticker reward system but emphasized that it works effectively for her, helping her to stay focused and motivated. Similarly, Anthony talked about celebrating milestones, emphasizing that they are not necessarily the milestones outlined in academic manuals but are personal milestones he sets for himself.

Wesley highlighted the importance of dedicating time every Monday to address his coursework and ensuring he started early. He often completed assignments or responses well before the deadlines. Minerva took a creative approach using the "Heroes Journal" where she sets three daily goals and then reflects on them with color and doodles at night. This journal includes prompts for gratitude, challenges, allies, and side quests. She uses this gamification approach to make tasks more engaging and manageable. Daryl recalled his childhood experiences where his parents, despite their lack of college education, intuitively implemented gamification techniques to aid his learning. They rewarded correct answers with small incentives like peanuts. These early experiences have influenced his approaches to learning and working to this day. For students like these, in order to maintain motivation and focus, it is essential to have tangible

goals and a competitive spirit. It allows them to transform potential stressors into motivating tools by setting rewards for themselves and treating deadlines more as challenges to be overcome.

Personal Faith

Taking part in demanding online doctoral programs can be challenging for students with learning disabilities or ADHD, and for some students, their personal faith provides them with a source of resilience and strength. This spiritual engagement offers more than solace; it guides them through academic challenges with a sense of purpose and divine guidance. James expressed that one of the most critical factors for him was faith, which he perceived as a higher calling. This sense of faith prevented him from giving up, as he did not see failure as an option. He believed that the Lord had given him a clear vision of what he needed to accomplish in his life, which included obtaining a specific degree. Similarly, Rick mentioned that his faith in God kept him motivated. He felt encouraged to keep going and put his challenges in God's hands. He also shared a personal anecdote about his grandmother, who believed he would become a doctor and had even bought a frame for his degree before her passing in 2016.

Wesley emphasized his reliance on personal motivation and faith. He had insecurities about pursuing his academic journey, but his self-motivation, coupled with his faith, was the driving force behind his persistence. Similarly, Daryl mentioned that his journey was not solely powered by technology and community support; his faith played a monumental role. Furthermore, Marie expressed that she had faith and received support from her instructors and her husband. For these students, their personal faith instills a sense of belonging, a belief that their educational journey is part of a bigger, divine plan. For these students, their personal faith is deeply embedded with their academic persistence, paving the path ahead.

Self-Efficacy

In navigating learning disabilities or ADHD in online doctoral programs, self-efficacy plays an important role in academic success. Although they face obstacles due to their conditions, these students have a strong belief in their own ability to achieve their goals. Their sense of self-efficacy empowers them to engage in their coursework, seek support when needed, and utilize strategies to manage their disabilities. As much as it is about overcoming challenges, it is also about finding the confidence to embrace learning opportunities, resiliency to overcome setbacks, and determination to keep going toward academic success. For this population of students, inner strength and a positive self-view are just as important as intellectual ability and are key to their academic persistence.

Overcoming Personal Hurdles

The online doctoral experience presents a unique set of personal hurdles for students with learning disabilities and ADHD. Yet, it is the very act of overcoming these obstacles that often motivates their academic persistence. Anthony reflected on his childhood struggles with ADHD, which was initially perceived as a lack of intelligence. Despite these challenges, he learned steps to help him focus and complete tasks. He also highlighted the support he received from his parents, who were his best cheerleaders. In his narrative, Daryl confronted his battles with depression and dwindling motivation. He recalled instances of feeling incapable of achieving his ambitions, which spiraled into negative self-talk. Nevertheless, he stressed how critical perseverance was and the need to self-affirm his abilities. Similarly, Rick underscored the significance of education within his family. Despite his disability, there was a consistent push from his family to pursue academic excellence. It was this ingrained family support that laid a

steadfast foundation, igniting a resolve within him to navigate and surmount any obstacles in his path.

Marie said it was the positive feedback and encouragement she received from instructors that played a crucial role in her motivation. This support helped her overcome personal challenges and hardships. Then, Minerva discussed facing varied challenges during the lockdown, including unexpected housing and financial pressures. The constant stress led to anxiety, breaking her coping mechanisms, and necessitating the development of new strategies and coping skills with the help of a counselor. Minerva emphasized the importance of regular check-ins with a counselor, especially for those with neurodiversity. Furthermore, Lane emphasized the importance of finding intrinsic motivation to stay engaged. The real challenge for her was motivating herself because, ultimately, she was the one who had to get things done. As much as it is about overcoming challenges, it is also about finding the confidence to embrace learning opportunities, resiliency to overcome setbacks, and determination to keep going toward academic success. These stories demonstrate how the determination to succeed academically can be fueled by overcoming personal hurdles and demonstrating the power of resilience and strength in the face of personal struggles.

Self-Awareness

Online doctoral students with learning disabilities and ADHD are often influenced by a keen understanding of self, which plays an important role in their academic success. Recognizing both student strengths and weaknesses is key to understanding and accepting their unique learning processes. Jolene emphasized the power of making personal connections to the material she is studying. She mentioned the strategy of making text-to-world or text-to-self connections, which helps her relate the material to her personal experiences. This approach aids in making the

material more personal and relevant to her, which in turn enhances her understanding and retention. Lane expressed satisfaction with her ability to self-motivate and her strong belief in herself and her capabilities. She reflected on her journey, especially having ADHD, and how understanding herself and her condition has been rewarding.

Daryl shared his background and how his experiences have been distinctive. He mentioned a lifelong personal conflict with his perception of his intelligence. Despite often feeling unintelligent, deep down, he knew he was smart. This dichotomy led him on a personal quest to understand his learning barriers. His motivation to participate in the study was fueled by his desire to understand himself better and contribute to knowledge about learning disabilities. Murph described her motivation as being very internally driven. She mentioned that academics is where she feels confident, knowing she is smart and has a good brain. This area is where she feels she can excel and at her own pace. Her understanding of her strengths and capabilities in the academic realm has been a driving force behind her decision to continue her education.

Anthony highlighted the importance of persistence and commitment. He mentioned the challenges of relearning material that took others a shorter time to grasp. Anthony emphasized his ability to recognize when he does not know something and his determination to seek out the answers. For these students, developing self-awareness enables them to build strategies for academic success and produce resilience in the face of struggle.

Positive Inner Dialogue

For online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD having a positive inner dialogue is an important factor for academic success. Despite the hurdles, students have found that keeping an encouraging conversation with themselves provides them with the strength to overcome obstacles and find academic success. Kate emphasized the importance of cultivating a

positive inner dialogue. She constantly reminds herself of her capabilities and reassures herself that she has the capacity to work diligently and utilize her academic prowess efficiently. Daryl discussed moments of self-doubt and negative self-talk, such as thinking "I cannot do this" or "I am so stupid." However, he also highlighted the importance of pushing forward and reminding himself of his capabilities, suggesting a shift from negative to positive self-talk.

Marie's personal experiences and the positive feedback and encouragement she received from instructors played a crucial role in her motivation. The support she received fueled her determination and motivation, indicating positive reinforcement and inner dialogue. Positive self-talk can be transformative, as these stories show. It provides students with not only a motivational tool but also a psychological necessity that helps students navigate their way through challenging doctoral programs while managing the challenges of their learning disabilities.

Support Systems

Online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD often face challenges in their studies. However, many of these students shared how having a strong support system made a big difference in their academic journey. Support from family, friends, and peers helped them push through tough times and stay focused on their goals. By listening to their stories, we learn how crucial it is for students with learning disabilities or ADHD to have the right kind of support to succeed in their academic pursuits.

