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# Grounded theory approach to understanding student perceptions of asynchronous high school learning environments

Paige N. Morabito  
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Paige Morabito

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Walden University  
2010

ABSTRACT

Grounded Theory Approach to Understanding Student Perceptions of Asynchronous  
High School Learning Environments

by

Paige N. Morabito

B.A., Stetson University, 1990  
M.Ed., University of South Florida, 1999

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Education  
Teacher Leadership

Walden University  
November 2010

## ABSTRACT

Although the development of cyber high schools over the last 10 years has increased, no data are reported in the literature regarding the factors that have contributed to the increased enrollment or student perceptions of success. The purpose of this grounded theory study was to develop a theory describing why students currently enrolled in an online high school program chose an asynchronous setting and their subsequent perceptions of success. Critical pedagogy, as a basis of transformational experiences through education, served as the conceptual framework. An attitudinal survey, provided as a limited data set by the high school, was used to identify preliminary generative themes responding to the research questions. Based on the preliminary themes, student interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached. Data were analyzed using the constant comparative coding method to address the research questions. Interviews and surveys provided the necessary data for triangulation through multiple achievement based comparison groups, enabling cross-checking between theoretical constructs and specific criterion identified during data analysis. Findings suggested these students migrated to an asynchronous high school to address the perceived detrimental effects as identified in one of the four generative themes: traditional classroom setting, inflexible scheduling, needing a more individualized curriculum, or issues related to school culture. Moreover, findings indicated that students' perception of success appear to have increased as a result of their migration to an online setting. The findings from this study may help teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators better advise their students in identifying the best learning environment, enabling students to enhance their own learning and potentially experience an increased perception of success.



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## DEDICATION

As a high school student I enjoyed challenging the way it was supposed to be done, whatever “it” was; therefore I was drawn to the students in this study as they too found their own way to achieve success. This document is dedicated to the students who openly shared their opinions, future students who will refuse to be an empty vessel waiting to be filled, and all those who encouraged me to find the answers to my questions. My parents, Jim and Judie Bradley, supported me with all of their love, time, energy, and resources no matter how irritable I became in this process or how often I threatened to quit. My in-laws, Don and Brenda Morabito, understood why I could not attend a number of family functions on those days I had to transcribe, review, or rewrite. Our friends forgave a number of unreturned phone calls and then graciously allowed me to drop by and unwind whenever my schedule would allow. My son Bradley brought me coffee whenever I needed a few more hours of focus and repeatedly told me he was sorry I had to work so hard but that he was really proud of me. My daughter Carrigan hugged me when I looked frustrated, understood why mommy could not tuck her into bed or answer her questions right this minute, and continually revised my due date to finish Chapter 5. More than any other this is dedicated to my husband Don. He kept our family fed, ensured the children made it to practice and home, and actually listened as I reasoned through the analysis out loud. Without his support as an intellectual sounding board I would not have developed this theory, without his love I would have surely given in and given up long ago.



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After a few weeks in my first research course Dr. Nathan Long introduced me to the concept of generative themes as described by Paulo Freire and my world shifted. Critical pedagogy was a new concept to me and quickly began to frame my studies and my paradigms. Dr. Long assured me that he would push me well beyond my limits, which he did. He also provided unwavering support and dedication to my efforts, more than I expected, deserved, or will ever be able to express the extent of my gratitude. I can even forgive his horrible April Fool's joke of 2009. Dr. Esmail was very responsive whenever needed, even though I seemed to need his attention at the most inconvenient times, like the birth of not just one but two of his children. Dr. Stefani Hite agreed to be my external auditor and shared her valuable insights. My mother and Aunt Coco read every word of Chapter 5 aloud one morning to assist with editing; they were my first practice for my defense. Last I owe endless thanks to my husband Don who helped me think out loud as we drove through, flew over, or walked around New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Missouri, Washington DC, Austin, Phoenix, California, the Abaco Islands, Germany, and Italy during the course of writing this study.

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## SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

### Background of the Study

From the initial opening of the first two charter schools in 1992, the trend has continued to grow in number of schools, as well as the number of states with charter legislation (R.P.P., 2000). Similarly, the development of cyber high schools over the last 10 years increased the opportunity for students to choose an asynchronous learning environment for their secondary education. Hassel and Terrell (2004) reported that at least 90 cyber charter schools were in operation in 2004. The greatest concentration was found in Arizona, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. Many of these cyber schools were born out of the same rationale given for developing charter schools. “Nearly two-thirds of newly created charter schools seek to realize an alternative vision of schooling, and an additional one-quarter of newly created schools were founded primarily to serve a special target population of students” (R.P.P. International, 2000, p. 76).

Based upon a review of professional literature, research describing why secondary students would choose to attend an online school is limited. While the literature reviewing the benefits at the collegiate level has given some insight into asynchronous learning, the data are not necessarily applicable to the pedagogical approach or the developmental needs of high school students. To better understand what benefits the asynchronous environment may provide for high school students, research had to be conducted at the secondary level. Recent research at the collegiate level provided a structural basis for research of the asynchronous environment at the secondary level.



There are many different areas that researchers may need to address before any or all of the benefits of an asynchronous environment at the high school level can be uncovered. The primary area of inquiry for this study focused on why students in Pennsylvania are choosing this option in rising numbers. Using students' reported motivation for currently attending a cyber school, generative themes were identified. They are generative "because (however they are comprehended and whatever action they may evoke) they contain the possibility of unfolding into again as many themes, which in their turn call for new tasks to be fulfilled" (Freire, 2005, p. 102). I identified the themes through a structured interview process. A thorough analysis of an existing archived student survey enabled me to begin the identification of preliminary themes in order to create appropriate interview questions necessary to generate the data for the identification of emergent themes that address the research questions.

In addition to identifying students' reason for choosing an online school, the survey also identified their perception of success in the online environment. Due to the lack of research relating to this area of study, it was not known whether students would identify their perceptions of success as social success, academic success, or a combination of both within their responses. With both definitions of success included in the data, I will describe the generative themes found within the stated reason for choosing an online high school program and the student's perception of success in an asynchronous secondary setting.

## Problem Statement

In the current literature there are researchers who have indicated that students, particularly those within a marginalized population, experience systemic discrimination and harassment in a traditional school setting. According to the 2005 FBI report on hate crimes across the nation, the final statistics indicated that hate crimes are occurring in college and school settings as well as near the home. The report stated,

54.7 percent were motivated by a racial bias, 17.1 percent were triggered by a religious bias, 14.2 percent were motivated by a sexual-orientation bias, and 13.2 percent of the incidents were motivated by an ethnic/national origin bias. The majority (30 percent) of hate crime incidents in 2005 occurred in or near residences or homes; 13.5 percent at colleges or schools. (FBI, 2005, para. 1)

The report stated that these are just the reported crimes; because less physical assaults may never be reported, verbal and emotional abuses are likely not included in these figures (FBI, 2005). Students need the opportunity to find educational environments that allow them to participate in their education free from harassment. Several students currently attending the asynchronous school used for this study indicated, through anecdotal information, that they chose an asynchronous school due to harassment in their former schools. These students indicated they chose an asynchronous school in hopes of achieving academic success through the anonymity of cyber learning.

The problem addressed in the current study is that there is insufficient documentation in the literature addressing which populations predominantly choose to obtain their secondary schooling online and their motivation for attendance. If the data from this study provide insight into a possible relationship between a student's perception of success in an asynchronous school and the motivation for choosing an asynchronous

educational setting, this information may provide an indication of which populations are best served in an asynchronous environment. The description of such relationships, if there are any, may help teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators direct students to asynchronous programs when it is an appropriate educational setting. If no relationships are identified, then the development of theory based upon students' motivation to attend and subsequent perceptions' of success may allow for further research to address this area more specifically. An identification of the populations that are appropriate for an online learning environment could also provide the educational community with the data necessary to determine which students are not currently represented in an online learning environment or are underrepresented for future research. Because the process of grounded theory has an "emphasis on inductive strategies of theory development in contrast to theory generated by logical deduction from a priori assumptions" (Patton, 2002, p. 125), the data uncovered emergent themes not specifically identified at the inception of the study.

### Research Questions

The research questions that served as the basis for this study focused on the lived experiences of students currently attending an online high school. My intent was not to provide evidence that asynchronous learning has beneficial effects for every student but rather to describe the reported motivations given by students for attending and their perceptions of success within the environment. The research questions and subquestions guided the process of gathering the data, thus generating information to identify emergent themes that elucidate relationships between the stated reasons for attending an online

high school and subsequent perceptions of success. These connections may provide the basis for further research to determine which reported motivations might be indicative of the populations for whom it is an appropriate method of instructional delivery. The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1. Why are students from across the commonwealth of Pennsylvania choosing to attend an online high school?

a. What factors from their prior setting do students identify as having been detrimental to their learning?

b. What aspects of learning online did students believe would be more satisfying as compared to their prior setting?

2. How do students currently attending an online high school program describe their perceived success in the asynchronous setting?

a. How do the students define success and to what degree do they perceive their academic achievement and social interactions contributing to their success?

#### Purpose of the Study

A grounded theory approach using critical pedagogy as the conceptual framework provided the structure necessary to identify generative themes in the motivations reported by students currently attending an online high school. In addition, the data elucidated relationships between themes and students' perception of success. A critical pedagogy framework served as a possible basis to describe generative themes that helped me develop a theory based on a need for educational settings that allow students to actively participate in the educational process (Creswell, 2007). Although it is not necessary to

frame a grounded theory study with a theoretical lens in the initial design, critical pedagogy provided a perspective in my approach, as well as in the process of analysis. The framework guided the development of categories in either the similarity of themes to those of critical pedagogy or as a contrast. Hatch (2002) described the need for a conceptual basis as “substantive theoretical grounding is necessary during the design phase, but that does not preclude the importance of continuing to explore alternative theoretical explanations as the study progresses and reports are written” (p. 40).

Identification of the stated motivations for attending an asynchronous school, as described by students in an archived self-report student survey, occurred in the first phase. Within the school, a student support manager was responsible for creating and delivering surveys to gather student feedback and customer service ratings. Surveys were completed anonymously and included no student identification. I used the constant comparative method to analyze the information within this limited data set (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The surveys provided the data for the preliminary identification of emergent themes and guided the development of the interview questions. In their discussion of the best methods for researching online learning, Goldman, Crosby, Swan, and Shea (2005) described the need for thick, rich description:

We propose that to understand the range of human experience in ALNs, [asynchronous learning networks] a full range of methods also needs to be employed . . . to fully understand teaching and learning in technology-based environments, researchers need to explore how learners and teachers design emerging learning cultures by layering a variety of perspectives to reach conclusions. Geertz (1973) would say that layering the thick description improves the validity of conclusions. (p. 104)

Thick description, as described by Geertz (1973) and Goldman et al., cannot come from a single survey, even if participants have the opportunity to expand their responses beyond Likert-type questions. Individual interviews are necessary to gain the depth and breadth of information necessary for a grounded theory study.

As a primary tenet of grounded theory, the researcher is “the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, and the mode of inquiry is inductive” (Merriam, 2002, p. 142). The second phase of the present study included individual interviews with students in an open-ended, structured format. An initial group of students who volunteered to participate made up a convenience sample. After initial open coding, I then returned to the field for further interviews and used theoretical sampling to ensure that participants were able to provide responses that focused on the constructs being studied as I moved toward data saturation. Saumure and Given (2008) listed three primary strategies that have been established to achieve saturation in qualitative studies: using a cohesive sample, employing theoretical sampling, and engaging in sustained field research. In their review of these strategies, Saumure and Given focused on choosing the sample appropriately for the study as well as acknowledging negative cases, which “provide salient evidence of where gaps may exist in the developing theory, illustrating whether saturation has or has not been achieved” (p. 196). Specific timelines necessary for achieving data saturation are not noted, but a sample size of 15 to 20 is listed as “appropriate for saturation of themes during analysis; however, the sample size will vary depending on the context and content under study” (p. 195).

As a part of the analysis in the current study, data from interviews were compared based on criterion sampling, grouping participant responses in three different categories of academic achievement. The first priority was to include those with information-rich cases (Patton, 1990, p. 169). To protect participants, student achievement was identified only as Category 1, Category 2, and Category 3, in an effort to remove any association, positive or negative, that a student or anyone reviewing the final study might attach to a specific level of achievement in an effort. The creation of this additional comparison group provided another set of data for “within-method triangulation” (Jick, 1979, p. 603). The use of the achievement groups was not intended to imply that the setting had any effect on achievement, but to minimize bias in forming the groups. In section 3, I will describe the methodology, data collection, and analysis in further detail.

#### Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to develop a theory describing why students currently enrolled in an online high school program in Pennsylvania chose an asynchronous setting, their perception of success in the online setting, and any relationship between generative themes and students’ perception of success. Although traditional public schools in Pennsylvania offer a multitude of course options and continued improvement on state required measurements (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2007), students continue to enroll in online schools across the commonwealth. Identifying students’ motivation to attend an asynchronous school may help describe generative themes that elucidate why some students’ perception of success increase in an online environment. Student perception of success may be equally, if not more, important

than the traditional measurement of academic achievement. Watkins and Kaufman (2003) made the connection between the need for data on both achievement and student perception, particularly for alternative educational settings:

If any educational institution continues to focus on achieving results only at Micro and Macro levels (at best), it will eventually lose out to competitors whose mission is to give learners the skills and knowledge they require to attain long-term success and a high quality of life. (p. 514)

Identification of generative themes within the reported data may provide information for future research to determine if students who fell within specific themes perceived themselves as more successful than those with similar motivations in a traditional setting.

### Conceptual Framework

To ensure that a study remains focused on generating theory, the design must include a conceptual framework that “places it in a frame of reference for the researcher and the reader” (Hatch, 2002, p. 41). Several students currently enrolled in the asynchronous school who participated in the current study indicated they felt alienated by their peers or teachers in a traditional setting. High school may be portrayed in popular culture as, overall, a positive social and educational experience; but Giroux (1983) illustrated that critical social frameworks exist for many students who do not perceive their high school experience as positive. Giroux argued that “schools are political sites” (p. 46) and create their own “discourse, meaning, and subjectivities” (p. 46). The alternative setting of online learning may help reduce the inequalities reproduced in a traditional setting through the “unstated norms, values, and beliefs that are transmitted to learners through the underlying structure of meaning in both the formal content as well as the social relations of school and classroom life” (Giroux & Renna, 1979, p. 22). Kanpol



(1999) defined critical pedagogy as “the means and methods that test and hope to change the structures of schools that allow inequalities and social injustices” (p. 27). Critical pedagogy was used as the conceptual framework for this study because it brings to light the need for some students to find alternative educational settings where they do not feel restrained by the social constraints they might experience in a traditional classroom setting. “Critical pedagogy seeks to unoppress the oppressed and unite people in a shared language of critique, struggle, and hope to end various forms of human suffering” (Kanpol, 1999, p. 27).

Student success in an asynchronous school is largely dependent upon the ability of the teacher to relinquish a traditional role and learn to become a participant in an electronic educational dialogue with students rather than using a banking method of education. The banking method uses a process described as follows: “Instead of communication, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize and repeat. This is the ‘banking’ concept of education” (Freire, 2005, p. 72). The banking method of instructional delivery includes the cultural perspective of the teacher, whereas in an asynchronous school, students can develop their own generative themes that are a part of their own culture as they participate in an educational dialogue with the teacher. The theory of critical pedagogy describes the liberatory effect of appropriate education and may provide the basis to identify the generative themes reported as a cause for leaving a traditional school setting (Freire, 2005).

In his response during an interview, Giroux (n.d.) pointed out that students must have access to an appropriate educational setting and the ability to create a cultural connection to their learning to find the liberatory nature of education:

I am suggesting here that educators provide the conditions for students to recognize that the relationship between knowledge and power can be emancipatory, that their histories and experiences matter, and that what they say and do can count as part of a wider struggle to intervene in and change the world around them. More specifically, teachers need to argue for forms of pedagogy that close the gap between the school and the real world. (as cited in Aziz & Rizvi, n.d.)

In addition to the liberatory effects Giroux described as being achieved through a problem-based and student-centered approach, an asynchronous setting may also allow a varied time frame for completion, differentiation without the constraints of a traditional classroom, and reduced influence of peer perceptions. This setting enables a uniquely individualized educational process, which allows each student to make necessary connections to the content while incorporating individual and cultural differences.

Students who have experienced frustration or fear due to any type of discrimination or harassment in their traditional educational setting may not be able to learn effectively because of these situations. Not all students experience this type of detrimental situation, but for students who do, learning is no longer of utmost importance because survival skills take over where learning used to occur. Students

spend an inordinate amount of energy plotting how to get safely to and from school, how to avoid the hallways when other students are present so they can avoid slurs and shoves. . . . Too often, students have little energy left to learn.” (Bochenek & Widney, 2001, p. 3)

Education itself is sometimes a struggle for students as they attempt to discover where they fit into the existing society, as Shaul (2005) pointed out in his opening remarks to Freire's work:

Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes 'the practice of freedom,' the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (p. 34)

If students are not able to integrate into the educational system as offered in a traditional setting, they have to find other means to complete the important and necessary task of obtaining an education. Even when an educator attempts to utilize critical pedagogy itself as an emancipatory exercise in a traditional classroom, it may not be enough, as Ellsworth (1989) found. With a conscious attempt to empower students, Ellsworth implemented a study of racism, but the group setting was still a part of the issue because there was "resentment that other oppressions (sexism, heterosexism, fat oppression, classism, anti-Semitism) were being marginalized in the name of addressing racism" (p. 316). A more detailed review of the literature concerning learners in asynchronous educational settings will be provided in section 2 of this study.

#### Definition of Terms

*Asynchronous education:* This setting allows students access to their instructional materials at any time; there are no specific dates or times when students must be at the same place at the same time, whether that be physically or online. Communication in this setting occurs primarily through e-mail and discussion boards, and work is predominantly submitted through a learning management system (LMS). When students and teachers are

separated by time and space, there must be an effective means of submitting work, receiving feedback, participating in discussion with classmates, and communicating general information pertinent to the successful completion of the course. An LMS provides the structure for all of these functions, as well as for completing exams, quizzes, and other forms of assessment. The LMS is often part of an asynchronous learning network (ALN), defined by Hiltz and Goldman (2005) as a setting where “learners use computer and communications technologies to work with remote learning resources, including coaches and other learners, but without the requirement to be online at the same time” (p. 5).

*Traditional educational setting:* A secondary school in which students follow a set schedule and are all in the same physical location. The term *brick-and-mortar* is often used in the literature to refer to the distinction between a physical classroom setting and an online learning environment.

*Virtual schools:* “A form of distance education in which teacher and learner are separate and instruction is mediated” (Clark & Berge, 2005, p. 9). In 2004, the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Technology presented a definition of cyber schools or e-learning as being comparable to virtual schooling as they “are essentially the same product: they provide individual online instruction” ( p. 34).

#### Assumptions, Scope, Limitations, and Delimitations

I assumed that participating students were enrolled full-time in a predominantly asynchronous secondary school in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. I also assumed that students who chose to participate in the interviews would be representative of the

population that responded in the limited data set, because both populations attend the same asynchronous online school. Further, I assumed that students would be honest in their responses.

The scope of the study included students in Grades 9-12; some students had been enrolled in the online school since Grade 6. Only high school students were included in this study, but they likely had different years of experience in the asynchronous environment. Students were from different regions across the commonwealth and were from different socioeconomic backgrounds. They volunteered to participate in this study. Although the scope was narrow, the data generated may be used in future studies due to the limited research on this topic in the educational literature.

Factors that delimited this study are the population, type of data gathered, and time taken to complete the research. Data gathered for analysis consisted of survey results from the limited data set and individual student interviews, which occurred in the time it took to reach saturation. The population included only students who attended an online high school in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania at the time of the study and previously attended a traditional school.

A potential weakness of the study is that some students with the highest aversion to a traditional setting or the most disparate educational histories might not have chosen to participate. Students enrolled in the study school are there by choice and will tend to have a more positive attitude toward this method of instructional delivery and opportunities provided in this setting. In the first phase of the study, I reviewed a self-reporting survey, so the data may have a “tendency toward a *halo effect*; if the student is

generally happy with the course, including the instructor and the grade then all questions on a survey tend to be answered positively, and vice versa” (Arbaugh & Hiltz, 2005, p. 88). Arbaugh and Hiltz also pointed out that the research on the educational experience of students is not isolated: “A course is not a laboratory; many other things are happening to the student while he or she is taking a particular course. In other words, it is impossible to control all of the sources of variance” (p. 89).

Although I am a teacher with some administrative responsibilities in the school under study and therefore have personal bias, qualitative studies require a subjective approach. As Guba and Lincoln (1994) noted, this methodology involves a value mediated collection of information in that “the investigator and the investigated object are assumed to be interactively linked, with the values of the investigator inevitably influencing the inquiry” (p. 110). Because an investigator collects, records, and analyzes the data, there may be a biased interpretation of the results. In an attempt to mitigate that effect, a peer review took place after the data were collected (Merriam, 2002). The peer review is also referred to as an external auditor (Creswell, 2003). By asking an educator with experience teaching online and a background in educational research to review the data and the interpretation of the data, apparent bias was identified. The auditor also reviewed the data to determine if the analysis appeared to communicate what the participants perceived as indicative of their experiences.

#### Significance of the Study

Results of the present study will support asynchronous learning as a liberatory practice for marginalized populations, students with severe health issues, students who

have been discriminated against, students who are not represented in the curriculum or instruction, students who require alternative schedules, and students who have experienced harassment. When students' culture does not match that of the instructor or other students around them, a cultural gap occurs. This gap in understanding is not conducive to learning. Szabo and Lambert's (2002) definition of constructivism supports the idea that students with similar culture or the ability to build a common culture learn more effectively together because "learning is by nature social and is most likely to occur when learners share ideas, inquire, and problem solve together" (p. 205). Students who feel alienated in a traditional setting due race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, health issues, or gender may find anonymity in an asynchronous environment. The asynchronous environment allows for educational discussions that do not rely upon social acceptance that is based upon verbal or visual cues.

The information from this study could benefit those supporting cyber charter schools and curricular reform for traditional schools, and professionals in the educational field who might direct students to alternative placements when a traditional setting is not appropriate. The identification of generative themes among stated reasons for leaving a traditional school may also provide a basis for future research comparing the perception of success of students with similar motivations in a traditional setting verses an asynchronous setting.

### Social Change

Anecdotal information provided by students currently enrolled in an asynchronous online setting indicated that students who were not successful in a

traditional setting often found success by completing their high school education in an online setting. Additionally, students who perceived that they would not or could not move on to postsecondary schooling found that their goals changed, and they did in fact continue their education after graduation from an online high school. The goal of the study was to identify why students chose to attend an online high school and their perception of success in this setting. Results will provide the basis for theory regarding the type of students who may find increased success in an online high school. Social change may occur by providing the results of this study to those in the educational community who could guide students with similar traits or concerns, who are not being successful in a traditional setting, to an online environment. Those who guide students include teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators.

The lack of data in the professional literature describing why students are choosing an online option at the K-12 level provided me with the impetus to employ a grounded theory approach for this study. With the data gathered for this study, those in the educational community interested in moving forward in this area can conduct further research to begin to confirm why specific demographics are not represented at a greater percentage within asynchronous schools. Researchers may also need to conduct further studies to determine how the schools are providing information to those who do not currently have access to the Internet or are not computer literate. Social change may also occur if online schools at the K-12 level could increase their enrollment of students who do not have computers in their homes or Internet access. If the results of this study provide data to support theory regarding the motivation for attendance in an online



school, that theory could then be used for future research or action to increase the enrollment of the populations that may not be currently represented. My primary goal, beyond answering the research questions, was to disseminate the information regarding which populations could benefit from learning online in order to identify this method of education as an option for students who may not have any exposure regarding online learning as an alternative option if a traditional setting is not meeting their needs.

Although learning online is not appropriate for many students, those that do not perceive themselves as successful in a traditional setting, for whatever reason, deserve to have access to alternative settings. Every student is entitled to know his or her options and have the opportunity to find an educational setting that is least restrictive and supports his or her future goals.

### Summary

The first section covered the problem statement, nature of the study, purpose statement, conceptual framework, definitions, assumptions, and significance of the study. The primary goal of this section was to communicate the basis of this study and the key concepts addressed. In section 2 I will present the historical basis of cyber charter schools and the benefits they provide for students, as found in the current literature. Section 3 will include an explanation of the methodology used in this study. In section 4 I will present an analysis of the data collected. Finally, section 5 will include the final summary of the study, conclusions, and recommendations for further study.

## SECTION 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

In this literature, review I discuss research related to the development of asynchronous learning and its possible benefits for secondary students. The first portion of the review chronicles the historical perspective. The second portion of the review addresses the benefits of asynchronous schools in the areas of equity, access, discrimination, and harassment. The final section is a review of critical pedagogy directly addressing the significance of this theory as the conceptual framework for the study.

### Historical Perspective

#### *The Charter School Movement*

With the increasing growth of secondary cyber schools, student enrollment in these schools is climbing steadily. It is not known why students are making the decision to attend high school classes online or if there is really a need that cannot be met in a traditional classroom. These questions resonate with the onset of the charter school movement. Why create a new school rather than addressing the issue in the current educational setting? Charter schools are often not well-received by those in public education. Charter schools often receive funding that would have gone to local school districts and often operate outside rules and regulations applicable to local school districts (Gentzel, 2001). The ideology behind the creation of charter schools began years before American Federation of Teachers (AFT) president Albert Shanker formally proposed it in 1988. Budde (1996) first initiated this idea of education by charter a decade before he finally published his ideas in 1988, and the presentation by Shanker was based upon this

publication (p. 72). Flexibility is a main benefit, as the 2000 State of Charter Schools report noted:

The school's charter gives the school autonomy over its operation and frees the school from regulations that other public schools must follow. In exchange for the flexibility afforded by the charter, the schools are held accountable for achieving the goals set out in the charter including improving student performance. (R.P.P. International, 2000, p. 1)

The report indicated that the impetus of most charter schools was not to be in direct competition with local public schools, but rather to "realize an alternative vision of schooling" (R.P.P. International, 2000, p. 2).

When a need arises that cannot be adequately addressed in an existing public school, sometimes an appropriate alternative is a charter school. In their review of research on charter schools, Mulley and Fisler (2002) found that the main reasons parents and students chose a charter school were "educational programs, opportunities for parental involvement, safety, technology, better teachers, and location" (p. 8). Just as charter schools were created to provide an alternative setting within the public sector, online schools were born out of the need for an alternative to a traditional setting bound by time and space. For the purpose of this study, the primary similarity to charter schools is that cyber or virtual schools provide instructional delivery online and are able to meet a need that simply cannot be met in the traditional school, for a myriad of reasons. These reasons will be further identified in the following sections.

### *Distance Learning*

Distance learning, defined by Schlosser and Anderson (1994) as a learning environment where teacher and student are separated by time or space, has existed in

many different cultures throughout history. One of the first methods of distance learning began with the tradition of delivering instruction by correspondence. Instructors would send descriptions of the lessons to be learned to students, who then responded with completed assignments. This implementation of formal learning demonstrates distance learning's early attempt to provide an education to those who could not, for geographic or economic reasons, participate in a traditional classroom setting. One of the earliest documented stages of correspondence study programs began in the United Kingdom and Europe in the mid 1800s, using the traditional mail system to deliver lessons (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2006). From the inception of distance learning with the first correspondence courses, many different versions have emerged. Distance learning may include instruction being delivered within synchronous sessions delivered over the radio or television, to the more recent method of providing correspondence materials online without interactivity. The various methods of instructional delivery used to create a learning environment beyond that of the traditional classroom stem from the need to find alternative methods of providing an education to those students who cannot participate in a traditional setting like their peers.

Similar to the development of cyber learning nearly 15 years ago, distance learning at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was provided first to those at the postsecondary level, with many courses being offered for the purpose of obtaining college credit. Although some university-level correspondence schools were not successful, such as the Correspondence University created by Cornell University in 1883 (Gerrity, 1976), the need to provide learning outside classrooms persisted. Garrison

(2000) pointed out that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the main focus was on how to connect to students who were challenged by geographical distance. The need to deliver information in a new way stemmed from the separation of student from the teacher in time and space, but the cause of the separation is not defined in the literature. Although there are many references in the literature to those in rural locations not being able to easily access a traditional school setting, no documentation of race, gender, or socioeconomic status is made. Additionally, the literature does not address the fact that geographic distance may have existed because many students did not have the economic means to relocate to a college setting, or that their race, gender, or culture may have inhibited their acceptance on campus. Distance learning may have been the only possible option to many students, for any or all of these reasons.

Garrison (2000) stated that the implementation of correspondence as the primary method of instructional delivery, mass-producing, and sending out learning packages to students contributed to the identification of this era as the industrial era of distance education. He noted that the current focus on distance education has created a necessary challenge from the educational community to develop theory in response to issues found in the postindustrial era of distance education. Garrison's definition of the postindustrial era, in which the "transactional issues (i.e. teaching and learning) will predominate over structural constraints (i.e., geographical distance)," (p. 2) indicates that he was referring to the need to develop theory specifically in response to how teaching occurs at a distance.

Geographic distance from a college campus and the economic constraints of some students are two of the primary reasons the distance learning model continued from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the present, but gender issues played a role as well. According to Kramarae (2003), the exclusion of women from many universities with traditional programs made the implementation of distance learning even more historically pertinent:

In Scotland, between 1877 and 1931, St. Andrews University offered an external, higher education degree designed specifically for women. In the United States, the State of New York allowed the Chautauqua Institute (a summer training program for Sunday school teachers) to award degrees through mail instruction. In 1891 the university of Chicago offered the first university-sponsored correspondence course (Guri-Rosenglit, 1999, pp. 3-4). Others followed, and for more than a century women have been heavy users of distance education courses-in fact, they have been the majority of students in correspondence courses. (p. 262)

Kramarae (2003) noted that the women who participated in this alternative means of earning an education did so based on individual needs that were in some way outside the norm. Kramarae did not acknowledge that perhaps this population of women made the choice to participate in a nontraditional education because of social constraints or as a way to “change their social and educational situation” (p. 262). Considering each woman as an individual, rather than as a part of a social group, “does not help us recognize the particular difficulties that women as a social group have had or their political and ideological struggles and successes in higher education” (Kramarae, 2003, p. 262). The women who completed their education through correspondence courses may have found a way to circumvent the prejudicial practices of restricting admission to women at certain higher education institutions.

The U.S. Department of Commerce granted the first educational license to the Latter Day Saints University in Utah in 1921. By January of 1922, two more universities were issued licenses, and “shortly after a number of other educational institutions applied for and received licenses” (Saettler, 2000, p. 202). In addition to having lectures transmitted via radio from microphones set up in lecture halls, musical and drama performances were also presented in this medium. According to Saettler, school administrations felt this use of radio would encourage students to enroll in courses, or at least provide publicity for the school. By 1945 the Federal Communication Commission issued the first educational television license to Iowa State University (Saettler, 2000). During the 1950s and 1960s, radio and television were the primary means of distance learning, providing an instructional model that reflected a traditional classroom experience in that the teacher presented the information synchronously while students took notes and then submitted work. There was little or no live interaction between student and teacher within this model of instructional delivery. This model is an example of distance learning as the instruction was delivered in a synchronous model with the student and teacher separated by space. The lectures or performances that were recorded and delivered at a time convenient for the learner would exemplify an asynchronous model.

Although the basis of distance learning was to reach those who could not otherwise access a similar education, there have been improvements in how instruction is delivered in regards to learning styles and inclusion of educational dialogue. Like Freire (2005), Wedemeyer (1981) noted in his review of open universities that the key was the

relationship between the teacher and learner, that relationship being equally, if not more important, than the delivery of instruction (pp. 147-148).

### *Beginning of Asynchronous Learning Networks*

There are likely as many different models of incorporating the Internet as a means of delivery for all or a portion of the curriculum in an educational setting as there are online programs. Each school has its own variations on the theme and organization. For continuity and consistency, the educational setting described in this study is an ALN. Classes may include some synchronous options, but they are not a requirement. If the class requires synchronous meetings, it then becomes a blended delivery of asynchronous and synchronous and no longer meets the criteria for an ALN. Colleges and universities utilized the online delivery of curriculum as many as 15 years ago. “Since the early 1990s, the field of asynchronous learning networks has been growing as a research community, with meetings, a journal, and informal networking among its practitioners” (Hiltz & Goldman, 2005, p. ix). These ALNs began at the collegiate level and have continued to grow in size and application. The benefit this method of instructional delivery provided for commuting students and professionals continuing their education while maintaining full-time employment began to be measured in the mid to late 1990s.

NJIT Virtual Classroom [students] were asked about the relative convenience of online versus traditional classrooms, the vast majority of students (71%) felt that online courses provide better access to their professor, and more than two thirds felt that online learning networks are “more convenient” overall. (Hiltz & Wellman, 1997, p. 32)

Asynchronous classes, which provide instruction without the teacher and students working or communicating at the same time, inherently increase flexibility and decrease



scheduling issues however; most important is the quality of the educational experience being provided for students. It may seem counterintuitive to some, when student and instructor may never meet face to face, that an ALN could provide a higher level of communication than a traditional setting. In a meta-analysis of the results of hypotheses tests comparing traditional delivery to ALN at the collegiate level, Fjermestad, Hiltz, and Zhang (2005) found that

ALN methods clearly increase the communication among students (Heckman & Annabi, 2003) whether in small groups or the whole course. Furthermore, Heckman and Annabi (2003) suggested that instructor presence (dominance) is more pervasive in traditional face-to-face discussions than in the online discussions. This leads to communication inhibition in the classroom and increase student participation in ALN. (p. 43)

With these results the development of asynchronous environments for secondary, and even elementary students, was intensified. “Although ALN began at the university level, it is percolating down to the high school and Grade 1-8 levels” (Hiltz & Goldman, 2005, p. 9). The brief existence of these schools has not allowed the research to percolate down to K-12 levels as well.

#### *ALN's Transition from University to High School*

Although the effectiveness of asynchronous learning has been researched at the collegiate level, there are few analyses of the effectiveness of these schools at the high school level, other than the meta-analysis conducted by Cavanaugh (2001) and the subsequent meta-analysis reported by Cavanaugh, Gillan, Kromrey, Hess, and Blomeyer (2004). This topic may seem like a trend on its way out, but the numbers seem to indicate otherwise:

It is tempting to dismiss cyber charter schools as a trivial byproduct of a larger charter school movement. But preliminary analysis suggests the existence of a substantial demand for nonclassroom-based learning, especially among families frustrated by the stringent requirements of public education. In 2004, an estimated 68,000 students were enrolled in nonclassroom-based charter schools, accounting for 10% of the total charter school population. (Huerta et. al, 2006, n.p.)

Based on the number of new cyber schools opened in the last 7 years, it seems that cyber schools are not a novel idea that will fade as quickly as it arrived. Research determining the effect upon academic achievement or students' perception of success at the high school level has not been conducted, beyond the initial studies of Cavanaugh et al. (2004). The reasons students are choosing this method of secondary education have not been researched. With the wealth of data and supporting anecdotal information on the benefits of face-to-face instruction and socialization for secondary student learning, what could this asynchronous environment possibly provide in the absence of direct interaction and a traditional collaborative classroom environment? Perhaps the best question is not what cyber schools provide, but what is absent. In some situations the issue is the classroom itself. In other situations the issue is not the educational setting but the people in the setting. Do the motivations of students currently attending cyber schools provide any indication of the asynchronous setting's ability to ameliorate experiences of discrimination or harassment in the high school setting?

### Benefits of Asynchronous Instructional Delivery

#### *Equity and Access*

High school students may have jobs, but they typically do not have full-time professions. Similarly, a traditional secondary school setting does not function with the choice of available times and instructors as a collegiate schedule might. With these

mitigating factors out of the equation, the motivation of a high school student to attend an asynchronous school should be examined. According to Berge and Clark (2005), “The ability to provide an expanded curriculum is probably the most frequently cited benefit of virtual schools” (p. 11). Most secondary schools provide curriculum based upon what is most beneficial for a majority of the school population. If student enrollment is not substantial, the class may not be offered, or if there is not a teacher with appropriate certification, it may not be offered. Another common occurrence is conflicting class times; students may not be able to take an elective or honors level course because it is offered at the same time as another required course. A student now has to choose between the two classes, if he or she is given the choice, because graduation requirements may dictate the outcome.

Students may not have access to a wide selection of classes they want or need in smaller, rural, inner-city, or low-socioeconomic-area schools with limited faculty and staff. Not only do these students have less access to varied curriculum, they may also lack access to the development of technology-based skills. These skills will transcend any curriculum and help students prepare for work in a multitude of settings after graduation. Access to technology and training in how to use it are becoming a necessary part of basic education to enter many fields. If the virtual school provides the computer, access to the Internet, and other curriculum materials, then low-income and minority students receive the benefits of the curriculum and the introduction to new technology skills. In their analysis of the National Center for Education Statistics 2002 fall survey, Kleiner and Lewis (2003) found that among public schools in the United States, 99% had access to

the Internet. The 64% increase from the data gathered in 1994 may show in future research that improved access to the Internet helps diminish the negative effects of the digital divide at the school level. Berge and Clark (2005) noted, however, that the divide is still prevalent in home computer use:

Survey data found wide ethnic, family income, and parental education differentials in the use of computers at home by children aged 5-17. About 41% of Black and Hispanic children used computers at home, compared to the 77% of White and 76% of Asian children. Only 31% of children from families with annual incomes of less than \$20,000 used computers at home, compared to 89% of those whose families had annual incomes over \$75,000. (p. 14)

Although improving nationwide, the disparity of access to curriculum and technology still exists in many settings. Hernandez (2005) pointed out that as more “computer-based educational materials become available, minority and poor students have access only to the oldest, not the latest and greatest; consequently, these students do not use technology as much as they should to increase their level of education attainment” (p. 21). By providing the same technology to each student, regardless of socioeconomic status, virtual schools may have a liberatory effect for disaffected or disenfranchised student populations. Access in the home may benefit the student and the family, by making available computers, Internet access, and basic training on effective skills, and students may pass these skills along to the other members of the family. Further research on the impact of virtual schooling on the family of those enrolled is another area for future studies.

The effect of providing connectivity in the home may be more expansive than the research has measured to date. “Because virtual education has the potential to challenge fundamental education tenets, it deserves special attention as a means to overcome

barriers for minority and poor students” (Hernandez, 2005, p. 21). There is little research on this aspect of virtual schooling, and information to assist data-driven decision making, in regards to family involvement, is not occurring on a regular basis.

While much has been written about the digital divide, little has been written about how to build bridges across that divide. And there is little research (and, particularly unhelpfully, few case studies) on efforts to address the education gap with virtual schooling. (Hernandez, 2005, p. 30)

Equitable access to an appropriate curriculum was one of the generative themes identified in the current study as a motivation for currently attending an asynchronous school.

Students with this stated motivation and their subsequent perception of success help begin to describe the relationship between motivation and the academic achievement of students in an asynchronous school.

