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Experiences of High School Dropouts in a Work Force Development Program

Reginald J. Hester, Sr.
Walden University

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Walden University

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Reginald J. Hester, Sr.

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The Office of the Provost

Walden University
2019

Abstract

Experiences of High School Dropouts in a Work Force Development Program

by

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MA, Hampton University, 2002

BS, Bethune Cookman College, 2000

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Education

Walden University

November 2019

Abstract

The issue of high school dropouts has been an ongoing concern for educators, community stakeholders, and politicians on local, national, and global levels. Little was known about students' experiences before they enrolled in a workforce development program and how their earlier experiences may have caused them to drop out of high school. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to understand the school-related experiences of high school dropouts enrolled in a workforce development program, and how the innovation and integration of social media technologies during academic instruction helped reengage these learners. The research questions focused on how the participants described their personal and academic experiences before they dropped out of high school, their collaborative learning and social-relational experiences while enrolled in the New Hope workforce development program, and how the infusion of social media technologies during academic instruction impacted their development. Yin's descriptive qualitative case study model was used to capture the academic and social experiences of 20 program participants from one-on-one interviews and focus groups. Cross-unit evaluation was used to identify emerging codes and themes. Results revealed the importance of sustainable relationships between the students and instructors. Findings may be used to promote functional learning communities with conscientious and compassionate instructors.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this project study to my family, friends and dedicated change agents of the world. To my family, especially my wife, I would like to thank you for your patience, words of support, encouragement and constant reminders to keep focused on the greater goals of this academic journey; I love you. To my mothers, Bessie and Zenobia, thank you for your unconditional love, courageous conversations and for always being a permanent foundation of unwavering love and support; I love you. To my children, Reyasha, Reggie Jr. (RJ) and Caleb, thank you for being amazingly awesome! Thank you for making this journey as seamless as possible while providing purpose and inspiration without having a clue as to how much and what you mean to me; I love you.

To my friends, I dedicate this study to you and thank you for words of support, encouragement and for holding me accountable. With every high and every low, you all have been right there to celebrate every victory and to pick me up when I wanted to concede. Thank you; I love you with all my being.

Lastly, to the dedicated change agents of the world (educators), thank you for all you do daily across the world. Despite being undervalued, underpaid and often unappreciated, you all are the “true” life savers of the world. I celebrate you; I salute you; and I encourage you to keep fighting the good fight in transforming lives for the better.

Acknowledgement

I surrender all honor and praise to God (the Most High) for equipping me with the necessary support system of family and friends (local angels), as well as patience and endurance to finish this doctoral race. Thank you, Father for your favor, your mercies and strength to conquer this mountain.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The issue of high school dropouts has been an ongoing concern for educators, community stakeholders, and politicians on local, national, and global levels. According to Sipma (2016), high school dropouts continue to be a global phenomenon and will potentially negatively affect 12 million learners in the next 10 years. Despite improved high school graduation rates across the United States, researchers have confirmed that students who drop out of high school struggle academically, socially, and emotionally; moreover, they experience difficulty gaining competitive employment in their local job markets (Partin, 2017). There is a need for an alternative learning program that engages disconnected high school dropouts and equips them with the skills and credentials necessary to gain sustainable employment.

To address the high school dropout phenomenon in a Midwest city, one organization created a program to help students complete their high school diploma with a state-certified working credential. This program incorporates social media technologies designed to guide academic instruction and social engagement within an identified learning community or cohort. This teaching and learning model could transform how students and teachers communicate within learning communities. Because technology is accessible in academic and social landscapes, it may be leveraged to foster relationships and supports to reengage previously disconnected learners into becoming contributing members of society.

The high school dropout phenomenon continues to be an epidemic within the United States. According to Ecker-Lyster and Niileksela (2016), one third of students

receiving a public education at the secondary level drop out annually. For purposes of this study, I documented the experiences of high school dropouts participating in a workforce development program in a Midwest city.

In Chapter 1, I present the background of the study, problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, conceptual framework, nature of the study, operational definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, significance of the study, and a summary of the chapter. I explain why learners drop out of school, how an alternative workforce development learning model was used to promote student engagement using social media technologies, and how school-related experiences can influence the decision to complete or abandon high school. Without sustainable support and positive, collaborative relationships, participants in this study may not complete the requirements to graduate from the identified alternative learning program.

Background

There are many reasons why students drop out of high school. Kearney and Levine (2014) concluded that many students abandon high school because of poor grades, lack of family support, and negative stigmas or labels applied to students identified as having a learning or behavioral disability. As a consequence of the lack of community-school resources and support and the embarrassment of being overaged and undercredited, many students in the Midwest United States have decided to drop out of high school (Kearney & Levine, 2014).

Despite improved graduation rates, there continues to be an influx of students who decide to leave school early. Table 1 reflects the races of students who have dropped out of District X high schools over a 4-year period.

Table 1

District X Annual Dropout Rate

	2014	2015	2016	2017
Asian	52	52	57	52
Black	2641	1897	2024	2100
Hispanic	447	344	363	423
Indian	34	24	25	36
Multiracial	132	117	145	122
Pacific Islanders	11	4	15	17
White	2855	2759	2820	2667
Total	6172	5197	5449	5417

Note. Adapted from “2014-2017 Dropout Summary and Statistics Report” (Department of Elementary & Secondary Education Comprehensive Data, 2017).