Family Support

Online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD often face unique challenges in their academic journey. During these times the encouragement, understanding, and

unwavering belief from family members have been instrumental in helping them navigate the complexities of their studies. Jolene highlighted the significant support she received from her family, especially her husband. He played a pivotal role in ensuring a conducive environment for her to focus on her work. Lane emphasized the support she received from her husband and family, especially when she needed assistance with her children. Daryl mentioned the support he received from his wife and family members. His wife, in particular, was a pillar of strength, reminding him of the significance of his academic journey. Minerva spoke about the invaluable support she received from her friends, family, and even the parents of her kids' friends. During her Ph.D., her family played a significant role in supporting her emotionally and practically, especially when her husband was stationed in Japan.

James acknowledged the support he received from his wife, who encouraged him to seek diagnosis and treatment. Kate emphasized the importance of family support in her academic journey. Anthony expressed gratitude for his family, especially his wife, who has been very supportive. She helps guide him back on track when he goes off on a tangent and ensures he does not feel inadequate. Rick emphasized the importance of coming from a family that values education. In his family, education is seen as the key to unlocking opportunities. Despite his disability, he was continuously encouraged to strive for educational excellence. Having family members with doctorate degrees also served as a personal motivator for him. Marie mentioned the faith and support she received from her instructors and her husband. Kate emphasized the importance of family support in her academic journey and mentioned finding the right resources and strategies to support her success in the program. These reflections show the invaluable role that family influence plays in supporting the academic persistence of students with learning disabilities or ADHD.

Community Support

For some online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD, developing a sense of community can play a significant role in their academic journey. Being part of a community provides them with a feeling of belonging, mutual understanding, and shared experiences, which can be especially important when navigating the challenges of online doctoral programs. James emphasized the importance of face-to-face interactions in his online-based doctoral program. During intensive sessions, he was able to build a sense of community with fellow students, some of whom also faced challenges similar to his due to ADHD. This community became a source of mutual accountability and support, uplifting each other during challenging times. Rick created a community of people who were familiar with his disability and had already earned their doctorates. This community was aware of the challenges of being in a doctoral program. They shared their wisdom and experiences with him.

Marie highlighted the strong sense of community within her class and the encouragement to engage with peers. She also appreciated the continuous support provided by instructors. Minerva emphasized the importance of a strong support system during her dissertation process. This support allowed her to handle various stressors simultaneously, such as being a mom, homeschool educator, military spouse, daughter, and scholar. Her husband, even when deployed, served as a pillar of support, checking in on her progress. Friends also played a crucial role, assisting with her children and providing emotional support. These stories highlight the crucial role that a sense of community can play in the academic persistence of students with learning disabilities or ADHD.

Peer Support

For some online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD, peer support is extremely important and can be an important contributing factor to their academic success. Having peers who understand and share similar experiences offers a sense of camaraderie and mutual encouragement. This shared journey can be a source of strength and motivation. James highlighted the importance of building community with colleagues and faculty during the week-long intensives on campus. He mentioned how having these interpersonal relationships made a tremendous difference in his persistence because it provided both accountability and camaraderie. He said that when one of his classmates was struggling, the others would pick them up and get them back on their feet.

Marie emphasized the strong sense of community within her class and the encouragement to engage with peers. She stated that in her experience, the university's support factors that stood out were the strong sense of community within the class, the encouragement to engage with her peers, and the continuous support provided by her instructors. These personal accounts highlight the influence that peer support, along with broader community connections, can have on the academic persistence of students with learning disabilities or ADHD.

Personal Determination and Perseverance

Personal determination and perseverance are key factors found in many online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD. They possess this inner drive that pushes them to overcome obstacles, adapt to challenges, and stay committed to their academic goals. Their stories reveal that while external support is valuable, it is their inner resolve and passion for their studies that truly fuels their journey. This personal determination and perseverance become the foundation upon which they build their academic success, proving that with the right mindset, they can achieve their goals despite any challenges they face.

Self-Awareness

For some online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD, self-awareness of their disability can become an important factor in their success. Recognizing and understanding their unique learning styles and needs allows them to develop strategies tailored to their strengths and challenges. This self-awareness not only empowers them to navigate their academic pursuits more effectively but also instills a sense of confidence and resilience. Minerva discussed the ebb and flow of self-advocacy and how small victories built her confidence over time. She also acknowledged that she still has much to learn despite her achievements. Rick expressed a potent self-motivation rooted in a firm belief in his capabilities. He emphasized the importance of genuinely believing in oneself and the impact of others echoing that sentiment. Lane mentioned that reaching this stage in the program, despite having ADHD and encountering numerous obstacles, feels immensely rewarding. Lane's self-awareness and belief in her capabilities significantly influenced her persistence.

Anthony highlighted the importance of persistence and commitment. He also mentioned his ability to recognize when he does not know the answer and the importance of that self-awareness in his academic journey. Jolene discussed the power of finding personal connections to the material she was studying. She emphasized the strategy of making text-to-world or text-to-self connections to make the material more personal to her. Jolene's self-awareness helped her navigate moments of self-doubt and find the determination to push forward. Marie highlighted that her personal experiences and the positive feedback she received from instructors fueled her determination and motivation to continue with her academic journey**.** These reflections show the importance of self-awareness and adaptability and the major influence they can have on the academic persistence of students with learning disabilities and ADHD.

Goal Setting

Setting clear and achievable goals is an important strategy for many online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD. By establishing specific targets, they can map out their path, measure their progress, and maintain their focus. This approach not only helps them stay on track but also provides a sense of accomplishment with each goal reached. Rick expressed a strong self-motivation rooted in a firm belief in his capabilities. He mentioned that that genuinely believing you can achieve something becomes a driving force towards your goal. Rick's determination to see things through to the end was evident in his statement, "If I decide to do something, I will see it through to the end." Lane described being extremely intrinsically motivated and highlighted the importance of setting continuous goals for herself. Lane's goal-oriented nature and the pressure she puts on herself to achieve those goals significantly influenced his persistence. Anthony talked about setting personal milestones, not necessarily those outlined in manuals, but those he set for himself. Celebrating these milestones, even with small gestures like going out for dinner or having a slice of pie, served as a form of self-recognition and motivation for him. These narratives show the significant influence that goal setting can have on the academic persistence of students with learning disabilities and ADHD, helping them reach their goals one step at a time.

Desire to Prove Themselves

For some online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD, the desire to prove themselves can be a powerful motivator to demonstrate their true potential. This determination to challenge societal perceptions and overcome doubts becomes a significant driving force, pushing them to persist and succeed in their studies. Minerva expressed her determination to prove herself, especially in the context of her intelligence. She mentioned that she always knew she

was smart but had difficulty expressing it, especially in school. She also discussed her experience

of not being accepted into the gifted program during her high school years, which further fueled

her desire to demonstrate her capabilities.

Wesley emphasized his strong desire to complete his academic journey, driven by his

belief in his intelligence and capabilities. He mentioned that he knew he was smart enough and

that it was primarily about persistence and convincing himself that he could achieve his goals.

Murph highlighted her perseverance and determination, even when faced with challenges. She

mentioned that she always knew he was intelligent but struggled to channel that intelligence

effectively. Her determination grew stronger as he began to understand and manage her

capabilities better. These reflections show the significant influence that the desire to prove

themselves can have on the academic persistence of students with disabilities or ADHD.

Spiritual Calling

For some online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD, a spiritual calling

can serve as a source of hope and motivation. This deep-seated belief or sense of purpose often

provides them with the strength and determination to persevere through the challenges they

encounter. James expressed that he felt a strong sense of calling, believing that the Lord had

given him a clear vision of what he needed to accomplish in his life, which included obtaining a

specific degree. This sense of calling prevented him from losing trust in his path and kept him

from giving up, as he did not see failure as an option. Daryl also mentioned his background

being deeply rooted in the Apostolic Pentecostal church where he grew up. His motivation to

participate in the study and his academic journey was influenced by his spiritual beliefs and

experiences, as well as his personal conflict with his perception of intelligence. These reflections

show the influence that a spiritual calling can have on the academic persistence of some students with learning disabilities and ADHD.