### *Skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

A traditional educational setting, although successful for a majority of students, may not provide all students with the opportunity to develop the skills needed to achieve in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Hargreaves (2003) defined what he considered the knowledge society to be, its economy, and the ways students need to be prepared to be productive in this era. Hargreaves also presented what he perceived as missing in this new society: a sense of community and a responsibility to each other in the best sense of civics. More and more occupations include working individually in front of a computer monitor or in another form of isolation, and the economy is based less on what is being produced than on the generation of ideas and knowledge. Preparing students for their future requires shifting from teaching in an industrial model to one that teaches students the necessary skills to be sufficient in the knowledge society.

Most schools encourage students to use all the technology they have available, during at least a portion of the time in their classes. The issue becomes how to change educational strategies to better meet the needs of students who use computers, phones, and other electronic devices to communicate their ideas with others on a regular basis. Not only is it beneficial for students to learn in a way that uses the vast amount of information available through electronic means, but the ultimate goal is providing students with the skills necessary to be successful and productive after graduation. Not all these needs can be met with the skills tested on high-stakes assessments.

In the late 1970s, American sociologist Daniel Bell identified a shift to the knowledge society (Hargreaves, 2003). For decades, students graduated from high school, and possibly attended college, with goals to move into the industrialized society and economy, where they would produce things as a means of earning their living. What Bell noticed was that more of the economy revolved around “services, ideas, and communication” (Hargreaves, 2003, p. 15). Bell viewed postindustrial society as moving to a knowledge society in a number of ways. “Sources of innovation are increasingly derived from research and development. . . . The weight of the society—measured by a larger proportion of Gross National Product and a larger share of employment—is increasingly in the knowledge field” (Bell, 1976, p. 212).

As was first identified by Bell (1976), changing how students are being educated for the future is imperative because their economic stability depends on becoming more fluid in the job market by learning to “work more flexibly, invest in their future financial security, reskill or relocate themselves as the economy shifts around them” (Hargreaves,

2003, p. 1). The shift seen in the late 1970s away from production of goods to the creation of knowledge and its implementation will certainly not be the last; in fact, the shifts may happen more rapidly in the future. For that reason, students cannot afford to learn skills that prepare them for a specific career with only one skill set. Hargreaves identified the necessary process for institutions and organizations to focus on the needs of the knowledge society and prepare their members by providing them with

extensive opportunities for up-skilling and retraining; by breaking down barriers to learning and communication and getting people to work in overlapping, flexible teams; by looking at problems and mistakes as opportunities for learning more than as occasions for blame; by involving everyone in the ‘big picture’ of where the organization is going; and by developing the “social capital” of networks and relationships that provide people with extra support and further learning. (p. 3)

None of this preparation will likely occur in classrooms that focus only on skills measured through standardized testing.

Giddens (1998) pointed out that it is essential to promote this kind of skills training, “particularly as far as poor groups are concerned” (p. 30) because this interaction with the skill set necessary for success in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century workforce is “imperative of government today, a key basis of the redistribution of possibilities” (p. 30). Hargreaves (2003) asserted that the necessary training and preparation cannot happen if the educational community does not work collectively to “promote young people’s opportunities in, engagements with, and inclusion within the high-skill world of knowledge, information, communication, and innovation. All children must be prepared for the knowledge society and its economy” (p. 21). To take the next step in preparing students in this way, new and creative learning environments, those that meet the needs

of many different types of students, will need to be implemented because many schools are “locked in modern—even premodern—principles of the factory and the monastery” (Hargreaves, 2003, p. 21). Even though the transition may be difficult for the educational community as a whole, this change must take place to benefit all students, particularly those who do not have the benefit of modeling these skills after their parents. Students from lower socioeconomic or rural areas may not have access to ways to build these skills, outside of their 180 days of schooling in the public schools, and they may not have had access to a computer and learned to use it as a tool or even recreationally.

Teachers who work toward providing a democratic education for their students not only address mastery of the curriculum but increase the chance of students’ further success. As Hargreaves (2003) noted, “Like a marriage, democracy cannot be sustained through indifference or neglect. It must be tended to, cared for, defended and reviewed everyday” (p. 55). Teachers who commit to providing a democratic education beyond the standards and achievement “develop not only intellectual capital in their students but also social capital: the ability to form networks, forge relationships, and contribute to as well as draw on the human resources of the community and wider society” (Hargreaves, 2003, p. 54). To help their students develop social and cultural capital, teachers will need to identify and help correct gaps in this portion of the learning process, and care for and defend each student’s right to a democratic education. For some students the most democratic and appropriate education is not found in a traditional educational setting.



*Amelioration of Discrimination and Harassment*

Maslow (1943) developed his hierarchy of needs in an effort to assist in the identification of human motivation. As applied to education, if the student's basic needs are not being met, learning is unlikely to occur. The most basic needs are physiological, followed by safety and security. According to Maslow's theory, one needs basic physiological functions to be stable and needs to feel safe to learn effectively. Maslow described the need for safety as second only to the physiological needs:

Again we may say of the receptors, the effectors, of the intellect and the other capacities that they are primarily safety-seeking tools. Again, as in the hungry man, we find that the dominating goal is a strong determinant not only of his current world-outlook and philosophy but also of his philosophy of the future. Practically everything looks less important than safety, (even sometimes the physiological needs which being satisfied, are now underestimated). A man, in this state, if it is extreme enough and chronic enough, may be characterized as living almost for safety alone. (p. 377)

If a student is in constant fear for his or her safety, the curriculum presented will, obviously, seem less important.

Students who are at a lower level in the social hierarchy may find they participate differently in an asynchronous setting due to the lack of visual or physical social cues, which are tied to social status (Keisler et al., 1984; Seigal et al., 1986). The asynchronous environment may be most effective in ameliorating detrimental experiences for students when visual cues instigate behavior. Because students do not interact face to face in an online classroom, the visual cues of clothing, race, or other physical appearance are removed from the interaction. No educational setting can eliminate all forms of discrimination or harassment. The documented discrimination and harassment of students in school settings by their peers, and even some instances by teachers or administrators, is

vast in the professional literature and has been the topic of many publications; specific examples will be provided in the following sections.

Bochenek and Widney (2001) researched discrimination against students for their sexual orientation in educational settings.

For some, the burden of coping each day with the endless harassment is too much. They drop out of school. Some commit suicide. Others just barely survive as they navigate the open hostility of peers and the deliberate indifference of school officials. They try to do well academically, but much of their energy is focused on surviving another day. (p. 5)

Students who participated in the study by Bochenek and Widney (2001) had little energy left to put into their learning after strategically planning their paths in hallways, avoiding physical altercations, and trying to ignore verbal threats and debilitating comments from their harassers. This type of harassment is sometimes difficult to address and even more difficult to change in a traditional school setting; teachers cannot be everywhere. When something is witnessed or heard, it is sometimes difficult to bring appropriate action if the administration is not comfortable discussing and defending a student's right to discuss or display his or her sexual orientation. In Bochenek and Widney's study, the setting was only a small portion of the problem; the behavior of other students in the setting was the main problem.

Students who do not fit the cultural norm may also find themselves the target of harassment. Rice, Hiltz, and Spencer (2005) pointed out that in a computer-mediated-communication (CMC) setting, such as a threaded discussion board or live chat (a synchronous component to many online classrooms), participants lack the "cues" that might cause discriminatory behavior:

Precisely because cues that ordinarily regulate speaking, turn taking, and attention are reduced or absent (e.g., physical appearance, voice, dress, gender, status, etc.; Rice, 1984), CMC may foster greater participation from and among students, especially those who are shy or anxious, are minorities or have speech or sight disabilities, or are not typically dominant in face-to-face settings. (p. 221)

Every situation has a positive and a negative side, and in the case of asynchronous schools the same environment that provides safety and security for some may allow others to exhibit negative behaviors. Disinhibition in an online setting was defined by Joinson (1998) as “any behavior that is characterized by an apparent reduction in concerns for self-presentation and the judgment of others” (p. 44). The possibility of being invisible, yet connected at a safe distance, may allow students to feel more comfortable contributing to their education. In an asynchronous setting it “may allow individuals who feel disenfranchised or disempowered in the real world to express their thought more effectively in an online environment” (Willard, 2004, p. 6). Students who feel comfortable connecting with a diverse group of peers may benefit from the input of positive interactions with other students with different cultures, if they are able to find a common connection. Too often, students do not find a common connection because they are put off by the visual and verbal cues of another person before ever getting to know the wealth of ideas behind the external appearance.

Similar to the experience of students whose sexual orientation does not match that of their peers, in their 3-year study, Shakeshaft, Mandel, Johnson, Sawyer, Hergenrother, and Barber (1997) found that girls who do not fit the perceived norm for physical appearance were harassed, whereas boys were predominantly harassed for their actions.

Regardless of what form the harassment took in the reported case studies, the results all had detrimental effects on the students themselves and their learning:

They [the students] felt bad about themselves. One girl told us that she felt “sad and worthless.” A middle school boy said, “They make fun of me; it’s depressing. I would change schools if I could.” Another girl reported, “It makes you feel powerless.” (Shakeshaft et al., 1997, p. 24)

These are scenarios that play out every day in schools. For some students the harassment is minimal and they are able to move on to the next class ready to learn. But when the harassment is severe, as for the students cited in these examples, one may not have the necessary resiliency and strength of self-concept to feel safe and secure. Students who feel physically or emotionally threatened may remain in the lower levels of Maslow’s hierarchy, not able to learn effectively. Because some students who participated in the current study indicated they did not feel safe in their prior setting, a description of the relationship between their motivation to attend an asynchronous school and academic achievement may provide further insight into this theme.

## Methodology

### *Conceptual Framework*

Regardless of where students live, what their economic or ethnic background may be, or even their sexual orientation, Giroux (1998) pointed out the necessity of allowing students access to a curriculum that empowers everyone, not just a privileged few:

Education in this [the current] framework becomes less a social investment than an individual investment, a vehicle for social mobility for those privileged to have the power to make their choices matter, and a form of social constraint for those who lack such resources and for whom choice and accountability betray a legacy of broken promises and an ideology of bad faith. (online resource)

Critical theorists have written about the benefits of education and the need to question the structure dictated by the educational provider (Bartolome & Trueba, 2000; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1998; Kanpol, 1999; McLaren, 1989). Who is providing the education, how is the instruction being delivered, and to what degree does the educational setting mirror a true democratic process? Does the educational setting reinforce a socially or politically biased environment that allows discrimination against those who are marginalized: students who are in a minority based on socioeconomic status, gender, culture, sexual orientation, or race? Students who do not have access to the same educational experiences due to insufficient resources, their culture not matching that of the instructor or other students, or harassment that interferes with the learning process, participate in an educational process that Freire (1970/2005) described as oppressive and marginalizing. Those privileged students identified by Giroux (1998) as having the necessary resources will continue to excel, and the disparity between those who fit the perceived societal norms and those who do not will persist or possibly increase. But if those who do not experience a democratic learning environment could find an alternative, perhaps the educational setting could be liberating instead of oppressive. “The solution is not to ‘integrate’ them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become beings for themselves” (Freire, 2005, p. 74).

One of the key tenets of critical pedagogy is that all students deserve an appropriate education regardless of gender, race, creed, color, culture, or economic background. “Critical pedagogy is the challenging of any or all forms of alienation, oppression and subordination no matter from what identity position one is coming from”

(Kanpol, 1998). Students who are in an oppressed state have the greatest need for appropriate education because the liberatory effect is most profound for these students. Unfortunately, in any setting where educators use the banking method of education, students may not experience any connection to their learning. Freire (2005) described the detriment this method of instructional delivery causes to students:

He [sic] expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students. His task is to “fill” the students with the contents of his narration—contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance. (p. 71)

Kanpol (1999) described the inequity found in schools when “different people divided by race, class, and gender receive and/or are privileged to receive certain forms of educational knowledge skills, and curriculum in unequal ways” (p. 3). Although students who do not fit perceived norms represented in the classroom due to visual cues or overt observable differences from the teacher or other students seem to be most likely to experience a disconnect, there may be another portion of the student population that is on the periphery. Kincheloe (2004) identified how students from a social class perceived as inferior, like himself, can find themselves disempowered due to a lack of confidence after negative interactions with those who are in the majority or in positions of power:

As a rural student from the southern Appalachian Mountains, I ran into college professors who felt that someone from my background could not do well in school. As a member of a subculture with particular cultural markers, I “wore” my relationship to dominant power. I was an outsider seeking “certification” by the academy. On numerous occasions I was told by different professors after handing in an essay or research paper that they knew I had plagiarized the work because “someone like me” was not capable of producing such writing. (p. 99)

The situation described by Kincheloe may play out each day in the world of education, perhaps not at the level of accusation he experienced, but the confrontation can relegate one to a subordinate position. Those students who are resilient and find a way to continue the learning process are fortunate, but this resiliency should not be required to earn an education. Kincheloe (2004) warned that even though it may not seem severe, lacking confidence is one of the “many subtle ways that power vis-à-vis the domains of race, class, gender, geographical place, religion, etc., operates to collate students, to sort and rank them” (p. 99). This method of ranking may not even enter the consciousness of a teacher or other students in the class; it may seem almost like common sense to those in the dominant group.

Students in the subordinate group may find themselves marginalized but see it as inevitable because this self-perception is all they have ever known. As Kanpol (1999) noted, “Schools have been variously described as dumping grounds for the economically disadvantaged, in many cases exacerbating the poverty-stricken inner-city school environment” (p. 26). The problem is that students who have never known anything different may not realize that their school environment could be different, that it is not providing them with the skills or opportunities necessary to move beyond their current economic situation. Juan-Miguel Fernandez-Balboa (2003) was forceful in his description of the need for students to become aware of their “ranking” and to make an attempt to remedy this situation. Fernandez-Balboa urged marginalized people to realize that their status is due to institutional forces, such as meritocracy, which are instrumental in keeping them in an oppressed state. Kanpol (1999) pointed out that a capitalist mindset,

like the meritocracy mentioned by Fernandez-Balboa, can exist in the classroom, causing students to compete for a set amount of merit rather than each student working towards a common goal. Additionally, the decision of who is most deserving of merit might be made by someone who is unknowingly rewarding students based upon their ability to respond in a way that mirrors what is accepted by the teacher as appropriate in his or her culture. Instead of each student working to achieve mastery of the curriculum, Kanpol illustrated that the economic system appears in a school setting as “the number of stickers children compete for, higher-grade success rates, and awards for athletic and academic accomplishments” (p. 29).

Competition is not the problem. Students who do not have the benefit of being part of the dominant culture will likely not benefit from an environment where mediocrity is encouraged for everyone. The problem is that those who are marginalized need more instruction on how to challenge inequalities and find ways to reap the academic rewards they should earn for to their efforts.

Critical theorists and critical pedagogists argue that alternatives to an educational system that on the one hand preaches equal opportunities through values such as hard work, self-discipline, and motivation and on the other hand supports inequality within social, cultural, and economic relations must be realized and changed. (Kanpol, 1999, p. 29)

Teachers enter the education profession to help students learn, not to assist in the preservation of an oppressive social order, but there are likely teachers who are perpetuating an environment that is not truly democratic. Most commonly this process of reproducing the social inequities, even unknowingly, occurs through a

tool known as hegemony. Under hegemony those who are oppressed are giving their permission to be oppressed to those who are dominating them.



It is a subtle, almost invisible, form of control, in which everyone (including the oppressors and the oppressed) believe it is the only way, the right way. (Shaw, n.d).

Antonio Gramsci provided the critical theorist movement with a perspective on the “nature of social order as natural hegemony, that is, a system of power based not only on coercion but also on the voluntary consent of dominated, subaltern classes” (as cited in Morrow, 1995, p. 250). Gramsci’s description of hegemony, what may be seen in educational settings as cultural reproduction, is based on his belief that “rule by intellectual and moral hegemony is the form of power which gives stability and . . . wide-ranging consent and acquiescence, every relationship of hegemony is necessarily a pedagogical relationship” (Gramsci, 1975a, p. 1321). How could intellectuals, in this case those with an education largely devoted to educating students, contribute to an environment that provides further rewards for those who already have the benefit of cultural capital? Teachers present the curriculum they have been given, thus reinforcing what is considered important, appropriate, and necessary by the dominant culture. In addition, before students become a part of adult society, their teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators guide them and help them make decisions about future educational plans and goals. If those in the educational profession are unaware of their role in perpetuating hegemony, students who need the liberatory effects of a strong education will be least likely to receive it.

It may seem apparent that students will have more difficulty in a traditional classroom when their culture does not match that of the dominant culture, but an understanding of the subtleties of cultural capital is imperative to describe how degrees of

acceptance and assimilation become a key factor in education. Bourdieu (1986) recounted that the idea of cultural capital presented itself to him during his research and helped him explain why students from different social classes had “unequal scholastic achievement” (p. 98). Bourdieu was able to point out the discrepancy between the “presuppositions inherent both in the commonsense view, which sees academic success or failure as an effect of natural aptitudes, and in human capital theories” (p. 98).

This idea that cultural capital has a large bearing on the academic success of students is further supported by Bourdieu’s (1986) observations that schools often sanction the passage of cultural capital from parent to child, in that “the scholastic yield from educational action depends on the cultural capital previously invested by the family” (p. 99). Students often inherit their parents’ cultural capital and build upon it without even knowing what they are being given. Kincheloe (2004) described how students use social capital in the classroom:

Membership in the dominant culture affords individuals ways of knowing, acting, and being (cultural capital) that can be “cashed in” in order to get ahead in the lived world. These ways of knowing, acting, and being often are thought of under the categories of manners, deportment, taste, style, accent, proper grammar, level of affect, and so on. Those, like myself, who come from social and cultural locations outside of dominant culture may possess particular abilities but are marginalized because we don’t understand the codes of dominant cultural capital. (p. 100)

Regardless of how seemingly insignificant the repercussions from a mispronounced word or inappropriate action in the classroom may appear to others, the need for acceptance encourages many students to become or continue to be subordinate because their culture does not match the dominant culture. When other students giggle at a response given by a peer because it does not fit in their perception of what is

appropriate for their age, gender, or class, a strong message of inequality is sent. The subtle acceptance of behaviors by students in the dominant culture contributes to a hegemonic environment, particularly when the actions of the dominant culture are accepted as commonsense. Kanpol (1999) argued that this environment is perpetuated through a “hidden curriculum—those unspoken values, norms, and ideologies that are passed on to students as common sense (competition, success, discipline, stereotype, gender division, etc.)” (p. 34). The effect of the hidden curriculum has been studied for how socioeconomic status or a class system is reproduced through tracking students in their course selection (Kanpol, 1999). Just as Kincheloe (2004) experienced professors who doubted his ability to produce work at the level he submitted, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or with less cultural capital are often put into lower-level courses, where the expectations for those students are lower than for their peers. “In large part, students are tracked into social class divisions (e.g., college-bound chemistry classes in high school versus science classes, those students taking calculus versus those taking shop” (Kanpol, 1999, p. 26).

If any students ought to be given opportunities to expand their learning and increase their chances to obtain the education necessary for professions with higher potential, it is those who have not had the benefits of enrichment and exposure in their homes and who need the support and guidance of teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators to help them experience this liberatory effect of education. Parents of students who lack cultural capital may contribute to perpetuating the lack of capital in their own children. A parent who states that his or her son is not strong in math based on

his grade report may lack the background to question the influence of the cultural atmosphere in their home, may lack the sense of power to question the authority of the teacher who issued the report, or may legitimize an academic performance by the student that is below his actual aptitude by reinforcing preconceived ideas about his abilities (Grenfell & James, 1998). In this way many parents are collaborators in the process. “Social privilege passes as a natural fact or given state of affairs because the founding principle of equality of aspiration and achievement is made legitimate by common tacit agreement” (Grenfell & James, 1998, p. 21). When students are receiving their education in an environment that does not challenge inequity, a change, likely a drastic change, must take place in order for the educational process to provide a liberatory effect. The “tacit agreement” may be perceived by parents, teachers, and students as commonsense, the way it has always been and will always be. The role of a critical pedagogue is to challenge this hegemony and attempt to create a democratic environment.

### *Research Methods*

The first step in determining which qualitative methodology to choose for a study is to identify how best to address the goals of the study. For this study the goal was to generate a theory in regards to the research questions because there is little in the professional literature regarding the motivation of students at the K-12 level who choose to receive their education in an online setting and their perception of success in the online setting. Patton (2002) suggested that qualitative methods are appropriate when “measures have not been developed and tested” (p. 192). The use of grounded theory, defined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as “a way of arriving at theory suited to its supposed uses”

rather than “theory generated by logical deduction for a priori assumptions” (p. 3), met the needs of the current study to develop theory in regards to the research questions.

Particularly in a study where the phenomena being researched have recently begun, such as learning online in the K-12 setting, the best data are gathered from those who are living the experience. Additionally, when the phenomena do not have validated data as a basis for further research, “one does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 23).

Although the data regarding learning online at the K-12 level are still limited, research conducted at the collegiate level can be used as a model for collecting appropriate data. According to Goldman, Crosby, Swan, and Shea (2005), many researchers have confirmed the strength of a collecting data with a variety of strategies:

Blending of research methodologies has been used to study ALNs (Asynchronous Learning Networks) due to their focus on complex social phenomenon and their development over time. Researchers tend to employ naturalistic designs: case studies of particular online classes (Coppola et al., 2002; Gunawardena et al., 1997; Piccian, 2002) or programs (Haythronthwaite et al., 2000; Hunter, 2002; Russell & Daugherty, 2001) comparative studies examining particular concepts across multiple course contexts (Rourke et. al., 2001; Swan et al, 2000) or as instantiated in online and traditional environments (Benbunan-Fich & Hiltz, 1999; Hawkes & Romiszowski, 2001; Rovai, 2002); and field studies employing sampling techniques to investigate social supports in participant groups (Brown, 2001; Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997; Walther & Boyd, 2002). They make use of a variety of data collection strategies, often within studies, aimed at eliciting participant perceptions and/or recording participant behaviors. (p. 111)

Additionally, Mills (2003) substantiated the need to employ several methods to gather data, not attempting to rely on “any single source of data, interview, observation, or instrument” (p. 52). When a researcher uses qualitative data to achieve depth and

richness in the study, Mills pointed out, concerns regarding bias can then be addressed through triangulation.

In the first phase of the present study, I reviewed the motivations reported by students in an archived, self-reporting, anonymous, attitudinal survey provided as a limited data set from the school. Arbaugh and Hiltz (2005) addressed the advantage of using an attitudinal survey as a point of data in researching learning online:

It is highly useful for teasing apart which elements of the pedagogy and/or technology students feel are most easily mastered, most comfortable, and/or most personally rewarding (as well as which are perceived as most difficult, most frustrating, and/or most futile). (p. 86)

As Patton (2002) explained, grounded theory provides a process through specific coding procedures to systematically analyze the data gathered. Because the goal is to generate, not test theory, using grounded theory design “requires only the saturation of data—not consideration of all available data nor are the data restricted to one kind of clearly defined case” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 104). This method best met the needs of this study in that the findings may not be generalizable to a larger population, nor was that my intention. The goal was to generate theory to support further research in the area of online learning.

The second phase of the current study included individual interviews with a convenience sample of participants who volunteered for the open coding portion of the analysis. As Merriam (2002) suggested, most studies using grounded theory use interviews and observations, but incorporating other “data-caches,” such as the limited data set used in phase one, adds another valuable source of data (p. 142). Theoretical sampling, in which “the researcher samples incidents, slices of life, time period, or people

on the basis of their potential manifestation or representation of important theoretical constructs,” allowed me to further investigate those participants who were “representative of the phenomenon of interest” (Patton, 2002, p. 238).

A primary strength of grounded theory is found in analyzing data using the constant comparative method, where “units of data deemed meaningful by the researcher are compared with each other in order to generate tentative categories and properties, the basic elements of a grounded theory” (Merriam, 2002, p. 143). Using this method, a researcher is able to include data that are most useful in development of a theory. The grounded theory approach allowed me to gather and analyze data and then provide a description of the relationship between motivation for attending an asynchronous school and students’ perception of success.

### Summary

The review of literature in this section described the beginnings of the charter movement, ALNs, and the use of asynchronous instructional delivery for secondary students. These topics provide necessary background information for the study’s variables. I also reviewed research supporting the benefits asynchronous environments provide for students who are not receiving a democratic education and who may need to question how they are represented in their learning. Such research also substantiated the use of critical pedagogy as a conceptual framework for this study. The topics addressed in the literature review also relate directly to the identification of generative themes that were used to answer the research questions, further describe the relationship between the motivation for attending an asynchronous school and the students’ perception of success,

and ultimately help generate theory. Lack of research on the benefits of asynchronous learning for secondary students supports the purpose of the study, as stated in section 1, as does the use of grounded theory methodology to generate theory rather than prove existing theories. More specific information on the methodology and research procedures will be presented in section 3. In section 4 I will present the methods used for analysis of the data collected. Finally, section 5 will include the final summary of the study, conclusions, and recommendations for further study.



## SECTION 3: RESEARCH METHOD

### Introduction

This section includes the methods I used to answer the study's core research questions. The implementation of qualitative research methods is detailed in this section, along with the types of data gathered and how the data were analyzed. The participants and setting are described, as well as the role of the researcher. The purpose of this study was to describe motivations reported by students who have chosen an asynchronous setting and their perception of success in that setting, thus allowing me to generate theory. The data may provide more information to the educational community regarding which populations chose an asynchronous setting for their high school education in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania, as this continues to become a more readily available option with the increased number of online schools. The theory generated as a result of this study may be useful in future research that could possibly be generalized to a larger population.

In this study the particular situation or phenomenon being researched was asynchronous learning and how it impacts high school students who have migrated from a face-to-face environment and why they chose this type of educational setting. Online learning first appeared as an educational setting for adult learning at the collegiate level. The professional literature has documented research conducted in those settings. Each year researchers publish more information regarding learning online for the K-12 level, but it is still a relatively new phenomenon. To address the question of students' motivation to attend an online school and their subsequent perception of success, a

grounded theory approach with critical pedagogy as the conceptual framework was appropriate for this study.

A search of the professional literature regarding online learning at the K-12 level revealed no findings about student motivation to attend an online school, nor are there valid and reliable instruments available for studying the effect the setting has on academic achievement and how online schools should be developed. Patton (2002) pointed out that grounded theory fits “where not enough is known about a phenomenon for standardized instruments to have been developed (or even to be ready to be developed)” (p. 33). A qualitative design using the grounded theory approach facilitated the review of both survey and interview data describing the relationship between reported student motivation to attend an online school and subsequent perceptions of success. A grounded theory approach resulted in generation of new theory after a comparison of the themes from surveys and interviews. The theory will not be generalized to the general population; instead, it will be “about some facet of professional practice, about real-world situations” (Merriam, 2002, p. 142) as well as “slices of social life” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 522). Patton (2002) portrayed one benefit of in-depth qualitative studies using small sample sizes as an opportunity for others to “learn from them-and learn a great deal, often opening new territory for further research” (p. 46).

Any social change implications resulting from this theory will be acute. It will not include information applicable to the general population, but it is my hope that it will give voice to those who may not have been represented in the literature as of yet. Students who attend high school online have not yet had their motivations captured in the

literature. The strength of the data derived from this study may be found in the richness and depth of information participants provide to the educational community in an area that is currently untapped. Rather than testing a hypothesis, this study will provide a theory to further expand educational research in online learning at the K-12 level.

Many students find that their needs are met in a traditional school setting, but Kanpol (1999) noted that “many students also want to take on the structural elements of schools that lend themselves to a history of oppression, alienation and subordination” (p. 182). This is one of the goals of critical pedagogy: to question and take on the structures that are inhibiting or in some way oppressing those that should be emancipated by the educational process. As Luke (1996) noted, “A key pedagogical and political strategy of emancipatory pedagogy is to give voice to the diversity of student experiences through inclusive curricular content and classroom dialogue in place of exclusive curriculum, and monologic transmission models of pedagogy” (p. 21). Some students who participated in this study felt disconnected from the educational process, the curriculum, or other students in their prior setting. This study will provide those in the educational community responsible for ensuring an appropriate setting for high school students with information that may help create an alternative option that is less oppressive for those students who do not feel a part of the traditional setting.

### Research Questions

The questions developed to inform the problem statement are integral to the design and guide the study as a whole. Without constantly referring to these questions, I was in danger of losing focus and not addressing the problem statement. By guiding the

research process, the research questions led to the generation of a new theory, thus supporting further educational research and social change. To that end, the questions are stated in a clear and concise manner and relate directly to the problem statement:

1. Why are students from across the commonwealth of Pennsylvania choosing to attend an online high school?
  - a. What factors from their prior setting do students identify as having been detrimental to their learning?
  - b. What aspects of learning online did students believe would be more satisfying as compared to their prior setting?
2. How do students currently attending an online high school program describe their perceived success in the asynchronous setting?
  - c. How do the students define success and to what degree do they perceive their academic achievement and social interactions contributing to their success?

Although the identification of generative themes found in the data from the first phase were predicted to provide insights into possible modifications of questions used for the individual interviews, a preliminary set of questions was developed. A strength of grounded theory is one's ability to focus on the emergent nature of categories and themes and to modify the initial questions to address those categories in subsequent phases of data collection or analysis. I created the following questions as a preliminary draft, based upon anecdotal information from students during my 7 years as a teacher at an online high school.

1. Why did you leave your prior school?
2. As you were thinking about switching to an online school, why did you think learning online would be a better solution for your high school education?
3. How would you define success overall?
4. How would you define success in school?
5. Describe what, if anything, about taking classes online is helping you become successful in your online school?
6. Describe what, if anything, about taking classes online is not helping you become successful in your online school?
7. Could you explain why you think you are more or less successful in an online setting than you would have been in a traditional setting?
8. How comfortable were you in your prior school?
9. How safe did you feel in your prior school?
10. How were you able to connect with teachers in your prior school?
11. How is your ability to connect with teachers in an online school different?
12. Thinking about how connected you felt to other students in your prior school, describe why you feel more or less connected to other students in an online school.
13. If you had a friend or family member considering taking classes online, what would you tell him or her about your online experience?
14. Thinking about how you felt when you were in class in your prior school, describe the difference between taking classes in your prior school and this school.
15. What are other students in your online school like?

16. How are they like or unlike you?

17. What would you like to change about your current online school?

### Research Design

Often the first step of a decision entails deciding what does not work before coming to the conclusion of the best solution. In the case of research design, the goal of this study could not be addressed through a quantitative design. As Patton (2002) noted,

Such an approach (1) oversimplifies the complexities of real-world programs and participants' experiences, (2) misses major factors of importance that are not easily quantified, and (3) fails to portray a sense of the program and its impacts as a whole. (p. 59)

After determining that a quantitative design was not appropriate, I then turned to a qualitative design, which is most appropriate. In a study where the goal is not to prove a hypothesis, but rather "to derive a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of participants" (Creswell, 2003, p. 14), grounded theory is the most appropriate qualitative approach. This methodology leaves little to chance "by giving you rules for every stage on what to do and what to do next" (Glaser, 2001, p. 12) as it follows a rigorous and systematic process, from determining design to the culmination of generating theory. Beginning with a general description of the phenomenon, a researcher then moves to organizing the data into categories based upon initial emerging themes, while using participants' thick, rich description to provide further depth and insight into the categories. By the use of constant comparison between and across categories, the investigator, if thoroughly immersed in the topic, should reach a stage where analysis can lead to the final development of theory.

In doing our analyses, we *conceptualize and classify events*, acts, and outcomes. The categories that emerge, along with their relationships, are the foundations for our developing theory. This abstracting, reducing, and relating is what makes the difference between *theoretical and descriptive coding (or theory building and doing description)*. Doing line-by-line coding through which categories, their properties, and relationships emerge automatically takes us beyond description and put us into a *conceptual mode of analysis*. (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 66)

Another key tenet of grounded theory is the identification of not just the categories themselves but variations within and across categories. Patton (2002) stressed that the researcher must continue the process until the analysis moves beyond “lower-level concepts to higher-level theorizing” (p. 491), which occurs when analysis has reached saturation. Reaching saturation may require returning to the field several times to ensure that there are “no gaps or unexplained phenomena, saturation has been achieved” (Saumure & Given, 2008, p. 195) and the theory can be constructed. Once a comparison of the data is complete and commonalities and variations within generative themes have been identified, the research questions can be addressed and the goal of developing the theory based on the data comes to fruition.

In the first phase, I reviewed the limited data set provided by the school, a self-reporting survey completed anonymously by students prior to the beginning of the study, to identify stated motivations for leaving their prior school setting and their subsequent perceptions of self-defined success. The surveys provided an initial basis to identify any generative themes found in the data while addressing the research questions: Why are students from across the commonwealth of Pennsylvania choosing to attend an online high school? How do students currently attending an online high school program describe their perceived success in the asynchronous setting? At the beginning of the study, it was

not known whether survey data would address the subquestions: What factors from their prior setting do students identify as having been detrimental to their learning? What aspects of learning online did students believe would be more satisfying as compared to their prior setting? How do the students define success and to what degree do they perceive their academic achievement and social interactions contributing to their success? There are surveys at the collegiate level that identify why college students choose an online learning experience, but collegiate populations are different from those at the K-12 level. Based upon a review of the literature, no surveys were found that addressed a similar topic for use in the first phase of the present study. The archived survey, then, was the most appropriate source of data. Goldman, Crosby, Swan, and Shea (2005) described the necessity for multiple types of data to fully understand the student experience in online learning:

We propose that to understand the range of human experience in Asynchronous Learning Networks [full text not in original] (ALNs), a full range of methods also need to be employed. Researcher must strive for a variety of point of viewing (Godman-Segall 1998) the data. The *points of viewing theory* states that to fully understand teacher and learning in technology-based environments, researcher need to explore how learners and teachers design emerging learning culture by layering a variety of perspective to reach conclusions. (p. 104)

I coded the limited data set for the initial identification of generative themes as the first step in the grounded theory approach. A microanalysis of the data, “a line-by-line analysis necessary at the beginning of a study to generate initial categories (with their properties and dimensions) and to suggest relationships among categories; a combination of open and axial coding” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 57), helped guide further modification of the initial interview questions for the second phase of the study.



Arbaugh and Hiltz (2005) identified the strength of additional in-depth qualitative data in addition to a survey:

Attitudinal surveys can provide a summative overview of how and/or what students do, think, or feel about a given course, but a more detailed understanding of students' attitudes requires the use of supplementary research methods such as individual or group interviews. (p. 88)

The individual interviews addressed this need in my attempt to further elucidate students' motivation to attend an online school and their subsequent perceptions of success. Interviews with individual students provided further depth and insight into the research questions and subquestions. After initial open coding, theoretical sampling was employed prior to returning to the field to ensure that participants were representative of the sample population. This sampling will not necessarily permit generalization to a larger population. Although the inability to generalize may be seen as a weakness in an experimental study, the inverse is true for a grounded theory study:

What would be "bias" in statistical sampling, and therefore a weakness, becomes intended focus and therefore a strength. The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting *information-rich cases* for study in-depth. . . . Studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations. (Patton, 2002, p. 230)

Another benefit to theoretical sampling is the opportunity to identify multiple constructs for comparison, thus adding to the strength of the study by providing the means to create multiple comparison groups for within-method triangulation (Jick, 1979). Patton (2002) provided specific examples: "Triangulation within a qualitative inquiry strategy can be attained by combining both interviewing and observations, mixing different types of purposeful samples (e.g., both intensity and opportunity sampling)" (p. 248). To further address the generative themes identified in the limited data set, I used

theoretical sampling in interviews as I moved toward saturation, and then used criterion sampling to group participants' responses for additional comparison to ensure that students from three different academic categories were included in the data. The identification of categories based on grade point average informed creation of the criterion samples (Patton, 2002). Through criterion sampling, each student's unique situation and motivation for selecting an asynchronous high school were highlighted, and generative themes found across the data were also identified, thus elucidating the themes that cut across a diverse group of participants. This method of sampling strengthened the study by addressing the question of bias in the selection of participants. Groups were identified only as Category 1, Category 2, and Category 3. The criteria were not intended to suggest an effect caused by the setting but merely to address concerns that a single achievement group was represented in the data. The three categories allowed an analysis of the interview data from a different perspective. The school provided the categories after the students volunteered to participate in the study, and they were based on grade point average. The creation of three comparison groups methods enhanced my ability to address the research questions and describe the relationship between motivation to attend an online school and students' perception of success.

Analysis, like many steps in a grounded theory study, is a systematic process. This stage of the process includes "theoretical comparisons-systematically and creatively" (Patton, 2002, p. 490) to move from the initial identification of categories at the onset to developing theory at the culmination of the study. Implementing a rigorous method of coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) guides a researcher in generating

theoretically based interpretations of the data, possibly leading to the creation of new theory. This method includes open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Open coding identifies the concepts found in the data based on their properties, breaking them into smaller parts. Axial coding begins the process of comparing the generative themes found in the data, thus putting the data back together in a new form that presents the relationships between the themes found within categories and possibly even subcategories. In the final stage, selective coding moves the inferences made at the beginning stages of identification of themes to the culmination of the process, wherein the themes are integrated to generate theory.

#### Rationale

Critical pedagogy as the study's conceptual framework was necessary to guide me because it provided a basis for initial coding in the first and second phase, as well as a basis for the theoretical sampling in the second phase. According to Glaser (1992), "There is a need not to review any of the literature in the substantive area under study. This dictum is brought about by the desire not to contaminate" (p. 32). Goulding (1999) noted that due to the perception that the goal of a grounded theory is to "provide a fresh slant on existing knowledge about a particular social phenomenon" (p. 6), a common misconception is that this methodology requires a researcher to ignore or avoid other theories until the conclusion of the analysis. Rather than dismiss all other theories in the process, Goulding pointed out that Glaser (1978) addressed

the role of existing theory and its importance in sensitizing the researcher to the conceptual significance of emerging concepts and categories. Knowledge and theory are inextricably interlinked and should be used as if they were another informant. This is vital, for without this grounding in extant knowledge, pattern

recognition would be limited to the obvious and the superficial, depriving the analyst of the conceptual leverage from which to develop theory. (p. 7)

In this respect, critical pedagogy provided a background for initial comparisons in identifying emergent concepts and categories.

Reviewing the limited data set provided by the school in the first phase was a valid method of collecting data from this population for several reasons. First, students complete their coursework online and therefore were comfortable completing online surveys. Second, students may have been more likely to identify why they left their prior educational setting if given the anonymity of an online survey versus speaking with another individual. Third, the online survey provides responses in a convenient format. I identified any generative themes found in the individual surveys to further elucidate the phenomenological experience of asynchronous education for secondary students. Using the data gathered from the first phase to guide modification of the questions, sampling methods, and analysis of the interview data strengthened the second phase of the study.

The second phase of the study involved individual structured interviews with a sample of students to provide a more in-depth response than could be derived from a survey response, and these were an additional source of data. As Hatch (2002) stated, interviews provide a better understanding of how participants' perceptions are created, and I used them "to uncover the meaning structures that participants use to organize their experiences and make sense of their worlds" (p. 91). The interviews were recorded electronically and transcribed verbatim to ensure "that everything said is preserved for analysis" (Merriam, 1998, p. 87). Interview data provided enough depth or specific detail to corroborate the survey data and thoroughly answer the qualitative questions. Because

interviews were conducted after the initial identification of emergent themes in the first phase, any minor adjustments to the questions enhanced my ability to address the subquestions. In addition, the richness of information found in students' responses further elucidated and deepened my understanding of the data by including students whose "voices have been absent, misrepresented, or marginalized [in prior studies] and that inclusion of these voices is necessary for a rigorous research study" (Mertens, 2003, p. 142).