Such data are helpful for understanding how experiences may have affected at-risk learners served in District X, and for revealing what factors may have caused them to drop out of high school.

According to Freeman and Simonsen (2015), a culmination of challenges cause individuals to abandon high school. Buka (2013) suggested that students drop out of school because a lack of family support and healthy student-teacher-peer relationships established in a student’s learning community. As learners’ academic experiences become more expansive, so do their emotional and social values, potentially leading them to becoming discouraged in and disengaged from their overall learning process (Buka, 2013). As learners become dissatisfied with their learning environment, they often miss a

significant number of classes and display behaviors counterproductive to their academic or social success. According to Buka (2013), poor student-teacher relationships, increased absenteeism, and counterproductive behaviors are significant predictors that a learner will not complete high school.

Campbell (2017) suggested that to better comprehend the dropout predicament, educators and community support programs and agencies should collaborate to identify what service cohorts, interventions, and practices can be applied to address this phenomenon. To maximize the outcomes of these efforts, stakeholders should share pertinent information regarding the students, disabilities, triggers, strengths, limitations, and family or community supports. This is a critical component for establishing a functional academic plan for the student (Campbell, 2017). Positive relationships and interactions are vital to the success of a student earning a high school degree or dropping out of school (Buka, 2013; Farnan, Hudis, & LaPlante, 2014). Khalkhali, Sharifi, and Nikyar (2013) indicated that teachers are intrinsic parts of their students' academic and socioemotional well-being. Based on the research conducted by Khalkhali et al., 2013, Teachers set the tone and mood for a learning community. When teachers model consistent behaviors and display an excitement for teaching education, their students will most likely follow suit. Although motivation is a huge factor for student-teacher success, a teacher should create lessons that are relevant and engaging and should utilize some form of 21st century technology when applicable.

Another factor affecting high school dropout rate is the learner's sense of belonging and acceptance by school staff and peers. Murray and Kennedy-Lightsey

(2013) noted that when students feel they have become validated members of their learning communities, they tend to make a concerted effort to achieve their personal and expected goals. Learning communities have become more than institutions designed for learning; they have become safe houses, counseling centers, and parenting universities (Simon & Johnson, 2015). Educators have many roles and are charged with the gravest responsibilities including nurturing, educating, and preparing their students for the next chapters of their lives (Wang & Fredricks, 2014). When students feel a sense of belonging to their learning community and believe they are valued and respected by faculty and staff, they become self-motivated to display appropriate behaviors and accept responsibility for their decisions and actions (Buka, 2013; Wang & Fredricks, 2014).

As high school dropouts become older and transition from teenagers to young adults, they find few alternative learning programs that offer an opportunity to gain a high school diploma. I investigated the New Hope Program and explored what services and innovations it offered to reengage disconnected young adults. Although researchers have conducted extensive research on probable causes for why students leave high school, little research has focused on analyzing the experiences of high school dropouts 18-24 years old who are engaged in an innovative alternative workforce development model in a Midwest city. The goal of this study was to understand the experiences of learners enrolled into the New Hope program, identify factors that forced these learners to drop out of high school, and to explore how social media technologies can be used during academic instruction to promote learning and communication. Because this alternative learning model was in the inaugural stages of development, no research had

been conducted; however, the data collected were based on the reported experiences of the candidates enrolled in the program.

I used two research questions to guide this study for understanding how the infusion of social media technologies during academic instruction influenced reengagement and experiences for the participants of the New Hope Workforce Development Program. Understanding what supports and innovations were needed to reengage overaged high school dropouts was the cornerstone of this investigation. I gathered data from participants enrolled in the New Hope Program in a Midwest city.

Problem Statement

High school dropout has been a domestic and global problem (Databank, 2015). The National Center for Educational Statistics defined the dropout rate as the percentage of young adults 16-24 years old who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school credential or an equivalency such as a general equivalency diploma (GED) or Hi-SET (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Few studies had addressed how social and relational experiences between peers and school staff can influence a decision to drop out of high school. Wilkins and Bost (2014) noted that students go through an extensive decision-making process before dropping out of school. According to Freeman and Simonsen (2015), an individual's negative experiences may accumulate, eventually leading them to abandon high school prematurely. Dewey (1938) proposed that students learn through both positive and negative experiences, and Vygotsky (1978) proposed that students learn and develop through social and relational experiences with their peers. Doll, Eslami, and Walters

(2013) observed that students drop out of high school due to a variety of experiences, including academic and vocational workloads, demanding instructors, poor attendance, behavioral targeting (i.e., frequent suspensions), and family or financial concerns. To improve high school dropout rates, Partin (2017) suggested that teachers should structure lessons using relevant life examples designed via their students' experiences to improve high school graduation rates. Vygotsky found that using collaborative learning groups based on students' past and newly acquired learned experiences resulted in higher student engagement activity. Because students learn through environmental, relational, and hands-on experiences, Dewey's pragmatism theory and Vygotsky's social development theory were used to frame this descriptive case study. Another theory that was used to frame this study was connectivism. Introduced by Siemens and Downes in 2005, connectivism is a digital social learning theory used to explain how social media technologies can be used to create new learning experiences and opportunities for various groups of learners to learn, share information, and connect socially through various social media platforms and resources.