Research Question Responses

This study examined a central research question and three sub-questions focused on the experiences of online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD to determine the factors that contribute to persistence in online doctoral programs. The data presented above was used to answer each of the research questions below.

Central Research Question

What are the factors that contribute to academic persistence in online doctoral programs for students with LD and ADHD?

One of the main factors students used was striking a balance between their jobs and their schoolwork. All of the candidates were working professionals, so they frequently had to manage their job responsibilities while also meeting academic deadlines, which could be very stressful. For example, Lane spoke about how valuable it was to make good use of her mornings. She said, "The biggest thing for me was making the most of my mornings.... Dedicating time in the mornings to concentrate on tasks was extremely helpful for me." By dedicating her mornings to her schoolwork, it allowed her to focus on her job during the day.

Taking short breaks while doing schoolwork was also seen as essential. Students realized the importance of taking time away from their studies to refresh themselves. For example, Kate, when discussing a strategy that helped her stay on track, said, "This process might involve reading or listening to a page, followed by typing a page, and then taking a short break, often to stand, walk, or even get some water. I find that incorporating brief pauses to engage in activities

such as these keeps me energized and focused." Building in short breaks helped them keep their motivation and concentration.

The participants also depended on assistive technology, such as eBooks and audiobooks. James said, "Given my struggles with focus and my inclination towards aural learning, audiobooks became an invaluable resource for me." For students like James, these technologies made learning more reachable and suited to their individual requirements. Some also mentioned text-to-speech features. For example, Jolene said, "So definitely like using the speech feature. When I am just struggling to pay attention, I can change the speed or the voice of the speech feature." Having the ability to control the speed and tone of the voice assisted students with reading and comprehension.

Time management was another important factor. Students such as Wesley began their weeks early and worked on assignments ahead of time to lessen stress. He said, "Knowing I had this done beforehand was a relief," talking about the comfort that comes with planning ahead. A consistent routine and structure were also stressed. For instance, Murph said, "I have a routine where I get up at 3:00 o'clock in the morning every single day, without fail, seven days a week. This includes weekends and holidays; I maintain this schedule consistently. The early morning hours offer a quiet atmosphere… It is also the time when my brain is fresh and not yet worn out from the day's events, making it the ideal time to focus on my homework. It has become an integral part of my daily routine, helping me stay on track with my studies." For students like Murph, this disciplined routine became a fundamental part of her success.

For some students, medication and treatment were part of their approach to control symptoms and keep their concentration. Marie highlighted the significance of this, saying, "Managing my symptoms was vital because, without the medication, I probably would have had

a hard time keeping the focus I needed." Additionally, James, talking about the importance of having a medical team to support him said, "My psychiatrist was exceptionally available and not solely focused on medication. Instead, he aimed to address my ADHD from multiple angles, seeking the most effective strategies for me." For students like James, having both personal and medical support is crucial to their academic success.

Motivation differed from student to student. Some were motivated from within, inspired by their own objectives and a deep-seated desire to achieve. Take Lane for example; she said, "I must say that I am extremely intrinsically motivated… this trait has also enabled me to persist and continually strive for success." Others, like Anthony, found motivation by rewarding themselves for hitting deadlines. He said, "Early on, I started setting mini goals for myself. I would print out the syllabus and break it off into weeks, setting specific deadlines, and allocating certain days of the week to be at a certain point in the syllabus." For students like Anthony, allowing some rewards for meeting these deadlines, keeps them motivated and on track.

The participant's self-efficacy was strengthened by positive self-talk and overcoming personal hurdles. Kate discussed her method, saying, "I dedicated a lot of effort to developing a positive inner dialogue.... I reassured myself that I was capable of completing this." For students like Minerva, it was a gradual building process. She said, "Small victories, like overcoming tough days or finding better learning strategies, gradually built my confidence. Gamifying my approach to learning turned out to be my best strategy, making it more enjoyable." Students like Minerva, after years of being told or made to feel like they were not smart enough, felt their self-efficacy affected. But with each small accomplishment, their confidence grew, allowing them to persist to the highest levels of academia.

Support networks were crucial for many students. Family, friends, and fellow students offered support and understanding. Anthony commented on the importance of this support, saying, "My family was great. My parents have passed, but my wife is really supportive and helps me tremendously when I go off on a tangent, guiding me back without making me feel stupid." Similarly, Jolene said, "My family, especially my husband, has been a significant source of external motivation and support throughout my journey." For these students, knowing they have the support of others can be a great source of encouragement, especially during the difficult parts of their online doctoral programs.

Finally, the personal determination and persistence of these students were evident in their stories. Marie's story reflects this determination, as she said, "My driving force is undoubtedly perseverance. Regardless of failures or doubts from others, I have an unwavering determination to keep moving forward. The opinions of others do not hold me back; instead, I use them as motivation to prove my capabilities. In a way, I am fueled by doubt, and it only strengthens my resolve to show that I can overcome challenges and succeed." For students like Marie, their doctoral journey is much more than just getting a degree. It is a personal quest to prove to themselves and others that they can overcome their learning challenges and see their dreams come true.

Sub-Question One

How do online doctoral students with LD and ADHD describe the influence of their learning disabilities on their academic persistence?

The students' academic persistence was influenced by their learning disabilities in several ways. They often faced difficulties in maintaining focus, managing their time effectively, and balancing work with their studies. These challenges could make it overwhelming to meet

academic deadlines and keep up with the demands of their programs. However, despite these obstacles, the students developed various strategies to cope and persist in their studies. They utilized tools like eBooks, audiobooks, and noise-canceling headphones to better engage with the material. They found that managing their time, such as starting their weeks early and tackling assignments in advance, helped reduce stress. Medication and treatment were also crucial for some in managing symptoms and maintaining focus.

Personal qualities like self-efficacy, motivation, and self-regulation also played a significant role in their ability to continue their education. They built support systems with family, friends, and peers to provide encouragement and understanding. Through a combination of these strategies, support, and their own determination and perseverance, these students were able to navigate their academic challenges and persist toward their educational goals.

Sub-Question Two

What strategies and accommodations are effective in supporting academic persistence for online doctoral students with LD and ADHD?

The participants found ways to succeed by using a number of innovative strategies and helpful adjustments. One strategy used by Lane to balance her work with her studies was using mornings effectively. She also allowed herself to have days off. This method helped her maintain her energy and motivation. A strategy that Wesley found essential was taking regular breaks. He discovered that he worked best in short spurts because he struggled to hyper-focus for long periods of time. He realized that after 15-20 minutes, he needed a short break. This technique of taking frequent rests helped him stay alert and prevent burnout.

Participants like Anthony found using assistive technologies like eBooks and audiobooks a game-changer. These resources let students interact with their study materials in a way that

matches their learning preferences. Being accountable to someone else also greatly influenced their success. James shared how he developed relationships with his professors. These connections helped him stay focused on their goals.

For students who needed some additional assistance to block out distractions, some students like Jolene talked about how she would play white noise to hold her concentration. This strategy helped her to focus on her studies without outside distractions. To help students manage their time effectively, students found strategies to help reduce stress and give them peace of mind. For example, Wesley began his school weeks ahead of schedule, which helped him manage his stress levels. For Anthony, the peace of knowing he had things done ahead of time gave him peace of mind.

A consistent routine was also important for students, like Murph, whose secret to success was getting up early in the morning every single day. It became a crucial part of her daily routine. For others, like Marie, medication played a crucial role in their approach to managing symptoms and staying focused. She explained that managing her symptoms was essential because, without the medication, she probably would have struggled to stay focused.

Sub-Question Three

What role do individual factors, such as motivation, self-efficacy, and self-regulation skills play in the academic persistence of online doctoral students with LD and ADHD?

During their time in online doctoral programs, the students relied on a strong set of personal qualities to help them deal with their specific challenges. These strengths went beyond just smarts or book learning; they were what helped them persist in their studies. Motivation, for instance, acted like an internal coach, spurring them on. Lane said that she was extremely motivated by her own desires, continually setting goals for herself, which motivated her to keep

moving forward. Her determination was self-driven, prompting her to establish and reach her goals.