### Setting

The high school students invited to participate in the survey were enrolled in an asynchronous school, described herein as Asynchronous High School (AHS), in the northeastern part of the United States. As governed by the ordinances of cyber charter law, pursuant to the Act of June 29, 2002, No. 88, the school must accept students whose primary residence is within the boundaries of the commonwealth without preferential treatment for any geographic area. Students at AHS reside across the commonwealth, with the greatest concentration in the southeastern region.

The school opened in 2001, offering courses in Grades 9-12. The middle school courses were added in 2003 because many families had children in middle school and high school and wanted their children in the same school, thus expanding opportunities for students to remain in the school for the duration of their secondary schooling. Because the school is a charter school, it must follow the same regulations as all public schools in regards to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements, and it has successfully met or exceeded annual yearly progress (AYP) in the last 4 years.

At many charter schools, there is a greater fluctuation in population in comparison to traditional schools. At a school of choice, students may choose to leave the school at any time during the year to attend another school of choice or return to their local public school. Students may enroll during one of three enrollment windows during the school year. Over the last 3 years, the return rate of students at AHS has grown from approximately 15% to 40%.

### Participants

Students currently attending AHS range in age from 11 to 20 and are in Grades 6 through 12. High school students make up 386 of the 500 students; the remaining students are in Grades 6-8. Fifty-seven percent of the population is female, and 25% is identified as economically disadvantaged. During the enrollment process the high school students identified their ethnicity as follows: 88% White/Non-Hispanic, 6% African American, 2% Latino/Hispanic, 3% multiracial, and 1% Alaskan or Native American. The number of participants determines a researcher's ability to provide breadth and depth of data informing the research questions. The number of participants was anticipated to be as large as 40, which is approximately 10% of the population, but no less than 25, in order to provide enough data for adequate analysis and triangulation. Compared to the size of a sample necessary for a quantitative approach, this size may seem insufficient, but as Patton (2002) explained, "In many instances, more can be learned from intensively studying exemplary (information-rich) cases than can be learned from statistical depictions of what the average case is like" (p. 234).

### Participants' Rights

The school's chief executive officer gave me permission to contact students and parents to request participation in the study (see Appendix A). Students could volunteer to participate in the study after they and their parents signed consent form (see Appendixes B and C); all high school students were invited to participate. All written communication sent in connection with this study included my name and a statement that my role as researcher would be separate from that of my teacher or administrative roles. Informational letters for students and parents were sent both electronically through the school's e-mail system and through the mail as a hard copy. All students had the opportunity to participate, participation would not have a positive or negative effect on their grades, and there was no promise of reward for participation or repercussions for lack of participation. A student could, at any time during the study, choose to no longer participate without any pressure from me, anyone involved with the study, or any other school personnel.

Students and parents received two consent forms after they agreed to participate, one to return and one to keep for their records. After they agreed to participate and consent was granted by their parent or guardian, students were assigned a unique ID to protect their identity. IDs developed for this study were kept in a password-protected file and were accessible to me alone. The ID provided a reference number when a quotation was used in the analysis. The school identified which of the three achievement groups was most applicable to the student without providing a specific GPA. The achievement groups were labeled as Category 1, Category 2, and Category 3 in an effort to remove any

stigma, positive or negative, that a student or reader might attach to a specific level of achievement. The goal of this study was not in any way to show that the online learning environment has an effect on academic achievement. The use of achievement groups was only to ensure that a variety of students be represented, and this was accomplished by using the labels mentioned. The surveys provided in the limited data set were completed anonymously and therefore had no identifying information. Transcriptions of the interviews and any direct quotations used in the analysis include only the unique ID, such as Student 1. If any of details provided in the interview applied to less than three individuals in the school, the specific detail was blacked out to protect the participant prior to review by the external auditor or inclusion in the study.

#### Role of the Researcher

Identifying my role and acknowledging how this role could act as a possible bias is integral to gathering data. I have been a member of the teaching faculty of AHS all 8 years the school has been open. In my capacity as a faculty member, I have facilitated instruction for third-party courses, taught courses developed by the school, assisted with writing the charter renewal process, and now have some administrative duties. I am well-versed in the many versions of asynchronous learning the school has provided since its inception. Prior to the 2006-2007 school year, I also created a new enrollment process in an effort to better inform inquiring students about learning in an asynchronous environment. One step of the process includes a self-assessment of skills and learning styles to help students identify when an asynchronous environment may be less conducive to their learning relative to their prior setting. This enrollment process was



based on input from students and parents in focus groups used to inform the strategic planning process, which took place in the spring of 2005.

I am vested in the success of high school students in an asynchronous online setting as it directly relates to my chosen profession. Additionally, I have worked with many students in my classes who provided anecdotal information regarding their perceptions of the liberating effects of completing their classes online. It was imperative for the validity of this study that the data be checked for bias by someone who would not benefit from a positive or negative description of the data. An external auditor, chosen for a background in research and experience with online education, reviewed the content analysis in an effort to identify apparent bias and provide additional validity to the study. This individual, who had no leadership role in the school, also reviewed the data to ensure the analysis communicated what the participants shared as indicative of their experiences. If, in the course of auditing the data or the analysis, the auditor believed the data were misrepresented, that concern was discussed with me until both of us felt the data were properly represented and most appropriately described what participants shared in their interviews.

#### Data Collection

In this research study, the data collected from the student survey, which was created, collected, and then archived by the school prior to the inception of this study, were provided by the student support manager (SSM) after obtaining permission from the school's CEO and then given to me as a limited data set (LDS). All survey responses were anonymous and therefore had no identifying data. After the SSM provided a copy of

the data, they were kept on a computer with password protection so the data would remain secure throughout the study. Back-up copies of the data created on DVDs will be kept in a locked file in my home for 1 year after acceptance of the study, and then the DVDs will be destroyed.

Students and their parent or guardian decided where the interviews would take place. The structured interviews could either be conducted in students' homes, which is where they complete their schooling, or through an online communication tool they use daily to communicate with teachers and other students. As a faculty member since the inception of the school, I have administered numerous proctored exams and high-stakes tests in a student's home due to the student's health or an IEP accommodation. It would not have been a new experience to go into student homes to conduct interviews. All interviews were recorded digitally and kept on a computer with password protection for transcription after the interview. Prior to analysis, I replaced student names with numbers.

If a student described significant concerns based on distance to his or her home, or identified anxiety issues or scheduling conflicts, the online communication tool was used. Five of the students chose to complete the interviews face to face rather than use the online communication. Students participate in group discussions for their classes with this tool and therefore are comfortable communicating in this manner. The online communication was set up as an individual event, which requires creation of a session with a unique login and password. The online communication is similar to Voice IP, so no one else could access students' responses during the interview or after the program

had been exited. A recording of the session was created with an audio program that recorded and saved the audio file on a password-protected computer. Any copies made for backup purposes were created on DVD and will be kept locked in my home for 1 year and then destroyed.

### Analysis and Validation

Whenever the subject of a study involves human description, there will be variation, even if participants are describing the same event. Similarly, when several participants experience similar situations, each will have personal details and perceptions of his or her situation to share that are unlike anyone else's. The details found in participants' responses should allow for identification of generative themes to address the qualitative research questions. It is the detailed and rich description of the experience that is the strength of qualitative research (Creswell, 1998, 2003; Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 2002). Collecting a single type of qualitative data may not be enough. As Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggested, the grounded theory approach necessitates multiple data sources describing the same phenomenon. They defined these sources as slices of data. These sources of information, gathered through different techniques, will "give the analyst different views or vantage points from which to understand a category and to develop its properties" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 65). Multiple data points or comparison groups also provide the opportunity for synergistic analysis, or data triangulation.

The topic of analysis was described by Hatch (2002) as a means of "organizing and interrogating data in ways that allow researchers to see patterns, identify themes,

discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques or generate theories” (p. 148). The primary goal of this study was to identify themes in students’ reported motivations for choosing to leave a traditional setting and attend an asynchronous school and their subsequent perceptions of success. The generative themes identified from the initial LDS guided this process, and themes in each interview were first identified for comparison with others found in the first phase. A grounded theory approach necessitates inductive analysis to elucidate the categories and move the results from mere description of categories to development of theory.

Hatch (2002) described inductive analysis as “a search for patterns of meaning in data so that general statements about phenomena under investigation can be made” (p. 161). Grounded theory is most commonly analyzed through use of the constant comparison process (Merriam, 1998, p. 143). Trochim (2007) defined this analysis as “the iterative and sequential process used when analyzing qualitative data that involves refinement of categories and interpretations based on increasing depth of understanding” (p. 284). I used this method for analysis of both the LDS and the interviews. Glaser and Strauss (1967) described four stages in this process:

1. Create the coding categories by combing the data, starting with ideas generated by I and then refining these based on repeated instances of the category code.
2. Move from comparing common anecdotal incidents to focusing on the emergent generative themes.
3. As the theory begins to solidify, remove irrelevant categories or themes and move to higher level concepts.

4. Once the researcher has determined that the theory is fully developed, it is formally written (p.113).

In conjunction with the inductive analysis of the qualitative data, triangulation of all the data can occur.

Jick (1979) described the strength of triangulation as a means of developing more than just validity of the data because it “can also capture a more complete, holistic, and contextual portrayal of the unit(s) under study” (p. 603). Using data sources gathered at various times and from various means provides an opportunity to compare data and look for both common themes and different perspectives. “Triangulation may be used not only to examine the same phenomenon from multiple perspectives but also to enrich our understanding by allowing for new or deeper dimensions to emerge” (Jick, 1979, p. 603). Although the data may all be qualitative in nature, the insights gained can be quite different, and that is ultimately the strength of triangulation. For example, a researcher can compare data by “checking interviews against program documents and other written evidence that can corroborate what interview respondents report” (Patton, 2002, p. 55). Upon completion of triangulation, a description of the theory can be developed to answer the research questions and describe the relationship, if any, between why students choose to leave their prior school setting in favor of an asynchronous setting and their perception of success in the online learning environment.

#### Summary

The use of a qualitative design in this study with a grounded theory approach enabled a comparison of the survey and interview data in an attempt to develop a theory

to inform the educational community about further research into online learning at the K-12 level. I used best practices and strategies to identify bias, ensure that students' rights and safety were respected, and maintain the integrity and validity of the study itself. The results of the study will be included in section 4. The final section will include my interpretation of the results, how these results can be communicated to the educational community for positive social change, recommendations for further research, and a final statement on the study.

## SECTION 4: RESULTS

### Introduction

The goal of this qualitative grounded theory study was to generate theory about why students choose to attend an online high school and their subsequent perceptions of success. I used critical pedagogy as the theoretical framework to guide initial coding in both the first and second phase. Section 4 summarizes the data collection process, quality of the data, the analysis, and the findings. The identification of emergent themes took place in both the first and second phase during analysis that employed the constant comparative method consistent with a grounded theory approach. The research questions used to guide the study were as follows:

1. Why are students from across the commonwealth of Pennsylvania choosing to attend an online high school?
  - a. What factors from their prior setting do students identify as having been detrimental to their learning?
  - b. What aspects of learning online did students believe would be more satisfying as compared to their prior setting?
2. How do students currently attending an online high school program describe their perceived success in the asynchronous setting?
  - c. How do the students define success and to what degree do they perceive their academic achievement and social interactions contributing to their success?

## Data Collection

Following the grounded theory approach, as detailed in section 3, in the first phase of the study I used student responses from an archived student survey provided as a an (LDS) by the participating school to identify initial emergent themes. The second phase of the study included data from individual student interviews, detailing their perspectives and further elucidating the generative themes from the first phase. Because no existing collection instruments addressed this topic, I created an interview protocol (see Appendix G). The sample included 385 students who were currently attending an online high school program. All 385 high school students received an invitation to be a part of the study.

### *Phase 1: Limited Data Set from Student Survey*

After obtaining the necessary permissions from all parties (see Appendixes B and C), the student support manager provided access to the LDS and a description of the basis for the survey. At the end of each semester, the school requests that students anonymously complete an evaluation for each of their classes and instructors. The LDS used for this study was an additional opportunity to provide feedback on several topics at the end of the school year. Students regularly evaluate their courses, teacher interactions, peer interactions, and overall perceptions by answering multiple-choice, ordinal, and Likert scale questions in an online survey format, with the option to include additional information. The LDS used for this study included responses from 99 students regarding their overall perceptions of the online high school in several areas.



*Phase 2: Interviews*

Following approval from the academic reviewer and the Walden University IRB (approval #04-01-09-0303596), I contacted 385 students who were currently enrolled at AHS by U.S. mail and provided information about the study. Each student had the opportunity to respond that he or she would like to participate, and the mailing included a separate form for the student's parent(s) to complete. Additionally, the form included a place for students to indicate if they would prefer to complete the interview through a live webcast, which is how they participate in their classes on a regular basis, or to have the interview conducted in their homes. None of the participants chose the in-home option. In consideration for Phase 2 of the study, 32 students returned parental consent and assent forms indicating they would like to participate in the study. After receiving the signed consent and assent forms, I sent an e-mail to participants requesting that they choose a mutually convenient time for the interview. Two students said that they could not participate in the interview due to demands of their schedules. I thanked them for offering to participate and reassured them that I was grateful for their offer, even though ultimately they were not able to participate. Thirty students participated in interviews, 10 in each of three achievement categories. These categories were used as a part of triangulation of the data to provide within-method comparison and ensure that participants were not all from one achievement group.

Each interview began with a review of the information from the consent documents to ensure that participants understood their role and how to stop the interview if at any time they felt uncomfortable. Before beginning the recording, I reminded each

participant that the interview would be recorded and transcribed and that any identifying information would be removed before being reviewed by anyone other than myself. I recorded the interviews using a high-quality digital voice recorder and then personally transcribed the data verbatim. Patton (2002) pointed out that although having the recordings transcribed by a third party may save time, it removes the opportunity for a researcher to “get immersed in the data, an experience that usually generates emergent insights” (p. 441). All data with identifying information were kept secured in my home, on a password-protected computer, during coding and analysis. Prior to my sharing the data with the external auditor, all identifying data were removed from participants’ responses. The only identifiers were a number and a category, for example “student1” and “category1,” in order to protect participants’ personal information.

#### *Data Collection Tracking*

To track collection of data and how it related to the each research question and subquestion, I kept a journal of when questions were addressed, as shown in Table 1. Only one of the multiple-choice responses in the LDS related directly to the research questions, so additional comments from participants were heavily relied upon because they provided specific insights into students’ perceptions. Each survey question had a text box option marked, “Please put any comments you would like to add here.” The additional responses provided voluntarily by students in the LDS were the primary source of emergent themes in the first phase. Often the comments included insights that went well beyond the scope of the questions posed.

Table 1

*Data Collected and Relation to Research Questions*

<u>Research Question</u>	LDS Multiple Choice	LDS Open Ended	Interviews
Why are students from across the commonwealth of Pennsylvania choosing to attend an online high school?	X	X	X
What factors from their prior setting do students identify as having been detrimental to their learning?		X	X
What aspects of learning online did students believe would be more satisfying as compared to their prior setting?		X	X
How do students currently attending an online high school program describe their perceived success in the asynchronous setting?	X	X	X
How do the students define success and to what degree do they perceive their academic achievement and social interactions contributing to their success?		X	X

I created interview questions that generated responses specific to the research questions and allowed students to support their responses with further detail. After reviewing the questions and responses from the LDS in the first phase, I was able to refine the interview questions to elicit the necessary information. The data in the first phase provided the basis for initial identification of generative themes, but not the depth to compare data across achievement categories for triangulation. Using open-ended questions during the interviews in Phase 2 allowed participants to provide detailed descriptions and resulted in unanticipated statements and stories emerging, thus providing the basis for generative themes (Charmaz, 2006, p. 26). The use of follow-up questions,

or probes, ensured that participants provided responses with the depth necessary to result in thick, rich description required for qualitative analysis (Patton, 2002).

Data saturation occurred for the second phase in the first round of interviews. Participants described similar experiences, with no new ones being presented and no new themes emerging during data analysis. I tracked the experiences described in the LDS and compared them to emerging themes in the interview data, which helped identify saturation and enabled me to monitor development of themes in relation to the research questions as a part of the constant comparative method. I compared each interview to the themes identified in the prior phase, and any gaps or ambiguities were then addressed with all subsequent interviews. In this way I met the precondition of grounded theory analysis, described by Strauss and Corbin (1998) as theoretical saturation, the “point in category development at which no new properties, dimensions, or relationships emerge during analysis” (p. 143).

### *Memo Writing*

Keeping a journal during the coding process enabled me to identify repetition of developing codes and identify generative themes. Glaser (1978) stressed that memo writing, the “theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding” (p. 83), is imperative in a grounded theory study. Jotting memos in the journal enabled me to capture insights during coding that may have been lost otherwise. The journal also helped the coding process move from “lower level concepts to higher-level theorizing” (Patton, 2002, p. 491) through “conceptually raising the analytic formulation of the codes” (Glaser, 1978, p. 84). Each time I created memos

in the journal, I analyzed the relationship of the data to the codes and the code to the research questions in a conscious effort to move beyond lower-level concepts.

### Evidence of Quality

To ensure the data collected was of high quality, steps were taken at several points during the study. I focused on the purpose of the study during data collection, reflected following the interviews, and finally used triangulation (Patton, 2002). Because the goal of the study was to generate a theory rather than prove or disprove an existing theory, the foundation of the theory resulted from the thick, rich description provided by participants. This necessary depth of description cannot be reached if the data do not directly address the questions being asked. I transcribed each interview verbatim, which allowed me to reflect upon each interview and review the descriptions provided by participants for responses that directly addressed the research questions with depth.

I used an external auditor and triangulation to address the quality of the data and analysis. The triangulation of several sources minimizes bias that may occur when a single source, method, or observer makes up a study. In addition to having two independent sources of data, survey data and interviews, I included “within-method triangulation” (Jick, 1979, p. 603) by comparing responses across achievement groups.

As with all grounded theory studies, reliability of the findings hinged on how grounded the culminating theory was in the data. Glaser and Strauss (1967) pointed out that a means of developing credibility is to “use a codified procedure for analyzing data, which allows readers to understand how the analyst obtained the theory from the data” (p. 229). The codes developed for both the survey and the interviews were discussed with

the external auditor prior to her review of the data to ensure they were clear, and again after her review to address any unintended bias through word choice or connotation.

Although the lack of objectivity required for some research methods may seem like a detriment, theoretical sensitivity is quite necessary for grounded theory studies (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Glaser (1978) asserted that this sensitivity comes from one's knowledge and experience with the phenomenon being addressed. Due to my regular anecdotal exposure to the topic, the use of critical pedagogy as the theoretical framework provided the knowledge Goulding (1999) described as vital to move beyond obvious and superficial pattern recognition to develop conceptual leverage from which to generate theory (p. 7). The balance of personal immersion in the topic of online learning and the theoretical basis of critical pedagogy created a strong foundation for the beginning stages of analysis, from the development of codes to the identification of emergent themes.

#### Data Analysis

Analysis in a grounded theory study follows a specific and structured process, providing the tools for working with the vast amounts of raw data in this type of qualitative study (Patton, 2002). Glaser and Strauss (1967) emphasized that grounded theory depends on researchers fully immersing themselves in the data throughout each stage of the study so themes and relationships can emerge during the initial inductive stage and while hypothesizing about the relationships between the themes in the final deductive stage. In keeping with the constant comparative method, open, axial, and selective coding enabled me to identify categories that further defined the phenomenon and ultimately led to the generation of theory. The first step is open coding of the data.

Patton (2002) pointed out that this step is named as such to “emphasize the importance of being open to the data” (p. 454) during this stage of coding. Prior to the open coding process, I reviewed the quantitative data in the LDS to further immerse myself in the perceptions included in this portion of student responses.

#### *Phase 1: Review of the Data in the LDS*

Prior to open coding the narrative portions of the LDS, I read all responses in the survey to formulate a preliminary understanding of the data. I reviewed the multiple-choice responses to determine if any broad themes could be identified as the first step to developing the coding categories, before moving on to the open-ended responses. Survey questions 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13 were Likert-scale questions that yielded a percentage for each category (see Appendix G). With the exception of two questions, the multiple-choice answers in the survey do not directly address the research questions, because they were written and the survey conducted well in advance of this study. Although these responses did not provide data specific to the research questions, they illustrated additional insight into the thoughts, beliefs, and values held by students, thus providing an opportunity for me to become immersed in students’ perspectives.

In addition to the Likert-scale questions, the survey included two additional questions that framed the survey, one multiple choice and one ordinal. The first item on the survey, “The main reason I chose to attend school online,” related directly to the first research question, “Why are students from across the commonwealth of Pennsylvania choosing to attend an online high school?” In addition to the six choices provided on the survey, there was also an opportunity for students to create their own responses in the

form of a short answer. Results shown in Table 2 show the diversity of responses. About 28% of students chose to describe their rationale rather than selecting one of the existing responses. These responses correspond to the anecdotal information that students have shared with me during my years teaching online and were a strong basis for the interview questions.

Table 2

*Responses to Question 1 from LDS*

Response chosen	Percentage of students who responded
I had schedule conflict with the traditional schedule.	11.5%
I needed courses that were not offered at my school.	1.0%
I prefer to learn in my home.	11.5%
I prefer to learn at my own pace.	19.8%
I needed a different learning environment.	19.8%
I had concerns for my safety.	8.3%
Other, please write your response below.	28.1%

The last question, an ordinal response item, indicated that 53 of the students had a positive experience with online learning, so much so that they would recommend the school to a friend or family member considering attending an online school in the future. This response must be included in considerations of participant perception because most responses in the LDS were from students who overwhelmingly prefer online learning to their prior setting. The large percentage of students who responded positively to this item on the survey could be an indication of the halo effect (Arbaugh & Hiltz, 2005, p. 88), identified earlier in the limitations section.

The other survey item, “I feel learning online has helped me be more successful in school than my prior school,” related directly to the second research question, “How do



students currently attending an online high school program describe their perceived success in the asynchronous setting?” Table 3 reveals that 70% of students felt that learning online was at least a portion of the reason for their perceived increase in success, in that it in some way “helped” them become more successful than in their prior setting, even though 45.5 % felt “successful” in their prior school, as shown in Table 4.

Table 3

*Responses to Question 4 from LDS*

Response chosen	<i>n</i>	Percentage of students who responded
Strongly Disagree	3	3%
Disagree	6	6.1%
Neutral	20	20.2%
Agree	36	36.4%
Strongly Agree	34	34.3%

Table 4

*Responses to Question 3 from LDS*

Response chosen	<i>n</i>	Percentage of students who responded
Strongly Disagree	11	11.1%
Disagree	17	17.2%
Neutral	26	26.3%
Agree	28	28.3%
Strongly Agree	17	17.2%

These data provided insights that gave me an overall bearing on participants’ perceptions, which helped me realign the context of the questions prior to the coding process.

*Open Coding of Phase 1: Limited Data Set*

Open coding of data from the first phase began with open-ended responses provided by students in addition to or instead of the answers provided for each survey

question (see Appendix G). The coding process included using qualitative analysis software that enabled creation of codes, line-by-line coding, and preliminary comparison of data. The Text Analysis Mark-up System (TAMS) included the necessary functionality without being so cumbersome that it would have taken longer to learn the system than to complete the analysis.

The first step of coding involved creating codes, recording their definitions, and continually refining the codes during the coding process and data comparison. For example, there were initially two codes: WF to indicate that the student “wanted flexibility” in his or her schedule, and PIS to identify when students described their “prior setting having an inflexible schedule.” All these were subsequently marked with the PIS code because students who wanted flexibility made that statement because their prior setting had an inflexible schedule. I repeated this process, comparing and contrasting data from each open-ended response and identifying concepts as they emerged, until a final list of 44 codes had evolved (see Appendix J). Whenever a new code emerged, I reviewed all prior responses to determine if the new code applied to any other data. On a few occasions, the new code described the response better than the initial code, so I substituted the new one. After coding individual responses from the survey, I put responses with similar codes into visual clusters in the graphic-based software Inspiration, to move to the axial coding process.

#### *Open Coding of Phase 2: Student Interviews*

With the initial codes created during the first phase, coding the interviews began as soon as the transcription was complete. Several codes created during Phase 1 were not

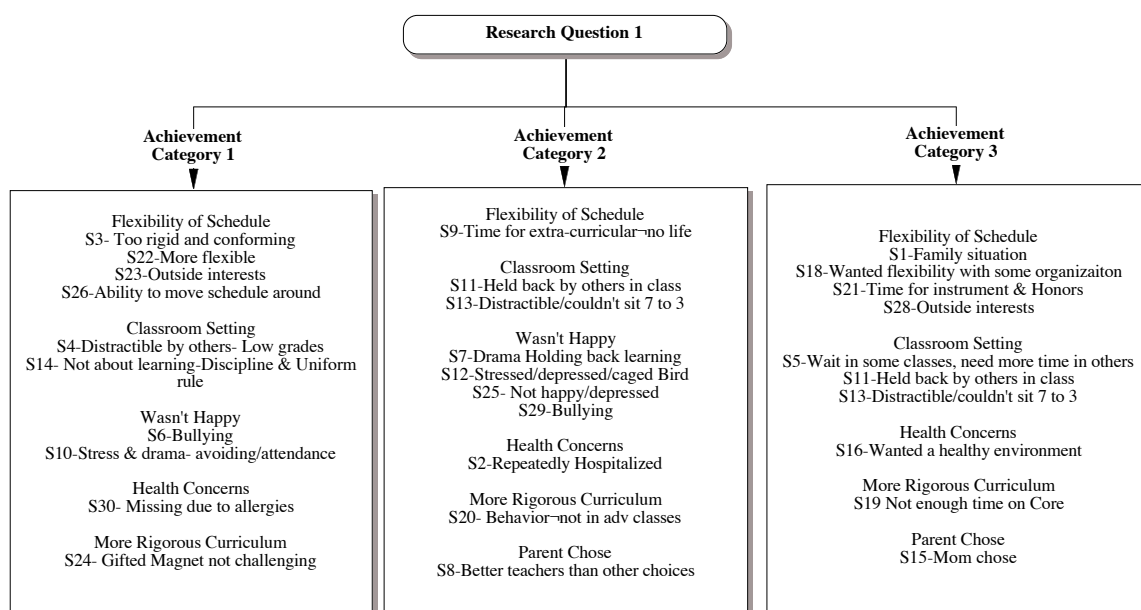
applicable to the interview responses because they were based on responses to survey questions, which were not necessarily related to the research questions. For example, the code PHS, to indicate that the student was previously home schooled, was not applicable in the interview data because that criterion would exclude a student from the study. Additionally, PD, SD, and JD referred to a question in the survey about who made the decision for the student to attend: the parent, the student, or a joint decision. Although two participants mentioned their parents' involvement in the decision to attend, none indicated that they made the decision without their parents' input, so the SD code was not used.

After importing the interviews into the TAMS database so that the transcriptions could be coded line by line, I completed open coding for each portion of the interview that addressed the research questions. I then exported the text for review by the external auditor. After discussing how the codes were created, the auditor reviewed the data for bias and provided additional input. Her comments included further delineating the characteristics relating to the classroom setting that were cause for concern when that was mentioned by the students. She revised the code "student is happier in online setting" to "student prefers online setting to traditional," and she identified repetitions in students' responses. Overall, she indicated that the codes documented what participants were communicating.

### *Axial Coding*

Axial coding followed the open coding process by "relating categories to their subcategories, termed 'axial' because coding occurs around the axis of the category

linking categories of the level of properties and dimensions” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 123). I organized the data, categorized by generative themes identified during open coding, from the LDS and the interviews in one graphic organizer. Each set of data was color-coded to distinguish its source. Data from the LDS were input as green and data from the student interviews were colored blue. A visual organization of the data from both phases allowed the beginnings of triangulation. After comparing the data from the LDS and the interviews, I compared the data across achievement groups, thus providing a third point of comparison, shown in Figure 1.



*Figure 1.* Comparison of data for research question 1 by achievement.

### *Selective Coding*

The final stage of coding, selective coding, brought together the categories developed in open coding and the relationships identified among categories in axial coding. As the final stage to mapping out the basis of a theory, I compared the data from

Phase 1 and Phase 2, clarifying the interrelations among categories and subcategories and their relations to the core category (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The selective coding process culminated as the categories came together to create the basis of a theory describing the relationship between the categories and how they emerged from the data. The core category “accounts for most of the variation in a pattern of behavior” (Merriam, 2002, p. 149). Verification of the core category was determined by reviewing each of the other categories and finding that they represented the conditions that brought about the phenomenon, in this case the migration of students from a traditional setting to an online setting. I determined that the core category was the alignment of detrimental factors of the traditional setting and perceived benefits of the online setting because neither one in isolation would have resulted in a participant’s choice to leave. This determination was further supported by the same themes emerging from the data relating to students’ perceptions of success for the second research question, thus supporting identification of the core category.

### Research Findings

This section presents the findings for both phases and the comparison across achievement groups in relation to the research questions. Phase 1 included all data from the LDS, the survey questions, and the open-ended responses. Phase 2 included participants’ interview responses. Themes identified during analysis were reduced from the original set of categories, and they addressed the research questions and subquestions.

*Analysis of Research Question 1 and Subquestions 1a and 1b*

Questions 1, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 13 from the LDS provided data supporting research question 1 and both subquestions. Given the themes that emerged during open coding of the LDS, I determined that interview questions would elicit the information necessary to answer the research questions. Interview questions 1, 2, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, and 16 drew out student perceptions related to the first research question and both subquestions.

As stated above, 99 students anonymously completed the self-reporting survey online, and the data were provided as a LDS. The data included information that related both directly and indirectly to research question 1 and subquestions 1a and 1b. Any responses that provided further insights and addressed one or more of the research questions were included in the coding process.

Each question in the survey gave students the opportunity to add comments after responding to the multiple-choice options. Students included information specific to their situation and may have addressed multiple topics in their response to the first question on the survey, “The main reason I chose to attend school online was . . . .” During open coding of the answers provided in lieu of the multiple-choice options, the themes shown in Table 5 were identified.

Table 5

*Themes Identified During Open Coding for Responses in the LDS*

Theme	<i>n</i>	Percentage of students with this response
Concerns regarding class size	1	1.9
Did not like the idea of local school/previously home schooled	3	5.5
Distractible in the traditional classroom	1	1.9
Experienced isolation in prior setting	1	1.9
Had health concerns	5	9.2
Needed a more flexible schedule/Preferred own pace	10	18.5
Negative impression of prior school	7	13
Other options were too far away	2	3.7
Parents wanted student to attend	3	5.5
Peer group related	2	3.7
Safety concerns	5	9.2
Social Issues with peers	7	13
Wanted improved curriculum options	6	11.1
Wanted to graduate early	1	1.9

Given this set of themes as well as responses to the multiple-choice items, I focused on further elucidating these responses during interviews. Using the codes developed during open coding of the LDS (see Appendix J) as a starting point, I coded student responses to question 1 of the interviews (see Table 6).

Table 6

*Themes Identified During Open Coding of Interview Question 1*

Theme	<i>n</i>	Percentage of students in this theme
Distractible in the traditional classroom	2	6.7
Had health concerns	3	10
Needed a more flexible schedule/Preferred own pace	11	36.7
Parents wanted student to attend	2	6.7
Social Issues with peers/bullying	5	16.6
Student was not happy in the traditional setting	2	6.7
Wanted improved curriculum options	5	16.6

Comparing the themes that emerged in the LDS and the interviews shows that the theme with the largest percentage in both was that of students who wanted a more flexible schedule or preferred to work at their own pace. One theme created during LDS coding and not used in coding the interviews was negative impression of prior school (NIPS). I developed this code to note when students did not identify what characteristic of the prior setting was problematic, but whatever the cause it was severe enough to result in the student looking for another educational setting. Because students completed the survey anonymously prior to the study, I could not go back and clarify with students or ask for more specific information to further delineate what caused their negative impression of the prior school. A benefit of completing the interviews in the second phase was that it allowed for further clarification of the themes discovered in the first phase and the ability to gather more in-depth insights from participants. When students gave a response that was too general during the interviews and required more focus with respect to the LDS responses, I asked for clarification in an effort to obtain the thick, rich detail necessary for a qualitative study.



After completing open coding and comparing emergent themes across both phases, I moved to the axial coding to identify relationship themes (Tables 5 and 6). This process enabled me to generate the categories shown in Table 7. Included in the table are responses from both the first and second phase that exemplify the category and provide insight into connections I made. These connections led to the formation of categories reflecting how responses from the LDS and interviews related to each other. Each category's label derives from the salience of responses about why students left the traditional setting.

Table 7

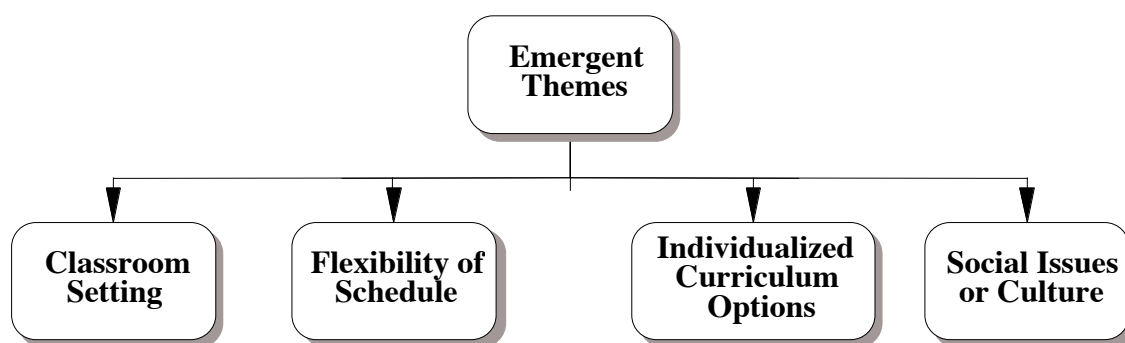
*Categories Created During Axial Coding*

Category	Phase	Sample responses
Classroom setting	1	I wanted to work at my own pace. I hated how big the classes were at my old school. I was very ill at some points and my grades were really suffering.
	2	There were too many distractions in the classroom and I wasn't doing the work. I felt that I couldn't learn really, there was just too much drama and it was holding my learning back. I left my prior school because I was having health problems and was repeatedly hospitalized and regular school was becoming a problem because I could not keep up with the workload.
Need for flexible schedule	1	I am a serious precollege classical musician and needed more time and flexibility for practice and lessons.
	2	I felt there was a lot more that could be had if I was in a situation where I could move my schedule around more and have more time for other things. I just didn't have time to do the whole 8 to 3 kind of thing for school and the cyber school is just so much more flexible.
Individualized curriculum options	1	I needed courses that were not offered at my school. My school was too concerned with athletics and not enough with academics.
	2	I went to a school for the gifted and I was still really bored in school and they couldn't offer me anything other than what they were offering me.
Social issues/culture	1	To stop being bullied. I did not like the situation of being overweight and going to gym class. My mom didn't like the schools around my house.
	2	The reason I left the traditional school originally was because of bullying and I got really tired of coming home every day basically in tears. I wasn't happy and when I'm not happy, I'm not happy and people see it.

During selective coding the external auditor and I discussed the category of flexible schedule and pace. After deliberating, we determined that the desire for a more flexible schedule was related to the time of day or amount of time per day that students wanted or needed to have for school, whereas the pace at which a student wanted to learn was an instructional issue. I then focused on clarifying the difference between restrictions of the classroom and a need for a more individualized curriculum.

#### Emergent Themes for Research Question 1 and Subquestions 1a and 1b

All themes identified during selective coding relating to Research Question 1 fell within one of the categories shown in Figure 2, with no discrepant cases. These themes represent reasons students left a traditional setting to attend an online high school. The same themes emerged during selective coding of the data relating to subquestions 1a and 1b as well.



*Figure 2.* Visual chart of the four emergent themes.

To best describe how each theme emerged from the experiences described in both the LDS and the interviews, I decided to present the findings by theme because the two subquestions help deconstruct the first research question. I was not surprised that data relating to the subquestions fell within the same themes without any discrepant cases. In

fact, the lack of discrepant cases further corroborated the strength of the themes identified during selective coding.

*Emergent Theme 1: Classroom Setting*

A thread found throughout descriptions provided by students in the LDS and interviews, as well as across achievement categories, was their experiences in the classroom setting itself. Each interviewee mentioned experiences from the classroom, although they had different perceptions about the impact of the classroom setting on their learning and success. During several interviews, students blurred the line between the impact of the daily schedule, the pace of instruction in the classroom, and the presence of others in the classroom, which required me to request further clarification. It was important that any overlap in responses be defined clearly in the analysis.

The emergent theme of classroom setting represents how participants noted the effect of physical space in the classroom affecting their learning. Within this theme were several subthemes that emerged during analysis, and I determined during axial coding that they were related in that students perceived that these phenomena would diminish when they were no longer in a traditional classroom setting. The subthemes were the number of students in the classroom and the effect that had on teachers' ability to provide instruction, on distractibility in the classroom, and on restrictions on students' behavior due to being in the same physical space. These subthemes provide further insight into how I identified the relationships across categories to identify the emergent theme of classroom setting.

### *Limited Data Set*

Responses from students in the first phase were communicated through multiple-choice responses as well as comments offered in addition to the given choices. Although the first question on the survey did not include classroom setting as a choice, several students indicated that classroom setting was the main reason they left the traditional setting. In response to the question in the LDS, *The main reason I chose to attend school online was*, students' responses fell into two subthemes: number of students in the classroom and distractibility in the classroom setting.

Rather than listing only the portions of the traditional setting they found detrimental, most survey respondents mentioned things they believed would be more satisfying compared to the prior setting. Several answers revolved around restrictions in the traditional classroom on a teacher's ability to interact with students individually as well as at a mutually convenient time and not be dictated by the number of other students in the room.

*Number of students in the classroom.* In response to the question about reasons for attending school online, one student stated, "I hated how big the classes were at my old school. I wanted to be home and away from kids that I believe were hurting my progress." Another referred to the classroom and the number of students: "My urban school had a lot of maintenance issues and overcrowding in the classrooms." Students might believe that having fewer students in the classroom would be more conducive to learning, but to one student there was a feeling of alienation in a smaller class setting: , "The previous school I was in kept me 100% isolated from other students, and somewhat

isolated from the teachers. I decided that anywhere was better than that school, and I'm very happy with this one.”

Components of the classroom setting that students cited as detrimental in the LDS related directly to the classroom as a group environment, due to the number of students in the setting. Students also described how this educational approach diminished the learning process for them. LDS responses focused on time spent in the classroom and the fact that the setting required teachers to manage based on needs of the group as a whole. One student responded, “It did waste a lot of my time.” Another student commented on how the teacher managed time during the class and the effect that had on learning: “Sometimes it started really late; then we had no time to go over things, but then sometimes it [started] really early and half the class wasn't awake.”