For this study, the participants used social media resource tools such as Facebook and YouTube as online learning and socialization tools to collaborate, share information, and complete or submit assignments within their respective learning cohorts. According to connectivism theory, the utilization of social media technologies brings learners together for the greater good of socially learning and gaining knowledge from one another (Anderson, 2016).

It is important that urban educators create more innovative ways to connect with students who are at risk for dropping out or have dropped out of high school to stop this trend so that these individuals can become productive citizens (Cheeseman-Day & Newburger, 2014). Despite attempts to address this problem, limited research has been conducted on alternative learning work force development boards for young adult learners. Very little was known about the participants' experiences before they enrolled in this workforce development program and how their experiences may have caused them to drop out of high school prematurely (Doll et al., 2013; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). The case study design was used to gain a deeper understanding of students' experiences and to aid schools in developing innovative programs to increase high school completion rates. In addition, very little was known about the successful innovative programs that have helped students complete their high school degree. Less was known about how program developers have used innovative social media technologies to engage students during academic instruction to assist them with the completion of their high school goals (Piotrowski, 2015). A deeper understanding of the experiences of these individuals may be used to reduce the number of students who drop out of high school.

Due to a limited number of alternative high school completion programs nationwide, a potential solution for bridging this academic gap and improving high school graduation rates could be programs similar to the New Hope Program. NHP's innovations include social media technologies infused in instructional activities to reconnect high school dropouts via an unconventional learning environment. This innovative teaching and learning approach may be a viable solution for engaging student

learning because it is highly accessible, familiar, and frequently utilized platform that provides immediate and collaborative feedback by peers and instructors (Rosen, Carrier, & Cheever, 2013). Moreover, this program may change how educators engage, communicate, and support their learners along their academic and social journeys.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to understand the school-related experiences and views of high school dropouts enrolled in a workforce development program, and how the innovation and integration of social media technologies during academic instruction can help to engage participants in the program. I used a descriptive case study design because such a study is focused and detailed, allowing the careful scrutiny of the phenomenon being investigated (Yin, 2017). This approach allowed me to capture the experiences of participants and identify themes, relational experiences, and environmental influences that may have led to these learners dropping out of high school and enrolling into the New Hope Workforce Development Program.

This learning model and the incorporation of social media technologies during academic instruction may improve students' academic and social experiences. The use of social media technology during academic instruction has the potential to make learning more relevant, applicable, and engaging (Graham, 2010). Social media technologies can be used by anyone, irrespective of age, residential vicinity, educational training, or professional merit (Graham, 2010). Infusing this technology during academic instruction may improve students' learning experiences, increase their participation, and build

collaborative learning communities for at-risk learners (Afshar, 2013). For this study, the participants used social media resource tools such as Facebook and YouTube as online learning and socialization tools to collaborate, share information, and complete and submit assignments within their respective learning cohorts. Connectivism theory was used to anchor this study to demonstrate how social media technologies bring people together for the greater good of socially learning and gaining knowledge from one another (see Anderson, 2016).

Research Questions

The following questions (RQs) guided this study:

RQ1: How did students in the workforce development program describe their experiences before they dropped out of high school?

RQ1a: How did students in the workforce development program describe their collaborative learning experiences before they dropped out of high school?

RQ2: How did students in the workforce development program use social media to engage in learning during academic instruction to complete their high school degree?

RQ2a: How did students in the workforce development program use social media to socially construct knowledge?

Conceptual Framework

Two theories were used to frame this study: Dewey's (1938) pragmatism theory and Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory. I used Dewey's pragmatism theory to understand how and why humans learn best through negative, positive, and hands-on experiences. To expand my knowledge and better align my study, I used Vygotsky's

social development theory to address how human capital (through relationships) and environmental influences can shape an individual's behavior. I used Vygotsky's social development theory and Dewey's pragmatism theory to explore the importance of human social interaction and reveal how these experiences affect how humans socialize, develop cognitively, and engage within an identified learning community.

Dewey (1938), introduced the theory of progressive education, asserting that educators should use reciprocal teaching and experiential learning to maximize student learning and overall development. Dewey is credited for expounding on the educational and philosophical theory of pragmatism, which holds that humans learn best through reality or hands-on experiences (Brinkmann, 2017). During his research, Dewey discovered that students achieved greater results when class instructors crafted lessons that built on their students' previous learned experiences. Dewey thought rote memorization as a teaching strategy was both inappropriate and highly ineffective for maximizing instruction and student engagement. Instead, to achieve sustainable academic and social outcomes, Dewey encouraged academic enterprises to be innovative, nurturing, and highly stimulating to increase student-teacher development (Dewey, 1938). I used Dewey's pragmatic theory as a framework to capture the impact of social media technologies on the participants' hands-on experiences and social engagement during academic instruction. Furthermore, I used Dewey's pragmatic theory to describe how participants detail their experiences when utilizing reciprocal teaching to socially develop knowledge to complete their high school degree.

Quality instructors consider the circumstances of the child and use different strategies, techniques, and technologies to connect with their students. In his pragmatic theory, Dewey (1938) described students who develop knowledge through positive and negative experiences. When such experiences proved positive, the learner would be receptive to try different things; however, traumatic experiences would often result in the learner displaying counterproductive behaviors that interfered with overall learning (Dewey, 1938). When students do not make applications to new concepts taught and learned, they struggle and become less receptive to more learning (Dewey, 1938). Dewey found positive correlations between school-age children and experiences gained through their local environment, social play, learning communities, and family interaction. Dewey asserted that a progressive learning model of pragmatism worked best in supporting and reinforcing critical thinking skills for learners. Moreover, the model provided confidence for learners because they were able to build on their personal experiences, make relevant connections, and become productive contributors in their local and academic communities (Dewey, 1938).