Self-efficacy was also key for helping the students have confidence in their own abilities. It assured them that they had the necessary skills and qualities to succeed. For example, Kate said that she dedicated a considerable effort towards cultivating a positive inner dialogue, constantly reminding herself that she was capable of completing her program. She continually reassured herself that she had the capacity to work diligently and overcome the challenges caused by her disabilities. For students like Kate, much of their success can be attributed to their internal communication. It helps them sustain the motivation to achieve their goals.

Then there were the self-regulation skills. These are the techniques that students like Marie used to stay focused. She said that she had enough self-discipline to make sure she concentrated on her studies. It allowed her the ability to navigate through tough situations with resolve and control. These personal attributes played a crucial role in the success stories of these students. They were the simple yet powerful traits that sustained their drive, allowing them to prove to themselves and everyone else that they were more than capable of achieving great things.

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of current and former online doctoral candidates with learning disabilities or ADHD to explore the factors that contribute to persistence in online doctoral programs. This chapter presented the following themes: Overcoming challenges and barriers, adaptation and coping strategies, motivation, self-efficacy, support systems, and personal determination and perseverance. These online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD faced many challenges, but they found creative

ways to handle them. They used special technology tools to assist with tasks like writing and reading. Many found that working early in the morning was best because it was quiet, and they could think clearly. They planned their time wisely, starting assignments early to lower stress. But it was not just about schedules and tools. These students knew themselves well. They understood what they needed and made personal plans to succeed. Some found strength in their faith or a deep personal belief, pushing them to keep going, even when it was tough. Others were driven by a need to prove they could do well, despite what others might think. Having friends, family, or teachers to talk to and stay accountable to was important. They knew what surroundings worked best for them, like studying in total quiet or with background noise. They believed strongly in their own abilities and kept pushing forward, no matter what came their way. Each student's story was different, but they all shared a strong determination to do well in their studies, no matter the challenges they faced.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD to explore the factors that contributed to persistence in online doctoral programs. A summary of the data presented in chapter four is included in this chapter. This will be followed by implications for practice, theoretical and empirical implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

Discussion

This section discusses the study's findings based on the developed themes and associates the findings with the literature. The interpretation of findings summarizes the themes resulting from the data and includes my interpretations.

Interpretation of Findings

The interpretation of findings begins with a summary of the study's thematic findings discussed above in chapter four: Overcoming Challenges and Barriers, Adaptation and Coping Strategies, Motivation, Self-Efficacy, Support Systems, and Personal Determination and Perseverance. The triangulated evidence from discussion board prompts, individual interviews, and focus groups supported the interpretations.

Summary of Thematic Findings

The six themes and 23 sub-themes were developed to answer the three sub-questions: (1) How do online doctoral students with LD and ADHD describe the influence of their learning disabilities on their academic persistence? (2) What strategies and accommodations are effective in supporting academic persistence for online doctoral students with LD and ADHD? (3) What

roles do individual factors, such as motivation, self-efficacy, and self-regulation skills play in the academic persistence of online doctoral students with LD and ADHD?

Six themes emerged that described the factors that contributed to persistence in online doctoral programs for students with learning disabilities and ADHD: Overcoming Challenges and Barriers, Adaptation and Coping Strategies, Motivation, Self-Efficacy, Support Systems, and Personal Determination and Perseverance.

For Overcoming Challenges and Barriers there were eight sub-themes: Balancing Work and Studies, Setting Aside Time for Breaks, External Stressors, Using eBooks and Audiobooks, Use of Mornings for Effective Work, Having Accountability Partners, Using Noise-Canceling Headphones, and Audio-Video Speed Adjustments. For Adaptation & Coping Strategies there were four sub-themes: Use of Technology, Time Management, Routine and Structure, and Medication and Treatment.

For Motivation, three sub-themes emerged: Internal Motivation, Rewards for Meeting Deadlines, and Personal Faith. For Self-Efficacy, three sub-themes emerged: Self-Awareness, Positive Inner Dialogue, and Overcoming Personal Hurdles. For Support Systems, there were three sub-themes: Family Support, Community Support, and Peer Support. For Personal Determination and Perseverance, there were four sub-themes: Self-Awareness, Goal Setting, Spiritual Calling, and Desire to Prove Themselves.

Breakdown of Themes

Overcoming Challenges and Barriers. The most significant factor that contributed to the participants' persistence in their online doctoral programs was their ability to overcome challenges and barriers. Masten's (2001) work on resilience in development explains how

individuals can overcome adversity through natural processes of adaptation, which is critical for academic persistence.

These online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD often faced a challenging journey, trying to manage both their work and academic duties. Balancing work and academic tasks was a significant challenge (Reyes et al., 2023). Their learning disabilities or ADHD made the demands of professional life and academic studies even more challenging. Yet these students found effective strategies to handle this balance. For instance, several participants found that the early hours of the morning were a quiet and focused time, perfect for academic work. Taking breaks was also a key strategy for some of these students. By setting aside specific times to rest and recharge, they ensured that they remained focused and productive when they returned to their studies.

External challenges, whether they were personal issues or other factors, proved to be difficult at times. However, these students developed strong coping strategies to get through these difficult moments. The rise of digital tools was a great help for these students. eBooks and audiobooks offered new ways to access information that suited their needs (Pittaway & Malomo, 2021). The ability to adjust the speed of audio or video materials meant they could control their learning pace, making sure they understood the material.

Having someone to be accountable to was also a great support. Whether it was fellow students, teachers, or family members, these relationships provided the support and motivation they needed to keep going. While the online doctoral programs for these students with learning disabilities or ADHD was filled with challenges, it was also filled with stories of determination, adaptability, and academic success.

Adaption and Coping Strategies. Adaptation and coping strategies were another important factor that contributed to persistence for these online doctoral students. Many of these students had found success by developing adaptation and coping strategies tailored to their unique needs. Their experiences highlight the importance of resilience, adaptability, and the power of understanding one's own needs.

One factor that contributed to the students success was the use of assistive technology. Assistive technology has greatly simplified and enabled tasks for people with disabilities by helping them work around their academic challenges. For over 40 years, these technologies have been evolving and making significant contributions to education (Thapliyal & Ahuja, 2023). Technology provided these students with tools specifically designed to address their challenges, enabling them to excel in their studies. For example, tools in word processing software helped refine their work, ensuring they produced quality assignments. The role of technological innovation in supporting inclusive education cannot be overstated.

Effective time management was another essential skill for these students. This approach was instrumental in their academic persistence. By being proactive and planning ahead, they could reduce stress and ensure they met the demands of their academic program. Additionally, establishing a routine and structure proved to be beneficial. A consistent schedule provided a sense of stability, allowing students to manage their time and tasks more effectively. For many, this structured approach was key to their academic success, providing a predictable framework that supported their studies.

For some students, medication and treatment were crucial in managing their symptoms. With the right medical support, they could navigate the challenges of their doctoral programs and achieve academic success. Ensuring that symptoms were well-managed could make a significant

difference in the academic success of students with learning disabilities or ADHD. While challenges were unavoidable, with the right strategies and support, these online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD proved that they could succeed. Their stories are a testament to the power of adaptation, coping strategies, and the importance of understanding and addressing individual needs.

Motivation. Another important factor that contributed to these students' persistence in their online doctoral programs was motivation. As Morina (2019) concluded, students with learning disabilities can be extremely motivated. For these individuals, this internal drive went beyond ambition; it involved resilience, self-awareness, and a dedicated commitment to achieve their personal goals. These students encountered many challenges, yet their determination to achieve, combined with positive reinforcement and the desire to inspire others, gave them the drive to persist. Their experiences highlight the value of being accountable to a community, setting definitive goals, and staying resilient.