*Distractibility in the classroom.* Responses in this subtheme focused on how students perceived the setting as disruptive to learning due to other students in the room. Said one, “I knew I wouldn't do well with all the distractions that come with attending a traditional school.” For some students the classroom itself posed a threat to their learning because it affected their health. “I am chemically sensitive and being in a public school would have made me sick all the time,” said one, “and the area was making me sick.” The remaining student responses that referenced health concerns addressed the need for flexibility in the pace at which they completed their work and therefore are not included in this theme.

*Restrictions on learning due to limited time.* In an online setting students perceived an increase in their opportunity to interact with teachers one on one, rather than

having to wait for the class as a whole to be ready for the information. One student said, “I know the teachers are always there to help me when I need it,” and another student said, “The teachers make it a better experience by being there when the students need them.” Another student felt a connection to teachers: “Above all, the teachers are awesome and everyone here just wants to help you succeed as much as you do, and they help you so much along the way.” Even in the LDS, without benefit of clarifying questions, students seemed to suggest that it was the classroom setting itself that inhibited teachers’ ability to work with them individually, suggesting that the detriment was the physical classroom setting and not the teacher.

#### *Student Interviews*

Similar to LDS responses, several interviewees said their primary reason for leaving a traditional school was the classroom setting. These students voiced concerns related to the limitations a classroom puts on teacher interaction, their own distractibility in the classroom, and restrictions on behavior due to being in the same physical space. The categories became subthemes and supported the emergence of the theme itself.

The depth of responses by interviewees allowed me to further delineate the specific reasons students reported about what they considered detrimental in the traditional classroom setting. Akin to the LDS, interviewees mentioned the degree to which the group as a whole dictated the use of instructional time. The perceived negative effect that the traditional classroom setting had on their ability to receive productive instruction was the most common detriment cited by students in this theme.

This emergent theme also reflected how students thought the online learning environment would address aspects of the traditional classroom they found detrimental, thus providing a more satisfying learning experience. I included responses that referenced the number of students in the classroom, distractibility in the classroom, restrictions on behavior due to being in the same physical space, and teachers' ability to provide instruction in the classroom setting as a group environment. In both the LDS and the interviews, students identified ways the online setting reduced the impact of these situations.

Not surprisingly, students who identified problems with the classroom setting as their primary reason for leaving the traditional setting also described aspects of the online learning environment that alleviated or ameliorated the classroom setting's negative characteristics. Areas addressed in interview data centered on the increase in teacher communication due to removing time constraints and other students in the classroom, the reduction in distractions, and the ability of students to spend time learning in the way they determined most productive rather than what was best for all learners in the classroom.

*Number of students in the classroom.* Student 17 said that other students in the setting inhibited the learning process, which mirrors a statement in the LDS. This student also said that an increase in teacher interaction was the primary reason for leaving the traditional setting:

The teachers were very inaccessible and we felt that our education should be more hands on and that is why we came here. We heard from another student that it was hands on, and in a traditional setting there are a lot more kids per class at a time,



synchronously, so the teacher has less time to address individual needs which I think is very important in learning.

Although this was the only participant in the interviews who gave this rationale as the primary reason for leaving the traditional setting, many mentioned this characteristic as a benefit of learning online.

According to Student 12, some teachers had “hundreds of students and didn’t have the time or energy to give you all the attention you needed so you may be able to fit in a 10-minute study hall with them before the day begins.” Student 8 did not experience a connection with teachers in a traditional classroom setting “because you are there with all those other students. You might be able to connect with them once or twice in the hall, but it’s ever the real one on one.” Although other students might flourish in the group setting and develop a connection with their teachers, these students did not experience the positive aspects of the face-to-face classroom and felt that teachers in the traditional setting did not “have time because they’re a teacher and they have all these other kids to tend to. So, the issue was not having time for just one person” (Student 25). These students seemed compassionate towards the limitations on teachers’ time. As Student 3 pointed out, “They have a lot of kids, they have large classes, and it was pretty difficult to specifically have a working relationship or anything with them.” Student 13 said that he saw a difference in a few of his teachers:

I’d say the majority of teachers were just there to teach and didn’t really connect with the students. They were just kinda in and out, but there were a few here and there that really took interest in what I had going on and were willing to come out to school events and support me.

Students' understanding of the situation did not reduce the frustration it caused them. As Student 2 emphasized, "It did seem a little frustrating because there were so many other kids. You had to wait your turn, which was a little frustrating because usually you were working on some kind of deadline." Student 18 voiced the most despondent response when asked how she was able to connect with the teachers in her prior school: "I can't remember ever wanting to connect with them." Student 7 said that she was not progressing due to the classroom setting:

It all plays into the whole. I was getting held back in the class by other students so I thought I needed more one on one time with the teachers and not have to worry about, "Oh I can't talk to the teacher now."

*Distractibility in the classroom setting.* In his response to the first question, Student 4 focused on how the classroom seemed to affect his motivation and behavior:

There were too many distractions in the classroom, and I wasn't doing the work because I'd rather sit there and talk with my friends. I didn't do the homework that was brought home because I'd rather go outside, and then I just started to fail because I wasn't paying attention in class.

Conversely, Student 14 found the behavior of other students and the subsequent response by the teacher a distraction that served as the impetus for her to leave the traditional setting:

[My prior classroom setting] wasn't about the learning; it was about this and that. It was making sure kids weren't hurting each other and that kids were obeying the uniforms rule. I wanted that education where I was actually learning something, not just obeying rules or this or that or the other thing, and that was what we knew we could get from being online.

Unlike other students in this subtheme, Student 19 implicated the classroom setting as distracting from her learning by having a direct effect on her health: "One of the big draws that cyber school had for me personally, was that I had some

hypersensitivities, like a kind of allergy to the building or like several buildings and environments. Among those environments is the school building.” Her statement corresponds with those of students from the LDS who mentioned similar reactions to the classroom environment and that it detracted from their learning.

Student 3 commented that the prior setting “just wasn’t working” for him, and he described how the classroom setting was more distracting than engaging. When asked to expand, he replied that “in the normal classroom, [the teachers] only talk to you if there’s a problem or if you did something wrong” and that classes for him often meant “messaging around for 30 minutes in a 45-minute class. You know getting yelled at like you’re not working and that wasted a lot of time, listening to your teacher drone on about something that’s unnecessary or [not] specific.” Student 7 voiced concerns about the amount of time spent on discipline because teachers had to be “too worried about keeping the class quiet and everybody would just talk and talk over the teacher. I couldn’t really connect with the teachers because they didn’t really have much teaching time.” Ultimately, this led to an overall feeling of frustration because she found “the atmosphere wasn’t right for me and I’d be trying to learn while everyone else was goofing off and stuff like that.” The behavior described by Student 7 may not have seemed quite so significant or disruptive to others in the room, but they were to her. Student 1 echoed similar sentiments regarding the behavior of other students and how it detracted from her learning:

The classes in a traditional school, more than half of it was disciplining the other children and not actually teaching it and then rushing through it and then giving you a whole bunch of homework. Sometimes I would be able to get a minute or two after class to talk to them.

Student 19 found, like Students 7 and 1, that others in the classroom influenced her learning environment. She shared her perception of how other students created a positive or negative environment: “Who you were around created your environment. In the bricks-and-mortar setting teachers spent a lot of time doing discipline, and I feel like the focus wasn’t as personalized.” The frustration experienced by both students and teachers was something Student 27 picked up on in her prior setting:

Learning from teachers that were more about when you’re in a brick-and-mortar school there are so many other things that you have to deal with. The teachers were so fed up with the system that many didn’t care, and I was absolutely miserable.

Student 4 realized that he needed an online learning environment because it would help him focus on his learning rather than distractions in the classroom: “I could sit at home and there wouldn’t be anyone around me to talk to me and get me distracted so I would be able to do my work.” For some students, a collaborative classroom environment is critical for learning, but Student 25 viewed the reduction of peripheral interaction as beneficial:

You are not around people all the time; it’s not distracting. If you have 20 kids in a room, trying to take a test, someone's tapping their pencil or tapping their feet and then I can’t concentrate. Now I can take a test in my room and you know, nobody’s bothering me, because the teacher isn’t there looking over your shoulder at what you’re doing. It’s much better than my old school.

Student 6 also realized that her distractibility would be minimized once she moved to learning in the online setting:

I can pay attention a lot more in an online class than in a traditional school. It was very easy for me to turn from having distractions throughout the entire day and having homework to bring home and spending 2 to 3 hours on schoolwork to being more focused.

In these examples, students found the online setting much less distracting and therefore more beneficial to their learning than was the traditional setting.

*Restrictions on student behavior.* Student 13 described the limitations the traditional classroom put on his ability to move around as needed, in addition to distractibility, as his primary reason for leaving a traditional setting:

I was having trouble with being able to sit still and deal with being in a classroom all day, from 7 to 3. I was having trouble staying organized and trying to keep up with that many classes at one time. I thought it would be easier to keep it organized, easier to manage everything; that was like one of the main reasons I was looking into the school.

He understood that his need to move around while learning could not be met without causing distractions for other students.

Given the nature of the classroom and the need to control students' behavior, Student 24 had difficulty not being able to get up and move when necessary: "I was not comfortable because of the type of learner I am. If I need to fidget, I need to fidget."

Student 28 also described problems in this respect:

I was pretty uncomfortable. I'm not really antiauthority. I don't really act out, so I didn't get in trouble in school, but I know my teachers didn't appreciate me constantly getting up, getting tissues, doing this, doing that, I'm hungry, I'm this, I'm that. I drove them crazy.

These students found the restrictions detrimental and realized that learning in an online environment would allow them to participate in classes without creating a distraction by moving around physically while learning.

*Restrictions on learning due to limited time.* Both teachers and students share the frustration of not being able to accomplish what needs to be completed in the time

allotted in a classroom setting. This frustration may manifest as acute anxiety for some students, such as what Student 4 experienced:

At my old school there's a lot of notes, and sometimes there'd be an unexpected test the next day, and it made me feel terrible. I was terrible at tests at my old school because I put myself under a lot of pressure to pass, and then I ended up failing anyway.

He found that the time constraints added stress that negatively affected his ability to demonstrate what he had learned. The teachers could not change the anxiety Student 4 felt while testing, the number of students in the classroom, or the amount of time allotted for each class period.

One area teachers can directly affect is the most common method of direct instruction used in the traditional high school setting: the use of lecture. Student 14 pointed out a flaw she found with this method:

When you go to a brick-and-mortar school, your teacher's at the front, they are talking, and they're showing you. You can raise your hand and say, "Wait, I don't understand," but you can't at the end of the day sit back down in that seat and hit rewind and watch your teacher do it again.

She realized that as a learner she needed different access to the instruction than could be provided in a traditional classroom.

Student 17 described how she thought greater teacher interaction in the online environment and the removal of strict times allotted in a traditional classroom setting would have a positive effect overall:

You should have an individualized learning plan, and this school has teachers that could talk to you and work with you and guidance counselors that could sculpt a plan for you. It was very attractive. I was very comfortable [in the traditional setting], got along well with my teachers and other students, but academically in the school we had some issues. I was never hesitant to ask questions, but the communication in cyber is better. Communication-wise it's a lot better where we

are now; there's so many more means to communicate and without the time constraints.

She then went on to express how the online environment allows for asynchronous learning and its effects on her learning:

There's a lot less pressure in cyber learning. With brick and mortar you have very set times for finishing your work, and I don't think there's that rush, so you can spend time on assignments as you see fit. If you are really interested in a topic you can really go above and beyond and spend a lot of time on it, and if it's not your forté you can decide to do that assignment and move to something you're more interested in. I think having that control helps you to stay focused on what you want in learning.

Like Student 17, Student 9 felt there was a disconnect between how she preferred to spend her time learning and how her time was scheduled in her prior setting: "When I do work in this school I am actually doing work 100% of the time, whereas in a traditional school there was a lot of time [wasted]." Student 9 did not define the time in the traditional setting as time off task by other students or time spent in an instructional method that did not benefit her learning, such as lecture or group discussion, but either instance would support her response in this theme.

Student 23 identified the advantage she saw in learning online as being able to interact with her teachers outside traditional classroom hours: "The teachers would pretty much always be available. They have night hours and I could go to them regarding homework or anything like that." When asked about his connection with teachers, Student 4 compared the traditional and online settings in regards to his ability to communicate with his teachers, as well as regarding his comfort level:

If I asked to go down at the end of the day I was comfortable, but if they wanted me to come down I'd be a little bit uncomfortable. [Online] if I had a question I

just e-mail to them instead of second-guessing whether I want it answered or not. I like going into their virtual offices and texting them in there.

Student 1 also felt that her ability to work with teachers would be increased in the online setting compared to the traditional setting:

Sometimes I would be able to get a minute or two after class to talk to them, but I know the teachers online here so much better. Because I always tend to be more quiet and they [teachers in the traditional setting] don't pay attention to the quiet ones; they pay more attention to the problem children making loud noises and paper airplanes and stuff. I kinda got ignored.

Based upon the description of interactions in the traditional classroom by Student 1 and others in this theme, it is clear that they felt the online setting would allow further opportunities to connect with teachers. The reduction of time constraints and increased availability to work with the students one on one increased students' satisfaction, not only regarding availability but also a sense of attachment.

#### *Triangulation of Data for Emergent Theme 1: Classroom Setting*

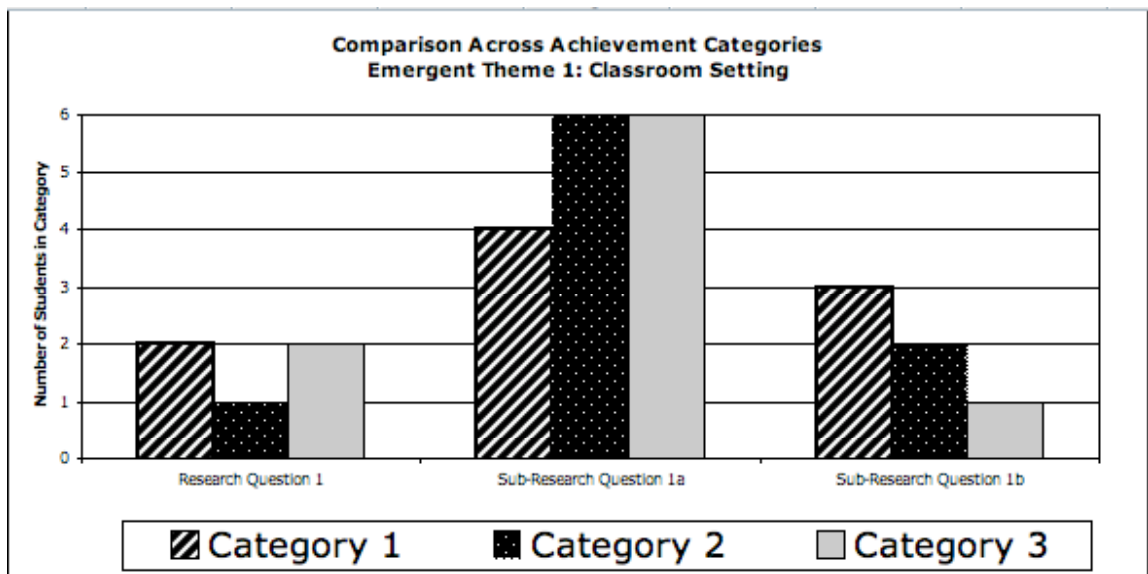
Repetition of evidence from the LDS, interviews, and across achievement categories supported the creation of this theme. Students described how characteristics of the traditional classroom setting provided the impetus to move to an online learning environment. In response to subquestion 1a, students in the LDS and interviews described how they perceived the classroom setting as a detriment in their prior setting. Data from subquestion 1b included further supporting information relating how students believed the online setting would provide a more satisfying experience.

Within this emergent theme, data detailed why students chose to leave the traditional setting, citing specific push and pull factors that led to their ultimate migration to the online setting. This theme emerged from the data and supported the core category



in that students left the traditional setting due to restrictions of the classroom and the perception that characteristics they found detrimental (number of students in the classroom, distractibility in the classroom setting, restrictions on students' behaviors, and restrictions on learning due to limited time available) could be alleviated by attending an online high school.

To further corroborate the data, I used achievement categories as a means of within-method triangulation to address bias and the possibility of a halo effect. As shown in Figure 3, students from each achievement category were represented in this emergent theme. As noted above, achievement categories are not identified as high, medium, and low because I had no intention to show any correlation between the online environment and subsequent academic success.



*Figure 3.* Comparison of data for emergent theme 1: Classroom setting by achievement group.

### *Emergent Theme 2: Flexible Scheduling*

Students at the university level began to acknowledge the convenience and take advantage of attending online schools in the late 1990s (Hiltz & Wellman, 1997, p. 32). The online option has not been available to public school students for that long, but the opportunity is becoming more prevalent across the United States. The theme of desiring flexible scheduling was repeated throughout the LDS, in several questions from the interviews, and across achievement categories.

The emergent theme described as flexible scheduling focused on why students chose the convenience of learning online. For several, learning online instead of in a traditional setting was a need more than a want. Statements fell into three groups, which made up the subthemes: those whose personal goals created a conflict with the traditional school schedule, students whose health necessitated a more fluid approach to learning, and a group who found the traditional schedule too rigid.

Students repeatedly cited the need for a flexible schedule as at least part of their reason for choosing an online learning environment for their high school education. Even those who did not mention that need as a primary reason for leaving a traditional setting did include various characteristics of the traditional schedule as a detriment to their learning. The focus of this theme revolved around the restrictions of a traditional schedule because they conflicted with students' ability to pursue personal goals, maintain a consistent pace in their studies, or be free from a rigid schedule.

Research regarding learning online at the collegiate level frequently cites the flexibility it affords as one of the greatest benefits, and students in this theme reiterated

that as well. Although the similarities between online learning at the postsecondary and online secondary levels are scarce in the literature, this is one area where they seem to parallel. For those at the secondary level, learning online provides a solution to conflicts associated with students' ability to pursue personal goals, attend to familial responsibilities, or maintain a consistent pace in their studies due to health concerns.

The question in the LDS that provided data related to this theme was "My prior school's daily schedule was a problem for me." Most responses in the open-ended option were phrased to communicate how the schedule was detrimental; these relate most directly to subquestion 1a. One response in the LDS indicated how the online setting provided a more satisfying option: "I did like how I was able to wake up at 8:00 rather than 6:00 thanks to [this school]." This response falls into the subtheme relating to students who found the traditional schedule too rigid.

#### *Limited Data Set*

The online school students attended at the time of the study was originally created to address the need for an educational alternative for this population: dancers, performers, those who had begun professional careers, and students with illnesses that necessitated extended stays in the hospital. Representatives of this group are clearly documented by the examples provided in the LDS. Also included in the LDS are students with health issues and how those issues affected their ability to function in a traditional high school setting.

Finding time to balance the responsibilities in their lives is a skill students mentioned. In certain instances they illustrated why a flexible schedule was imperative by

expanding on their responses to the multiple-choice questions in the LDS, and data for those student are included in this theme.

*Conflict with traditional schedule due to personal goals.* The demands of students in highly competitive fields are vast, from training during the day to persistent travel: “I do gymnastics and can travel while doing school [online].” “I am a serious precollege musician, and I needed more time and flexibility for practice and lessons.” “I am involved in rodeo and am a singer/songwriter, so I needed to be able to do my schoolwork whenever it fits my schedule because of my hectic rodeo schedule and performances.” One student who provided additional information for this question in the LDS described his need to support his sibling: “My brother wanted someone to do it with him, and since I was more in tune with school than he was, he thought I could motivate him to finish his school too.” These students clearly exemplified the needs of this population and were the basis for the initial generation of this subtheme.

The following example from the LDS clearly demonstrates how personal goals conflicted with a traditional schedule: “I had a lot of trouble finding enough time to practice because of a long commute and hours spent in the school building.” Another student told of missing important instructional time: “I was always leaving school early because of having to leave for a rodeo performance.” These students needed to adjust their daily routine on a regular basis, but other students mentioned that beginning and ending times were more the issue. The only student in the LDS to define the schedule in terms of goals related to a familial situation said that the traditional schedule became a problem after the father’s death:

It was a big problem for me because after my dad died, I did not like the fact that I could not be at home for my sister when she got home and I could not help my mom get things done through the day that she could not do herself since she was at work.

*Conflict with schedule due to health issues.* Students with health issues often require unusual solutions to help them work around their illness in order to master course content. It is difficult to see young people struggle with managing their pain and treatments, while somehow trying to find the importance of completing school assignments. In light of their health issues, mastery of the educational standards may have seemed less than important, but students showed dedication to their education and focused on getting well while achieving their academic goals.

The unpredictable nature of illness created a unique challenge for these students. They had to be incredibly productive on the good days to give themselves time in the future, just in case: “I was very ill at some points at school and my grades were really suffering.” “I had a thyroid problem and it [traditional school] wasn’t working.” Fortunately, the number of severely ill students was not large, but there were students, in addition to those mentioned above, who had medical issues that were disruptive to the traditional schedule, such as the student who said, “I had sleeping problems and couldn’t get up early.”

*Student found traditional schedule too rigid.* One student succinctly responded that he or she was “not a morning person.” Another tied the schedule to achievement: “Going to public school obviously means waking up early. I did not do well with having to wake up so early and get to school. I found myself struggling because I was tired in my morning classes.” These responses showed the degree to which the daily schedule itself

contributed to students' decision to attend an online high school, but further detail was needed to explore the various aspects of this theme.

### *Student Interviews*

Patton (2002) described the importance of having participants that provide exemplary cases in relation to the area of study because “more can be learned from intensively studying exemplary cases than can be learned from statistical depiction of what the average case is like” (p. 234). Students in this emergent theme provided data that mirrored data in the LDS, indicating that the theme was appropriate. In addition, students offered substantial information that supported all three subthemes.

Consistent with data in the LDS, several students detailed characteristics of the traditional schedule they found detrimental. The only subtheme represented in the data for subquestion 1a related to how students felt the traditional schedule was too rigid. Although it seemed unusual that few students mentioned the traditional school schedule as a detriment, others addressed the schedule in other sections of the interview.

Students grouped in this theme had several reasons for leaving a traditional school: to find a more flexible setting to pursue their goals, as a result of health concerns, or because they were looking for an educational environment that provided them with more time for both learning and meeting their other needs. In subquestion 1b participants stated their original perceptions about why they felt the online setting would be more satisfying. In the interviews, students often included additional insights gained after working in an asynchronous environment.

*Conflict with traditional schedule due to personal goals.* A great reward of the educational profession is the ability to support students as they find and embrace their passions, but supporting students is difficult when their passion has little to do with the areas addressed in the scholastic setting, and even more problematic when a passion requires one to spend more time outside school than working on classes. Asynchronous learning environments are inherently more flexible than a traditional setting because they are not bound by time and location, which opens up a number of options for students who have found and are pursuing their passions. When asked why she chose to leave her prior school, Student 24 said,

The reason was because of dancing. I wanted to spend more time on that because that was what I was interested in, and I wanted to see if I could make a career out of it. Normal school wasn't offering me that option, the option to take morning classes, and any type of flexibility really wasn't an option at my prior school.

Likewise, Student 23 found that she needed more flexibility, as well as being more focused on her future career than others in her prior school:

I am pursuing my career interests, and I just didn't have time to do the whole 8 to 3 kind of thing for school. The cyber school is just so much more flexible, the hours, for me. I focus on my academics and my career. I'm not gonna focus on partying and doing illegal things that could possibly ruin my career.

Student 21 described needing substantially more time than he could find while attending a traditional school. He also described how the attempt to juggle his time and the demands of his prior school with his passion affected him emotionally:

I need hours and hours of practice for each instrument, and because of the intensity of the public school I was in and the intensity of the classes I was taking, because my parents still expected me to get good grades and such in honors classes, I really didn't have time to practice. For a person who loves music as much as I do, it was really difficult both emotionally and stress-level-wise to have my teachers saying, "You know you need to practice, you need to finish this many

pieces this month, and you have a recital here and a competition here.” It would just go from four honors tests to a weekend full of concerts and recitals that I had barely enough time to prepare for because I had been working so hard at school. It’s a really unhappy environment and very cookie cutter. I didn’t like feeling like a number rather than an individual student. We’d have a free period in gym or health, and I’d ask to go to a practice room because I had a Brahms piece or something to prepare, and they wouldn’t let me go because they either didn’t trust the fact that I was going to go practice and thought I’d go smoke outside or something, or they didn’t have the respect for what I was trying to do. That was really depressing: to either not be trusted or not feel like you were appreciated as an individual, and also I found myself more and more really questioning the basic roots of this public education system that we have set up in America, where everyone takes the same classes and these same courses and all that stuff. I was not happy.

Student 21 mentioned the toll his practice time and school work took on him and that it left very little time for anything else. Balancing the time necessary to excel in areas such as dance, music, and other pursuits that require intense practice schedules was difficult for these students. Similarly, Student 9 said that her schedule left her feeling isolated:

I left for a number of reasons. First of all, I really didn’t feel like I fit in because of my extracurricular activities. I was busy every night from directly after school until very late, and that really didn’t offer me very much time to have a social group.

The students in this theme placed more emphasis on their need to find enough hours in the day to meet all the demands on their time than on being uncomfortable with the structure of the traditional school day.

Student 12, a highly competitive performing vocalist, said, “It really was perfect in the way it sort of met every need of a person who was in my situation, which was it gave a very flexible schedule.” Student 15 voiced the same perception. She liked the idea that she “would be able to stay home and have the flexibility of not having to go to school



on a set schedule,” in addition to allowing her parents to be more involved “somewhat if they wanted.” Student 28 needed a flexible schedule in order to pursue dancing as a profession, but unlike Student 15, who wanted her parents to be more involved, she wanted highly qualified teachers to oversee her educational growth:

I think cyber schooling seemed like a good option for me because it was certified teachers, people who were certified in those areas, who knew everything, actually teaching my classes as opposed to my mother, who obviously is not a certified science teacher.

Student 18 also referred to needing some guidance and support, along with the freedom that can be had in her cyber classes: “I needed the deadlines; stuff wasn’t getting done, but I wanted to be able to work at my own pace and have the flexibility with my schedule.”

In addition to the ability to alter her schedule beyond the bounds of the traditional school day, Student 21 described her desire to find a setting where her other interests and goals were acknowledged:

[This school had] teachers who understood that there are things outside of my academic courses that were going on that also needed priority. It cut out the pointless busy work that for whatever reason is in a public high school. The prospect of not having to be in such a standardized system, where in fact even though its not face to face all the time, it’s a lot more personalized.

These students found that their ability to adjust the daily schedule to meet their personal goals created a more satisfying learning environment. As Student 21 noted, she experienced an unexpected benefit of feeling validated in her choices as well as being able to address her goals.

*Conflict with schedule due to health issues.* Two students in this theme referred to needing a more flexible schedule in connection with health issues. Unlike students who

had a reaction to the building or the setting itself, student 2 left the traditional setting because he could not keep up with the work as a result of repeated hospital stays: “I left my prior school because I was having health problems and was repeatedly hospitalized, and regular school was becoming a problem because I could not keep up with the workload.” Having the freedom to determine his own schedule allowed Student 2 to find and pursue new interests rather than spending his free time making up work he missed while being out of school due to his health. Student 30 described why he left his prior school and the positive effect learning online had on his health:

I was missing a lot of school due to illness. I would have to leave early maybe three out of the five school days in a week because of health issues. Being at home, I was able to do the work without getting these terrible headaches and other health-related issues. That was why we looked at cyber school in the beginning.

Student 2 thought working at a consistent pace online would be more satisfying, due to his health concerns, but he also found he was able to do more than just keep up after adjusting to the flexible schedule:

I thought it [learning online] would be better because if I was hospitalized I could still do school work and I wouldn't have to worry about falling so far behind that it would be a problem later catching up, and working at my own pace seemed like a really fun idea. I've been able to pursue musical interests in the day, and I can make up work at night if I missed any. And just like the start time and end time, I really use it to my advantage.

In each of these cases students chose to leave a traditional setting for the online setting to find increased flexibility in their schedules. For some, this freedom allowed them to focus more on their passion, whereas others identified a need to have more say in how and when they learn. Several participants that did not include this as their primary reason for choosing to attend an online school did cite this characteristic as a benefit.

*Student found traditional schedule too rigid.* Students described their frustrations with the rigidity of the daily schedule. Unlike the professions and real-world experiences they may have after graduation, students in a traditional school setting often spend their day following a given schedule, moving from class to class, most often at the signal of a bell. All professions have required tasks that must be completed at a specific time or within a given range, but there is usually some input on the part of the individual. Even though teachers follow the same daily schedule as their students, they have a greater sense of control over their daily schedule because they determine the activities that occur within that structured time. To some students this routine is comfortable and creates a sense of rhythm, but for the students in this subtheme the traditional schedule was anything but comforting. Student 3 said he left his prior school

because it was too rigid and conforming for me. It was getting up at the same time every morning, having everything working in the same sequence, and the people not being very flexible with what you turned in and when you turned it in, that type of thing.

Student 1 focused even more on her perceptions of the monotonous daily routine when asked why she left her prior setting:

Oh gosh, everything. Well first of all, getting up at 5:30, driving to the carpool, and then going straight to school was like really exhausting. And the whole 9 hours, have to do this, lead around like cattle thing really didn't work.

Student 22 chose an online school to “basically have a more flexible schedule.”

Student 5 said, “My home district isn't very good, and I like being able to be flexible and like being able to do school whenever I want, not having to go everyday at a set time.”

Rather than looking at her prior setting as a negative experience, Student 26 looked at the online experience as a possibility to expand her horizons:

I felt that there was a lot more that could be had if I was in a situation where I could move my schedule around more and have more time for other things. I mean it's a lot more direct learning: what I need to know and getting done what I need to get done as opposed to just stuff the teacher hands out.

Most students in this study were not especially interested in the social aspect of school; they had other pursuits that required their time that they found more important. Again, the traditional schedule for these students seemed more than just inconvenient; it was disruptive to achieving their goals. These students took all the information into consideration, weighed the options, and determined that the online learning option was better for their individual situation.

Student 3 described the schedule overall as being “okay, but it was monotonous and overly rigid.” Student 1 described a typical day:

There's a lot of hand holding and leading around, and you have to go here at 12:48, and you have to eat in this amount of time or else you don't get to eat at all. It was very stressful to me. The getting up at 6:30 in the morning, I was tired and exhausted too.

Student 12 reiterated feeling exhausted:

I usually felt worn out and tired because you wake up at an ungodly hour, at 7 a.m., which is before you're even conscious, and they're stuffing algebra down your throat. After that, once you woke up around your third or fourth class, it was exhausting.

Student 6 described her frustration with not being able to work at times that were best for her schedule: “In a traditional school, if you get behind you can't work during the weekend doing the actual lessons and being able to finish early.” Student 9 felt a similar frustration: “In a traditional school there's a lot of time when you're sitting there, through transitions, waiting in line, sitting in lunch, and sitting in study hall.” Most students in a

traditional high school would spend such time talking with friends and pursuing social relationships, but students in this study had other priorities.

*Triangulation of Data for Emergent Theme 2: Flexible Schedule*

The LDS and student interviews both included data indicating that students left their prior setting due to needing a more flexible schedule. Their reasons included having more time for individual goals, having to adjust their schedules to address health concerns, and simply finding the traditional schedule too rigid to the point that it affected their learning. In both the LDS and interviews, participants described how the rigidity of the traditional school schedule was detrimental and how the flexibility of the online learning environment provided a more satisfying experience. The emergent theme of flexible schedule included descriptions of the conditions that influenced a decision to move from the traditional setting to the online high school setting.

I completed triangulation by comparing data across achievement groups to determine if any discrepant cases existed. As shown in Figure 4, data included responses from students in each of the achievement categories for the first research question and both subquestions. More responses to the first research question were in Category 1. After reviewing the data again, I determined that several students who indicated that their primary reason for leaving the traditional setting was the need for increased flexibility in their schedule related characteristics that fell in the other emergent themes for subquestions 1a and 1b.

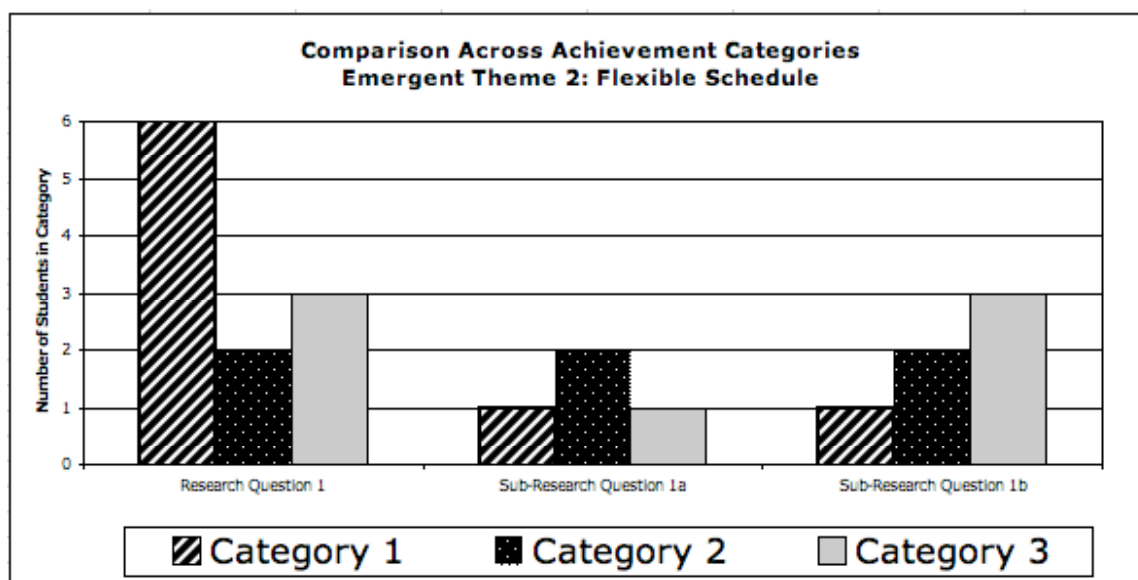


Figure 4. Comparison of data across achievement categories for emergent theme 2: flexible schedule.

### *Emergent Theme 3: Individualized Curriculum*

Students in this theme did not leave the traditional setting because of the daily schedule or the classroom setting; instead, their responses focused on how they received instruction in their traditional high school. The pace of instruction, or rather the inability of the teacher to individualize the pace, was the basis of this theme. A traditional classroom can provide teachers an effective setting for leading group discussions and encouraging students to work collaboratively, which may work well for students who have different strengths and levels of interest. But if the class as a whole progresses at a pace that works for a majority of the students, there may be individual students whose needs are not being met because the pace is dramatically different from what they need.

Regardless of abilities and training, there is a limit to the differentiation a teacher can provide in a single classroom, where lecture and group discussion are part of the

learning process. Participants found that their need to move through the curriculum at an individualized pace was inhibited at their prior schools. Several described having difficulty gaining access to a curriculum that was most appropriate for their abilities, and this drove them to investigate other educational options.

This theme includes students who said the traditional school was not able to accommodate their desire to learn at a pace different from other students in the class, or those who were unable to access the most appropriate level of curriculum in one or more content areas. Students who indicated that learning at their own pace was a benefit of learning online will be included in the data for subquestion 1b.

The primary thrust of this theme was students who determined that the pace of instruction or the inability to individualize the level of instruction or the curriculum itself was detrimental to their learning. Not all of students found these concerns enough of a hindrance to list it as their primary reason for leaving the traditional setting, but it was apparent in responses to questions in the LDS and at least two different areas in the interviews that some students felt this condition was detrimental to their learning.

Students in this theme said that teachers' ability to individualize the level of instruction and address the pace and presentation of instruction created a more satisfying learning environment. In an online high school, teachers can create differentiated instruction and implement it in a variety of ways that could not occur in a traditional setting due to innumerable restrictions. The online instructor need not feel tied to a set amount of time daily, to the instructional needs of a group of students, to a daily schedule, or to the consequences of creating a completely different curriculum path for

one or two students. This flexibility allowed students to learn in ways other than what they described experiencing in the traditional setting: lecture and discussion for direct instruction.

### *Limited Data Set*

*I prefer to learn at my own pace* was one of the given choices in the multiple-choice response to the question, *The main reason I chose to attend school online was*; 19 students chose this response as their answer. The remaining responses included in this theme focused on the need for a different or individualized curriculum. Each of these areas represents one of the subthemes in this category.

*Preferred to learn at an individualized pace.* In addition to students who indicated they chose to attend an online school to be able to work at their own pace, six more wrote a response expressing the same sentiment. One student said that physical safety was a concern as well, and another said the desire to move through the curriculum at a faster pace would enable him or her to graduate early and that was the “primary reason” for choosing an online school.

Participants described the benefits of being able to move at their own pace and the ease of transitioning to a new method of learning. Said one, “It was very easy to learn the pace of the class within the first few days.” Another said that learning online in an individualized setting “helped me understand the subject matter better than before.” These statements confirmed that students were able to access the curriculum easily in the online setting, move at their own pace, and enjoy an individualized learning process that, according to at least one student, improved understanding of content.



*Individualization of curriculum content.* One student said he or she “needed courses that were not offered,” without indicating what those classes were. Another said the courses available were inappropriate: “I went to schools with curriculums used by my elementary school. I wanted a good education.” Responses such as these indicated a shared concern relating to the curriculum available in prior settings or an inability to gain access to an appropriate curriculum.

In the LDS, responses about the need for more individualized curriculum were prompted by two questions: *I felt successful in my prior school* and *My prior school had all the classes I needed to prepare me for my future goals*. Students said classes were not able to address their individual needs, and they were unable to apply course information toward their goals.

One student wrote that although he or she was able to complete the coursework, “it wasn’t challenging and I didn’t feel accomplished when I finished the year.” This student spoke to the depth or quality of the curriculum, whereas another participant included a more general description of the courses as “available but they weren’t as involved.” Another said appropriate classes at the prior school were available but “[the teachers] didn’t give me the flexibility to do it,” thus alluding to needing more time or a different pace to complete the work.

Another student said, “The school I was at before did nothing to help me in any field that I wanted to go to because they were not equipped to do so.” It is not clear from this response if the courses were not available or if the student did not think the quality of curriculum would provide the necessary preparation for a career. Another student

complained about having to repeat content: “I was put into classes that I had already taken, and if I stayed at my prior school I would have missed out on many courses that I need to attend the college I want.” It is not clear if placement in these classes was due to the student’s age or for another reason. From the information provided, either the student could not complete the appropriate courses due to his or her age, year in school, or availability of courses. Regardless of the cause, the student found that his or her needs were not met by the curriculum and therefore identified the lack of individualization as a detriment.

#### *Student Interviews*

The mention of needing more rigorous courses rippled through the interview results, but the discussion of pace revealed several perspectives. A few students wanted to move through some classes at a faster pace to allow more time in other courses, thus playing to students’ strengths and enabling more time and energy in areas of need. As in the LDS, students mentioned wanting to move faster to achieve a specific goal.

The interviews provided information that was specific to students’ situations and allowed for further clarification when their responses were too general. Because data from the LDS included information without supporting detail, I used the interviews to ensure that data from the second phase included rich, thick description to support the generation of themes. Because fewer students responded with information that fit this theme in relation to subquestion 1a, the data required substantial depth of detail to support creation of the theme.