Dewey's pragmatism theory aligned with the problem and purpose of this study because Dewey asserted that students learn best through hands-on, preexisting experiential experiences. Additionally, Dewey argued that learning communities should be innovative, nurturing, and stimulating to capture and maintain students' attention. In the current study, because social media technologies were used during academic instruction to engage the students, Dewey's pragmatic theory complemented and aligned with Vygotsky's social development theory.

Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory aligned with the problem and purpose of this study because Vygotsky asserted that students learn best through collaborative learning groups and through social interactions with their teachers and peers based on previous or newly acquired experiences. Like Dewey, Vygotsky argued that learning communities should be innovative, nurturing, and stimulating to capture and maintain students' attention. Because social media technologies were used during academic instruction to engage learners in the current study, Vygotsky's social development theory complemented and aligned with Dewey's pragmatic theory.

Another theory used to frame the study was connectivism. Introduced by Siemens and Downes in 2005 (as cited in Goldie, 2016), connectivism is a digital social learning theory used to explain how social media technologies can be used to create new learning experiences or opportunities for various groups of learners to learn, share information, and connect socially through social media platforms and resources.

Vygotsky's Social Development Theory (1978) was developed to analyze human capital and the environmental influences that shape an individual's behavior. Vygotsky sought to develop a more comprehensive assessment to understand how people thought and developed throughout their lives. Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory was established on two primary functions: (a) human social interaction and (b) human cognitive development. Socialization, which he characterized as *interpsychological*, defines how humans interact, engage, and learn from one another through collaborative efforts and experiences. Vygotsky also utilized the phrase *intrapsychological* to express

how an individual internalized and applied social experiences to build lasting and appropriate relationships with others (Pappas, 2013).

Vygotsky's social development theoretical model supports my research questions because it explores how human capital and environmental experiences shape an individual's behavior. Because the New Hope program is a collaborative learning model, it is important to understand how relationships, environmental stimuli, and social media technologies influence the participant's behaviors and experiences. Vygotsky's social development theory has two components—human social interaction and human cognitive development—which are essential for determining if social media technologies can assist these adult learners in building lasting and appropriate relationships with their instructors and peers. Based on the research questions created to guide this study, Vygotsky's social development theory aligns with the problem and purpose of this exploration because he explicitly asserts that students learn best through collaborative learning through social interaction with their teachers and peers based on previous and newly acquired experiences. Additionally, just like Dewey's Pragmatic Theory, Vygotsky believed that learning communities should be innovative, nurturing, and highly stimulating in order to capture and maintain students' attention. Because social media technologies were utilized during academic instruction, Vygotsky's Social Development Theory complemented and aligned with Dewey's Pragmatic Theory. Lastly, Siemens and Downes (2005) Connectivism theory anchored this study and proved that social media technologies brought these learners together for the greater good of socially learning and gaining knowledge from one another (Anderson, 2016). Connectivism is a digital socially

learning theory used to explain how social media technologies can be used to create new learning experiences and or opportunities for various groups of learners to learn, share information and connect socially through various social media platforms and resources (Goldie, 2016). For this study, the participants used resource tools such as Facebook and YouTube as online learning and socialization tools in an effort to collaborate, share information and complete and submit assignments within their respective learning cohort(s).

For the purposes of this exploration, the theories developed by Dewey and Vygotsky guided this exploration. Dewey's emphasis on "Pragmatism" and Vygotsky's "Social Development Theory" detail how learners comprehend and develop within a structured collaborative learning community. Dewey's and Vygotsky's theories share similar theoretical cornerstones of social-collaboration, academic innovation and past-present (experiences) proficiencies that closely align and served as a driving force for this study. Moreover, these theories offer guidance on how learners best learn and develop through life experiences, observation, modeling, collaborative learning, the use of 21st century technologies.

There were seven tenets that structured Dewey's Pragmatism theory and five tenets that structured Vygotsky's Social development theory. After integrating Dewey's and Vygotsky's theories, this conceptual framework was guided by the following principles which was critical for understanding how a student's positive or negative environmental and social experiences impacted their decision to remain or withdraw from high school.

1. A student's social and cognitive development is shaped by positive or negative life experiences and by various environmental influences such as family, peers and school personal.
2. Quality learning occurs through the use of collaborative learning groups and innovations that are based on students previous and concurrent learned experiences (Dewey,1938 & 2017 & Vygotsky (1978).

I used this conceptual framework to interpret the experiences of the participants within the NHP. My goal was to capture how each participant described their academic, environmental, and social experiences before enrolling in the NHP. I compared each participant's responses with the two main principles in this conceptual framework to identify themes or contradictions.

Nature of the Study

I used a qualitative descriptive case study approach. A qualitative descriptive case study is focused and intentional and provides anecdotal details of a phenomenon being investigated (Padilla-Díaz, 2015). Yin (2017) defined a qualitative descriptive case study as the exploration of participants' world view based on their experiential life experiences. Because I was interested in developing a deeper understanding of the factors that caused learners to drop out of school and enroll in the New Hope Program, I used the qualitative descriptive case study methodology to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences.