An important part of this motivation was internal. These participants often had a strong inner drive and commitment that helped them to overcome hurdles. This went beyond simple ambition to include resilience, self-awareness, and a dedication to reaching their goals. This inner motivation stood as evidence of the strength and resolve found in these students. Rewards and the excitement of meeting deadlines also served as motivators. By using a system of rewards and careful time management, they pursued their academic goals.

Personal faith provided a source of strength and endurance for some of the participants. Their spiritual beliefs gave them a sense of purpose and direction, helping them face academic hurdles. This spiritual connection provided comfort and motivation, strengthening their

dedication to their studies. Whether through an internal drive, the pursuit of rewards and meeting challenges, or spiritual support, motivation was key to these students' academic persistence.

Self-Efficacy. Another key interpretation was the crucial role self-efficacy played in the participants' academic persistence. According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy influences the choices people make, the effort they put into activities, their persistence in the face of difficulties, and their resilience to adversity. These students, faced with distinct challenges, held a strong belief in their capabilities, which drove them toward achieving their academic goals. This confidence allowed them to actively participate in their coursework, seek the support they needed, and use strategies that worked for their individual needs. It was not only about overcoming difficulties; it was also about having the assurance to take on learning opportunities, the resilience to bounce back from setbacks, and the determination to keep going. Believing in themselves and their inner strength was just as important as their academic skills for these students.

Self-awareness greatly affected these students' educational paths. Recognizing their own strengths and weaknesses helped them understand and accept their unique ways of learning. This self-awareness led them to create successful strategies and remain resilient when facing academic challenges. Additionally, keeping a positive internal conversation was another key to their success. By encouraging themselves, these students found the strength to get past their academic barriers.

Personal challenges became powerful motivators for these students persisting in their online doctoral programs. Overcoming these personal challenges not only brought a sense of achievement but also strengthened their belief in their own abilities. Self-efficacy, self-awareness, a positive internal dialogue, and the motivation to overcome personal challenges were

crucial for these online doctoral students. Their experiences highlight the significance of inner strength, determination, and a positive self-image in reaching academic success.

Supportive Systems. Another important factor was the impact of support systems, including family, friends, peers, and mentors. A study by Kuh et al. (2008) highlights how engagement, often facilitated by a supportive environment, positively impacts academic outcomes and persistence in college students. Support systems were crucial for the success of these online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD. These students often faced daunting challenges, but the right kind of support made a significant difference in their ability to keep going and succeed.

Support from family was a key element for many of these students. The constant encouragement and firm belief from family members provided a strong foundation, enabling students to tackle the unique challenges of their studies. The sense of community also played an important role in helping these students persist in their studies. Being part of a community gave them a feeling of belonging and shared understanding. The knowledge that they were part of a larger group, sharing both the difficulties and the successes, often motivated students to remain focused and resilient.

Peer support was another key factor that contributed to the students' success. The friendship and encouragement from peers, who often faced similar challenges, were invaluable. The experiences of these participants were filled with challenges, but the support from family, community, and peers provided them with the necessary strength to overcome obstacles and reach their academic goals. These students' experiences highlight the significant impact that support systems have in helping students with learning disabilities and ADHD persist in their online doctoral programs.

Personal Determination and Perseverance. A final key factor was the critical role of personal determination and perseverance in these students' academic pursuits. Tinto (1993) suggested that students' personal commitment to their educational goals and determination to achieve them are critical factors in their decision to persist in college. These students had an inner drive that helped them to face and overcome various challenges and to stay focused on their studies.

Being very aware of their own learning styles and needs was key to their success. This self-awareness allowed them to create strategies that played to their strengths, which helped them to be confident and resilient. Setting clear goals was also important for these students. Breaking their studies into smaller, more manageable parts, helped them to keep track of their progress and stay motivated. For some students, their spiritual beliefs provided additional motivation. They drew strength and determination from their faith, which helped them to keep going even when faced with tough challenges.

The desire to prove others wrong was a strong motivator for some students. They were driven to show that they could succeed despite what others might have said about their abilities. While support from others was helpful, it was the students' own determination, perseverance, and inner drive that were the main reasons for their success in their online doctoral programs. Their experiences show the incredible things that can be achieved through personal strength and the will to overcome obstacles.

Implications for Practice

The implications of the study results are addressed in the below section. The discussion focuses on potential changes that could improve the online doctoral program experience for

students with learning disabilities or ADHD. Considerations include what is taught, how it is taught, and opportunities for engagement.

Implications for Practice

The experiences of online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD highlight the necessity for adaptive educational practices and support systems tailored to meet their unique needs. These students face a wide variety of challenges, ranging from managing distractions and reading difficulties to balancing work, studies, and personal life. Despite these challenges, their resilience, strategic planning, and personalized learning approaches play a crucial role in their academic persistence.

Leadership should consider the integration of eBooks and audiobooks into their online curriculum, as these digital formats cater to diverse learning preferences and needs. For example, Anthony talked about his struggle with maintaining focus on reading, and switching to audiobooks whenever possible was a substantial game-changer for him. This small, practical adjustment made a noticeable difference in his learning experience. Incorporating these digital formats would allow institutions to provide a more inclusive and adaptable learning environment, ensuring that students with varied learning styles could access and engage with the content more effectively.

Providing students with extended time on quizzes and exams is an essential accommodation that can make a significant difference in their academic success. Students with learning disabilities or ADHD often face unique challenges that can affect their ability to process and recall information at the same pace as their peers. Rick, for instance, shared his experience of benefiting from extended time for assignments and untimed tests and quizzes. This accommodation allowed him to associate certain memories or surroundings with questions,

aiding him in answering them correctly. By granting him the extra time, he was able to process the information more thoroughly and at his own pace, ensuring a deeper understanding and better recall of the material. Rick's story highlights the importance of such accommodations in leveling the playing field for all students, ensuring that they are assessed based on their knowledge and understanding rather than the constraints of time.

Leadership should prioritize the integration of training in self-regulation skills within their academic programs. As highlighted in this study, self-regulation emerged as a critical factor in academic success for students with learning disabilities or ADHD. For instance, Jolene emphasized how her struggles with self-regulation were lessened by external reminders, such as her husband reminding her of her mission, which subsequently strengthened her motivation to persist. Similarly, Lane, who described herself as being goal-oriented, underscored the importance of learning strategies to manage her ADHD. She emphasized the significance of recognizing when to take breaks, suggesting that such self-awareness and regulation were crucial for her emotional well-being and overall persistence in her doctoral program. These insights show the deep impact of self-regulation skills on academic persistence, emphasizing the need for institutions to incorporate training in this area to support and enhance student success.

Leadership must recognize the emotional impact of external stressors on students with learning disabilities or ADHD. Minerva, for instance, faced the loss of her father during her doctoral journey. This personal tragedy, combined with the challenges of her studies, could have easily derailed her progress. However, with determination and support, she persevered. Marie, on the other hand, had the added responsibility of taking care of her father-in-law with dementia. This caregiving role, alongside her academic commitments, required her to juggle multiple responsibilities and manage her time effectively. Both Minerva and Marie's experiences

highlight the importance of recognizing the effect of external stressors on students. Institutions should offer support systems, such as counseling services or flexibility in submission deadlines, to help students navigate personal challenges while pursuing their academic goals. This would ensure that students like Minerva and Marie do not feel isolated or overwhelmed by external pressures and can continue to progress in their doctoral programs.