Because interviewees were attending an online school at the time of the study, they would be expected to have positive perceptions of the benefits an online learning environment could provide. Students compared what had not worked in their prior schools and how they believed, prior to enrolling, problems would be resolved in their new environment. Of the 30 participants, 11 responded to the interview question, *As you were thinking about switching to an online school, why did you think learning online would be a better solution for your high school education*, with statements that aligned with subquestion 1b and ultimately fell within this theme.

*Preferred to learn at an individualized pace.* Student 11 gave his main reason for attending an online high school as “being able to work at my own pace” because this was the primary characteristic he found most frustrating in his prior setting. Student 16 moved beyond pace alone to acknowledge how pace contributed to other aspects of her learning:

I think one of the very big draws was how it is asynchronous because we all, every person, have very different learning styles and learning speeds, and I think it was a big plus that I could work at my own pace.

Student 18 needed the freedom of the asynchronous pace while having adequate structure and support:

It was getting a little overwhelming having to figure out all the high school requirements: trying to make sure I fit everything in, and if I didn't have the motivation to do something then it was in danger of not getting done. So, it was nice to have the security of going to a cyber school. Everything would be taken care of, so to speak; all I had to do was help pick out my classes.

Student 18 knew she needed support to ensure she was getting all the building blocks to achieve her goals. She did not need a class that moved at a consistent pace that might not match her learning. Coming from a traditional setting where the class moved on whether

she completed the work or not, or that moved at a pace that was slower than she liked, did not match her needs.

Students 11 and 30 said that the one aspect of learning online they anticipated as being more satisfying was “being able to work at my own pace,” a sentiment echoed by Student 3:

You can work at your own pace. Really, it was all out there to do, so if you were good at one subject you could just do it quickly and, you know, work a little harder on the harder ones for you.

The ability to choose the pace he could take in each course, rather than having a consistent pace in all of them, created a more individualized path. Student 16 voiced a similar feeling:

I think one of the very big draws was how it is asynchronous because we all, every person, has very different learning styles and learning speeds, and I think it was a big plus that I could work at my own pace. Not only was it asynchronous within the classes but we could do whatever grade-level work where you needed it to be done. It was a very personalized learning program.

Likewise, Student 24 hoped to find a situation where she could accelerate through the curriculum at a pace that was appropriate for her:

I had a gifted IEP [individualized educational plan], so they could accelerate my classes, and so I was able to work through two grades in one year, two years in a row, and I got classes I was interested in, taught by teachers who knew what they were talking about. It exceeded my expectations.

Student 5 also thought that choosing her own pace would be beneficial:

Compared to a traditional school, I think that I learn better on my own than I would in a classroom where I would have to, if there are a lot of kids who don't understand something and I do, then I have to wait for the other kids; I have to wait for the teacher to be able to explain it to me. I like being able to move at my own pace.

Student 5's reference to teacher interaction was also mentioned by Student 7: "I could move at my own pace, and I could take as much or as little time as I needed to absorb the material, and if I had a problem with it I could go to the teacher directly." Unlike Student 5, who mentioned feeling held back by the other students, Student 7 described needing more time to "absorb" the material.

Student 22 found herself at a defining moment in her education. Clearly the traditional setting had not worked for her, and she thought perhaps the online setting would be what she needed:

I kinda searched a little bit and thought it might be a lot easier for me to stay home, stay in school without dropping out, because that was a big thing for me. I didn't want to be a dropout and just get my GED, and so I actually stuck to it. I'm actually glad I failed the one year and got held back because I really feel that this school has given me a lot better education, like it's more of a higher form of the same classes, but much harder and higher education. By failing I actually got to start over.

All the students in this subtheme considered individual pacing integral to creating a better solution for their high school education.

*Individualization of curriculum content.* Student 16 described how individualized curriculum could complement being able to work at a personal pace: "Not only was it asynchronous within the classes but we could do whatever grade-level work where it needed to be done; it was a very personalized learning program." This personalization was considered a necessity for their success. Student 20 also knew that she wanted something different, but she was told she could not take advanced classes because of her behavior:

As far as they were concerned I couldn't be put into the advanced classes because I had behavior problems. The only way to get into advanced

classes was to have an IQ above the state limit and you had to be well-behaved. The school environment was not good for me.

In her prior setting Student 20 could not gain access to the appropriate level of classes to challenge her intellect based on the supposition that her behavior was indicative of her intellectual ability. She also said that once she had the ability to move at her own pace, she could do much higher quality work than what she had done previously in the traditional classroom.

Student 27 said the work she was completing was comparable to what her sister was doing in an elementary school:

All sorts of red flags went up for my parents, and they found that they wanted a change. There are a lot of kids in my family, so private school was out, couldn't afford that, and someone told my mom about this school. She decided that that would be really great for us.

After enrolling in the online school, Student 27 was able to take classes at the appropriate level and monitored her own progress in conjunction with her mother and teachers.

Student 24's family had diligently worked with the school district to find the right placement for her advanced abilities, which were several years beyond her chronological age. Even with a placement in a gifted program she was not challenged:

I was just bored in school. I went to a magnet school for the gifted, and I was still really bored in school. They really couldn't offer me anything other than what they were offering me. I was in the honors program at the magnet school for the gifted, and I was getting straight As in all my classes without any type of studying or any type of interest in anything.

This student reached the ceiling of what the district could provide for her, and it still was not enough. Her parents hesitated to put her into a classroom with students 3 and 4 years older. For student 24, online learning allowed her to interact asynchronously in

discussion forums and in live classes via a webcast. To the class she was simply another person participating in the discussion. She did not have to be seen to communicate with her classmates in the online setting.

These students needed something that could not be found in the traditional classroom setting: The class could not be completed at an individual pace, the necessary classes were not available, or the student did not meet the school's stated criteria for participation in the course. In most cases, students understood that their prior schools could not accommodate their need for an individualized learning environment.

Student 13 said that learning through the lecture method was detrimental: "In a regular school you're basically going in for 45 minutes and getting lectured, but then in the online school you're not getting the lecture so it's almost easier to learn because you're not sitting through a lecture." When asked to clarify how he felt this affected his learning, he replied,

I think that a lot of times in my old school if you learn differently, or don't get things the first time through, you kind of get pushed to the side, so I think it has an effect on a whole bunch of other students who learn the same way as me, which may not be the same way as everyone else.

Student 13 revealed an understanding of a difficulty facing educators: How can learning be individualized for students who do not fit in the traditional model of a teacher-led, or even collaborative, classroom? Because individualizing everything for every student with every type of learning preference is impossible, the question becomes which students the teacher should focus on when a decision must be made regarding direct instruction, and there is no easy answer.

Student 30 realized he needed an individualized curriculum: the ability to work on a learning path designed for him. If the teacher in his prior school had been able to create separate learning paths for each student and the time and opportunity for students to work through an individualized curriculum, Student 30 might not have felt that he was “held back by where everyone [was in the curriculum] because the teachers couldn’t make a separate curriculum for me.”

Student 19 addressed another difficult question: Who determines the curriculum that is taught? Teachers and administrators work together to create curriculum based on national and state standards, but on a day-to-day basis it is the classroom teacher who determines the time and focus given to each topic. Student 19 questioned how the curriculum was addressed in her prior setting: “In my previous school they spent a lot of time teaching certain subjects and missed whole sections of others, so we’d go into extreme detail on some subjects, but we weren’t getting the core knowledge.”

Given the anecdotal information I have heard from students in general conversations over the past 8 years, I was surprised by the few examples in interviews related to this theme for subquestion 1a. In discussions with me outside this study, students repeatedly described how their prior school’s inability to individualize the curriculum or allow them to work at their own pace was detrimental to their learning. I reviewed the data again and determined that a majority of responses in this area were posed as benefits of learning online. For students who focused on what teachers could individualize in the online school, instead of what could not be done in the traditional setting, I included those data under subquestion 1b.



Student 13 said that his preferred mode of learning did not lend itself to lectures, so he looked to an online setting to better meet his needs because he thought he could learn more effectively in another modality: “As much as lectures may get the point across, I think that not much is being left out, and actually I get more by not having the lectures because there’s more time to learn stuff and ask questions.” Student 26 also wanted a different means of accessing the curriculum and thought she could find that in an online setting due to the use of what she felt was “more direct learning, what I need to know and getting done what I need to get done as opposed to just stuff the teacher hands out.” A focus on the quality of the curriculum was important to Student 27, who looked for an environment where teachers could focus on what he needed to know:

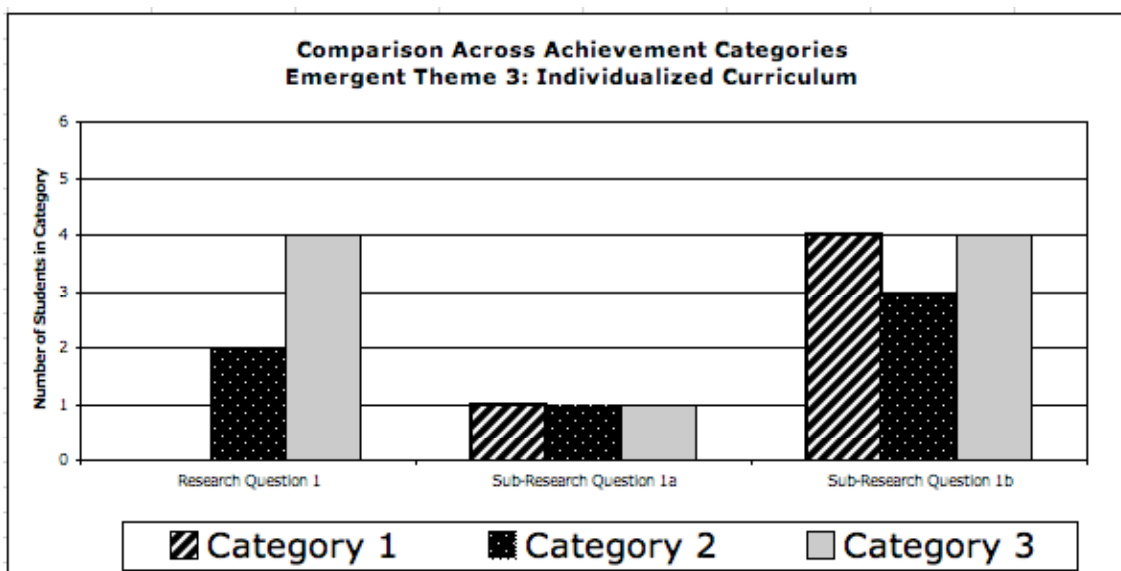
When it’s online it’s all about [the teacher checking] are you learning your material, are you going in this direction. That was comforting for my parents and for me. It was more about the educational value here, and we knew that there would be a lot of educational value at this school.

Students voiced a need for an individualized path through the curriculum, either in specific content areas or through an entire scope and sequence. They envisioned the online environment as a vehicle to achieve that individualization while attending their previous schools and confirmed those beliefs after transferring.

#### *Triangulation of Data for Emergent Theme 3: Individualized Curriculum*

According to Patton, “Studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations” (p. 230), a statement that rings especially true in regard to the third emergent theme. Whereas 11 students cited reasons for choosing an online setting that related to inflexible scheduling, only 6 mentioned individualized curriculum. This is also the only theme emerging from the first research

question that was not represented by at least one student from each achievement category represented, as shown in Figure 5.



*Figure 5.* Comparison of data across achievement categories for emergent theme 3: individualized curriculum.

I determined that, as in the case of the second emergent theme, students who believed having an individualized curriculum would be more satisfying were best represented in responses to subquestion 1b. That theme emerged from data representing students' ability to identify characteristics they were looking for in a school: the pull factors (amelioration of conflict related to the traditional schedule). This theme, then, supported the core category by demonstrating how a traditional schedule was a catalyst for students to transfer to an online setting.

#### *Emergent Theme 4: Social Issues Related to School Culture*

In this theme, students described the social issues or differences in culture they found detrimental in their previous school, unlike the preceding theme, where they tended

to describe positive features of the online setting. Some statements grouped in this theme are emotional descriptions illustrative of the challenges participants faced in a traditional environment. The degree of emotional frustration varied among students, but consistently they chose to leave their prior setting as a conscious decision to stop the cycle of submission to the dominant culture, which was having a negative effect on their education.

Education, as a transformational agent, can ameliorate cultural hegemony. In a setting where students from varied social standings come together to learn, discuss, and interact on a regular basis, the opportunity to address inequitable societal constructs is often missed; instead, the existing hierarchy or perceived norm gets reinforced. Students grouped in this theme described aspects of learning online they hoped would ameliorate the social and cultural experiences they had in their prior settings. Indeed, some students did not hope to make the situation better; they merely hoped the negative behavior would end.

#### *Limited Data Set*

LDS data relating to this theme reflected students' responses to the first question on the survey, *The main reason I chose to attend school online was*. Included were descriptions of bullying, concern for safety, differing cultural perspectives, and the general statement that there was too much drama in the traditional school setting. The data were further delineated into categories, which evolved into subthemes.

One question asked, *How comfortable were you with the other students in your prior school?* which elicited the majority of responses that fell within this theme. Most

responses indicated a hostile relationship between participants and other students.

Another survey item, *Please describe your feelings of overall safety and comfort at your prior school*, also elicited responses that were included in this theme, predominantly in the first subtheme, *concerns for safety or experienced harassment*.

*Concerns for safety or experienced harassment.* Students described being bullied in the classroom: “Kids would always pick on me, so I couldn’t focus on my studies as much as I needed to.” One mentioned weight without explicitly connecting it to being harassed or teased: “I did not like the situation of being overweight and going to gym class.” Sometimes concerns for safety came from parents: “My parents didn’t want me in the public school because of safety reasons.” Other times students themselves voiced concerns: “In my old school there was a lot of violence, and it was very unsafe there.” “I didn’t like the feeling of being in an arsenal.”

Although not all responses in the LDS included specific details about students’ experiences in their prior setting, it was not difficult to determine that they had experienced threatening situations. For example, one said, “The kids at my old school were very hostile and being different was very frowned upon.” Another said that being harassed “was one of the main reasons why I left. The kids picked on me and it was distracting.” Another described being “extremely uncomfortable. I’m not sure I’d go back there if you paid me.”

Students who wrote that they had concerns for their safety included descriptions of their specific concerns: “There [were] too many bomb threats and way too many people fighting and using bad words and just plain nasty.” “I don’t think that I was

uncomfortable at my prior school, but at times I did feel unsafe because we had a lock-down a few times due to kids bringing in knives and guns.” “We had a bomb threats every day for about 2 months. They had to close down almost all of the bathrooms.” For one student, violence moved beyond threats: “There was no safety at my old school. It seemed like every day there was a fight or someone was stabbed, and it happened so often most of it never makes it to the news.” Another student wrote, “It really depends on the day” which I interpreted as the student feeling unsafe at least a portion of the school year. All these students described how their culture was threatening and caused them to be uncomfortable, and in some cases to fear for their safety.

*Wanted to remove the drama or conflict.* One of the most interesting factors to me was acknowledgement of the social drama that occurs in a traditional academic setting. One student put it baldly: “I was fed up with high school drama.” Other responses included more detail: “My school was too concerned with athletics and not enough with academics.” “I felt like I was suffocating, more or less, having to choke down other people’s opinions and act as if they were the facts.”

Another group of responses to the question *How comfortable were you with the other students in your prior school?* contained fewer hostile statements but still referenced negative experiences. One student mentioned the drama that detracted from the learning environment: “I had a lot of friends, but there was always the drama that comes with public schooling.” Another tied that drama to gender:

I was comfortable with the students that I was friends with and I knew, but as for those cliques, I couldn’t take it anymore. I really wanted to get away from the “she did this, and she did that” girl drama.

Drama could also manifest itself as stereotypes: “In public school there are people who believe in stereotypes, people who do not associate with you because of who you associate with, and people in public school were not as open.”

When asked to describe their feelings of overall safety and comfort at their prior school, several students who gave additional feedback to this question said they felt safe but not comfortable: “I felt safe but uncomfortable; the schoolwork caused a lot of stress.” “I was picked on and teased, but I was not concerned for my safety.” “I felt very uncomfortable at my prior school because I was the ‘new’ kid in school.”

Because the LDS did not have a question that addressed how the online environment reduced negative interactions experienced in one’s prior setting, LDS data do not directly indicate how students thought the online setting would be more satisfying in this area. The student who said, “I felt that I wasn’t similar to the peers at my other school, causing a lack of friendships” also stated, “I’m extremely happy with the peers in [this] school,” which suggests a positive change in social interactions due to moving from a traditional setting to an online setting. Interview data provided more insights in this area.

### *Student Interviews*

I analyzed the data from the first interview question (“Why did you leave your prior school?”) and identified three subthemes that supported the emergent theme: harassment or concerns for safety, wanting to remove drama or conflict, and experiencing a devaluing of one’s culture. These interviewees determined that their prior educational setting exemplified a structure they were unwilling to be a part of any longer. Responses

that fell within this theme ranged from not being like other students or not belonging to the predominant culture in the classroom to experiencing anxiety, harassment, and exasperation. This emergent theme had the most responses identified with subquestion 1a.

For several students, their prior experiences in a traditional setting either included or were on the verge of harassment. Any educational setting that removed the catalyst for insecurity, fear, and safety would be perceived as more satisfying. Even those who noted less overt negative interactions (e.g., when their culture did not match the predominant culture) had more satisfying educational experiences once they attended an online school. These students said the online learning environment was more satisfying because it alleviated the negative social interactions they had in a traditional setting. Particularly for those who experienced harassment or bullying, the absence of threat allowed them to focus on the curriculum and on rebuilding an educational dialogue that was not based on their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2001).

*Concerns for safety or experienced harassment.* Two students said they were no longer willing to be harassed by others and left their prior school due to bullying. Student 6 said, “The reason why I left the traditional school originally was because of bullying, and I got really tired of coming home every day basically in tears.” Student 29 was not comfortable providing any details about specific incidents. When asked why she left her prior school, she said, “Because of bullying. School was probably the least safe place for me. I would have felt safer in an old alleyway with a map and no way to go home.” From

their detached tone and change in mannerisms, it was clear that this was not a topic they were comfortable exploring in detail.

Student 14's mother witnessed the negative effect the social climate was having on her daughter:

That was one of the reasons my mom pulled me out. I would come home miserable. I had two or three friends; they were all guys. I tend to get along better with guys,. They were all big, so I knew if anyone picked a fight with me that I would be safe, but there were days when those guys were sick or I wasn't hanging out with that person.

She dealt with the negative aspects of the culture in her traditional school by befriending others who would protect her.

Student 22 had a teacher who helped look out for her when she was feeling threatened. One incident occurred when the teacher found a note written by other students:

She actually found a note some of the kids in the class were writing, a note about me, and it was really stupid. I think it was something about harming me in some way. So she would actually move the kids around so they wouldn't be near me or each other.

The teacher dealt with the threatening behavior in the classroom, but she could not address behavior in the hallways, or bathrooms, or outside school.

Student 29 was not fortunate enough to have had a teacher who intervened on her behalf:

There were negative social aspects. I left [the traditional] school because of bullying. If I could have found a way to skip school, I would have done it every single day. It wasn't that I dislike school; I know that learning is important, but at that point I would have completely skipped school just to not go there.

Student 6 also encountered harassment in her prior school:



I was actually very insecure. I was on the heavier side, and I still am, but at that school everyone made fun of me for not only being a little overweight, but also because of religious reasons, so I got harassed and picked on every day. It was harder for me to actually focus on what I had to do for school, and I mostly came home every day in tears.

Because her physical appearance did not match that of the predominant culture in the classroom, Student 6 found herself the brunt of social stigma.

*Wanted to remove the drama or conflict.* Student 7 said that the disruptive drama of high school was having a negative effect on her and might have had a similar effect in her future had she conformed to the behavior of others:

I felt that I couldn't learn really; there was just too much drama and it was holding my learning back. Every day people were talking about him or her, who did what, you know, it was just every day. It impaired my learning with all the drama. Who hates who, whose party is on Friday. I'm just not into that stuff; I focus on my academics and my career.

Student 10 reached a point of desperation in her need to find an educational setting that more closely matched her own culture, where she could find her own way:

I left because I got, over Christmas break, I got really depressed, and after I went back after break I really wasn't happy and just started skipping school, playing sick, because I really didn't think I had a purpose there anymore. I kept having to get doctors' notes. I'd go a week and then skip a week, and then go a week and skip a week. It got to the point where if I didn't go, then my parents would get fined. We don't have the money to pay a \$300 fine everyday. We were talking to the guidance counselor one day and she happened to mention cyber school, and we didn't know anything about it. We had heard of it, but didn't know we could do it. In the process of signing up I got a little better going to school because I knew my last days were coming up.

She had hit a point of losing herself in the conflict she felt, but removing herself from that setting was liberating. Her reaction to the prior setting was the most contentious of any

interviewee, with the threat of fines for not attending, but the level of distress was similar to others. Student 25 mentioned needing therapy prior to transferring to the online setting:

I wasn't happy, and when I'm not happy, I'm not happy and people see it. I was in therapy for a few months. The last time I saw the counselor was when I got my enrollment letter; that letter cured me.

Student 25 experienced a similar sense of relief to that of Student 10 upon transition from a traditional setting to the online setting.

Students groped in this subtheme recognized how their primary goals or perspectives differed from other students around them. Student 23 noted how others' behavior created a rift that she could not, or chose not, to bridge:

I am very different from other students because they don't really . . . care about their future. They have no clue what they want to do the rest of their life. They just care about who's having a party on Friday or Saturday or who's involved with who. I am definitely not like that. I've known what I wanted to do since I was in middle school. I'm dedicated and I don't think that they have something to be dedicated to. I'm definitely not like other kids my age. I feel like I'm a 25-year-old trapped in a 17-year-old's body because my maturity level is way higher, I think, than kids my age.

She mentioned her goals, as well behavior that other interviewees referred to as the "drama," as being the most obvious divide.

These students felt different from others. Student 10 described a general sense of discomfort:

I wasn't comfortable because I just wasn't. I wasn't feeling that school, you know, when you've never been to high school before and you you're nervous those first couple weeks. Then I got used to it and then it started getting, "I can't do this anymore," and I was very uncomfortable. It was just me not getting up and going to school everyday. I didn't really care what happened, just so I could be at home most of the time instead of going to school and having the stress of school and the drama.

Student 7 also mentioned drama:

I actually was not comfortable at all, especially because of all the drama. Worrying about what people think about me, what I wore yesterday, how everyone is judging me. I felt pretty safe, but I always knew that there was something going on behind my back about me and stuff like that.

Student 7 did not mention having any regrets about leaving the traditional setting in regards to the social aspects of her prior school.

Student 22 said she was glad to have left the traditional setting:

I talk to people from that school, but I've really distanced myself from the group of friends I had. And now looking back on it, I'm glad I transferred into a cyber school because now, looking at those certain friends, they were not the right crowd for me, and they actually made me feel more insecure than I needed to feel.

These students viewed their socialization with other students as detrimental to their learning, but the examples provided do not illustrate a hostile environment, and their interactions with peers in their prior setting were less adversarial than those described in the prior subtheme.

Student 10 did not describe direct harassment, but she was depressed and her experiences in the traditional setting were far from positive:

I didn't have friends. I had acquaintances. It was never, "Oh come over to my house this weekend; let's go do something." There was none of that. It was more like, "Oh, how was your weekend? It was fine. How about yours?"

Likewise, Student 19 looked for a setting where she could be more in control of her environment. Her prior setting was detrimental, and she felt the reduced social interaction in cyber school was positive: "You're not all there in the same environment; you create your own learning environment." Student 20 echoed this sentiment, noting that the traditional school environment had not been good for her and the feature of online learning she felt would be more satisfying was that she could be removed from her prior

setting and “be at home, but it wasn’t my parents teaching me.” For all these students the enticement was not learning online so much as the absence or reduction of negative interactions with others: “It’s the fact that it isn’t the school I was in; I had to change schools” (Student 29). Student 8 and his family had similar concerns regarding negative interactions; when asked for specific details he said, “An example would be influences like violence and things like that.”

*Experienced a devaluing of their culture.* Student 12 described feeling like a caged animal in his previous school:

I had decided early on in high school, and even late middle school, that I wanted to be a performing vocalist, especially in the classical world, which is where I think I’m headed. I was really pretty miserable in high school, not for lack of friends or anything. I had a lot of amazing friends I still get to see, even more so now because I have more time on my hands. At my school it was very difficult if you had a passion or a pursuit that was outside the norm. It was very very difficult to function, and teachers were not sympathetic. I felt like this caged bird, and there was no room to do anything.

Student 12 did not feel threatened but was miserable that what he valued was not given credence.

Consistently, these students said that if what they believed in or found important was not valued at school, it detracted from their learning, a feeling sometimes shared by their parents.

[Our parents] didn’t want us to be in that kind of school environment, where we’d be affected and we’d have to think about our clothes too much and things like that. We’d have to think about things that are not important instead of education. Like an example would be, if a child was being picked on, or discouraged to do a certain activity because there’d be something wrong with him, that would be one example. (Student 8)

“Mom looked around and got the whole list of cyber schools, and she contacted them and we really liked this school” (Student 15).

These students felt they were not like others. Some identified specific ways in which they felt different, but for others it was just a general sense.

I was not comfortable at all. All the other kids seemed to be in a different mindset than I was, or something. I would come home upset every day because something had happened, or the kids were acting weird and I didn't know why; I didn't know what I had done. Kind of always on my guard. I felt different, like an outsider. (Student 18)

Student 26 realized that had her priorities been more like those she perceived as successful in the traditional setting, she might have been successful there too:

Had my priorities been different, like if I wanted to be a doctor and I was taking all these AP biology courses and such and really laying on the academic stick, perhaps that would have helped me get through the other things about the traditional school I couldn't stand.

Her culture did not match that of other students in the traditional setting. Student 21 also found she did not seem to fit the traditional setting, and it made her uncomfortable:

I felt like I was in this cookie-cutter system and I didn't fit in their cookie-cutter design. I always seemed to knock something over and mess something up or get caught in the auditorium playing Rachmaninoff, and somehow that was a bad thing. To me that was my only breath of air the whole day. The feeling I remember most from being in a traditional school is exasperated, exhausted, because you never had a chance to breathe.

Student 12 described a similar sense of being out of sync with teachers and other students:

Overall it's certainly a feeling of discomfort, very uncomfortable in that setting. Not because the whole school was out to get me, just because of the general vibe. All of the extra stuff you had to deal with, from teachers who you felt had it out for you, to struggling in subjects, to the stress of these deadlines and knowing that, geez Louise, no matter how hard you work there's one half of my life, which is the traditional school and the other half of my life, which is my passion, and

neither want to cooperate. So having to practice this constant balancing act between 10 different things and being pulled in 10 different directions is very uncomfortable.

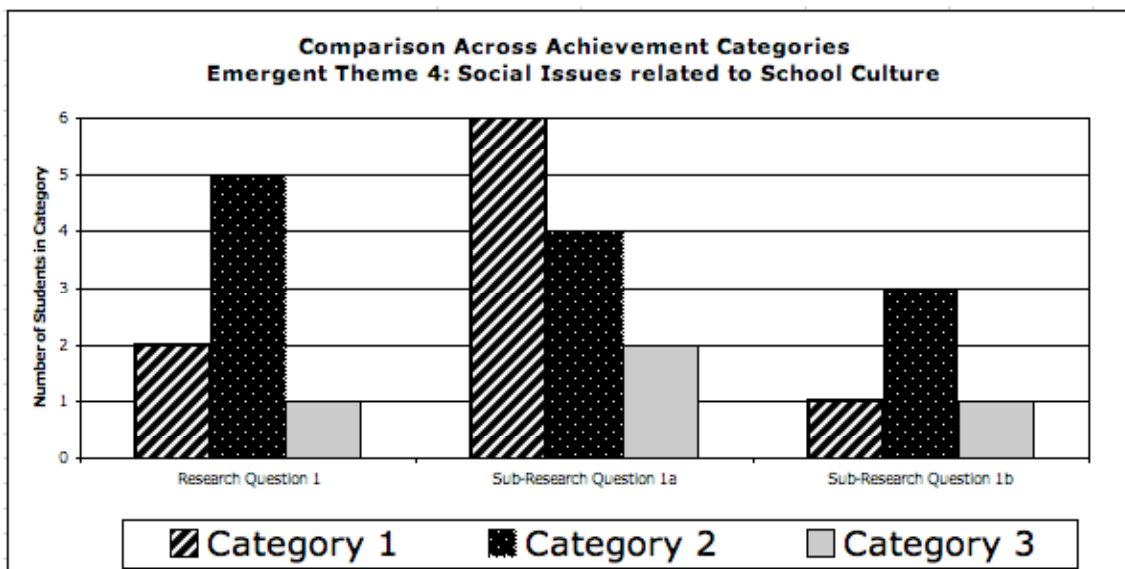
The feeling of being pulled in so many directions, and the anxiety it caused, rippled through other responses as well. For some students, discomfort caused them to limit their participation in class. As Student 4 recalled, “When I was in my old school I didn’t really talk to that many people, just a couple kids here and there.” His feelings were similar in regards to his teachers: “I wasn’t really comfortable working with them during class because I didn’t know what they’d say if I got something wrong or anything like that.” Although most students experience moments of uncertainty during class discussions and worry about answering a question incorrectly, Student 4 experienced this anxiety in all his classes on a regular basis, so he stopped participating in class. Student 25 described herself a shy person: “I wasn’t completely comfortable because I’m shy, but there are those who were more shy than I was. If I was called on I would talk.” She then recounted one of her last days at her previous school:

In my class it was announced that “you’re not going to be here now that you’re doing cyber school,” and this one girl, [who] was one of the popular girls, said, “Won’t you miss your friends?” And I said, “What friends?” and she looked at me like “oh.”

This experience crystallized a common misconception some have regarding the perceived lack of socialization for high school students in an online learning environment. If the socialization in their prior setting was predominantly negative, then a reduction in negative interactions at their new school represents a positive change, not a detraction.

*Triangulation of Data for Emergent Theme 4: Social Issues Related to School Culture*

Both the LDS and the interviews illustrated the effect social issues and school culture had on students' decisions to choose an online high school instead of a traditional school. Participants described harassment and bullying, concerns for safety, a desire to remove the drama or conflict from their learning environment, and a sense of having their culture devalued. When the data were compared across achievement categories, all categories were represented in this theme (see Figure 6). Data showed that students considered the characteristics of this theme more significant as push factors, with most respondents listing a reason they left the traditional environment and the factors they found detrimental in their prior school.



*Figure 6.* Comparison of data across achievement categories for emergent theme 4: Social issues related to school culture.

*Analysis of Research Question 2 and Subquestion 2a*

The first research question addressed reasons for leaving a traditional setting in favor of an asynchronous online high school. The second research question was an attempt to get at students' perceptions of success in their new school. I deliberately worded this as success rather than academic achievement in order to describe the relationship between students' perceptions of success and their motivation to attend the asynchronous program, as well as to identify the liberatory nature of the setting. To fully understand perceptions of success, one must know how success is defined, which is why I included the subquestion, *How do the students define success and to what degree do they perceive their academic achievement and social interactions contributing to their success?*

One item in the LDS directly addressed perceptions of success in an online learning environment: *I feel learning online has helped me be more successful in school than my prior school.* Thirty-four percent of students strongly agreed with the statement and 36% agreed, indicating that learning online in some way positively affected their perceptions of success. Not included in the LDS data were students' definitions of success. In addition to the Likert data, students could provide an open-ended response. I coded these responses when they provided specific reasons and incorporated them in the appropriate theme. Several students provided general information: "I learned so much here! It's great! I love it!" Generalized data such as these demonstrated an increase in perception of success but did not reveal to what one attributed that success, so those responses were not included in the themes.



To elicit more detailed and revealing information, I created the following interview question: “Could you please explain why you think you are more or less successful in an online setting than you would have been in a traditional setting.” I coded responses using the initial set of themes (see Table 8).

Table 8

*Themes Identified During Open Coding for Interview Question 7*

Theme	<i>n</i>	Percentage of students in this theme
Comfortable in cyber school	3	10 %
Removed classroom distractions	2	7 %
Health concern	1	3%
Increased sense of curricular understanding	4	14 %
Increased sense of independence	3	10%
Increased teacher interaction	5	16%
More flexible daily routine	2	7 %
More rigorous instruction	1	3 %
Prefers own pace	9	30%

After I finished the open coding and compared emergent themes, I completed axial coding to identify any relationships between themes. This process concluded with the following generative themes emerging from the data: removal of restrictions from the classroom setting, increased flexibility in daily schedule, benefits of individualized curriculum, and improved social and cultural interactions (see Table 9).

Table 9

*Themes Identified During Axial Coding for Interview Question 7*

Theme	<i>n</i>	Percentage of students in this theme
Removal of restrictions from the classroom setting	11	37 %
Increased flexibility in the daily schedule	5	17 %
Benefits of individualized curriculum	7	23%
Improved social and cultural interactions	7	23 %

After further consideration, I realized that the themes from the first research question were reiterated in students' responses to the second research question. With the first research question, themes emerged as obstacles in the traditional setting, whereas with the second research question, the same themes represent how transition to the online setting ameliorated the effects experienced in the prior school.

*Emergent Theme 1: Removal of Restrictions from the Classroom Setting*

In both the LDS and interviews, numerous students mentioned restrictions of the traditional classroom as their primary reason for leaving that setting, or the absence of those restrictions in the online setting as having alleviated their concerns. Given the frequency of this sentiment, I was not surprised when this theme emerged during data analysis in relation to students' perceptions of success in an online learning environment. Evidence from students' descriptions about their perceptions of success demonstrated how they believed the online setting ameliorated situations similar to those described in their earlier negative portrayals of the traditional classroom setting. Based on statements that mirrored data in the first research question, I determined that the emergent theme of classroom setting was consistent regarding the second research question and subquestion

as well, in this case representing removal of the restrictions found in the traditional classroom setting.

### *Limited Data Set*

A focus on increased teacher interaction in the online setting was a common reason cited by students in the LDS for their academic success because portions of the traditional classroom setting that would restrict individual teacher interactions were removed. One student said, “In this school I get the ability to work one on one with the teachers.” Another affirmed that “the teachers were more interactive with me and helped me more than any other [traditional classroom] teacher has.”

### *Student Interviews*

This theme included data from students who felt that by removing themselves from the traditional classroom they increased their ability to focus and learn more efficiently, which was one of the primary reasons they cited for being more successful in an online school than they would have been in a traditional school.

*Number of students in the classroom.* Student 1 said she could not interact with her teachers due to the behavior of other students in the traditional classroom. She attributed her increased success in her new school to more effective learning due to the absence of other students’ disruptive behavior, which led to an increased focus on learning. Once she left the traditional setting, she no longer had “half [her] day wasted by just sitting there.” Student 29 made a similar claim:

My grades kept dropping [in the traditional school]. Cyber school has helped because it doesn’t have so many pointless exercises. It gives you lessons and a project or an assignment and then a test so you can work on your own time and you don’t have to do so many reviews.

When she moved to the online learning environment, Student 29 could review as necessary, and her learning was not dependent on the class as a whole or on the preferred learning style for the classroom, which may not have been the best for her.

*Distractibility in the classroom setting.* Student 22 said her new learning environment has fewer distractions:

It's easier for me to do schoolwork in an online setting because I only have one distraction: my kitty cat. It's just really a better way for me to learn because on top of the schoolwork online, and I'm doing everything myself, I'm learning responsibility for my own actions. And everything involving my schooling teaches me to be more responsible, to be more organized, and planning.

She found that by removing herself from a setting that was distracting her from learning, she was able to be more successful.

Student 18 considered the reduction of distractions a primary reason for increasing her success, and she also realized she benefitted from the structure in the online setting: "I am more successful because I have the deadlines and the organization."

*Fewer restrictions on students' behavior.* Students 9 and 13 both voiced a need to move around physically on a regular basis to improve their focus, and they could not do that in the traditional classroom without being distracting to others. Although teachers in a traditional setting might have been willing to allow these students to move around to improve their focus, other students in the classroom and the time constraints associated with this method of instructional delivery made such accommodations unlikely.

I'm definitely more successful because I don't have to sit at a desk all day. I can't really do that, so I think I'm more successful doing school [online] because I have the ability to get up and go do something else if I can't focus; there's more of a way to become focused. (Student 13)

*Benefits due to increased time.* Some students said they perceived themselves as more successful in an online setting due to increased teacher interaction. Working with their teachers beyond the bounds of the traditional classroom increased their perceptions of success. For Student 5, the ability to work with highly qualified teachers who are available when she needs direct instruction had a positive effect:

If I don't understand something, I can go right to the virtual office and ask the teacher and [he or she] will show me how to do it, whereas [in my prior school], if I didn't understand something I would have to wait for the teacher to have a free minute, or sometimes I would have to figure it out for myself.

Likewise, Student 27 described dramatically increased interactions with his teachers:

I'm able to go back and look at the information and work with the teachers, things I wouldn't be able to get in a brick-and-mortar school unless you went and forced the teacher to spend a couple extra hours with you, which normally you can't do. So I wouldn't have been able to understand math at all. I probably would not have met some of the English teachers that convinced me that I'm a good writer and to keep working at it. I would never have done half the things I've done, and I wouldn't have the self-confidence I need.

Student 8 had a similar experience: "Teacher interaction is very important, also the ease at which you can go through these online courses. What helps me the most are the teachers and the time they spend talking to you."

Student 6 described how she and other cyber students have unusual, student-centric, accesses to their teachers:

I can go back and review, and if I have any questions I can go into the virtual offices, ask questions, e-mail the teachers, and even if it's during the weekend I can e-mail them because some of them do look at their e-mails over the weekend and they respond to me, which is a really good thing.

Student 6 focused on the use of asynchronous communication and the connection she felt with her teachers. Student 10 also benefitted from teachers' support:

It's less stress because even though you have deadlines to get things in, I mean sometimes things happen, things come up and you can't get the work in, and the teachers call to help you: "Oh can you maybe get this in? Let's do this instead." I've fallen behind; who hasn't? I guess it's normal, and all they're doing is encouraging you; they're not saying, "You better get this in or you're going to fail." It's none of that.

All these students described themselves as feeling more successful in the online setting than the traditional setting. To fully understand the implications of their perceptions, it was necessary for me to let them define success for themselves.

### *Definitions of Success*

Students defined success, both overall and academically, by using concrete measurements commonly associated with traditional school culture: earning good grades, learning the material well, and achieving goals. The most common measure of success was accomplishing a goal. Student 6 was representative in this regard: "The way I think about success is to set a goal and to work hard toward that goal, and eventually accomplishing the goal in mind and being able to be successful at it." For Student 9, success is "when I've reached my goals." Student 18 defined success as "the ability to do something and accomplish the goal you wanted to accomplish." She also mentioned academic achievement, noting that it is important to

do well on the assignments, not just getting away with the minimum requirements, getting good grades, not necessarily straight As all the time. Trying your hardest, even if you get a grade you didn't really want, you know if you tried your hardest.