Because very little was known about the participants' experiences before enrolling into this workforce development program and how their experiences may have caused them to drop out of high school, I used a qualitative descriptive case study

approach to collect and analyze the data. Qualitative one-on-one interviews and focus groups were used to capture this information. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to understand the school-related experiences and views of high school dropouts enrolled in a workforce development program, and how the innovation and integration of social media technologies during academic instruction can help to engage participants in the program. The data were analyzed to identify themes and address barriers based on the participants' experiences (Yin, 2017).

Definitions

The terms defined in this section were used throughout the study. Defining these terms may assist readers in understanding high school attrition and how this epidemic impacts academic, economic, and political landscapes.

Academic quandary: Low-performing academic output among students, teachers, and academic organizations (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000).

At-risk students: Students who are likely to drop out of school due to academic, socioemotional, behavioral, or external issues outside of their control (Lemon & Watson, 2011).

Deviant affiliation: Peer and communal influence that affect an individual's decisions. This influence has extensive involvement with gang-related activities (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Staff & Kreager, 2008).

Family socialization: The influence that an individual's parent, guardian, or family has over him or her with respect to family issues, education levels, and other

stressors that arise in family dynamics (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Frostad, Pijl, & Mjaavatn, 2015).

Dropout interventions: Programs and innovative learning models created to assist learners who have dropped out of school to complete their high school requirements (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004).

Dropout prevention programs: Programs and organizations established to provide support and services for at-risk students to keep them encouraged and to prevent them from dropping out of school (Almeida, Steinberg, Santos, & Le, 2010).

Dropout rate: The number of learners abandoning high school prematurely within a specific school district, academic organization, grade level, gender, or ethnic subgroup when compared to the total number of enrollees within the same subgroup and categories of another organization or subgroup (Murnane, 2013).

General deviancy: Behavior related to excessive substance abuse issues, socioemotional issues, mental health issues, high sexual activities, and excessive absentee rates (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000).

High school attrition: The rate at which students discontinue or abandon high school courses of study without obtaining a high school diploma. Attrition includes individuals who did not obtain their HiSET, formerly known as the GED, from an accredited program or school district (Zinth, 2015).

Social capital: Collaborative learning within a controlled academic setting in which all members of that community are actively engaged and benefit from one another's participation (Stern & Adams, 2010).

Structural strains: School-related stimuli that influence an individual's behavioral patterns (Peguero, 2011).

Virtual school: An alternative method of academic delivery in which instruction is conveyed more than 50% of the time using the Internet. Face-to-face instruction may be implemented to assist with the initial delivery of content to ensure all participants are comfortable with this virtual learning technique (Barbour & Reeves, 2009).

Assumptions

For the purposes of this qualitative descriptive study, assumptions included the following:

1. The students in this program would actively participate in program discussions, complete personal and group projects and assignments in a timely fashion, and use social media technologies responsibly to enhance learning and development.
2. The students participating in this study would respond to the interview questions openly and honestly and not provide any biased or influenced responses.
3. The students participating in this study would have a sincere desire to complete this program and identify positive experiences and practices to prevent peers or future learners from dropping out of school.

Scope and Delimitations

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of high school dropouts 18-24 years of age enrolled in a workforce development program and to

determine how the innovation of social media technologies during academic instruction can help to engage participants in a Midwest city. The students participating in this alternative learning model had previously dropped out of school and were looking for an opportunity to complete their high school requirements while gaining working credentials. To gain a broader understanding of the experiences of the participants in this program and what led them to drop out of high school, I interviewed 20 learners and documented their responses. The data provided a deeper understanding that may be used to reduce the high school dropout rate in District X.

Each participant had to meet specific criteria to participate in this study. Participants ranged between 18 and 24 years of age, had previously dropped out of high school or a high school equivalency program, and had a desire to obtain their state certified working credential. Twenty participants were randomly selected from identified career-sector cohorts within a local Work Force Development Board in a Midwest city.

Limitations

One chief limitation of this qualitative descriptive case study was the unknown conditions or factors at the place where the participants took the program that could have created bias among their responses. Another limitation was unknown variables and conditions that could have created bias within the responses of the participants, such as peer or facilitator influences. Twenty participants were selected to participate in this study. Ten students (five males and five females) were asked to participate in a one-on-one interview, and 10 others were selected to participate in a focus group interview. These learners were recruited from four career pathway cohorts (certified nursing

assistants, commercial driver's license, warehouse and logistics, and certified customer service agents). A condition of participating in any of these career cohorts is that each student-participant must complete an I Promise program completion agreement that identifies requirements and responsibilities for participating in the NHP. One limitation of this case study was keeping students who had previously dropped out motivated and connected to supportive resources so they could complete their goals of obtaining their high school and working credentials. The second limitation was identifying capable and willing facilitators interested in constructing innovative-relational learning communities that would prepare these customers for their career endeavors. Although unique in its construct and in the delivery of its instructional component, this learning model is tailored to meet the individual needs of every member of this community. Career technical education (i.e., workforce development) boards are used in different capacities depending on the state, school system, or private sector implementing their services. Because this program is on the cutting edge of academia and instructional delivery, research was warranted to address the sustainability of the student's success within the program and the career pathways selected.