Leadership should actively promote practices that nurture a positive mindset among students with learning disabilities or ADHD. Drawing from this study, it is evident that maintaining a positive inner dialogue is crucial for overcoming challenges. For example, Daryl described moments of self-doubt, often berating himself with thoughts like "I cannot do this" or "I am so stupid." However, he highlighted the importance of countering these negative thoughts and reminding himself of his capabilities. Marie further reinforced this point. She shared how positive feedback and encouragement from her instructors were instrumental in keeping her motivated, even when faced with personal challenges. These personal accounts from the participants emphasize the importance for educational institutions to recognize and support the cultivation of a positive mindset, as it plays a crucial role in a student's ability to persist and succeed academically.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

Three theoretical and two empirical implications were drawn from this research and are discussed below. Theoretical implications surrounding self-efficacy and motivation, social support, and spiritual engagement play a crucial role in understanding the persistence of students with learning disabilities or ADHD in online doctoral programs. Self-efficacy, rooted in Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory, suggests that individuals' beliefs in their capabilities to execute tasks influence their actions, perseverance, and resilience. When students believe they

can succeed, they are more likely to be motivated and persist in their academic pursuits.

Furthermore, the role of social support, grounded in Vygotsky and Cole's (1978) sociocultural

theory, emphasizes the importance of interpersonal interactions and community in shaping

learning experiences. Students with strong support systems, whether it is peers, family, or

faculty, often feel more grounded and encouraged in their academic journey. Finally, although

less traditionally studied in academic settings, spiritual engagement can help students cope with

academic challenges by offering solace, purpose, and resilience.

Assistive technologies and personalized learning strategies offer tangible tools and

methods to support students with learning disabilities or ADHD. Assistive technologies, such as

text-to-speech tools or focus-enhancing apps, provide students with practical means to navigate

their learning challenges, making content more accessible and manageable. Personalized learning

strategies, grounded in empirical research on differentiated instruction, highlight the importance

of tailoring educational experiences to individual needs. By recognizing and addressing the

unique challenges and strengths of each student, these strategies promote a more inclusive and

effective learning environment, ultimately reinforcing persistence in online doctoral programs.

Theoretical

Theoretical Implications of Self-Efficacy and Motivation: The theoretical implications

of self-efficacy and motivation for online doctoral students with learning disabilities can

significantly extend and enrich Tinto's theory of student persistence. Tinto's (1975) model,

which originally placed heavy emphasis on the integration into the academic and social fabric of

the institution, can be deepened by considering the intrinsic factors of self-efficacy and

motivation that drive student persistence. Self-efficacy can be a critical factor for students with

learning disabilities or ADHD. These students often face unique challenges that can impede their

academic journey. By integrating self-efficacy into Tinto's model, we acknowledge that a student's belief in their capability to complete tasks and overcome challenges is as crucial as institutional support for academic persistence. This belief can motivate students to engage more deeply with their coursework and persist despite obstacles, advancing Tinto's theory by highlighting the importance of internal psychological resources.

Motivation, particularly intrinsic motivation, is another key factor that can be woven into Tinto's theory. For online doctoral students with learning disabilities, intrinsic motivation can fuel their determination to persist in their studies, even when external support systems may be lacking. This can lead to a more refined understanding of Tinto's theory, which would now include the personal passions and internal desires that keep students moving forward. Integrating self-efficacy and motivation into Tinto's model could advance the theory of student persistence that accounts for both the environmental factors of the educational institution and the individual psychological attributes of the students. This expanded theory would better capture the complexity of student persistence, particularly for those with learning disabilities or ADHD, and could inform more effective support strategies within online doctoral programs.

Theoretical Implications of Social Support: Integrating the concept of social support into Tinto's theory of student persistence could significantly advance its application, especially for online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD. Tinto's (1993) model, primarily focused on the physical campus, can be expanded to include the virtual learning environment, where social support manifests differently but remains equally critical. Tinto's theory can be broadened to include virtual forms of social integration that are crucial for online learners. For students with learning disabilities or ADHD, social support takes on additional importance as it

can provide not just a sense of belonging, but also specific resources tailored to their needs, such as technology-assisted learning tools and online community support groups.

The role of interpersonal relationships in academic success can be emphasized more in Tinto's model. Online doctoral students with learning disabilities may rely heavily on social support networks that include family, peers, faculty, and disability services. These networks can offer encouragement, understanding, and concrete assistance with academic tasks, directly affecting persistence and completion rates. Theoretical implications extend to personal development and self-efficacy. Tinto's model could incorporate how social support helps students with learning disabilities develop self-efficacy, which is crucial for overcoming the inherent challenges of doctoral studies. This could address the internal psychological processes that contribute to a student's persistence. Tinto's theory could also advance by recognizing the feedback loops between students and institutions. Social support for students with learning disabilities could encourage institutions to become more proactive in their support, leading to better retention outcomes and creating a more inclusive academic environment.

With the inclusion of social support, Tinto's theory could reconceptualize the reasons students may depart from programs. For online doctoral students with learning disabilities or AHD, the lack of adequate social support could be a primary factor in their decision to leave, rather than the more traditional factors of academic failure or lack of integration into the social fabric of the institution. By recognizing the adaptable nature of social support—ranging from emotional encouragement to academic accommodations—Tinto's theory can be advanced to reflect a more comprehensive understanding of what supports student persistence. It could shift the focus from institutional structures to the quality of interpersonal support networks, which are especially significant in the online learning environment where physical presence is absent.

Theoretical Implications of Spiritual Engagement*:* The theoretical implications of spiritual engagement for online doctoral students with learning disabilities can be understood through the lens of Vincent Tinto's theory of student persistence. Tinto's model originally focused on the social and academic integration of students within educational institutions as key factors influencing their persistence and completion rates (Tinto, 1975). However, when considering spiritual engagement, Tinto's theory could be advanced or expanded. Spiritual engagement introduces a non-traditional support system that may not be accounted for in Tinto's original model. For students with learning disabilities, spirituality or faith-based practices may serve as a form of emotional and psychological support, enhancing their resilience and ability to persist through the unique challenges of a doctoral program.

Spiritual engagement can also strengthen intrinsic motivation and reinforce the commitment to personal academic goals, which Tinto recognizes as vital for persistence. The sense of purpose gained from spiritual beliefs might encourage students to persevere through difficulties, aligning with the theory's emphasis on goal commitment. While Tinto's model emphasizes the importance of integration into the academic community, spiritual engagement could extend this to include integration into spiritual communities, which may be particularly accessible in online environments. This can offer a sense of belonging and a community of support that extends the traditional academic social structures.

Tinto's theory could be advanced by recognizing that spiritual practices may serve as coping mechanisms for the stress associated with doctoral studies, especially for those with learning disabilities or ADHD. The incorporation of spiritual coping strategies into the model could provide a more comprehensive view of what enables student persistence. Furthermore, the original model of student persistence is primarily focused on academic and social experiences.

Spiritual engagement, however, invites a more universal approach to student development, suggesting that personal and spiritual growth is intertwined with academic success, especially for students who may face additional challenges.

Tinto's model predates the widespread adoption of online learning. Spiritual engagement online can represent a form of social and academic integration that is not bound by physical campus interactions. This adaptation acknowledges that online communities and support can be just as critical for persistence in modern educational settings. Finally, the implications of spiritual engagement highlight the need to consider the diverse backgrounds and needs of students. Learning disabilities require accommodations and understanding, and incorporating the role of spirituality can advance Tinto's theory to be more inclusive and applicable to a broader range of students. The inclusion of spiritual engagement within the framework of Tinto's theory of student persistence suggests a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that contribute to the persistence of online doctoral students, particularly those with learning disabilities. This broader perspective could inform the development of support services and retention strategies that acknowledge the full spectrum of student experiences.

Empirical

Empirical Implications of Assistive Technologies: The empirical implications of assistive technologies in the academic journey of online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD are evident in this study. Daryl highlighted the benefits of using the audible review tool in Word, which aided in refining his written work. This tool not only helps him review his writings but also assists in dictation, allowing him to capture precise words and spellings from videos. Marie emphasized the significant impact of online citation generators and templates provided by the university's online library. These tools have streamlined the citation

process, making it more efficient and accurate. Kate mentioned the benefits of assistive tools, stating that they bridged the gap between obtaining a degree and falling short of it. James discussed an app that converted PDFs into audio format, which significantly enhanced his learning experience. Minerva relied on Microsoft Word's voice-to-text feature during late nights, which proved invaluable when she was too exhausted for manual work. These personal accounts from the participants highlight the empirical significance of assistive technologies in enhancing academic performance and making the learning process more accessible and manageable.