Some students mentioned specific goals:

[Success is] when I set goals to achieve. For example, to get a 90% in every class and at the end of the year to achieve it and finally get there, so I'd say for pretty much anything that once you finally get to the goal you set. (Student 13)

Student 10 said, “I will feel accomplished when I graduate, and then I’ll feel successful.”

A second way of achieving success is being happy. Student 1 said that to her. success is “what makes you happy. . . . I think you have that feeling that you know you’ve just reached your goal, and it’s like ‘Yes! I know I did it.’ It’s personal.” Student 5 defined success as follows: “I guess as long as you’re happy, because you can be happy doing pretty much anything. So, as long as you’re happy.” Student 27 acknowledged that he could not always be happy, but pointed out that striving for happiness and achieving it some of the time equated to success for him:

For me, let’s be real: You’re never always going to be happy, but if you can look back at your life and you have all the things that you need and you’re overall happy with how things have turned out, that’s success. I want to be able to meet my needs and be happy with it.

For Student 8, success is not something to be achieved but a constantly evolving state that includes not only oneself but others:

Success would be, well, achieving your full potential and being able to get along with other people, not just for your benefit but for everybody’s benefit as a whole. I don’t think it’s totally something that can be achieved, but I think you should always be working toward that.

This student showed a depth of character and concern for others that was consistent throughout all her responses.

### *Triangulation of Data*

As students described their success in an online learning environment, they talked about the removal of restrictions related to the traditional classroom. They gave specific examples of what they were able to achieve in the online setting that they had not been able to achieve in the traditional setting, such as increased academic achievement,

improved focus, and a sense of self-confidence. Their specific examples mirrored the goals they included in their definitions of success, both academic and social.

I compared the data from the first emergent theme across achievement categories to identify any inconsistencies. All the achievement categories were represented, with no discrepant cases. There were three students in Category 1, four students in Category 2, and four students in Category 3. Additionally, interview data were consistent with responses in the LDS.

#### *Emergent Theme 2: Increased Flexibility of Daily Schedule*

Students grouped in this theme were similar to examples cited in the literature, particularly at the collegiate and graduate level, in that they were looking for convenience. These students could not, or chose not, to attend a traditional school because their personal goals or health concerns made keeping a traditional schedule impossible. Learning online in an asynchronous setting removed the obstacles that inhibited their ability to attend classes in their prior schools and with other students. Before the prevalence of the public online education option, these students would have likely have been home-schooled, attended a private school that could accommodate their unique schedules, or pursued some combination thereof. With the growth of online options, the number of students that are aware of this option has grown, as has an understanding of some students' need for less restrictive schedules and learning environments.



### *Limited Data Set*

LDS students described the benefits of increased flexibility in their schedules in the online setting. Those benefits included what they gained in the classroom as well as in other areas of their lives as a result of attending an online school. For example, one student said, “I was able to accomplish a lot more, musically, this year.” Another said, “I find myself more motivated to do something successful with my life.”

### *Student Interviews*

These students had discovered other areas of their lives that were as important as their high school education, but they could not balance their academic and nonacademic lives due to the restrictive nature of the traditional school day. They characterized success in both the academic setting and in other areas of their lives as of equal importance. Consistent with responses to the first research question (*Why are students from across the commonwealth of Pennsylvania choosing to attend an online high school?*), the theme emerged from the data identified across the subthemes: reduced conflict with traditional schedule due to personal goals and increased flexibility due to the online environment.

*Reduced conflict with traditional schedule due to personal goals.* Student 7 said she was more successful in the online setting because “I just think I have more time for everything. I have more time to learn and I have more time for training.” She found that by arranging her schedule to accommodate both school and her training, she was able to become more successful in both areas. Similarly, Student 23 needed to pursue her career interests and train, and the traditional schedule precluded her from addressing those

goals. She confirmed that she felt more successful in the online setting due to the ability to manipulate her schedule to address both academic pursuits and other interests:

I can train more and that definitely helps me. I mean, being able to train every day from 9 to 3 is so helpful because I can focus on that and not worry about homework. I can go home and do my schoolwork. It just works out so much better for me.

Student 28 also needed flexibility to train and work toward becoming a professional dancer, but her prior school did not have the necessary flexibility. As a result of inflexibility in the traditional day, she determined that attending an asynchronous online school would help her achieve both personal and academic goals. A benefit she did not anticipate, which added to her perception of success, was her development of self-advocacy: “In a cyber school, if I want know more about something, it is up to me.” She elaborated that it was not just content areas she was referring to “but also how to use the Internet, how to use the computer, about responsibility, about taking responsibility for your own learning experience.”

*Increased flexibility due to the online environment.* Student 16 described several opportunities that were realized as a result of the new flexibility afforded him:

Being able to take the classes online, more as a whole part of my life, allows me to do a lot of different things: for example, taking classes at the community college, volunteering, doing lighting at different stages, and tutoring people. So sort of the extracurricular because of the schedule it’s allowed me, as far as online success in a specific curriculum because . . . you have to be engaged. You cannot sleep through class in an online school because you can’t show anything if you’re not doing the work. Part of the success is that you don’t get recognition if you don’t do the work. I think that it’s more active learning than a traditional school.

He found that he was able to achieve at a new level after reaching a more engaged level of interaction, as well as finding success in other areas of his life.

Student 21 experienced symptoms of depression as a result of her frustration with a traditional schedule: “It’s a really unhappy environment and very cookie cutter.” Once she could address studies in a schedule that did not preclude her from focusing on her passion, she experienced an increased sense of success:

The teachers are there for you. That certainly helped me be more successful in an academic level, having that encouragement. I want to do well, not just for myself but for my teachers because they’re there for you. That really gives you a two-sided reason to push in school. Also, I went from practicing sporadically, one- to two-hour stretches a couple times a week and being miserable because of it, feeling like the thing I wanted most in the world was right in grasp but I couldn’t actually get to it, to now practicing hours upon hours upon hours a day. Because of that, musically, performance-wise, which is what I want to do, so many doors have opened. I’m doing national competitions and recitals and playing and singing at a level I never would have expected to get to last year had things kept going the way they were. Musically, which is my passion, I’ve been able to forward my progress times 10 and also have time and the flexibility to go to these competitions in other states.

She lived for the opportunity to perform, but she knew the importance of her education and did not want either to suffer. Attending an online asynchronous school met her needs; this method of learning increased her perception of success and reduced her frustration.

#### *Definitions of Success*

Increased flexibility in the daily schedule has been cited in research at the collegiate level as a prime attraction for online education. In the present study, participation in an online asynchronous learning environment for convenience as a result of primary responsibilities outside the classroom emerged as a strong motivation for switching schools. But although the high school students’ rationale for choosing an online school was consistent with examples cited in the literature regarding college

students, the high school students seemed more focused on contentment and achieving their potential.

Two students defined success in terms of a sense of well-being: “I think I could define success [as] I’m really happy” (Student 23). “That’s success for me: I’m happy, I’m progressing, in school and outside of school, because of cyber school” (Student 7).

Student 7 elaborated on what made her happy:

I can just open my computer and just do my schoolwork and not worry about what people think about me or how I look that day or how my hair is or, “Oh my gosh, do my pants look bad?” You know what I mean. I can focus more in the online school than in my prior school.

She defined success as being happy and clearly identified being successful in school as a result of not being in a traditional environment, where she would be distracted by social concerns that had very little to do with her learning. Student 23, unlike Student 7, focused on a more traditional measure of academic success: “I have already become successful academically because of cyber school. My grades are significantly higher; I’m on the distinguished honor roll.”

The remaining three students in this theme included achieving their potential in their definitions of success. Student 16 defined success as “realizing your personal potential to do well for yourself and for other people.” He addressed his desire to do well not only for himself but for others too in his statement about his perceptions of success online. He used flexibility in his schedule to do lighting at the theater and to volunteer and tutor others. His definition of success in school also included his feeling that both academic achievement and social interactions contributed to his success:

I think success in school is where you are constantly challenged, but you're never overwhelmed—just challenged and learning and spending a lot of time really just working through and gaining knowledge as you go and learning how to think and how to learn. One of the indicators for me is when I learn something and I start telling other people about it, when I apply it to other parts of my life, I think that's part of the success and that's an indicator. Generally, success is when I learned a lot but it was not easy; I had to work to learn it.

Student 21 also referenced achieving her potential in her definition of success.

She tries to “get a result that is also the best result I could have gotten. Not just getting a result, but getting the best result that I could have.” She supported her definition of success overall with her definition of success in school: “I don't think that always means you get straight As. I think it just means that in various subjects you do the best you can and the best you're able to do with the time you have.” In both definitions she included statements that indicate her desire to achieve her potential, not by standards imposed by others but by measures she has created herself. Student 28 focused not just on grades themselves as the goal but the learning they represent:

At the core of it, success in school is getting the grades necessary to do well, but also learning and understanding the curriculum so that I can come back to it and two years later it would be like, “Wow, I know this.”

### *Triangulation of Data*

Students' examples supported their self-perception as being more successful in an online setting than they were or would have been in a traditional setting. They all gave specific details that illustrated the importance they placed on their emotional well-being in addition to achieving specific measures of academic achievement. Flexibility in the schedule afforded them to modify how they spent their time and to focus on areas that were of great importance to them in their perceptions of success.

The data from the LDS and interviews corroborated the results that emerged from students' responses to the first subquestion ("What factors from their prior setting do students identify as having been detrimental to their learning?") in that students described an increase in their perceptions of success once the factors they cited as detrimental were ameliorated. The data also paralleled results of the second subquestion ("What aspects of learning online did students believe would be more satisfying as compared to their prior setting?"). I compared the data across achievement categories and each of the categories was represented, with two students in Category 1, one student in Category 2, and two students in Category 3.

### *Emergent Theme 3: Individualized Curriculum*

Each learner poses a unique challenge to his or her teacher; as individuals they vary in their levels of experience and expertise in a content area. In addition to differences in prior knowledge, they also differ in aptitude and desire to succeed. One thing that affects all students' success is the teacher's ability to individualize the learning process. A traditional setting can limit that ability. In view of the success of public schools across the country, it is clear that a majority of students in traditional schools receive adequate individualization to achieve success. Students in this study, however, perceived themselves as more successful in an online setting because of the teacher's ability to individualize the pace, depth, breadth, scope, and sequence of learning in ways incongruent with a traditional setting. I identified examples in both the LDS and the interview data supporting the emergence of this theme, as well as the relationship

between the subthemes: ability to learn at an individualized pace and individualization of the curriculum.

### *Limited Data Set*

In the LDS students responded to the question, “I feel learning online helped me be more successful in school than my prior school.” One student described feeling more successful as a result of being able to individualize the learning process: “I have more time to look over things, and I have the freedom to do things in a way different than before.” Another student said, “I can work at my pace, not the pace of other classmates.” Another wrote that the online environment allows one to “fix your mistakes, and in regular school you don’t always get to do it. That way you learn what the answer is.” Each of these examples demonstrated how students felt specific portions of the online learning environment increased their success.

### *Student Interviews*

Individualization in an online setting takes many forms. Guidance counselors, teachers, and administrators in traditional settings would likely find solutions comparable to those found in the online setting if they did not have the classroom structure, daily schedule, and student age segregation to contend with. Responses in this theme revealed how individualization of the curriculum created a learning environment that students perceived as more successful than that of their prior setting.

*Ability to learn at an individualized pace.* Student 11 said his increased sense of success was due to his ability to “work at my own pace.” In his prior setting he felt “pretty comfortable—bored, but comfortable. The way the information was presented

was boring.” In the online setting he was able to adjust his pace when necessary to remain on task and mentally stimulated. Student 2 found that online learning affected other areas of his life besides academics:

I think I’m more successful now because I can move at my own pace. I’m not dependent on the teacher to sit there and go through each lesson statically. I can read more into the lessons because I have more time than I would in a traditional setting. I think I have a deeper understanding of the lessons. I definitely think that the independence of having to motivate yourself to do [your schoolwork] every day, because you know your teachers aren’t watching over you every second of the day, I really think that is what is helping me be more successful. I think becoming that independent is helping me find success throughout my life because I’m used to it, I do it every day, and it’s easy to transition between classes and other responsibilities I have.

Student 3 found that being able to move at his own pace directly affected his internal motivation:

I can work when I want, when it’s convenient, but also it’s getting used to working hard because I know I have to work; no one’s going to badger me to do it: “Do your work,” or “Turn your homework in,” or anything. It’s all me, which is how it is once you get a job. It’s a lot of self-responsibility; it allows you to work at your own pace on the things you might not be as good at, so it improves you on those. You can work on those on your own time and makes it a little bit easier to and less painful to do them. Maybe gain a little bit of likability. You enjoy the stuff that maybe you didn’t enjoy before because you now get to take the time to understand it instead of having to power through it just to get it done.

Student 3 likened the skills he developed while working at his own pace to those he will need after graduation in the workforce, and Student 2 mentioned using them as she moved from her classes to the other areas of life. In both cases the students saw their independence and self-motivation as an asset to their future in addition to the content area knowledge they were gaining in their classes.

Student 4 said he felt more successful in the online learning environment than in the traditional setting because “now I can actually learn the material and my grades are



passing. Now, I'm not failing." Several students recounted the need to individualize their learning with acceleration, but Student 4 needed additional time in some of his classes to gain mastery. He also developed new organizational methods to support his learning in the online setting that had not worked in the past: "I can go at my own pace in the reading and take as many notes as I want. I actually talk to my teachers in cyber school more than I did in my old school." He created a way of accessing instruction at a pace that was best suited for him while working with his teachers on assignments when he needed help to master the curriculum.

*Individualization of curriculum content.* Student 17 included her desire to have an individualized learning plan in her rationale for leaving a traditional setting, and she reiterated that motive in her statement about success in the online setting. In addition to working with her teachers and guidance counselors to create an individualized learning plan, she also described the skills she has developed and how she plans to apply those later:

I think there's a different set of skills you learn [online], so while in a building I would learn more to memorize or how to cram for a test, I think when you're memorizing the information you'll probably forget it. I experience the material so much more than just hearing it, so I get a deeper learning. I think cyber learning, more than classroom learning, is a great way to prepare you for college because a lot of college work is asynchronous, so you go out of the classroom and you explore and learn and complete assignments for your classes, and that's a lot of what we do in cyber.

Student 17 needed more than just honors or advanced classes at her grade level to individualize her learning.

Student 24 said she was "still really bored" in a traditional school even though she was attending a magnet school for gifted students. Even with the acceleration and

enrichment provided in that setting, she could not move at an appropriate pace access curriculum that was appropriate for her ability level. Once she moved to an online setting, she had access to curriculum that was 2 years ahead of her chronological age and that allowed her to feel challenged mentally. Her new school “exceeded my expectations,” thus increasing her perception of success in school.

### *Definitions of Success*

These students realized they needed an individualized curriculum to meet their academic needs, which many students may not have even considered. Because they represented each of the achievement categories, the need for an individualized curriculum is not indicative of any one achievement level. Most students included academic achievement in their definitions of success. Student 2 was an exception. He defined success as realizing “you’re truly happy and you enjoy what you’re doing every day and you just look forward to every day because you know you’re going to do something you enjoy and have fun with it.” He described being happy in life as important to becoming successful. He also included a strong sense of emotional well-being in his definition of success in school: “You’re happy with the work you’re turning in, you’re confident that you’ve done your best, and you’re going to get a good grade on it.” His response indicated that he focuses on the process and the result. Student 3 also included self-perception in his definition, describing success as “when you feel personal satisfaction.” He also paid tribute to academic achievement, citing “As and Bs” as his definition of success in school.

Students 4, 11, 17, and 24 all included specific goals in their definitions of success, as well as examples of how academic achievement supports those goals. Student 4 mentioned “having at least a B or an A” in his definition of success, along with “knowing the material.” He said that a specific goal he expects to achieve, now that he has found academic success, is to “go to college, and when I’m done with college, I’ll have a good job. That will be success.” For Student 24, success means you “become a successful person.” Success in school is more than just preparing for a test; she wanted to be sure she did not “just memorize it to take the test and forget it.” To feel successful she thought she needed to “know it, use it, enjoy it.”

Student 17 said, “For me success would be achieving my academic goals and . . . applying them to a career, and using a career to support a family. To me, reaching those goals would be success.” Like Students 11 and 24, she mentioned specific academic criteria for success: “To me, success in school would be to do the very best I possibly could with the intention of getting all As in my classes and then beyond that graduating from high school and going to college.” All the students grouped in this theme shared goals they had set for themselves and how those goals were a part of their definitions of success, both overall and academically.

### *Triangulation of Data*

Students’ definitions of success supported their perceptions that they were more successful in an online setting. For example, Student 2 said his increased sense of independence was largely responsible for his perception that he is more successful now than in his prior school. In both definitions he cited “being happy” as an integral part of

being successful, which he had obtained as a result of attending an online high school. Student 4 referenced specific letter grades in his definition of academic success. He also considered “knowing the material” as part of success, which supported his statement that he is more successful in the online setting because “now I can actually learn the material.” The remaining students focused on increasing their academic achievement, which was a primary focus in their definitions as well. This theme also demonstrated the most consistent comparison across achievement categories, with two students in each category.

#### *Emergent Theme 4: Social Issues Related to School Culture*

Students who experienced harassment or felt foreign to the predominant culture in the traditional classroom, so that they could not relate to the teacher, curriculum, or other students, said the last thing they could concentrate on was their learning. Several said they did not choose the cyber school because it was online: “It wasn’t all about online. We wanted a different school and thought it sounded pretty neat” (Student 20). For some, the online feature of the school was one reason they chose the school, or the technology skill they gained was an unintended benefit. For most, though, it was the absence of negative interactions that constituted the primary reason they perceived themselves as more successful in the online environment than in their prior schools.

#### *Limited Data Set*

A common misconception regarding online learning is that students who attend school online lack socialization. During my experience with online education, I repeatedly addressed this concern with potential students and their parents. As with any

school, some students in a cyber school seek out others who are like them to interact with, others work with their peers only when it is a requirement, and a few choose to have little or no interaction with their peers at all, sometimes to the extent of losing points on an assignment rather than participating in a group project. Opportunities for socialization exist in the online high school setting, and with the growth in social networking they continue to expand.

LDS data included statements from students documenting positive social interactions in the online setting, and a few mentioned an improved social life. One wrote, “I get a lot more interactions with people my age.” Another stated, “Everyone is so nice and they help you out with everything.” The most positive statement was this one: “I’m extremely happy with the peers in my school. [Student name] is one of my closest friends here.” Another student described a change in perspective: “I felt that I wasn’t similar to the peers at my other schools, causing a lack of friendships.” For another student, the new school had a different social climate: “I like how I can participate with other students and debate things on different topics.” These examples documented the positive socialization that occurred in the online school.

#### *Student Interviews*

This theme included responses attributing success to social or cultural factors. For most of these students, the social interactions experienced in their prior settings did not positively influence their learning, and in some cases the interactions had a detrimental effect. They described how the transition to an online asynchronous setting contributed to their perceived success in school.

Overall I'm certainly more successful. I'm a lot happier because I feel like the cyber school community and culture and such really suits me as an individual better. It's just a mood. You walk into my old school and everyone's stressed and the teachers are sick of their kids, whereas when I go into the virtual office of one of my teachers, they're happy for me to be there even if it's the fifth time this week and it's the same question. (Student 12)

Student 12 experienced an increase in his perception of success, overall contentment, and a significant contrast to his prior setting. Student 15 also attributed her success to the flexibility to adjust her own schedule and not having to spend time addressing peer pressure:

I'm more successful in an online setting because of the flexibility and the peer pressure. I don't have to worry about any of that, and also I can be in a quiet setting with nobody around and work on my schoolwork and not have to worry about getting up and going to the next class. I just go to the next class on my screen.

She chose a school where she did not have to engage the daily drama she associated with attending a traditional high school and where she would have the independence to work at her own pace.

Student 19 voiced concerns about the influence of the predominant culture in a traditional school. She did not want her personality to change as a result of being around other students whose culture was not like her own: "This is going to sound a little bit stereotypical maybe, but I think there's a personality that I have that I might not have had I gone to the traditional school." She realized that her culture did not match those who attended her local high school, so she investigated the options and found the online school. Student 30 had similar sentiments but expressed them more bluntly:

There's this kind of disgust, and a lot of them [other students] don't want to be in school. I know that if I was there for high school, that attitude would be almost impossible not to fall into if everyone around me kind of had that outlook, and

that's not a healthy outlook if you want to be successful in school. I think the outlook that I have, I think education is very important and that separating myself from that outlook and going to an online school is very important to who I am now.

He perceived that his values and culture were different from the prevailing culture in his prior setting and therefore searched for an alternative that would meet his educational and social needs.

Student 14 lived through several difficult family situations just prior to high school:

I would have spent all of those hours on [the family situation] and then all the hours I needed [for schoolwork] taking care of my siblings. Sure, maybe I would have been able to juggle all of that, but I might have been far too tired to understand any of the information.

She had a less-than-smooth transition in her freshman year and ultimately failed two classes. The online setting allowed her to address her areas of weakness and work with teachers in a way that benefited her learning. She found success, not only in school but in other areas of her life as well:

My 11th-grade year I got to work with a service organization. All of these things I never would have been able to do without this school. It has given me the ability to develop myself as well as my intelligence and my educational standards and whatever.

Student 14 perceived herself as substantially more successful in the online setting than she would have been in the traditional setting. Similarly, Student 20 said she improved her academic achievement once she transferred to an online school after having failed classes previously. She tied her academic improvement to the decrease in negative social interactions online:

In regular school, I failed several classes. I didn't have any confidence in myself whatsoever. Cyber school was really good for me to get out of that school. In my last school all my socialization was pretty much negative, but in this school all my socialization is pretty much neutral or perhaps positive, which has really helped.

Student 25 had a similar experience:

I'm glad I got out when I did because I don't know what would have happened to me if I didn't. [In this school] it's more like, "Come talk to me and I'll help you through it. If you have a question just ask me. I don't mind; I'm here to help you." With school it's a lot less stress. I know a lot of kids in my old school want to drop out because they can't take it anymore; they're so bothered and they can't get away.

Her comments demonstrated a hopelessness that changed shortly after enrollment in the online school. As she stated in her rationale for choosing to leave a traditional setting, "The last time I saw the counselor was when I got my enrollment letter."

Students grouped in this theme experienced a social or cultural disconnect in the traditional setting that was strong enough to cause them to leave. They described increased success in their new school and attributed that increase to the ameliorating effect of the online setting.

### *Definitions of Success*

Students grouped in this theme valued their sense of self and seemed to understand the impact of the educational setting on both their academic achievement and self-image. Their statements focused on social and cultural concerns and the changed perceptions of success that occurred with a transition to an online educational setting. Definitions of success in this theme centered on attaining a goal.

The three students who experienced at least one instance of academic failure prior to attending the online high school included a concrete goal in their definitions of



success. For Student 20, success means “writing books that sell.” For Student 25, success is simply “getting my education because at my old school I was going to drop out. If it came to it, when I was 16 I could legally drop out, but this school saved me and now I’m going to graduate.” Student 14 included both concrete and affective components of success:

I think success comes in different forms. In one way it’s physical: Do I have a roof over my head? Do I have all of my basic needs met? Then there’s the emotional. You know, having met all those needs, but am I absolutely miserable, am I okay, or am I happy?

Student 30 stated that success is achieving “desirable results from something I’ve struggled with.” Student 12 defined success as “when I have been able to complete whatever task or tasks I’ve set myself to, to my fullest.” Student 15 provided the most general definition of success: “Everyone tries to set their own goals, so it’s once you achieve your goals.” Although this definition lacks the specificity of others, she clarified that each person should set his or her own goals rather than assuming everyone shares the same ones. In addition to achieving a goal, Student 19 also defined the effort necessary for that achievement: “When I’ve overcome something difficult.”

### *Triangulation of Data*

These students set criteria for success that they developed themselves rather than using conventional measures. Their definitions supported the stated reasons for the increased perceptions of success in the online environment. Characteristics of the online setting addressed factors they found detrimental in the traditional setting. I compared data related to student perceptions of success in the online setting from the LDS and from interviews across the three achievement categories. All achievement categories were

represented: two students in Category 1, three students in Category 2, and two students in Category 3.

### Summary

In this chapter I summarized the results from a two-stage study of high school students' reasons for leaving a traditional school and enrolling in an online school, as well as their perceptions of success in their new school. Data analysis involved identifying emergent themes. Data in both phases of the study revealed that students left a traditional school setting because benefits there did not outweigh disadvantages: the classroom setting, inflexibility of the daily schedule, lack of an individualized curriculum, and negative social interactions. Students chose an online setting for their high school education based on the perceived benefits the cyber school offered as well as its potential to ameliorate the detrimental factors of the prior setting. The four characteristics of the traditional setting that proved most problematic emerged as the themes in response to Research Question 1, and they represented the conflicts described by students in both Phase 1 and Phase 2.

Although students' reasons for choosing an online setting fell within one of the four emergent themes, the factors they found detrimental in the traditional setting and the characteristics they believed would be beneficial in the online setting rarely were all in the same theme. All the participants, regardless of their primary reason for leaving their previous school, perceived themselves as more successful in the online setting, and students' definitions of success supported their stated reasons for increased success. Section 5 contains an interpretation of the results, how these results can be communicated

to the educational community for positive social change, recommendations for further research, and a final statement on the study.

## SECTION 5: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

### Introduction

The goal of the study was to identify why secondary students chose to leave a traditional high school setting to attend an asynchronous high school, characterize their subsequent perceptions of success, and describe any relationship between generative themes and students' perceptions of success. I conducted the study in order to develop a theory that would elucidate why students chose the online setting as an alternative to the traditional setting for their high school education and why they perceived themselves as more successful as a result. In addition to obtaining a LDS from the school under study, I invited all students currently attending an asynchronous online high school in Pennsylvania to participate in the grounded theory study; 30 students agreed to participate in interviews.

### Research Questions

To illuminate the phenomenon of student migration from a traditional to an online high school and the relationship between generative themes and students' perceptions of success, I generated two research questions:

1. Why are students from across the commonwealth of Pennsylvania choosing to attend an online high school?
2. How do students currently attending an online high school program describe their perceived success in the asynchronous setting?

Subsequently, I determined that subquestions were necessary to get at participants' perceptions regarding the phenomenon:

1a. What factors from their prior setting do students identify as having been detrimental to their learning?

1b. What aspects of learning online did students believe would be more satisfying as compared to their prior setting?

2a. How do the students define success and to what degree do they perceive their academic achievement and social interactions contributing to their success?

The research questions and subquestions allowed me to elicit students' descriptions of their rationale for transitioning to the online setting: both the factors that pushed them toward a new setting and those that pulled them away from the traditional setting. The final subquestion facilitated identifying perceived increase of success.

According to Freire (2004),

Recognizing that the current system does not include everyone is not enough. It is necessary, precisely due to this recognition, to fight against it, and to not assume the fatalistic position forged by the system itself, according to which nothing can be done; reality is what it is. (p. 110)

Participants in this study realized that their prior setting did not meet their needs; they were not included in the educational process in a meaningful way. They left their prior setting because they were not fatalistic; they knew something could be done.

#### Data Collection Methods

The study included two phases of data collection. In the first phase I used the LDS as the basis for analysis, and individual student interviews generated data for the second phase. The LDS included Likert and open-ended responses that were collected anonymously by the school in an online survey prior to the inception of the study. After

approval from the school's administration, I obtained the LDS, which included 12 Likert-scale questions, one multiple-choice question that addressed the primary reason for choosing the online school, and one ordinal question at the end of the survey. The second phase included data from individual interviews. I conducted the interviews, after receiving the appropriate consent and assent forms, using questions created to expand on data from the first phase. Each question aligned with a specific research question or subquestion (see Appendix I).

I analyzed the data using the constant comparative method: open, axial, and selective coding. After analyzing data from both phases, I compared interview responses across three achievement groups for within-method triangulation (Jick, 1979, p. 603). During selective coding, four themes emerged. The emergent themes revealed that students left their prior setting when characteristics of the traditional school they perceived as negative aligned with features of an asynchronous learning environment they believed would address their specific concerns. In their rationale for leaving a traditional setting, students described both push factors (things they thought could be addressed by leaving the traditional setting) and pull factors (features of the online environment they believed would be more beneficial). The alignment of push and pull factors ultimately led to a migration to the online setting.

### Summary of Findings

The four emergent themes that exemplified areas of concern in the traditional setting were classroom environment, flexibility of scheduling, individualization of curriculum, and social issues related to school culture. Each of these themes represented

reasons for the decision to attend an online school. During analysis of the second research question and subquestion, the same four themes emerged as the basis for increased perception of success in an online setting. Students described how the online setting addressed concerns they had in the traditional setting and ultimately resulted in their increased perception of success.

The classroom setting theme appeared in the LDS, student interviews, and across all three achievement categories as a reason for leaving the traditional setting. Students explained which characteristics of the traditional classroom setting they found disruptive rather than beneficial to their learning: ability to focus, health concerns, and teacher interaction. Their assessment of the traditional classroom was consistent with that of Giroux (1998):

Events in the classroom are governed by a rigid time schedule imposed by a system of bells and reinforced by cues room teachers while the class is in session. Instruction and, hopefully, some formal learning usually begin and end because it is the correct predetermined time, not because a cognitive process has been stimulated in to action. (p. 37)

Once students migrated to an online school, the factors they previously found detrimental were ameliorated. They were able to create a more conducive setting for their personal needs, have greater teacher interaction at times appropriate for them, and eliminate the influence of other students' behavior that was detrimental to their learning. Students attributed their increased perceptions of success to a transition to the online setting, where the detrimental characteristics of the traditional classroom setting were no longer part of their daily environment.

For most high school students in a traditional setting, the daily schedule might change from day to day if the school employs a rotating schedule, but the number of hours is constant. Data from the LDS and interviews identified students' need for a more flexible schedule as a primary reason for choosing an online high school. Students' ability to determine when they would access the curriculum in the online setting affected their perceptions of success in school and their ability to achieve personal goals outside the curriculum. Several students noted that increased flexibility in the online setting was apparent in the daily schedule as well as in their interactions with teachers. Several interviewees said their overall sense of well-being increased because they perceived that their passions were valued equally with their academic success, whereas in the traditional setting they were regularly forced to ignore or put their personal goals second to academic responsibilities. These students substantiated what Freire (2004) argued:

The more education becomes empty of dreams to fight for, the more the emptiness left by those dreams becomes filled with technique, until the moment comes when education becomes reduced to that. Then, education becomes pure training, it becomes pure transfer of content, it is almost like the training of animals, it is a mere exercise in adaptation. (p. 84)

Participants repeatedly described a desire to learn at their own pace, which was a characteristic of the individualized curriculum theme. For some, an increased pace met their needs, enabling them to accelerate through the content. Others were able to focus on difficult topics or those that deserved more of their attention before moving on to the next concept. Several needed a more advanced curriculum than was available in their prior school. Also included in this theme were students who benefited from interacting with classmates who were their intellectual peers but not their chronological age. The removal



of visual indicators of age allowed students to interact without bias based on age. Perceptions of success increased for students because they felt their academic needs were more effectively met in an educational setting that fostered their strengths and accommodated their needs. They were less frustrated in classes because they capitalized on their strengths, spent less time on concepts they had already mastered, and had additional time to focus on areas of need.

The most emotional responses in the LDS and interviews illustrated how social issues related to the school culture were the primary reason some students left the traditional setting. Students who experienced harassment or had concerns for their safety were looking for any alternative, and they thought an online setting would best meet their needs. Students who experienced social conflicts in the traditional setting, often identified as “drama,” chose to attend an online high school even though their conflicts were not described with as much emotion as were those who were harassed. These students’ experiences confirmed Kanpol’s (1999) observation that “one of the largest problems facing the United States in general and education in particular is how to build a school system that is just and fair and caring and nurturing as well as democratic to its large clientele” (p. 2). Removing harassment, drama, and a devaluing of their culture created an environment that increased students’ perceived success. They described the transition to an online high school as enabling them to focus on learning rather than dealing with a counterproductive educational environment.

In analyzing the LDS and interview data, I identified why students chose to migrate from a traditional high school environment to an online high school, thus

answering the first research question. Data addressing subquestions 1a and 1b enabled me to identify the push and pull factors that influenced students' decisions. I used students' definitions of success (subquestion 2a) to verify that they perceived the online setting had some effect on criteria they identified in their definitions, which allowed me to describe the relationship between students' increased perceptions of success and the emergent themes.

#### Theoretical Framework and Supporting Literature Related to Emergent Themes

People who perceive themselves as successful and happy in their current situation do not typically seek a change; they do not experience push influences. People with cultural capital might see the potential benefits of a new environment (i.e., pull factors), but they are unlikely to think those factors outweigh the possible discomfort of migrating to a new and possibly very different setting (Lee, 1966). Lee posited that influences on a person's decision to migrate include "factors associated with the area of origin, factors associated with the area of destination, intervening obstacles, and personal factors" (p. 50), noting that there are "countless factors which act to hold people within the area or attract people to it, and there are others which tend to repel them" (p. 50). In lay terms, these factors might be called the positives and negatives of any environment. In the current study, factors students described as detrimental to their learning in a traditional setting would be those that repelled them from that setting, and conditions they felt would be more satisfying in the online setting were the factors that attracted them to an online high school.

We can never specify the exact set of factors which impels or prohibits migration for a given person; we can, in general, only set forth a few which seem of special

importance and note the general or average reaction of a considerable group. (Lee, 1966, p. 50)

In this study the “considerable group” was students who left their prior setting to attend an online high school. Lee also suggested that it is one’s perception of the push and pull factors, more than the actual situation, that acts as the catalyst to migrate:

It is not so much the actual factors at origin and destination as the perception of these factors which results in migration. Personal sensitivities, intelligence, and awareness of conditions elsewhere enter into the evaluation of the situation at origin, and knowledge of the situation at destination depends upon personal contact or upon sources of information which are not universally available. (p. 51)

Lee’s theory supported the theoretical framework of the current study because he focused on individual perceptions as the basis for a decision to migrate, not the perception of societal norms.

Freire (2005) noted that those who lack cultural capital or positions of power need educational settings that reduce the hegemony that characterizes most traditional schools. He argued that the solution is not to integrate students into the existing structure “but to transform that structure so that they can become beings for themselves” (p. 74). Freire described a method of education that is not dependent on existing systems. He urged educators to do reduce their dependence on lectures, or narration:

Narration (with the teacher as narrator) leads the students to memorize mechanically the narrated content. Worse yet, it turns them into “containers,” into “receptacles” to be “filled” by the teacher. The more completely she fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are. (p. 72)

Students in the current study were looking for an educational setting that did not depend on existing structures. Several commented specifically on the benefits they experienced when their learning did not revolve around the lecture method, or having to

wait for the teacher to dispense the information they needed before moving on to problem solving. Freire also observed that problem solving brings students to a new level of understanding as they make connections based on their own reality rather than through the teacher's perception of reality.

Participants in the current study described both push and pull factors, defined by Lee (1966) as the factors necessary to instigate a migration, and these became the basis for the four emergent themes. The generation of themes contributed to the overall development of a theory describing why students chose to leave their prior setting to attend an online high school and their subsequent perceptions of success. In his forward to Freire's work, Shaull made the point that education is not a neutral process:

Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes "the practice of freedom," the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (as cited in Freire, 2005, p. 34)

Students in this study, who chose to migrate to an online asynchronous environment for their high school education, represented Shaull's "practice of freedom" by becoming part of a transformation rather than conforming to a system that did not meet their needs.

#### From Data to Grounded Theory

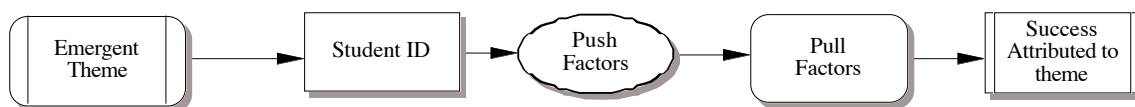
During selective coding, I found that the four emergent themes all related to the core category; students chose to attend an online school when they perceived that the detrimental characteristics of the traditional setting could be ameliorated by the benefits of the online setting, which resulted in an increased perception of success.

Identification of the core category led to creation of the first part of a theory that students migrate to an online environment when they perceive that the push and pull factors align to a degree that they outweigh any intervening obstacles. The theory addresses the first research question: Why are students from across the commonwealth of Pennsylvania choosing to attend an online high school? It also encompasses subquestion 1a (What factors from their prior setting do students identify as having been detrimental to their learning?) and 1b (What aspects of learning online did students believe would be more satisfying as compared to their prior setting?).

The second part of the theory relates to the second research question: How do students currently attending an online high school program describe their perceived success in the asynchronous setting? Student perceptions of success are acknowledged in the last portion of the theory because all students indicated that their perceptions of success increased in the online setting as a result of diminished frustrations or educational detriments. The resulting theory, that students migrate to an online environment when they perceive that the push and pull factors align to a degree that they outweigh any intervening obstacles and experience an increased perception of success, is grounded in the data resulting from both research questions and their related subquestions. Specifically, those data included students' primary reasons for leaving the traditional setting, the characteristics they found detrimental in the traditional setting, aspects of the online setting they perceived would benefit their learning, and how the amelioration of negative characteristics of the traditional setting increased their perceptions of success.

The emergent themes and insights into the role played by push and pull factors also supported generation of the theory.

A turning point in the analysis occurred when the data revealed that students' primary reasons for leaving a traditional setting did not consistently align with the same theme as the push and pull factors, or the area to which students attributed their increased success. Figure 7 illustrates the path I charted for each student in the final stage of reviewing the data.



*Figure 7.* Thematic review of student data.

I color-coded each data point by theme in order to visually depict the combination of push and pull factors for each emergent theme. Using this method to identify patterns in the data, I verified that push and pull factors often fell in different themes. The four emergent themes, then, support the theory, but the data for any one student are not isolated to one theme. The variations exemplify Lee's (1966) theory that push and pull factors will vary by individual. The combination of themes represented in each student's responses occurred because of an individual's perception that the alignment of push and pull factors was significant enough to outweigh any intervening obstacles that might result from migration. Although no student's responses fell within a single theme, each student exhibited an alignment of the push and pull factors that led to his or her migration and to an increased perception of success.

*Emergent Theme 1: Characteristics Related to Traditional Classroom Setting*

The traditional classroom setting contributed to students' decision to leave their previous schools because of characteristics they found detrimental to their learning: the number of other students in the classroom, the distractibility they encountered in the classroom setting, and restrictions on their learning due to the limited time available. Students 4, 13, 14, 17, and 18 said their primary reason for leaving the prior setting related to these characteristics. All the students grouped in this theme also described the classroom setting as at least one of the factors they considered detrimental to their learning.