Significance

This study included young adults 18-24 years old who had dropped out of school. I explored how they used social media to shape their learning in hopes of gaining their high school degree and working credential. The New Hope program provides individual, group, and career counseling and vocational mentorship for hands-on, on-the-job training for students who need more intensive supportive service. English and Kitsantas (2013)

concluded that student-centered, constructivist educational programs result in higher rates of high school completion. English and Kitsantas also noted that project-based learning and self-regulated learning inspired high school learners to engage in student-centered learning activities. The goal of the current study was to understand the experiences of high school dropouts 18-24 years of age enrolled in a workforce development program and to determine how the innovation of social media technologies during academic instruction can help to engage participants in the program.

Findings from this descriptive case study may provide educators and researchers with information regarding why students dropped out of high school and what the NHP offered them throughout their academic, social, and vocational development. Once credentialed, these learners will be more marketable which will enable them to become contributing members to their local and national financial markets. When these learners become gainfully employed, they will be less likely to apply for government assistance, they will be less likely to become incarcerated or participate in criminal activities, and they will tend to have longer lives because they will likely take advantage of the insurance benefit packages offered by their employers (Parr & Bonitz, 2015). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, a nongraduate will cost the economy approximately \$250,000 over his or her lifetime in terms of lower tax contributions, greater reliance on Medicaid and Medicare, greater rates of criminal activity, and higher reliance on public or state assistance (nces, 2017). Stark and Noel (2015) showed that one high school dropout could miss out on a lifetime earning a potential of \$670,000 in comparison to individuals who acquire their high school diploma or credential.

The NHP has the potential to transform the academic trajectory for students who make the conscious decision to leave high school prematurely. Because of the academic, social, and technological innovations used in the NHP, stakeholders should support this program because young adults are completing their education.

Summary

Chapter 1 provided an introduction, background of the study, problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, theoretical framework, nature of the study, definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study. I conducted a qualitative descriptive case study to explore the experiences of 20 participants who had dropped out of high school and participated in an alternative online learning community to help them acquire their high school degree with a working credential. Chapter 2 includes a review of the literature on the causes, effects, and economic repercussions of high school attrition. Chapter 2 also addresses online social media technologies, innovative learning communities, positive student-teacher-peer relationships, and on-the-job training with mentors.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to understand the school-related experiences and views of high school dropouts enrolled into a workforce development program, and how the innovation and integration of social media technologies during academic instruction can help to engage participants in the program. This study was conducted using a descriptive case study approach because they are focused and detailed and allow for careful examination of the phenomenon under investigation. This approach allowed me to capture the experiences of the participants and identify themes, relational experiences, and environmental influences that led these learners to drop out of high school and enroll into the New Hope Workforce Development Program.

The design of this learning model and the incorporation of social media technologies during academic instruction may improve students' academic and social experiences. Using social media technology during academic instruction has the potential to make learning more relevant, applicable, and engaging (Piotrowski, 2015). Social media technologies can be used by anyone irrespective of their age, residential vicinity, educational training or professional merit (Piotrowski, 2015). Infusing social media technology in academic instruction may improve student learning experiences, increase student participation, and promote collaborative learning communities for at-risk learners (Collins & Halverson, 2018).

According to the U.S. Department of Education, 1.2 million students drop out of high school every year, which equates to one student every 26 seconds or 7,000 students

per day (United States Department of Labor: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Despite improved high school graduation rates, many students struggle because of their previous and ongoing negative school-related experiences. As a result of these negative academic, relational, and systemic experiences, many of these learners have made a conscious decision to drop out of high school (Lucariello et al., 2016).

Very little was known about these participants' school-related experiences before they enrolled in this workforce development program, including the specific factors (in their own words) that may have caused them to drop out of high school (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). Limited research had addressed how social and relational experiences between their peers and school staff can influence their decision to drop out of high school. Knowing more about their school-related or personal experiences may aid schools in developing innovative programs to help these students complete their high school degree (Partin, 2017). Despite the limited knowledge on how social media technologies can be leveraged to promote student engagement during academic instruction, this program may promote social change and reduce the number of students who drop out of high school in District X.

When students fail to complete their high school programs of study (meaning they do not receive their high school diplomas or pass the high school equivalency test) these students have a negative impact on the local, federal, and global economy. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, a nongraduate will cost the economy approximately \$250,000 over his or her lifetime in terms of lower tax contributions, greater reliance on Medicaid and Medicare, greater rates of criminal activity, and higher

reliance on public and state assistance (nces, 2017). Stark and Noel (2015) showed that one high school dropout could miss out on a lifetime earning potential of \$670,000 in comparison to individuals who acquire their high school diploma or credential.

I examined the school-related experiences of participants enrolled in a workforce development program and how those school-related experiences led them to leave high school prematurely. I discovered the effectiveness of using social media technologies to build collaborative learning cohorts to provide academic-social instruction while engaging the participants. The structure and delivery of this learning model was effective because the classroom sizes were controlled, the technologies were contemporary, and the delivery of instruction was hands-on and innovative, a suggested best practice for teaching and learning initiated by Dewey (1938, 2017).