Empirical Implications of Personalized Learning Strategies*:* The empirical implications of personalized learning strategies are evident in the experiences of several participants in this study. Daryl, for instance, found strategies such as sitting at the front of the class, recording lectures, and reviewing them with notes to be particularly effective. He also emphasized the importance of asking questions for clarity and using resources like YouTube to understand challenging concepts, such as the 4-MAT writing technique. This approach not only enhanced his understanding but also significantly improved his academic performance. Jolene highlighted the power of making personal connections to the study material. She emphasized the importance of making text-to-world or text-to-self connections, which make the material more relatable and easier to grasp. For her, thinking about how a client could benefit from a particular topic or paper helped establish a connection to the material, making it more meaningful. Lane, on the other hand, expressed satisfaction with her ability to self-motivate, especially given the challenges of ADHD. She found success in using visuals to aid understanding and reaching out to professors for clarification when needed. These personalized strategies highlight the empirical benefits of tailoring learning approaches to individual needs and circumstances.

These theoretical and empirical implications emphasize the varied nature of the academic experiences of online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD. They highlight the importance of a comprehensive understanding that integrates aspects of self-efficacy, motivation, technology, personalized learning strategies, social support, and spiritual engagement. Further research in these areas will not only contribute to the academic literature but also inform practices that can better support the academic persistence for this population of students.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study, while providing valuable insights into the experiences of online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD, was not without its limitations and delimitations. One of the primary limitations of this study was the relatively small sample size. The experiences detailed were those of a limited number of students, which limited the comprehensive representation of the broader population of students with learning disabilities or ADHD enrolled in online doctoral programs. Additionally, the study's scope was confined to a single specific geographic region, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the study predominantly relied on qualitative, self-reported data. While this approach provided in-depth insights into the participants' personal experiences, it also introduced the potential for bias, as the data were subject to the participants' personal perceptions, memory recall, and willingness to share personal information.

Another limitation is that the study captured the experiences of the participants over a short period of time. A longer study, tracking students' experiences throughout their entire doctoral program to graduation, might have revealed additional insights or evolving challenges that this study did not address. While there were four participants who had completed their online doctoral programs, seven were still in their dissertation phase. Additionally, the

demographic diversity of the participants in this study was limited, potentially overlooking the experiences of students from varying backgrounds, ages, ethnicities, or with different types of learning disabilities or ADHD. This limitation restricted the study's applicability to a more diverse population. Finally, only two of the participants in the study utilized formal accommodations, and one was unaware of these services until participating in the study. This aspect limited the study's ability to fully explore the potential impact and effectiveness of formal support systems and accommodations provided by educational institutions.

While the qualitative nature of the study offered rich, detailed personal experiences, it also introduced subjectivity in data interpretation. The findings were interpreted through my own personal lens, and despite efforts to maintain objectivity, personal biases and perspectives could influence the analysis. In recognizing these limitations and delimitations, this study highlights the need for further research. Future studies could benefit from a larger and more diverse sample size, the inclusion of multiple institutions, longer analyses, and an exploration of the experiences of students who utilize formal accommodations. Despite these constraints, the study provides a valuable starting point and opens the door for more extensive research in the field of online education for students with learning disabilities or ADHD.

Recommendations for Future Research

The experiences of online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD, as detailed in this study, provided a rich foundation for future research in this area. Several potential avenues for further exploration have been identified, which could significantly contribute to the academic literature and practical support strategies for this population of students. While the current study highlighted the positive influence of assistive technologies, such as eBooks, audiobooks, and dictation software, further research is needed to explore the range of

technologies available, their effectiveness, and the potential for new innovations in this field. Comparative studies evaluating the effectiveness of different types of assistive technologies could provide valuable insights for institutions and educators.

The importance of a consistent routine was evident in the students' narratives. Future research could dive deeper into the psychology behind this need for structure, exploring how different types of routines impact academic success and mental health for students with learning disabilities or ADHD. Additionally, some students relied on medication and other treatments to manage their symptoms. Studies assessing the long-term effects of these interventions, as well as research into alternative therapies, could be beneficial. Furthermore, studies could explore how these treatments interact with other coping strategies and academic supports.

The role of accountability partners and support networks was a recurring theme in the narratives. Further research could investigate the optimal characteristics of these support systems and how institutions could facilitate their formation and maintenance. Additionally, the impact of these support systems on academic outcomes and student well-being could be assessed. Also, many students described the challenge of juggling academic responsibilities with work and other commitments. Research into time management strategies, flexible learning options, and institutional supports for students balancing work and study could provide important insights.

For some students, personal faith appeared to play a significant role in their resilience and academic persistence. Qualitative studies exploring the nature of this relationship, the variety of spiritual experiences among students, and the potential for supportive interventions could add a valuable element to the literature. Additionally, the concepts of self-efficacy and goal setting emerged as crucial factors in the students' experiences. Future research could explore these

concepts in more depth, potentially developing interventions to enhance self-efficacy and effective goal-setting strategies among students with learning disabilities or ADHD.

These recommendations for future research highlight the varied experiences of online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD. By pursuing these recommendations, researchers can contribute to a deeper understanding and more effective support strategies, ultimately enhancing the educational experiences and outcomes for this student population.

Conclusion

The study explored the lived experiences of online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD to determine the factors that contributed to persistence in online doctoral programs. The study revealed a group of individuals whose resilience, adaptability, and innovation were key components in their academic success. These students, navigating challenging academic demands and built-in learning obstacles, showcased an extraordinary ability to harness both intrinsic and extrinsic resources. Their proactive approach to time management, as expressed by Wesley's forward planning, underscores the importance of preparation in eliminating potential stressors. Moreover, the study showed the lengths to which these students go to create conducive learning environments. Jolene's strategy of seeking silence and employing white noise is a testament to their commitment to overcoming sensory overloads and distractions.

Challenges, both academic and personal, were not in short supply. Yet, the narrative of resilience, as illustrated by Minerva's journey through personal loss during a crucial academic phase, speaks volumes about the invincible spirit of these students. Their embrace of assistive technologies not only highlights their adaptability but also the transformative role of technological advancements in leveling the academic playing field. Additionally, motivation

emerged as a force, driven both by internal ambitions and external support systems. The intrinsic drive, as seen in Lane's goal-oriented approach, was complemented by the unwavering support from families and peers, reinforcing the notion that academic journeys are seldom solitary ventures.

While the study sheds light on the wide variety of strategies used by these students, it also raises important questions about the broader academic community. The limited use of formal accommodations prompts reflections on their accessibility and the potential stigma associated with them. This research serves as a reminder of the boundless potential that lies within every individual. With the right strategies, support systems, and tools, even the most intimidating challenges can be overcome. The narratives of these online doctoral students with learning disabilities or ADHD are not just stories of academic persistence; they are testaments to the human spirit's ability to adapt, overcome, and achieve any dream God places in their hearts.

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Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

September 6, 2023

Jerry Pitts
Alexandra Barnett

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY23-24-144 A Phenomenological Study Exploring the Factors That Contribute to Persistence in Online Doctoral Programs for_Students With Learning Disabilities or ADHD

Dear Jerry Pitts, Alexandra Barnett,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or

For a PDF of your exemption letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. Your information sheet and final versions of your study documents can also be found on the same page under the Attachments tab.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at ▨▨▨

Sincerely,
▨▨▨

Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B: Information Sheet

Title of the Project: A Phenomenological Study Exploring the Factors that Contribute to Persistence in Online Doctoral Programs for Students with Learning Disabilities or ADHD

Principal Investigator: Jerry Pitts, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To be eligible for participation in this study, candidates must meet the following criteria:

1. Be at least 18 years old.
2. Have completed an online doctoral program within the last two years or made it to their online doctoral program's dissertation phase and be currently enrolled.
3. Have received a formal diagnosis of a learning disability or ADHD.