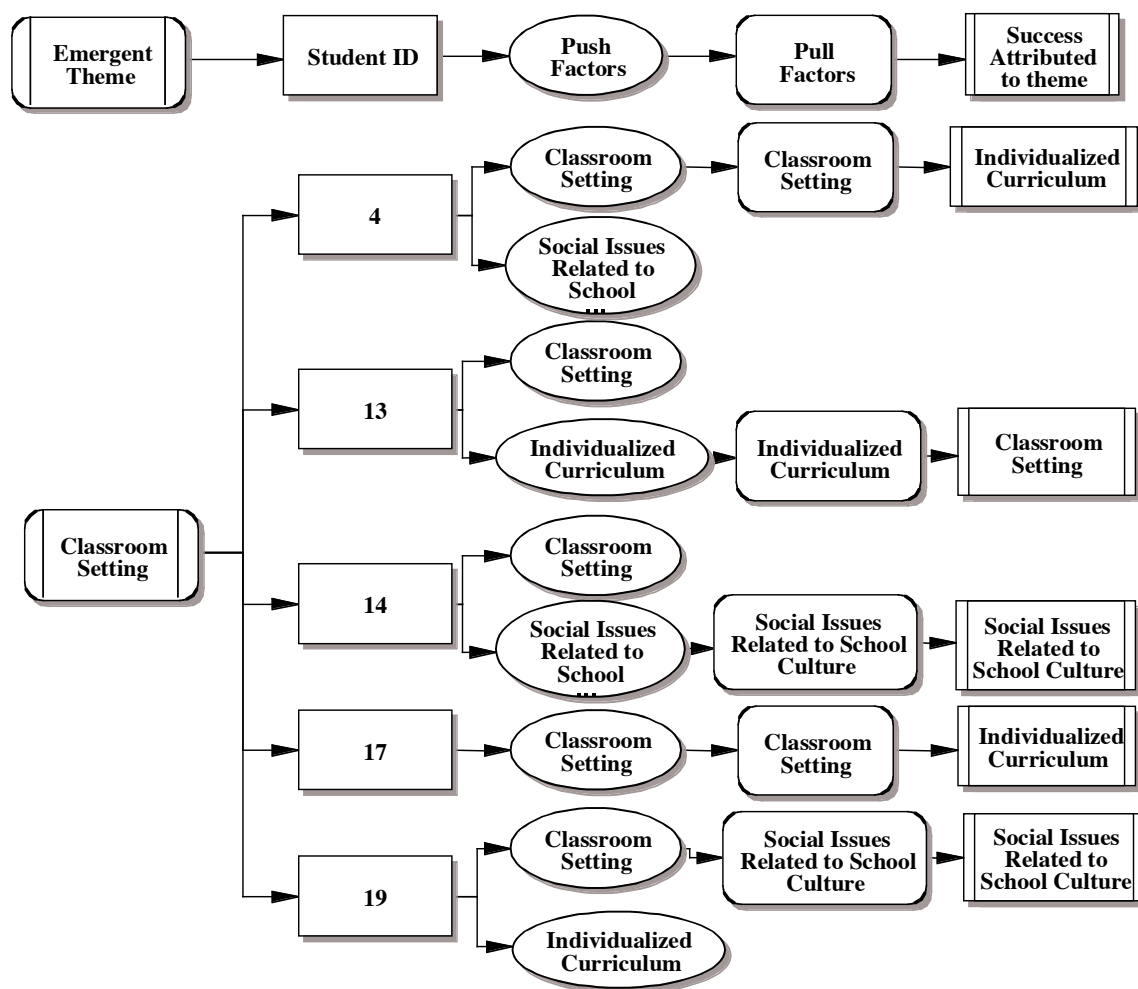
From an outside perspective, a classroom may seem democratic. When implemented by an experienced teacher, decisions about the amount of time spent on a topic, how instruction is delivered, and the depth of investigation will be determined based on the needs of the class as a whole. One year a teacher might cover more information than the prior year because of a different classroom dynamic. Variation might even occur from class to class on a given day. In this respect the classroom setting significantly affects students' learning. The teacher presents content based on the needs of most students in the room. Such an environment serves the majority well, but a minority will find themselves either ahead of or behind their peers. As Giroux (1998) noted, democracy too easily becomes hegemony, and the classroom setting becomes the terrain that embodies disenfranchised students' struggle.

Participants in this study determined that their learning was affected by push factors in the classroom setting, which answered subquestion 1a. The five students

grouped in this theme cited specific aspects of the classroom setting that drove them to investigate an alternative. Four students also listed a secondary reason, which fell into one of the other emergent themes. Students 4 and 14 described negative experiences related to social issues and school culture. Students 13 and 19 found the inability to individualize the curriculum in the traditional setting detrimental. All the push factors related to one of the four emergent themes.

Pull factors, those characteristics of an online setting students believed would be beneficial to their learning, were based the belief that an online setting would ameliorate detrimental influences. For example, Student 13 said he needed to get up and move around, which he could not do in a traditional classroom, and therefore he was attracted to the online setting. He also found that he could individualize the learning process, and his difficulty with organization was no longer an issue in an online school. This experience illustrated a point made by Lee (1966), that a combination of push and pull factors usually precipitates a decision to migrate. This dynamic is illustrated in Figure 8.





*Figure 8.* Students who migrated due to characteristics of the classroom setting.

The fourth column in the figure identifies the theme represented by responses to the second research question: the basis for perceptions of increased success in the online setting. To further clarify what criteria students used to measure success, I recorded their individual definitions of success, which correspond to subquestion 2a. Those definitions included the following components: earning good grades, learning the material well, achieving a specific goal, being happy, and achieving one's full potential. Participants

attributed the ability to achieve their individual definitions of success to the online setting and the mitigation of negative characteristics associated with a particular emergent theme. For example, Student 19 left her previous school because of negative effects the classroom setting had on her health, and she identified this as a detriment of the traditional setting. She also said that in her previous school there was a strong focus on discipline, and therefore instruction was not personalized. A feature of the online setting she believed would be more beneficial was that there would be no other students to affect her learning. She attributed her increased perception of success to developing her own sense of self by not being held back by negative behavior from other students.

As shown in Figure 8, each student represented a different combination of emergent themes. Again, this phenomenon supports the theory that students' decision to migrate was not based on a single factor or characteristic. Instead, students perceived that the alignment of push and pull factors was sufficient to outweigh any obstacles. Consistent with the other themes, all five students perceived an increase in their success based on their migration to the online setting.

#### *Emergent Theme 2: Need for More Flexible Scheduling*

Students at the university level began to take advantage of online education in the late 1990s (Hiltz & Wellman, 1997, p. 32). Enrolling in an online high school has not been an option for public school students for that long, but the opportunity is becoming more prevalent across the United States. According to a 2009 review by the Evergreen Education Group, 24 states and Washington, DC, have full-time online programs (Watson et al., 2009, p. 7).

The theme of desiring flexible scheduling emerged in the LDS, in interviews, and across achievement categories. Eleven students cited the rigid nature of the traditional school schedule as their primary reason for migrating to an online school. Students with a specific personal or professional goals requiring significant time and focus outside school found the typical school schedule especially problematic. A need for greater flexibility also applied to students with health or family situations that required a more fluid approach to learning rather than a lock-step structure based on the number of hours spent each day. Like college students who complete at least a portion of their classes online, students grouped in this theme said that having access to the curriculum and instruction in an asynchronous setting was a primary draw to an online program.

Students 5 and 9 said that the rigid schedule was the most detrimental aspect of the traditional setting. Students 1, 2, 3, 21, and 28 identified other characteristics associated with the classroom setting as detrimental to their learning, thus adding to the push factors in their decision. For Students 22, 23, and 26, the school culture affected their decision to transition to an online setting. Student 30 said that in addition to his health problems, he was frustrated that when he was in school he could not move at his own pace or have an individualized curriculum. He knew teachers could not create an entirely separate curriculum just for him, so he began to research other options.

More than half of students grouped in this theme (Students 1, 3, 5, 22, 26, and 30) thought an online setting would benefit their learning because the curriculum could be individualized, either by allowing them to move at their own pace or having access to the most appropriate courses (see Figure 9).

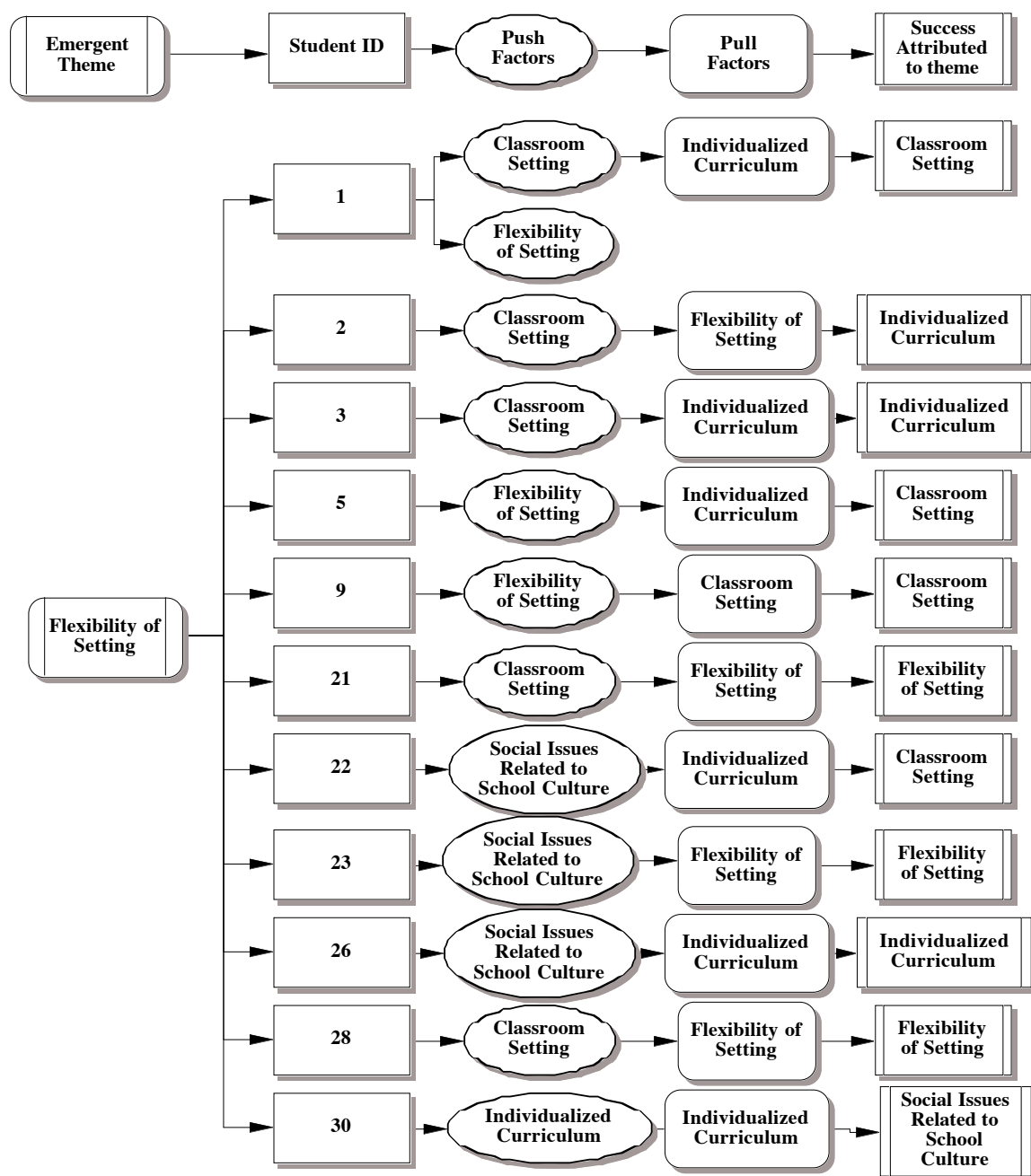


Figure 9. Students who migrated due to needing a more flexible schedule.

For Students, 2, 21, 23, and 28, a more flexible schedule was the pull factor that drew them to an online setting. They thought that setting would alleviate the factors they identified as detrimental in the traditional setting. Student 9 said she had difficulty sitting still and learning in a traditional lecture-style classroom. She thought that removing those two characteristics of the traditional classroom setting would benefit her learning. No students grouped in this theme identified any social issues related to school culture as being improved in the online setting.

As shown in the final column of Figure 9, three of the four students who identified an online school as providing a more flexible setting also attributed their increased perception of success to the same theme. Students 5, 9, and 22 described their increased perception of success as based on removal of characteristics associated with the traditional classroom, although their pull factors fell in both the individualized curriculum and classroom setting themes. Only Student 30 attributed his increased success to the amelioration of negative social influences by other students.

More than a third of the students who participated in this study (11 of 30) fell in this theme (flexible schedule) as their primary reason for leaving the traditional setting, but there was no discernible trend in the combination of themes for students across the push, pull, and perception-of-success categories. Because students in this group were predominantly focused on a personal goal outside the academic arena, their increased perceptions of success seemed predictable because they were able to achieve personal goals due to the online school setting.

*Emergent Theme 3: Need for Individualized Curriculum*

Teachers attempt the difficult task of meeting the needs of multiple students daily. Academic success for students in a traditional setting largely depends on a teacher's ability to address the needs of students who learn in different ways at different rates and have different levels of ability. One skill teachers must acquire is to differentiate instruction to address a variety of needs and learning styles. Students in this study who said their primary reason for leaving a traditional school was the need for a more individualized curriculum said the level of differentiation offered them was inadequate. These students wanted a more truly democratic education (Shor, 1996), one where they could actively help determine the pace at which they learned, participate in individualizing the curriculum, and even assist in determining the appropriate level of content regardless of their age or behavior.

Students 11 and 16 wanted to accelerate the pace of their instruction and were unable to do so in their previous schools. They listed this detriment as a secondary characteristic of the traditional setting, not their primary reason for leaving. Students 18, 20, 24, and 27 wanted access to a more rigorous curriculum. Student 20 felt she had been denied access to the most appropriate curriculum because of her behavior. She said school felt more like a jail than an educational setting. For Student 18, a secondary reason for switching schools was a detrimental culture at her previous school. All the push factors identified by students in this theme supported their motivation to migrate to an online setting.

Four students described a pull factor as their primary reason for leaving a traditional setting: a desire for a more individualized curriculum. Students 11, 16, 24, and 27 all believed being able to individualize their studies beyond the accommodations teachers could make in the traditional setting would benefit their learning. For these students, the push and pull factors showed up in the same emergent theme, thus demonstrating their belief that an online setting could ameliorate concerns they identified as the primary reason for leaving their prior setting. Student 18 described an anticipated benefit of the online setting as having the individualized support and organization she needed while being able to work at her own pace. For that reason she chose an online school rather than home schooling. Student 20 said she had considered asking her parents to home school her because her primary concern was getting out of an environment she and her parents thought was not productive or healthy. The pull factor initially was not that the curriculum was provided online but that she could have access to the most appropriate level of learning and have teachers that were not her parents. For all the students grouped in this theme, the online setting provided a solution to their concerns, not necessarily because it was online but because the individualization they desired could more easily be accomplished in that setting. Figure 10 illustrates the distribution of themes for this group of students.

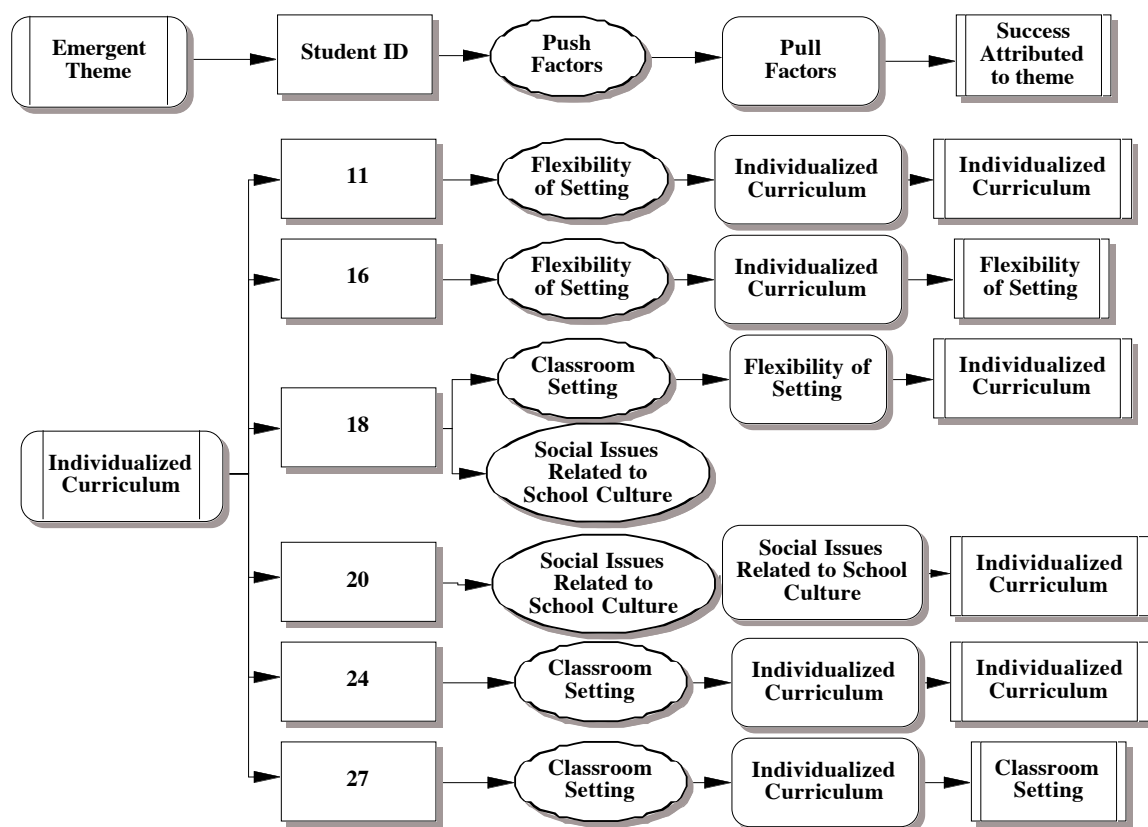


Figure 10. Students who migrated due to needing a more individualized curriculum.

Students grouped in this theme experienced self-perceptions of success. They attributed their success to individualization of the curriculum, access to the curriculum at an appropriate level and pace, and additional resources to support their learning. Students 11, 18, 20, and 24 all cited these reasons and therefore fell under the theme of individualized curriculum. Student 16 also mentioned characteristics relating to this theme, and he gave examples of other meaningful activities he participated in due to the online setting. He attributed his increased perception of success, defined as reaching his personal potential, to the flexible schedule because it allowed him to reach his academic goals and contribute to the local community. For this student, greater perceived success



in the online setting alleviated concerns he had in a traditional classroom. He achieved his definition of success by understanding and applying the content he learned rather than memorizing the material for a test and then moving on to the next topic. All the students grouped in this theme felt they made the right decision to migrate to the online setting.

*Emergent Theme 4: Social Issues Related to School Culture*

According to a 2007 survey of 55 million students conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, 32% of students reported that they had been bullied.

Within that group,

63 percent said that they had been bullied once or twice during the school year, 21 percent had experienced bullying once or twice a month, 10 percent reported being bullied once or twice a week, and 7 percent said that they had been bullied almost daily. (U.S. Department of Education, 2009)

Although it is not clear if these figures, which represent an increase from the 1990s, are due to an increase in the behavior or to better reporting, the fact remains that a significant number of students are experiencing a serious disruption in their education. The negative impact of bullying may not compare to the frustrations felt by students whose culture does not match that of their peers, but for the students in this study it was unsettling enough that they left their prior school. Several students said they did not feel safe at school or that their parents did not feel it was a safe environment. These sentiments formed the basis for an emergent theme and subthemes. Students had concerns for their safety or experienced harassment, wanted to remove the drama or conflict experienced in their prior school's culture, or experienced negative interactions related to a devaluing of their culture because it did not match that of other students.

Students grouped in this theme experienced harassment or thought that what they described as the “drama” distracted from the learning environment. The negative social issues were substantial enough to cause students to investigate other options for their high school experience. Parents of students who enrolled in my school often said they enjoyed the socialization they experienced in high school and were concerned about the diminished opportunities for student interaction in an online environment. Two parents who were most vehement that this option was not appropriate for their child contacted me several months after enrollment to recant their earlier statements. These parents, like many others who have shared similar stories with me in the last 8 years, described the metamorphosis their child experienced, both academically and socially. The students flourished once they could focus on learning instead of dealing with disparaging remarks from other students. Similar sentiments were voiced by students in this study. Students 6 and 29 experienced bullying, Student 12 described being so far outside the culture he could not breathe in, and Student 25 said she had been receiving therapy, which she no longer needed after transitioning to an online environment. Although the findings for this theme cannot be generalized to a larger population, any more than can the rest of the study, these students shared concerns I have heard anecdotally during each of the last 8 years.

The push factors students in this theme identified are shown in the second column in Figure 11. After students addressed issues related to school culture, they mentioned other areas of the traditional setting they found detrimental. Students 6, 12, and 15 needed more flexibility in their schedules to accomplish their academic and nonacademic

goals. For students 7, 8, and 25, characteristics associated with the classroom setting were detrimental to their learning, and they believed the online setting would address those areas. Students 10 and 29 had such negative experiences in their prior setting that they focused only on those areas as push factors.

With the negative experiences of their previous schools behind them, students identified areas of the online environment they believed would benefit their learning. Students 12 and 15 said that ameliorating the detriments would be the most beneficial aspect of learning online. Students 6 and 25 cited increased availability of and interactions with their teachers, and Student 7 mentioned being able to move at her own pace as the greatest benefit. Students 8, 10, and 29 felt that not experiencing harassment or drama in their daily interactions would dramatically affect the learning environment and therefore benefit their learning.

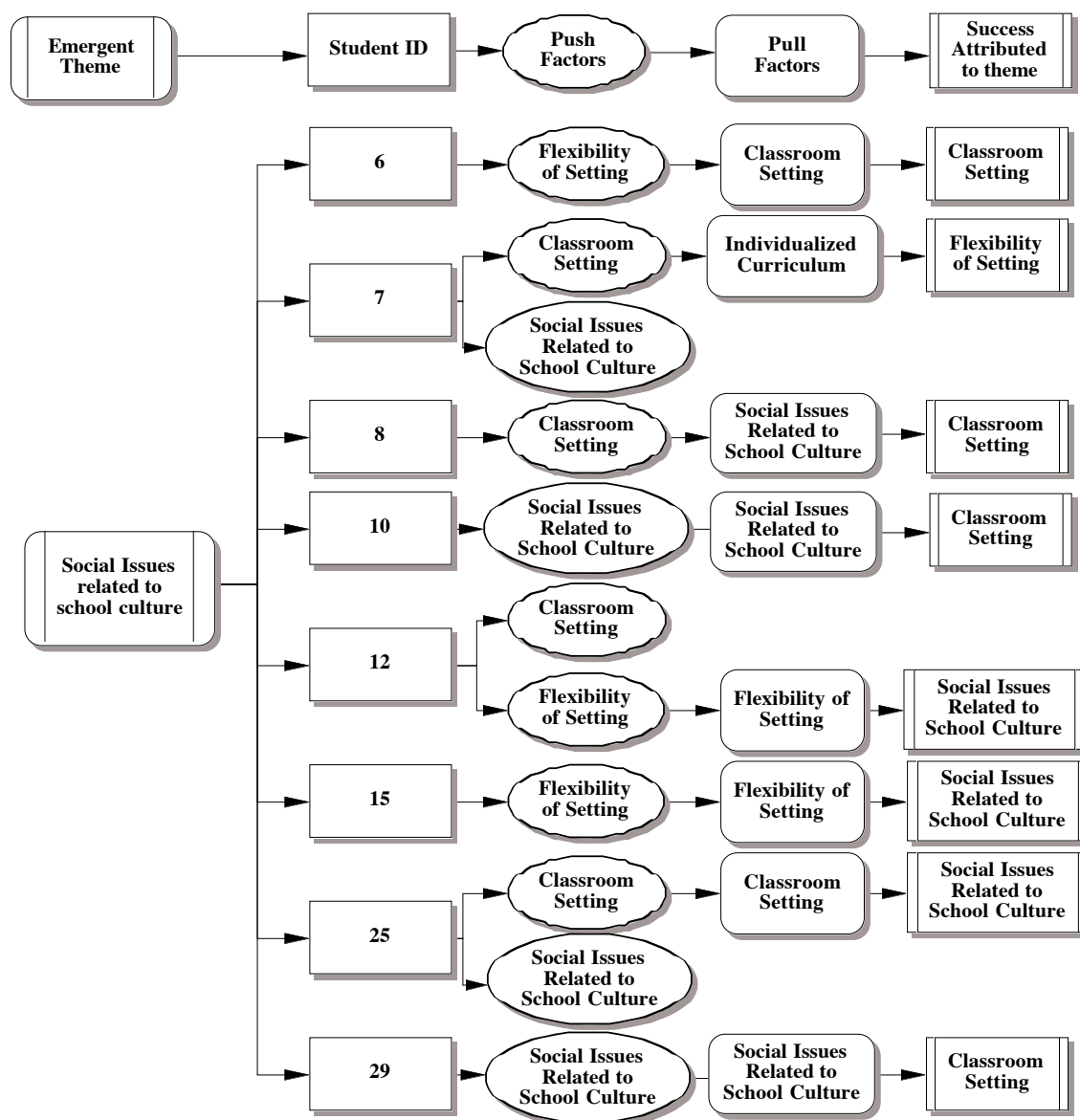


Figure 11. Students who migrated due to social issues related to school culture.

As with the other themes, the students grouped here experienced a perceived increase in academic success. Student 7 had a specific passion outside of school that was suffering in her prior setting. Because the drama was removed from her academic life, she could achieve her educational goals and have more time for her personal goals, while getting what she deemed a better education. Students 6, 8, 10, and 29 found that

removing the classroom setting provided a learning environment that allowed them to achieve their definitions of success, resulting in increased perceptions of success. The online environment provided Students 12, 15, and 25 with the opportunity to learn without the distraction and frustrations they experienced in a traditional setting.

### Reflections on the Researcher's Experience

At the onset of the study, I recognized biases that might affect my analysis and therefore the study's outcome. To mitigate this bias, an external auditor reviewed the analysis. She had no leadership role in the school and reviewed the data to ensure that analysis was consistent with what the participants shared as indicative of their experiences.

To help diminish any effect my role at the school under study might have on participants, I assured them that their responses would be kept confidential and asked them to choose the location for the interview. Two interview questions were designed to enable students to address aspects of the online environment they thought were not beneficial or that were handled better in the traditional environment: "If you had a friend or family member considering taking classes online, what would you tell him or her about your online experience?" and "What would you like to change about your current online school?" I stressed at the start of the interview that both positive and negative impressions of the online environment would support the study's goals because I wanted to assure students they had an opportunity to share multiple perspectives.

At the onset of the study, my perceptions on why students left their prior setting and their subsequent perceptions of success were based on anecdotal information I had

heard from students. This information led me to believe that students left their prior setting because they believed an online setting would address their concerns relating to the traditional setting. My predictions was that their primary reason for leaving, the push and pull factors, and their perceptions of success would to fall in the same emergent theme, but this was not the case. Instead, the data produced an entirely different model, a myriad of combinations that all resulted in an increase in students' perceptions of success.

My thoughts about definitions of success also changed. Prior to analyzing the data, I thought students were most concerned about grades, an external measure of their academic success, but the findings revealed that many students measured success by achieving a goal they set for themselves, an internal measure of achievement. This conclusion also supported the change in my thinking that some students might not perceive themselves successful because of failing to achieve academic expectations held by a majority of students. The study changed my thinking, then, in relation to both research questions.

#### Effect on Social Change

Results of this study can benefit those supporting cyber charter schools because the study clarified reasons for student's self-perceived success. Identifying areas cited as detrimental in a traditional setting can provide the impetus for curricular reform among traditional school administrators, some of whom could implement asynchronous instruction to create a blended curricular model. Education professionals who might direct students to alternative placements when a traditional setting is not appropriate can

use the results of this study to help students understand when migration to an online setting has worked for other students, such as the sample in this study.

Migration increases when push and pull factors align and any intervening obstacles do not sway the individual. Increased enrollment in online high schools across the country could be explained by the alignment of push and pull factors. A rising awareness and growing acceptance of asynchronous learning, which has different pull factors than traditional charter schools or other brick-and-mortar institutions, may be responsible for some of that growth. As the trend continues to gain recognition, those in a position to guide students toward the best educational environment could suggest online learning. An asynchronous environment is not appropriate for all students, but many students do not even realize this option exists.

#### Recommendations for Future Study

Although the goal of generating a theory based on this study's research questions was accomplished, there are other areas that should be addressed in future studies. To generalize the results of this study would require a much larger sample. The student population in this study mirrored the demographics of Pennsylvania, but other areas in the United States would provide a more diverse sample. With the growth in national and international online high schools, there is a possibility of dramatically increasing the diversity and sample size in future studies.

A weakness of the present study was a lack of diversity among participants. I recommend a study that uses a sample of students from online high schools across the country, which should increase representation from more diverse racial, ethnic, and

economic populations. Such a study would also improve a researcher's ability to generalize the findings to a wider population.

Another area that could not be addressed by the present study was the liberatory effect an online setting might have for those in lower socioeconomic groups. A mixed-methods study with such students could include a quantitative portion to gauge the effect of using cutting-edge technology and 21st-century skills, both for students and their families. Not unlike students who are the first in their family to learn English by attending school, students in an online school might act as technology translators for their families.

Another study could compare the perceptions of two groups: students who are dissatisfied with a traditional school but stay put, and those who switch to an online school. The first phase could include a survey to identify students with concerns similar to those of students in the present study. A researcher could then conduct individual interviews to isolate factors that facilitated or inhibited migration of students to an online setting.

A final recommendation for future study is a qualitative case study of students who left an online setting to return to a traditional school. Gathering data from that sample would enable a researcher to identify emergent themes and compare them to the themes found in this study. Completing a study of those who returned to the traditional setting would also enable a comparison of the push and pull factors that caused students to migrate to an online setting and then identify factors that drew them back to a



traditional setting. A study of this nature would also enable identification of the intervening obstacles that inhibited success in the online setting.

#### Recommendations for Action

The results of this study suggest several courses of action for high school students, parents, guidance counselors, and other school personnel who help guide students to the most appropriate educational setting. People who work with high school students must advocate for each student to have access to the most educationally appropriate setting. Informing students about the online educational options available to them is part of that advocacy. Based on the results of this study, a full-time online high school program might be the most appropriate setting for students who describe concerns about their school similar to those of participants in this study. Especially for students who do not have the resources at home or at school to find about online learning, an introduction to this option could prove beneficial. In some situations, completing classes online might not meet a student's needs, but if one does not know this setting exists, there is no opportunity to try this alternative.

Another suggestion for action is to use data from this study about characteristics of traditional classrooms students found detrimental to identify how some features of an online setting could be replicated to address specific concerns. Students who experience one or more push factors identified in this study may not find that those align with the pull factors of a full-time online program. Schools could incorporate aspects of the online setting, such as extended time for assignments, an alternative pace, or even the freedom to complete some online while remaining enrolled full-time in a traditional setting. A

creative approach to identifying students' needs and crafting an individualized plan could dramatically improve perceptions of the traditional setting, thus removing many push factors. This move would require a dramatic shift for some schools, but blending traditional and online settings is not significantly different than implementing an independent study or work release program, which currently exist in many schools.

### Conclusion

This study provided the basis for generating a theory describing students' decision to migrate from a traditional high school to an online high school and an increase in their perceptions of success. Data analysis revealed four themes representing factors that pushed students away from the traditional setting, attracted them to an online setting, and were perceived as having a beneficial effect on their success. Those themes were classroom setting, flexible scheduling, individualized curriculum, and social issues related to school culture. The findings answered the study's research questions: why students migrated to an online high school and how the new setting positively affected their perceptions of success. Another goal of the study was to describe any relationship between the generative themes and students' perceptions of success. Because all the participants perceived themselves as more successful in the online setting based on their own definitions of success, no single theme dominated the others in this regard.

The theory resulting from this study reflects results from both phases of the study (LDS and interviews) and across three achievement groups, with no discrepant cases. Students' descriptions of their reasons for leaving a traditional setting, characteristics they believed would be more satisfying in an online setting, and their perceptions of

increased success provided insights into the phenomenon of increased migration to online high schools beyond what currently exist in the educational literature. Students who do not perceive themselves as successful in a traditional setting can benefit in an online setting if the push and pull factors are consistent with those found in this study. Teachers, guidance counselors, and other adults who might help guide students to attend an online high school can reference these findings as they support students in decision making.

To gain the thick, rich data necessary for this study, I used theoretical sampling, which enabled me to collect, code, and analyze the data concurrently, consistent with the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For the theory to be grounded sufficiently required the participation of students who had left a traditional setting and were enrolled in an asynchronous high school at the time of the study. The creation of achievement categories allowed me to address the possibility of bias; those categories showed that the study did not discriminate based on academic standing. The achievement groups helped ensure that themes were not representative of a single group of low-, medium-, or high-performing students. Participants in this study were enrolled full-time in an online high school at the time of interviews and therefore could be predicted to have a generally positive attitude toward learning online. I suggest that further investigation of this topic include students who returned to the traditional setting after attending an online school, to address the opposite end of the spectrum.

Enrollment of students in online learning courses increased by 60% from the 2002-03 school year to 2004-05 school year, according to the U.S. Department of Education (2009). Online learning is certainly not on a downward trend. Any person with

a role in supporting a current or future high school student should understand the benefits online learning can offer. Without knowledge of this option, students may be attending a traditional setting because it is the only choice they have been given, instead of making the choice themselves.

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## APPENDIX A: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT STUDY



Jon Marsh  
21st Century Cyber Charter School  
455 Boot Rd

7/15/08

Dear Mrs. Paige Morabito

Based on my review of your research proposal, I give permission for you to conduct the study entitled "Students Who Choose an Asynchronous Environment: A study of the stated reason for leaving a traditional school setting and the perception of success in an asynchronous secondary school environment." within the 21st Century Cyber Charter School. As part of this study, I authorize you to invite students of my school, whose names and contact information I will provide, to participate in the study as interview subjects. Their participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the research team without permission from the Walden University IRB and myself as a representative of the school. Additionally, I understand that any identifying student information included within the study will be referred to as a code, for example "student 1234".

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jon Marsh", is written over a horizontal line.

Jon D. Marsh

Chief Executive Officer

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[www.21stcenturycyber.org](http://www.21stcenturycyber.org)

455 Boot Road, Downingtown, PA 19335  
Phone: (484) 237-5206, Fax: (484) 237-5134

## APPENDIX B: CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

**Name of Signer:**                    **Paige N. Morabito**

During the course of my activity in collecting data for this research: “Students Who Choose an Asynchronous Environment: A study of the stated reason for leaving a traditional school setting and the perception of success in an asynchronous secondary school environment” I will have access to information, which is confidential and should not be disclosed. I acknowledge that the information must remain confidential, and that improper disclosure of confidential information can be damaging to the participant.

By signing this Confidentiality Agreement I acknowledge and agree that:

1. I will not disclose or discuss any confidential information with others, including friends or family.
2. I will not in any way divulge, copy, release, sell, loan, alter or destroy any confidential information except as properly authorized.
3. I will not discuss confidential information where others can overhear the conversation. I understand that it is not acceptable to discuss confidential information even if the participant’s name is not used.
4. I will not make any unauthorized transmissions, inquiries, modification or purging of confidential information.
5. I agree that my obligations under this agreement will continue after termination of the job that I will perform.
6. I understand that violation of this agreement will have legal implications.
7. I will only access or use systems or devices I’m officially authorized to access and I will not demonstrate the operation or function of systems or devices to unauthorized individuals.

Signing this document, I acknowledge that I have read the agreement and I agree to comply with all the terms and conditions stated above.

**Signature:**    **Paige N. Morabito**

**Date:** 7/15/08

## APPENDIX C: STUDENT CONSENT FORM

Hello, my name is Paige Morabito and I am doing a project to learn about why students choose to attend an online high school and if they feel any more or less successful than in their prior school. There is very little research about the reasons students choose to attend an online high school program at this time. I hope to help the educational community by completing this study and describing useful information on this topic for teachers, guidance counselors, and other adults who might help guide students in their decision to attend an online high school. I am inviting you to join my project. I picked you for this project because you are a high school student currently attending an online high school. Please read the information below and contact me with any questions regarding the project or the process itself. You can ask any questions you have before you decide if you want to do this project.

### WHO I AM:

I am a student at Walden University. I am working on my doctoral degree. You may have met me during your enrollment process, worked with me during orientation, had me as an English teacher, or met me on a field trip. You may have me as a teacher in the future, see me at future field trips, or talk with me at other school events. My role at 21CCCS should in no way make you think you need to participate in this project if you do not really want to do so.

### ABOUT THE PROJECT:

If you agree to join this project, you will be asked to return the signature page of this form. After I receive the signed form I will contact you to participate in an individual interview with me. The interview should last no more than 1 or 1.5 hours and will be recorded so that I can transcribe the interview. The interview can take place at a location that is most comfortable for you. If you would like the interview to take place in your home I would be happy to meet with you there. It is very important that your parent or guardian be present in your home for the duration of the interview. You may also be asked to participate in a second interview, regarding your initial responses, which should last no more than 1 or 1.5 hours.

If at any time you do not feel comfortable, or for any reason at all you would like to stop and not participate in the study any more, please know that the choice is entirely yours. I will gladly stop the interview and leave if you do not want to continue, I want to make sure you are comfortable during the entire process.

**IT'S YOUR CHOICE:**

You don't have to join this project if you don't want to. You won't get into trouble with any of the staff at 21CCCS or myself if you say no. If you decide now that you want to join the project, you can still change your mind later just by telling me.

It's possible that being in this project might use some of the time you would have spent completing other projects or ask you some questions you have not thought about before. But this project might help other students, parents, teachers, community members, or other members of the educational community better understand the benefits and drawbacks about going to school online for high school students.

I would really like to thank you for considering participation in this project. The time you spend in an interview may help another student considering an online high school make the best decision.

**PRIVACY:**

Everything you tell me during this project will be kept private. That means that no one else will know your name or what answers you gave. The only time I have to tell someone is if I learn about something that could hurt you or someone else. All records of your responses will be maintained on a password-protected computer in my home. Your grades will be made available to me as a part of the research procedures, but will not be shared with anyone else. All information that might let someone identify you as a participant will be removed before being included in the study.

**ASKING QUESTIONS:**

You can ask me any questions you want now. If you think of a question later, you or your parents can reach me at [pmorabito@21cccs.org](mailto:pmorabito@21cccs.org) or 484-237-5214 or my professor at [nlong@waldenu.edu](mailto:nlong@waldenu.edu). If you or your parents would like to ask my university a question, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. Her phone number is 1-800-925-3368, extension 1210.

Please sign your name below if you want to join this project and return this form to me in the enclosed self addressed stamped envelope. I have included a second copy of this form for you to keep for your records or in case you want to refer to the information in this letter at a later time.

Name of Child \_\_\_\_\_

Child's Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher Signature \_\_\_\_\_

- Please check the box to the left if you would like to do the interview through a live webcast- (Illuminate).

## APPENDIX D: PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

Hello, my name is Paige Morabito and I am doing a project to learn about why students choose to attend an online high school and if they feel any more or less successful than in their prior school. I am inviting your child to join my project. I picked your child for this project because he/she is a high school student currently attending an online high school. Please read the information below and contact me with any questions regarding the project or the process itself. You can ask any questions you have before you decide if you want your child to participate in this project.