In Chapter 2, I describe the two theories that were used to frame this study: Dewey's (1938) pragmatism theory and Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory. Dewey's pragmatism theory was used to explore the factors that contribute to how and why humans learn best through negative, positive, and hands-on experiences. Vygotsky's social development theory was used to analyze how human capital (through relationships) and environmental influences shape an individual's behavior.

In the next section of Chapter 2, I describe the reasons why students drop out of high school. This section addresses attrition factors, individual and institutional perspectives, deviant affiliations, family socialization, structural strains, academic quandary, and how relational experiences with school staff and peers can influence a learner's academic experiences. The last section of Chapter 2 addresses how educators

can use social media technologies during academic instruction to promote student engagement, create relational hands-on learning experiences, and create an exciting learning community that prepares 21st century learners.

Literature Search Strategy

I searched contemporary literature manuscripts, peer-reviewed journals, organizational magazines, and scholarly search engines and academic databases. Scholarly databases included Pro Quest, Eric, and SAGE, which I accessed using the Walden library. I also used the Google Scholar search engine. Key search terms included *workforce development boards, digital learning communities, at risk learners, social and technological infused learning communities, high school dropouts, economic recourse of high school dropouts, digital citizenship, social media, graduation rates, high school degree, High School Equivalency Test (Hi-SET), twenty-first century learners, digital literacy, Career and Technical Education (CTE), Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA), career ready working credential, learning identity and informal learning, nontraditional learning community, and working credentials*. I used peer-reviewed and scholarly articles that focused on young adults who had dropped out of school and were looking to reenroll to obtain their high school diploma or Hi-SET, formally known as the GED (see Zinth, 2015).

Conceptual Framework

Two theories were used as the conceptual framework of this study. Dewey's (1938) pragmatism theory was used to explore the factors that contribute to how and why humans learn best through negative, positive, and hands-on experiences. Vygotsky's

social development theory was used to analyze how human capital (through relationships) and environmental influences can shape an individual's behavior. Dewey's and Vygotsky's theories were selected to frame this study because their principles address how humans develop and learn through negative or positive life experiences and through relational and environmental experiences. These theories were used to understand how individuals make decisions to complete or abandon high school.

Based on the research questions created to guide this study, Vygotsky's social development theory aligns with the problem and purpose of this exploration because he explicitly asserts that students learn best through collaborative learning groups and through social interactions with their teachers and peers based on previous or newly acquired experiences. Additionally, just like Dewey's Pragmatic Theory, Vygotsky believed that learning communities should be innovative, nurturing, and highly stimulating in order to capture and maintain students' attention. Because social media technologies was utilized during academic instruction to engage these learner's, Vygotsky's Social Development Theory complemented and aligned with Dewey's Pragmatic Theory.

Dewey's Pragmatic Theory

John Dewey was a renowned American psychologist and educational and reformer and introduced the theory of progressive education. In this learning theory Dewey believed educators should use reciprocal teaching and experiential learning to maximize student learning and overall development. Dewey is credited for expounding upon the educational and philosophical theory of pragmatism. Pragmatism is a theory that

humans learn best through reality or 'hands on' experiences (Brinkmann and Friedmann, 2017). During his research, Dewey discovered students achieved greater results when class instructors crafted lessons built upon their students previous learned experiences. According to Dewey, he thought rote memorization teaching strategies were inappropriate and highly ineffective for maximizing instruction and student engagement. In an effort to achieve sustainable academic and social outcomes, Dewey encouraged academic enterprises to be innovative, nurturing and highly stimulating in order to increase student-teacher development.

Quality instructors consider the circumstance of the child and use different strategies, techniques and technologies to connect with their students. In Dewey's pragmatic theory, he discovered students develop knowledge through positive and negative experiences. When their experiences proved positive, the learner would be receptive to try different things however; if the learner's experiences were traumatic, the learner would often display counterproductive behaviors that interfered with their overall learning. When students do not make application to new concepts taught and learned; they struggle and become less receptive to invite more learning (Dewey, 1938). Throughout his research Dewey found positive correlations between school aged children and experiences gained through their local environment, social play, learning communities and family interaction. Dewey believed his progressive learning model of pragmatism worked best to support and reinforce critical thinking skills for learners. Moreover, it provided confidence for the learner because they were able to build upon

their personal experiences and make relevant connections and hopefully become productive contributors within their local and academic society (Dewey, 1938).

The term Pragmatism is derivative from the Greek work “pragma” meaning action. In its natural form, the word pragmatism means practical, efficient, fruitful, and satisfying (Shusterman, 2016). Within the Pragmatism theory, Pragmatist believe human development should constantly evolve and advance through one’s maturation accumulated through life experiences and is reciprocated through social engagement and exchanges with others (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 2017). Dewey defined his Pragmatism Theory as a humans’ ability to learn and develop through experiential life experiences and to make applicable applications to future life events based on the negative, positive and hands on experiences gained through social interactions (engagement) with other humans (Brinkmann and Friedmann, 2017).

Within John Dewey’s Pragmatic Pedagogical Theory (1938 & 2017), he identified seven components to consider when measuring the effectiveness of an instructor and the impact their teacher-student relational pedigree has on the overall learning community. Dewey believed:

1. Experiential learning and reciprocal teaching should be used to analyze student comprehension in an effort to maximize teaching and learning for optimal student development and outcomes.
2. Humans learn best by formulating curriculum lessons based on life experiences and using hands-on applications to reinforce the new learning concepts/strategies being introduced.