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 primary purpose of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences, challenges, and strategies of individuals with learning disabilities and ADHD who have successfully completed an online doctoral program or have reached the dissertation phase and are currently enrolled. By exploring their unique perspectives, I aim to identify the factors that contribute to their persistence and success in these programs. The insights gained from this study will help inform online educators, administrators, and policymakers in creating supportive and inclusive environments for students with learning disabilities and ADHD.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to participate in the following:

1. **Online Discussion Board:** Participate in an asynchronous online discussion board that will be conducted over a two-week period. This platform will allow you to share your experiences, challenges, and strategies related to persistence in online doctoral programs. A prompt will be provided and participants with provide an initial post of 250-500 words, which will take approximately 45 minutes to complete. Learners will then respond to a minimum of two of their peers by asking questions, providing feedback, or sharing related experiences. The responses will take approximately 10 minutes to complete. Participants' identities will be kept confidential by using fictitious email addresses to log

in to the online discussion board. The fictitious Gmail email addresses will be provided to participants by me once the study begins.

2. **Online Personal Interview:** Engage in a one-on-one audio-recorded online interview with me. This interview will be conducted via Microsoft Teams, lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes. During the interview, you will have the chance to provide in-depth insights into your experiences, personal journey, and the factors that have contributed to your persistence.

3. **Online Focus Group:** Participate in an audio-recorded online focus group discussion via Microsoft Teams lasting 60 to 90 minutes with a small group of about five individuals who share similar experiences. The focus group will provide an opportunity to exchange ideas, compare experiences, and explore common themes related to persistence in online doctoral programs for individuals with learning disabilities and ADHD. Participants' identities will be kept confidential by using fictitious usernames to log in to the online focus group. Participants will create their own username when they log in.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

By participating in this study, you will have the opportunity to share your unique insights and experiences, which can contribute to enhancing the understanding of the factors that promote persistence and success for individuals with learning disabilities or ADHD in online doctoral programs.

Benefits to society include contribution to the development of targeted interventions, support strategies, and program improvements, benefiting future students facing similar challenges.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

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

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.

- Interviews and focus groups will be recorded via Microsoft Teams and transcribed by me using Microsoft Excel. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Is study participation voluntary?

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

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

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

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Jerry Pitts. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Alexandra Barnett, at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮.

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.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Appendix C: Online Discussion Board Prompts

Topic: Factors Influencing Academic Persistence in Online Doctoral Students with Learning Disabilities and ADHD

Background: This qualitative research study aims to investigate the factors that contribute to academic persistence in online doctoral programs for students with learning disabilities (LD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Your insights will provide valuable perspectives on the challenges and strategies related to academic persistence in this specific population.

Prompt: Please reflect on your experiences as an online doctoral student with LD or ADHD, and share your perspectives on the following questions:

1. What personal factors have influenced your persistence in your online doctoral program? Consider aspects such as motivation, self-efficacy, self-regulation skills, or other relevant factors. How have these factors impacted your ability to persist in your studies despite the challenges associated with LD or ADHD?

2. Based on your experiences or observations, what external factors, such as support systems, accommodations, or resources, have contributed to your academic persistence as an online doctoral student with LD and/or ADHD? Are there any specific strategies, interventions, or resources that you have found effective in supporting your persistence? Please provide examples or instances where these factors or strategies have been particularly influential.

Guidelines:

- Your initial post should be between 250-500 words in length.

- Share your experiences and insights in a clear and concise manner, focusing on the factors that have influenced your academic persistence.

- Feel free to draw on specific examples or situations from your online doctoral journey to illustrate your points.

- Respectfully engage with a minimum of two of your peers by asking questions, providing feedback, or sharing related experiences.

Please note that your participation in this discussion is voluntary, and all information you provide will be treated with strict confidentiality. Your responses will be used solely for research purposes and will be anonymized in the final study report.

Appendix D: Individual Interview Questions

1. Can you share a little bit about your background and what motivated you to participate in this research study? Ice Breaker

2. In your experience as an online doctoral student with LD or ADHD, what personal factors have played a significant role in your academic persistence? CRQ

3. How would you describe any particular strengths or attributes that have helped you overcome challenges and persist in your studies despite the presence of LD or ADHD? CRQ

4. In your opinion, how do external factors, such as support systems, accommodations, and resources provided by the university, contribute to the academic persistence of online doctoral students with LD or ADHD? CRQ

5. How would you describe any challenges have you encountered that are related to your LD or ADHD, and how have they influenced your ability to persist in your studies? SQ1

6. In your experience, how do the symptoms of LD or ADHD affect your engagement and focus in the online learning environment and how have these factors influenced your academic persistence? SQ1

7. From your perspective, how do the unique demands of online doctoral programs interact with the challenges posed by LD and ADHD? SQ1

8. Based on your experience as an online doctoral student with LD or ADHD, what strategies or accommodations have you found to be most effective in supporting your academic persistence and how have these strategies or accommodations positively impacted your ability to persist in your studies? SQ2

9. How do you feel assistive technologies and tools have affected your academic persistence? SQ2

10. Please share any specific instances where the use of assistive technology or tools has helped you overcome challenges due to your LD or ADHD. SQ2

11. How would you describe your personal experiences with motivation in your online doctoral program? SQ3

12. Please share some specific strategies you have used to stay motivated in your studies despite the challenges associated with LD and ADHD. SQ3

13. How do you perceive your self-efficacy in relation to your academic abilities and success in your online doctoral program? SQ3

Appendix E: Focus Group Questions

1. What inspired you to pursue your online doctoral degree, and how has the journey been for you so far? Ice breaker

2. What are some specific challenges you have personally faced that affected your academic persistence? CRQ

3. Based on your personal experience, which factors have been particularly influential in supporting your academic persistence? CRQ

4. From your own experiences, how does having LD or ADHD affect your academic persistence? SQ1

5. What specific challenges have you personally encountered in maintaining your motivation, engagement, and focus in an online learning environment due to your LD or ADHD? SQ1

6. Can you share any specific examples or success stories from your own experience where the implementation of certain strategies or accommodations has helped you? SQ2

7. Based on your own experiences, how do individual factors such as motivation, self-efficacy, and self-regulation skills contribute to your academic persistence as an online doctoral student with LD or ADHD? SQ3

8. From your personal perspective, what strategies or interventions do you believe could enhance your motivation, self-efficacy, and self-regulation skills, thereby promoting your academic persistence as an online doctoral student with LD or ADHD? SQ3

Appendix F: Social Media Recruitment Message

📢 **Join My Research Study!** 🎓
I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education at Liberty University.

🔍 **Study Purpose:**
My qualitative dissertation study aims to delve into the experiences, challenges, and strategies of individuals with learning disabilities and ADHD who have excelled in online doctoral programs. By understanding your unique perspective, I hope to identify the key factors that contribute to your persistence and success. The valuable insights gained from this study will inform educators, administrators, and policymakers in creating inclusive and supportive environments for students like you.

🎯 **Participant Criteria:**
To participate, you must:
✅ Be at least 18 years old.
✅ Have completed an online doctoral program within the last two years or be currently enrolled in the dissertation phase of their online doctoral program.
✅ Have a formal diagnosis of a learning disability or ADHD.

🔒 **Study Procedures:**

If you choose to participate, you will:

1️⃣ Engage in an online discussion board to share your experiences, challenges, and strategies related to persistence in online doctoral programs. The online discussion board assignments will take place over a two-week period.

2️⃣ Take part in a secure one-on-one online audio-recorded interview lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

3️⃣ Join an online audio-recorded focus group lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes with a small group of individuals who share similar experiences.

📞 **Contact Information:**
If you meet the criteria and are interested or if you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me:
✉ Email: ██████████
☎ Phone: ██████████