### WHO I AM:

I am a student at Walden University. I am working on my doctoral degree. You may have met me during the enrollment process, spoken with me during orientation, your child may have had me as an English teacher, or you may have met me on a field trip. Your child may have me as a teacher in the future, see me at future field trips, or talk with me at other school events. My role at 21CCCS should in no way make you or your child think he/she needs to participate in this project. There will be no compensation for participation nor will I pressure your child to participate if he or she does not want to be a part of the project.

### ABOUT THE PROJECT:

If you agree to allow your child join this project, he/she will be asked to: Participate in an individual interview with me.

### IT'S YOUR CHOICE:

Your child does not have to join this project if you have any concerns. Your child won't get into trouble with any of the staff at 21CCCS or myself if you say no. If you decide now that your child may join the project, you can still change your mind later just by telling me. You may decide where you would like the interview to take place and I will ensure it is a convenient location and time for your child and your family. The interview should not take more than an hour, but I will plan to schedule approximately an hour and a half so your child does not feel rushed. The interview will be recorded so that I can transcribe the interview. If you would like the interview to take place in your home I would be happy to meet with your child there. It is very important that you be present in your home for the duration of the interview. Your child may also be asked to participate in a second interview, regarding his/her initial responses, which should last no more than 1 or 1.5 hours.

If at any time you or your child do not feel comfortable, or for any reason at all you or your child would like to stop the interview and no longer participate in the study any more, please know that the choice is entirely yours. I will gladly stop the interview and leave if you or your child does not want to continue. I want to make sure you and your child are comfortable during the entire process.

It's possible that being in this project may use some of the time your child would have spent completing other projects or I may ask your child some questions he/she has not thought about before. However, this project might help others by helping other students, parents, teachers, community members, or other members of the educational community better understand the benefits and drawbacks about going to school online for high school students.

I would really like to thank you for considering your child's participation in this project.

**PRIVACY:**

Everything your child tells me during this project will be kept private. That means that no one else will know his/her name or what answers he/she gave. The only time I have to share any personal information is if I learn about something that could hurt your child or someone else. All records of your child's responses will be maintained on a password-protected computer in my home. Your child's grades will be made available to me as a part of the research procedures, but will not be shared with anyone else. All information that might let someone identify your child as a participant will be removed before being included in the study.

**ASKING QUESTIONS:**

You can ask me any questions you want now. If you think of a question later, you can reach me at [pmorabito@21cccs.org](mailto:pmorabito@21cccs.org) or 484-237-5214 or my professor at [nlong@waldenu.edu](mailto:nlong@waldenu.edu). If you would like to ask my university a question, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. Her phone number is 1-800-925-3368, extension 1210.

I will provide you with a copy of this form.

Please sign your name on the back of this letter if your child may join this project and return this form to me in the enclosed self addressed stamped envelope.

Name of Child \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Please check the box to the left if you would like the interview to be conducted through a live webcast (Elluminate).



## APPENDIX E: EXTERNAL AUDITOR CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

**Name of Signer: Stefani Hite**

During the course of my activity in collecting data for this research: “Students Who Choose an Asynchronous Environment: A study of the stated reason for leaving a traditional school setting and the perception of success in an asynchronous secondary school environment” I will have access to information, which is confidential and should not be disclosed. I acknowledge that the information must remain confidential, and that improper disclosure of confidential information can be damaging to the participant.

By signing this Confidentiality Agreement I acknowledge and agree that:

- 1) I will not disclose or discuss any confidential information with others, including friends or family.
- 2) I will not in any way divulge, copy, release, sell, loan, alter or destroy any confidential information except as properly authorized.
- 3) I will not discuss confidential information where others can overhear the conversation. I understand that it is not acceptable to discuss confidential information even if the participant’s name is not used.
- 4) I will not make any unauthorized transmissions, inquiries, modification or purging of confidential information.
- 5) I agree that my obligations under this agreement will continue after termination of the job that I will perform.
- 6) I understand that violation of this agreement will have legal implications.
- 7) I will only access or use systems or devices I’m officially authorized to access and I will not demonstrate the operation or function of systems or devices to unauthorized individuals.

Signing this document, I acknowledge that I have read the agreement and I agree to comply with all the terms and conditions stated above.

**Signature:**

**Date:**

## APPENDIX F: DATA USE AGREEMENT

### DATA USE AGREEMENT

This Data Use Agreement ("Agreement"), effective as of 9/1/2008 ("Effective Date"), is entered into by and between Paige Morabito ("Data Recipient") and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Cyber Charter School ("Data Provider"). The purpose of this Agreement is to provide Data Recipient with access to a Limited Data Set ("LDS") for use in research in accord with the HIPAA and FERPA Regulations.

1. Definitions. Unless otherwise specified in this Agreement, all capitalized terms used in this Agreement not otherwise defined have the meaning established for purposes of the "HIPAA Regulations" codified at Title 45 parts 160 through 164 of the United States Code of Federal Regulations, as amended from time to time.
2. Preparation of the LDS. Data Provider shall prepare and furnish to Data Recipient a LDS in accord with any applicable HIPAA or FERPA Regulations.
3. Data Fields in the LDS. No direct identifiers such as names may be included in the Limited Data Set (LDS). In preparing the LDS, Data Provider or shall include the data fields specified as follows, which are the minimum necessary to accomplish the research: The questions asked and the student responses without any identifying information. As the survey was completed anonymously, students gave no identifying information.
4. Responsibilities of Data Recipient. Data Recipient agrees to:
  - a. Use or disclose the LDS only as permitted by this Agreement or as required by law;
  - b. Use appropriate safeguards to prevent use or disclosure of the LDS other than as permitted by this Agreement or required by law;
  - c. Report to Data Provider any use or disclosure of the LDS of which it becomes aware that is not permitted by this Agreement or required by law;
  - d. Require any of its subcontractors or agents that receive or have access to the LDS to agree to the same restrictions and conditions on the use and/or disclosure of the LDS that apply to Data Recipient under this Agreement; and
  - e. Not use the information in the LDS to identify or contact the individuals who are data subjects.
5. Permitted Uses and Disclosures of the LDS. Data Recipient may use and/or disclose the LDS for its Research activities only.

6. Term and Termination.

- a. Term. The term of this Agreement shall commence as of the Effective Date and shall continue for so long as Data Recipient retains the LDS, unless sooner terminated as set forth in this Agreement.
- b. Termination by Data Recipient. Data Recipient may terminate this agreement at any time by notifying the Data Provider and returning or destroying the LDS.
- c. Termination by Data Provider. Data Provider may terminate this agreement at any time by providing thirty (30) days prior written notice to Data Recipient.
- d. For Breach. Data Provider shall provide written notice to Data Recipient within ten (10) days of any determination that Data Recipient has breached a material term of this Agreement. Data Provider shall afford Data Recipient an opportunity to cure said alleged material breach upon mutually agreeable terms. Failure to agree on mutually agreeable terms for cure within thirty (30) days shall be grounds for the immediate termination of this Agreement by Data Provider.
- e. Effect of Termination. Sections 1, 4, 5, 6(c) and 7 of this Agreement shall survive any termination of this Agreement under subsections c or d.

7. Miscellaneous.

- a. Change in Law. The parties agree to negotiate in good faith to amend this Agreement to comport with changes in federal law that materially alter either or both parties' obligations under this Agreement. Provided however, that if the parties are unable to agree to mutually acceptable amendment(s) by the compliance date of the change in applicable law or regulations, either Party may terminate this Agreement as provided in section 6.
- b. Construction of Terms. The terms of this Agreement shall be construed to give effect to applicable federal interpretative guidance regarding the HIPAA Regulations.
- c. No Third Party Beneficiaries. Nothing in this Agreement shall confer upon any person other than the parties and their respective successors or assigns, any rights, remedies, obligations, or liabilities whatsoever.
- d. Counterparts. This Agreement may be executed in one or more counterparts, each of which shall be deemed an original, but all of which together shall constitute one and the same instrument.

e. Headings. The headings and other captions in this Agreement are for convenience and reference only and shall not be used in interpreting, construing or enforcing any of the provisions of this Agreement.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, each of the undersigned has caused this Agreement to be duly executed in its name and on its behalf.

**DATA PROVIDER**

**DATA RECIPIENT**

Signed: [Signature]  
Print Name: Don D. Marsh  
Print Title: Chief Executive Officer

Signed: [Signature]  
Print Name: Paige N Morabito  
Print Title: Data Recipient

APPENDIX G: LIMITED DATA SET DATA

Student Feedback SP 08		
The main reason I chose to attend school online was:		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
I had schedule conflict with the traditional schedule.	11.5%	11
I needed courses that were not offered at my school.	1.0%	1
I prefer to learn in my home.	11.5%	11
I prefer to learn at my own pace.	19.8%	19
I needed a different learning environment.	19.8%	19
I had concerns for my safety.	8.3%	8
Other, please write your response below.	28.1%	27
Please put any comments you would like to add here.		38
<i>answered question</i>		<b>96</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>3</b>

**Please put any comments you would like to add here.**

The previous school I was in kept me 100% isolated from other students, and somewhat isolated from the teachers. I decided that anywhere was better than that school, and I'm very happy with this one.

I had been involved with a distance learning program sponsored by my school district. Mom wanted my two younger sisters to also be involved with a online school instead of homeschooling. One of the reasons she wanted this school was because it worked for 6th grade.
I am a serious pre-college classical musician and needed more time and flexibility for practice and lessons.
I did not like the situation of being overweight and going to gym class.
I definitely felt that the public school was not the right place for me, and I needed a school where I was able to work at my own pace, as well as being physically safe.
At my old high school, kids would always pick on me, so I couldn't focus on my studies as much as I needed to.
I am involved in rodeo and am a singer/songwriter so I needed to be able to do my schoolwork whenever it fit my schedule because of my hectic rodeo schedule and performances.
I think I could put down more than one of the given reasons. I suppose you could say it was all of the above. I hated how big the classes were at my old school, I wanted to be home and away from kids that I believe were hurting my progress. My school was also too concerned with athletics and not enough with academics. Athletes were pampered and everyone else had to find their own way.
A bunch of my friends were joining at the same time, so I joined in order to be in the same school as them.
I had sleeping problems and couldn't get up early.
I was missing a lot of school from XXXX. The reason is was because I had a thyroid problem it wasn't working. So me and my mom decided to look for a cyber school. When we went online we found this school and right away she called and I was able to be apart of it
I was having trouble in traditional school.
I really didn't like the public school environment and I knew I wouldn't do well with all the distractions that come with attending public school.
My mom didn't like the schools around my house and she had been teaching my sisters herself so why not me.
My parents put me in.
We were unable to continue homeschooling, and we did not desire the public school.
I do gymnastics and can travel while doing school.
it seemed interesting...I don't know
My mom wanted me to try it.
My school was trying to start a high school but it didn't really work out so I am doing this.
I didn't necessarily like the idea of going to traditional school, mostly for the safety factor. And my family couldn't find a Christian School that we could afford
I did not like the school I was previously going to. I thought online schooling would work

better for me. I wanted to get a job. I wanted to work at my own pace as well.
I just wanted to try something new and this was the best the best place to do that.
Want to take more responsibility for myself and my education.
My other school was very far away and the area was making me sick and I did not like the feel of being in an arsenal.
I was very ill at some points at school and my grades were really suffering.
I wish there was a "All of the Above" button, because to be honest, I did online schooling for all the reasons. Traditional school messed up my credits and I was taking the wrong courses. I also wanted to learn at my own pace and I was fed up with high school drama! The primary reason is because I wanted to graduate early, so now I am graduating in 2008 rather than 2009, which is awesome! =]
My school was moved into a hard to travel to area.
I felt like I was suffocating more or less. Having to choke down other people's opinions and act as if they were facts.
My reasoning included a few of these: I needed a different learning environment (the school I was previously attending was absolutely awful). I almost needed to work at my own pace.
There was no main reason, but factors that influenced our decisions were a combination of: I prefer to learn at my own pace. I needed courses that were not offered at my school.
I went to schools with curriculums used by my elementary school. I wanted a good education.
In my old school there was a lot of violence, and it was very unsafe there and it was also difficult to learn.
To stop being bullied by others
I was not satisfied with the local public school system.
My brother wanted someone to do it with him, and since I was more in tune with school than he was, he thought I could motivate him to finish his school too.
my weight etc...
I am chemically sensitive and being in a public school would have made me sick all the time. My parents and I didn't want to be in a public school because of safety reasons.

Student Feedback SP 08		
<b>I made the decision to attend on online high school, not my parents.</b>		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree	6.1%	6
Disagree	8.2%	8
Neutral	38.8%	38
Agree	24.5%	24
Strongly agree	22.4%	22
Please put any comments you would like to add here.		22
<i>answered question</i>		<b>98</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>1</b>

<b>Please put any comments you would like to add here.</b>
We made the decision together.
It was a mutual decision.
My parents AND I made the decision to do this; it wasn't just me.
It was mutual agreement. It seemed like a good idea.
They thought it was a good idea but it was my decision.
At the time i did not want to attend this school. Now i love it.
I wanted to do this, and my parents had to make sure it was ok.
After I left public school I was home schooled in XXXX, then I came back up here and enrolled in XXXX School. I did not like their style of teaching and quit that as well. I then enrolled in 21cccs and I have loved it, and now I'm graduating!
My choice is my choice .
I just wanted to attend a different school than the one I was at. I liked the idea of cyber school...but Mom looked it up.
I was excited to try it, but they came up with the idea, and made the ultimate decision.
I discovered online schooling before my parents, I brought the idea to them.
My parents agreed but I was the one who brought it up.
My parents and I decided together.
It was a bit of us both. At first I did not want to due to the lack of the social events such as the dances, sports/games, and the one event I would do anything to go to, the prom. After a while I realized that I was better off doing online schooling.
It was my choice and my mom was very supportive of my descion
My parents insisted that I join an online school. I did not disagree, but I did not agree either. I did not know what what to expect simply because no one could give me a 100%



accurate picture.
The topic of schooling was a greatly discussed one and our final decisions were a collaborative.
it was my decision and my parents' decision for me to attend an online school.
we both did
My parents and I made this decision together.
I wanted do do it and my parents wanted me to do it.

Student Feedback SP 08		
I felt successful in my prior school.		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree	11.1%	11
Disagree	17.2%	17
Neutral	26.3%	26
Agree	28.3%	28
Strongly agree	17.2%	17
Please put any comments you would like to add here.		16
<i>answered question</i>		99
<i>skipped question</i>		0

<b>Please put any comments you would like to add here.</b>
Up to 8th grade I was homeschooled by my mother which I did well in. In 9th grade I did a distance learning program with our school district. I did not do very well in it.
I had a lot of trouble finding enough time to practice because of a long commute and hours spent in the school building.
I wasn't getting bad grades at previous schools, but 21st Century has helped me understand the subject matter better than before.
I felt successful in my prior school; I probably wouldn't feel successful in the high school, though.
My previous school was a online school and it was a REALLY bad experience.
I was always an honor roll student.
I felt that they we acting like I was a little kid they would always give me small things to do. They did this because I have Dislexia.
I had no friends, and my grades were barely passing.
I did not like the learning environment or the teachers in my previous school, which

caused me to struggle.
When I wasn't sick I was fine, but when I was I didn't feel successful.
I have always been successful in school.
At my old school they did nothing to help me when I was not succeeding
I can never feel successful in school. I simply do not enjoy school.
I completed all the coursework in my prior school, but it wasn't challenging and I didn't feel accomplished when I finished the year.
Academically, not socially.
I did feel very successful however I was going into high school so we had to make a decision on where to go and we thought this sounded good so we tried it.

Student Feedback SP 08		
I feel learning online has helped me be more successful in school than my prior school.		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree	3.0%	3
Disagree	6.1%	6
Neutral	20.2%	20
Agree	36.4%	36
Strongly agree	34.3%	34
Please put any comments you would like to add here.		16
<i>answered question</i>		99
<i>skipped question</i>		0

Please put any comments you would like to add here.
I moved from my oldest school and was successful in that. In the one I was in last year never helped me because I came to it near the end of the school year.
I was able to accomplish a lot more, musically, this year.
you get to fix your mistakes and in regular school you don't always get to do it. That way you learn what the answer is.
I learned SO much here! It's great! I love it!
I sat that because it seems that we don't learn math a lot
I can work at my pace not the pace of other classmates.
Being here, I finally feel like I can face the world as an intelligent individual and not a mumbling bumbling fool. Although I will probably not be able to go to the college I dreamed of going to when I was younger, 21ccs has made me given me the tools and confidence to try and succeed somewhere else. Maybe I can hopefully one day be able to

transfer to my dream school.
In this school i get the ability to work one on one with the teachers. I was previously in a cyber charter school. So, i felt about the same amount of success.
I have learned a lot form this school.
My grades are now all above 90's, and I feel much more positive.
I have been equally successful in both schools.
I has helped me to have more responsibility, but academically I feel I did better in my prior school. The only reason being because I was very short of time many times rather than in school I had no choice but to sit there and do it. Distraction was the main disadvantage on my behalf.
The teachers where more interactive with me and helped me more then any other normal teacher has
I have more time to look over things, and I have the freedom to do things in a way different then before.
This school has worked better for me, but it isn't because of the online aspect, as my prior school was a cyberschool.
I enjoyed learning with my mom however I do like have teachers in specific fields.

Student Feedback SP 08		
One or more goals I have for the future have changed because of my experiences while attending 21CCCS.		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree	3.0%	3
Disagree	14.1%	14
Neutral	31.3%	31
Agree	33.3%	33
Strongly agree	18.2%	18
Please put any comments you would like to add here.		13
<i>answered question</i>		99
<i>skipped question</i>		0

Please put any comments you would like to add here.
My goals are the same but I am achieving them better.
I feel that it's made my life easier and more flexible.
I was willing to settle for an average life before I came to this school. Now I feel like I'm on top of the world and can do everything I ever dreamed of.
I didn't really have a goal, something i wanted to go to college before. But, now i have an idea of what i'd like to do.

I feel more prepared to go to college now.
No, my goals haven't changed.
Since attending 21CCS I find myself more motivated to do something successful with my life.
Yes, my goals have changed, some for the better and others for the worse. I'm happy that I can now take a year off of school to focus on what college I want to go to and my career because I graduated a year early.
Well attending this school I also discovered that my true passion in life is not law it is photography and anything involving art
As I have never actually had a goal for my future that relied on how well I did in school, my views remain unchanged.
Because this is such a vital period in my life it is important for me to find a topic I excel in and enjoy exploring. The science classes I've taken have really sparked my interest and helped me to develop a goal that could really impact the world for the better.
I have a lot of time to figure out what i want to do when i grow up but i used to think it was one thing but then i learned more about it and changed my mind.
I don't really think that anything has changed.

Student Feedback SP 08		
Were there other schools you considered before enrolling with 21CCCS?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
There were many other schools I considered.	2.1%	2
There were more than three other schools I considered.	6.2%	6
There were one or two other schools I considered.	22.7%	22
There was one other school I considered.	33.0%	32
I did not consider any other schools before enrolling with 21CCCS.	29.9%	29
Other, please write your response below:	6.2%	6
Please put any comments you would like to add here.		16
	<i>answered question</i>	97
	<i>skipped question</i>	2

Please put any comments you would like to add here.
There were many other schools that my mother considered.
Mom researched all the cyber schools available in PA until we decided on this one.
21CCCS is better for a person who needs flexibility, and the teachers make it a better experience by being there when the students need them.
I would've gone to the local school if we hadn't found this awesome cyber-school.
I went to one other school after making the decision to go to 21cccs, but only because I was too young at that point.
I previously attended a different cyber charter school. I transferred because my sister was in this school and because the other school had just started their high school and I didn't want to use that school anymore. I saw what my sister was doing and how she was working and decided I'd like it.
Yes, but when my mom called you guys you people were the nicest.
I went to another school but before that I wanted to go here first.
Really, my mother considered them, not me. But she only liked one or two others....
I was in another cyber school before 21cccs, but it was not helping me in the places where I needed the help. And when I first started 21cccs it was because one of my sisters were already in 21cccs and my mom really liked how the school worked. So I am now finished my second year at 21cccs and I will be back next year.
We considered the K-12 school, but they didn't have high enough grades.
I was either going to stay at my prior school or attend 21CCCS there were not any other options my parents and I made.

The last school I was in was so bad that if 21cccs did not work out I might have dropped out of school all together
There are not that many online schools out there with this much flexibility. this was the only choice that made any sense.
Another cyber school.
The only school I had considered before 21CCCS was the one I was currently enrolled in.

Student Feedback SP 08		
My prior school had all the classes I needed to prepare me for my future goals.		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree	11.2%	11
Disagree	21.4%	21
Neutral	31.6%	31
Agree	30.6%	30
Strongly agree	5.1%	5
Please put any comments you would like to add here.		9
<i>answered question</i>		<b>98</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>1</b>

<b>Please put any comments you would like to add here.</b>
Academically, yes, but I also attend two music programs and study music with independent teachers as well.
didn't give me the flexible time to do it.
They did have all the classes, but I think I was MUCH better off here rather than there.
I'm not certain if it had all the classes or not, but it wouldn't have mattered anyway because they messed up everyone's transcript. If not all the students, then about 75% of the students.
I guess they did....there was nothing wrong, anyway.
I was put into classes with freshman that I had already taken and if I stayed at my prior school I would have missed out on many courses that I need to attend the college I want.
The school I was at before did nothing to help me in any field that I wanted to go to because they where not equipped to do so.
There are no subjects in school that can prepare me for my future goals other then basic math, English, and
The classes were available but they weren't as involved.

Student Feedback SP 08		
My prior school's daily schedule (when classes started and ended) was a problem for me.		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree	15.3%	15
Disagree	22.4%	22
Neutral	25.5%	25
Agree	23.5%	23
Strongly agree	13.3%	13
Please put any comments you would like to add here.		10
<i>answered question</i>		<b>98</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>1</b>

Please put any comments you would like to add here.
I was always leaving school early because of having to leave for a rodeo of performance.
I was previously in a different cyber charter school.
Cause sometimes it started really late then we had no time to go over things but then sometimes it really early and half the class wasn't awake.
It did waste a lot of my time.
Not a morning person.
Going to public school obviously means waking up early. I did not do well with having to wake up so early and get to school. I found myself struggling because I was tired in my morning classes. I also wanted to get a part time job, and I believed the best way to go would be online schooling, so I could work on my schoolwork at the time of day that suited me best.
I didn't have a problem with the schedule, I actually liked it. However, I did like how I was able to wake up at 8:00 rather than 6:00 thanks to 21CCCS.
It was a big problem for me because after my dad died I did not like the fact that I could not be at home for my sister when she got home and I could not help my mom get things done through the day that she could not do her self well she was at work.
It was crazy... I didn't really understand the system.
My school days were essentially non-committal. I only needed to log onto the website once a day and my attendance was recorded.

Student Feedback SP 08		
How comfortable were you with the other students in your prior school?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Not comfortable	15.2%	15
Somewhat comfortable	30.3%	30
Comfortable	19.2%	19
Very comfortable	19.2%	19
Other, please describe further below:	16.2%	16
Please put any comments you would like to add here.		20
<i>answered question</i>		<b>99</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>0</b>

<b>Please put any comments you would like to add here.</b>
I was never introduced to other students.
It was a distance learning school that didn't have any interaction with other students.
My situation was unusual in that I transferred from a private school to an elite public magnet school that rarely admits 9th graders, so I was no part of the very small group of core students at that small school.
In 21CCCS, it doesn't make me feel strange to be in a cyber school. I know most of the students here are attending for the same reasons.
In the other school we weren't able to communicate like we can in this school
I had a lot of friends but there was always the drama that comes with public schooling.
That was one of the main reasons why I left. The kids picked on me and it was distracting.
Extremely uncomfortable. I'm not sure I'd go back there if you paid me.
I didn't really get to see the other students like I do in 21cccs.
It was mostly my siblings, and then other kids from my church, so I was very comfortable around them.
I had a great group of friends, but only to realize, they really weren't the type of people I wanted to be around.
In public school there are people who believe in stereotypes, people who do not associate with you because of who you associate with, and people in public school were not as open.



they were like my brother
There are a lot of snobs in XXXXXX.
I was comfortable with the students that I was friends with and I knew, but as for those "cliques", I couldn't take it anymore. I really wanted to get away from the "she did this, and she did that" girl drama!!! =]
The kids at my hold school where very hostile and being different was very froneded upon
I didn't really know my class.
I never interacted with the students in my prior school as it was cyber as well.
It was an virtual school so i never saw any of the students in my class.
pretty comfortable

Student Feedback SP 08		
Please describe your feelings of overall safety and comfort at your prior school.		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
I felt very safe and comfortable at my prior school.	20.8%	20
I felt safe and comfortable at my prior school	38.5%	37
I did not feel safe and comfortable at my prior school.	30.2%	29
Other, please write your response below.	10.4%	10
Please put any comments you would like to add here.		17
<i>answered question</i>		<b>96</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>3</b>

Please put any comments you would like to add here.
I felt safe but isolated from the world.
I felt very uncomfortable at my prior school because I was the "new" kid in school.
My urban school had a lot of maintenance issues and over-crowding in classrooms.
Safety is a big issue there they take it very serious.
At the local school, I felt it wouldn't have been safe if I went. I haven't actually gone to school there, though, so I'm not positive.
It really depended on the day.
I felt safe but not comfortable. I was picked on and teased but I was not concerned for my safety.
There was to many bomb threats and way to many people fighting and using bad words and just plan nasty.
I felt like I was at home
We had a bomb threat every day for about 2 months. They had to close down almost all

of the bathrooms.
I felt safe just not comfortable.
I don't think that I was uncomfortable at my prior school, but at times I did feel unsafe because we had a lock down a few times due to kids bringing in knives and guns. =/
There was no safety at my old school. It seemed like everyday there was a fight or someone was stabbed and it happened so often most of it never makes it to the news.
I felt safe, but uncomfortable. the schoolwork caused alot of stress.
Again, the cyber environment suited me just fine.
In some ways i felt safe and comfortable at this school this year but in other ways i didn't. I felt very comfortable knowing that my private information couldn't be seen by just anybody. Also i didn't feel very comfortable with how kids from other classes could just email me when i didn't know them but that is part of making friends and i just have to get used to that.
Kids were very immature

Student Feedback SP 08		
<b>Socialization and peer interaction were an issue at my prior school.</b>		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree	22.2%	22
Disagree	25.3%	25
Neutral	26.3%	26
Agree	15.2%	15
Strongly agree	11.1%	11
Please put any comments you would like to add here.		15
<i>answered question</i>		<b>99</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>0</b>

<b>Please put any comments you would like to add here.</b>
It was a distance learning school that didn't have any interaction with other students.
As I said above, my situation in 9th grade was unusual because I arrived at a small, elite public school as an "outsider", one of only two new kids in the class. It was not easy to make friends there even though I don't normally have a problem with with that.
At my prior school, kids weren't encouraged to socialize. The field trips weren't planned in a way that would make everyone feel comfortable. I believe 21CCCS is very considerate about socialization.
I felt that I wasn't similar to the peers at my other schools, causing in a lack of

friendships. Again, I'm not positive since I didn't actually go to the local middle school yet.
I had a one or two friends i emailed and saw at state testing, i didn't really find the need to interact with any more than that because i have friends where i live.
I had a lot of friends and they were all very nice and kool. But I made more friends here.
Didn't I mention I had no friends?
Sometimes, but I usually had other people to interact wiht.
As I previously said, people at my prior school tended to judge others, believe stereotypes, and start rumors.
I wasn't there much so I didn't really have a lot of friends there.
At my prior school, I didn't have a problem with socialization and peer interaction. It was a lot easier because kids were constantly there.
I made a few friends well at the school and interaction was never an issue for me because I am a very out going person.
1% socialization 99% work. I only saw them during the PSSA exam things.
Thursday Club kept me involved with other kids my age. In addition, I took part in soccer and other recreational, team-based activities.
Again, just me and my mom so no other people.

Student Feedback SP 08		
21CCCS meets my peer and socialization needs.		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree	7.1%	7
Disagree	13.1%	13
Neutral	38.4%	38
Agree	27.3%	27
Strongly agree	14.1%	14
Please put any comments you would like to add here.		16
<i>answered question</i>		99
<i>skipped question</i>		0

Please put any comments you would like to add here.
I like how I can participate with other students and debate things on different topics. But I still enjoy my friends who are not a part of 21cccs.
I haven't really connected with the 21CCC students, although I didn't expect to.
I'm EXTREMELY happy with the peers in my school- XXXXXX is one of my closest friends here. I think she's my best cyber-buddy, actually!
I can only go to 21cccs and get enough socialization because I know, and get together with a group of other students.
I talk to a couple people from the school, not many. I have a lot of other friends though so I would say its okay.
Yea cause everyone is so nice and they help you out with everything.
It doesn't, though i don't blame the school. For cyber school, it's good.
I get a lot more interaction with people my age, but I have a lot of interaction outside of school too.
I made some great friends, but it would be nice to have more "in person" socialization than is offered..
It was my choice though. I was only here for a year though so it didn't really bother me.
I have not made an effort in this school for socialization because I have plenty outside of school.
I felt like I was pushed away from A LOT of socialization. At traditional school, I really had no choice but to make friends. Online, I feel like my best friend was the internet!! HAHA.
They're where many trips set in place for me to go and meet with the teachers and staff but I could never make them but if I wanted to that would have filled the need.

I don't really have any peer and socialization needs.
21cccs doesn't really do the trick individually, but the structure allows me to seek out opportunities for socialization elsewhere.
I am not sure because i didn't go to any field trips but i did have a few friends in my class that i emailed.

Student Feedback SP 08		
<b>Socialization and peer interaction are not issues for me at 21CCCS.</b>		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree	5.1%	5
Disagree	9.2%	9
Neutral	22.4%	22
Agree	38.8%	38
Strongly agree	24.5%	24
Please put any comments you would like to add here.		5
<i>answered question</i>		<b>98</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>1</b>

<b>Please put any comments you would like to add here.</b>
I feel extremely comfortable; even when I started I felt comfortable!
Socialized too much instead of work sometimes.
I feel that socialization was a big issue for me because at times I feel very bored because there is nothing really to do exciting.
Nope it was never an issue for me because i am an out going person so it was not hard to talk to the other students.
I am sometimes forced to have to work with other students who are... really out of it. Not understanding what they are talking about, but acting like they do.

Student Feedback SP 08		
If you had a friend or family member thinking about going to a cyber school next year, how likely would you be to recommend 21CCCS?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
1 Not likely	0.0%	0
2	1.0%	1
3	1.0%	1
4	2.0%	2
5	4.0%	4
6	1.0%	1
7	11.1%	11
8	14.1%	14
9	12.1%	12
10 Extremely likely	53.5%	53
Please put any comments you would like to add here.		32
<i>answered question</i>		99
<i>skipped question</i>		0

<b>Please put any comments you would like to add here.</b>
I think that this is a good school. Kids just need to learn not to take advantage of their priv.
This school gave me everything I ever wanted in a cyber school. The teachers weren't bent on getting paid and actually wanted the students to succeed. The school didn't isolate the students, and I want it to stay this way.
Already did.
I don't think anyone besides me would really like it, because most of my friends really like the public school environment, when I'm the complete opposite of that. I'm not saying it's a bad school, but others around me LOVE the public environment and prefer that
I enjoy 21cccs, and it gives me a good learning environment, but it's not for everyone.
21CCCS is, by far, the best cyber school I've come across. I would definitely recommend it.
I have already recommended 21cccs to several people.
It depends on who the person is, because of their specific learning needs.
I have already recommended 21CCCS to several people.
Cause this school rocks!
I would recommend this school; it's the best one.

My friend XXXX is signing up for next year now :)
I love going to 21cccs! I love the teachers and I love how I can work at my speed and I know that the teachers are always there to help me when I need it.
XXXXXX- student name
I love this school!!!!!!
It depends on the person. Cyber schooling isn't for everybody.
I thought that the chess club was a good idea. It gave students time to just hang out and play chess and not have to be constantly poring over school and stuff like that.
I think that this cyber school is a very nice online school. I somewhat feel like I still have freedom but I still have work to get done. I also like the interaction with other students in the Vo's.
This school has turned me around 100%, I am so grateful that I found it.
Online schooling might not be for everyone. I would recommend 21CCCS to anyone who believes they would do better online than at their prior school.
Unless they weren't self-motivated.
I have already recommended the school to some friends and parents that I know who are looking for an alternative school for their children once they reach high school.
I think that if they wanted to be challenged and were really focused on their future this would be perfect for them. They learn responsibility and self- discipline. However, from my own personal experience, I was unable to attend the school field trips so the only big issues were with friends and social interaction (and of course not being able to go to the prom... which I would have loved to do).
I would recommend this school to anyone who has a busy schedule or just feels unsafe at their current school and above all the teachers are awesome and everyone here just want to help you succeed as much as you do and they help you so much along the way. Thank for 3 great years :)
Like with all schools, not everyone can fit into one kind of school. If I believe they are able to work effectively in this school, I will suggest it.
This school is the best, I recommend it to people even if they are not thinking about going to a cyber school.
I wouldn't recommend the school to just anybody, however, if I thought they would do well I wouldn't hesitate to recommend it.
Because it takes a decent amount of time to get used to the classes and what you are doing. For a while i was confused. But now i just love it!
already have
Yes, I would recommend the school for anyone trying high school. Not sure I would recommend the grade school because I'm not sure of how it works and how students like it. I do like the high school system. There is only one thing I really didn't like about this school...When first semester and second semester met, I wanted to keep going to get done early, I wasn't able to do this because once I was done with first semester I couldn't go right into second semester, I had to wait a whole week. I could have been done a whole week earlier.

I already have recommended my student, XXXX whom I give riding lessons to to 21cccs.  
She has since enrolled.

I like it and I think some of my other friends would like it too.



## APPENDIX H: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1) Why did you leave your prior school?
- 2) As you were thinking about switching to an online school, why did you think learning online would be a better solution for your high school education?
- 3) How would you define success overall?
- 4) How would you define success in school?
- 5) Describe what, if anything, about taking classes online is helping you become successful in your online school?
- 6) Describe what, if anything, about taking classes online is not helping you become successful in your online school?
- 7) Could you please explain why you think you are more or less successful in an online setting than you would have been in a traditional setting?
- 8) How comfortable were you in your prior school?
- 9) How safe did you feel in your prior school?
- 10) How were you able to connect with teachers in your prior school?
- 11) How is your ability to connect with teachers in an online school different?
- 12) Thinking about how connected you felt to other students in your prior school, describe why you feel more or less connected to other students in an online school.
- 13) If you had a friend or family member considering taking classes online, what would you tell him or her about your online experience?

- 14) Thinking about how you felt when you were in class in your prior school, describe the difference between taking classes in your prior school and this school.
- 15) What are other students in your online school like?
- 16) How are they like or unlike you?
- 17) What would you like to change about your current online school?

APPENDIX I: RESEARCH AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS HIGHLIGHTED BY  
CONNECTION AND RELEVANCE

- 1) Why are students from across the commonwealth of Pennsylvania choosing to attend an online high school?
  - a. What factors from their prior setting do students identify as having been detrimental to their learning?
  - b. What aspects of learning online did students believe would be more satisfying as compared to their prior setting?
- 2) How do students currently attending an online high school program describe their perceived success in the asynchronous setting?
  - a. How do the students define success and to what degree do they perceive their academic achievement and social interactions contributing to their success?

Interview Questions

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- 17) What would you like to change about your current online school?

APPENDIX J: CODES DEVELOPED

Code	Description
AA	student indicated a positive effect on academic achievement
AFP	indicated that he/she viewed this as achieving his/her full potential
CL	content was learned or there was strong growth in content
CSC	student shares a concern based on class size
DIC	student describes himself/herself as distractable in the classroom
GG	student indicated good grades
HC	student had a health concern that affected his or her ability to attend a traditional setting
IIFS	increased impression due to flexible schedule
IS	response is based upon inflexible scheduling in that a traditional setting cannot accommodate non-traditional schedules
ISI	Increased student independence
ISM	Internal student motivation
ITN	student needed increased time for areas of need
ITS	Insufficient teacher support due to the constraints of traditional setting, not as a reflection of teacher ability or concern
LG	situation was brought about by or resulted in student having low grades
MRI	student wanted more rigorous instruction across all areas
NGTI(iti)	student wanted greater teacher interaction
NIPS	student presents a negative impression of prior setting
PH (IPH)	student indicated that this resulted in increased personal happiness
PHS	student was previously home schooled prior to coming to the online school
PIDR (IDR)	prior setting had an inflexible daily routine
PIS	prior setting had an inflexible schedule, specifically start and stop times
PL	the physical location was problematic
PNC	prior setting was described as not challenging enough
POP	student prefers to work at his/her own pace
PS	student indicated that this resulted in increased personal satisfaction
PW	student indicated that this is what the parent wanted
SC	student had safety concerns
SEI	situation describes a response related to a socioeconomic issue
SGA	student described that a specific goal was achieved

SH	student described issues of being harassed
SI	student had negative interactions due to social issues
SR	indicated strong relationships
SRI	student remained in school
TS	teacher support
WF=PIS	
WLD	student wanted an educational setting with less drama
WSF	student wanted a school with stronger subject area focus
WSN	student stated that he/she simply wanted to try something new
PGR	Peer group related
WIPC (WIC)	student wanted an improved curriculum
SD	Student decision
PD	parental decision
JD	joint decision

## CURRICULUM VITAE

Paige Nicole Morabito

880 S York Drive  
Downingtown, PA 19335

### Professional Experience

February 2009 - Present

Coordinator of Curriculum and ISD

- Supervise curriculum development and revision
- Monitor implementation of ISD in all courses
- Coordinate professional development and ensure alignment with Professional Education Plan
- Oversee interviews, hiring, and induction of instructional staff
- Supervise and evaluate first year teachers
- Train instructional assistants in support of students' Plan for Student Learning
- Brandywine Virtual Academy liaison for onsite facilitators and district representatives
- Create and teach new orientation each year for returning students

September, 2008 - February 2009

Acting Principal

- Performed essential job responsibilities after creation of position, until filled
- Maintained responsibilities for Instruction and ISD

2001 - 2008

Lead Teacher and Course Developer

- Created and delivered standards based online curriculum for students in grades 7 to 12
- Developed and facilitated online orientations
- Wrote and implemented Teacher Induction Plan
- Designed and monitored current Professional Education Plan
- Authored Online Teacher Evaluation Tool supporting award of merit
- Wrote several sections of Charter Renewal Application
- Assisted with enrollment and marketing
- Responsible for open house presentations and meetings with local district personnel

1993 - 2001

Teacher of the Gifted

- Created inclusion model to address gifted needs in the regular classroom in addition to self-contained environment
- Provided access to enrichment for all students in the regular classroom
- Developed co-teaching model across grade levels
- Developed and implemented Gifted Individual Educational Plans

Education

2005 – 2010 Pursuit of Doctorate of Education in Teacher Leadership  
Walden University Minneapolis, MN

1991-1999 Master's of Arts in Gifted Education  
University of South Florida, Tampa, FL

1987-1990 Bachelor of Arts in English  
Stetson University DeLand, FL

REFERENCES available upon request