3. Students learn best when their instructors craft lessons based on previous learned student experiences.
4. Learning communities must be innovative, nurturing and stimulating.
5. Quality instruction begins when quality instructors consider the circumstances and experiences of the learner and infuses technology during academic instruction to connect with their learners.
6. All humans learn through negative and positive life experiences.
7. School aged learners learn best through social play, healthy learning communities and through basic social and family interaction (Brinkmann and Friedmann, 2017).

Based on the research questions created to guide this study, Dewey's Pragmatism Theory aligns with the problem and purpose of this exploration because he explicitly denotes students learn best through hands on pre-existing experiential experiences. Additionally, Dewey believed learning communities should be innovative, nurturing and highly stimulating in order to capture and maintain students' attention. Because social media technologies was utilized during academic instruction to engage these students, this theory complemented and aligned with Dewey's Pragmatic Theory.

Vygotsky's Social Development Theory

Vygotsky was a world-renowned Soviet Psychologist that developed many theories surrounding human capital and environmental influences on human behavior. He coined multiple theories and concepts but none more significant than the Social Development Theory. The foundation of Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory

was established on two primary functions a.) human social interaction and b.) human cognitive development. Vygotsky was interested in understanding how humans interacted with one another (socialization); as a result, he coined the term interpsychological; which means how humans interact, engage and learn from one another through collaborative efforts and experiences. Dr. Vygotsky also utilized the phrase intrapsychological to express how an individual internalized and applied their social experiences to build lasting and appropriate relationships with others (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky believed that an individual's "Zone of Proximal Development" is established through social interaction. In his theory, Vygotsky purposed that how we view life events/experiences have a direct correlation with how we respond and interact with others.

Vygotsky's social development theory has five components in which this theory is founded upon. These theories include:

1. An individual's culture affects and shape their cognitive development.
2. The environment in which a person grows up impacts their cognitive/social development.
3. Cognitive development thrives on social interactions through guided learning.
4. Cognitive development varies across cultures.
5. Skillful tutors are essential for promoting cooperative and collaborative dialogue between their peers, parents or expert facilitating instruction (Vygotsky, 1978).

A chief component of Vygotsky's social development theory is the "zone of proximal development." In this development model, learners develop skills through three

primary functions observation, interpretation, and application, meaning students learn new material and skills sets at their own merit, displaying their comprehension of an activity when necessary (Vygotsky, 1978). The zone of proximal development is highly relational in nature and involves ongoing collaborative learning initiatives from the expert (teacher) and novice (students) alike. Vygotsky considered Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) an operative way of building and maintaining successful and sustainable learning communities. Vygotsky strongly encouraged “reciprocal teaching” and “scaffolding” to be used in the (ZPD). Vygotsky further believed that students remain engaged longer in a ZPD and are less likely to exhibit counterproductive behaviors that interrupt the learning environment (Vygotsky, 1978).

Vygotsky’s social development theory is critical for this research study because it has the potential to bridge the relational gaps that tend to exist between students, teachers and themselves. In this model, both students and learners share a vested stake in the learning and collaboration that takes place in the learning community. As the relationship(s) strengthen, there tends to be a positive correlation between ability, confidence, and willingness to try new concepts without becoming overwhelmed and frustrated in the process. In the event that students struggle and find the information challenging, an established non-traditional support system is in place with peers they trust and can decode specific language in terms they recognize and can apply to their specific learning styles.

The greatest contribution of Vygotsky’s Social development model is the various battery of assessments that can be used to measure student mastery. The use of pen and

pencil assessments are not highly endorsed in this model. Experts are given the autonomy to assess their learners using non-conventional technologies, methods or projects to measure mastery (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's social development model is ideal for re-engaging over aged and under credited learners because it focuses on the learner's current relational experiences within an identified learning community and may expound why these individuals decided to abandon high school and enroll into a workforce development program. This nontraditional alternative learning model infuses social media technologies during academic instruction and promotes collaborative learning to socially develop knowledge. This is a primary function of Vygotsky's social development pedagogy and is being used to guide this research capstone.

Literature Review

Attrition Factors of High School Dropouts

There are many factors that are associated with learners abandoning their education and quitting school prematurely. Some of these factors include but are not limited to: an underprivileged socio-economic status, lack of parental or moral sustenance within their homes and community of residence, precarious and ferocious neighborhoods and fruitless academic careers (Wood, Kiperman, Esch, Leroux, & Truscott, 2017; & DePaoli, Fox, Ingram, Maushard, Bridgeland, & Balfanz, 2015). Additionally, students sometimes attend community high schools that have extensive teacher transiency, debilitating turnover rates and struggle to recruit human capital (teachers) that have the leverage, resources, training, technologies and experiences to provide quality instruction to this population of learners (McDaniel, Kim, & Guyotte, 2017).

Excessive missed days of school instruction, repeated disciplinary concerns, low self-efficacy, mental, physical or social-emotional infirmities, substance abuse struggles, and premature teen parenting are contributing conditions to why students drop out of school (Maynard et. al., 2015). In the succeeding section, I discussed two perspectives on the literature, individual attributes and institutional attributes, and five predictive properties – general deviancy, deviant affiliation, family socialization, structural strains and academic quandary, in order to understand why a student opts out of school without completing their high school requirements (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & Shernoff, 2014) and Winsper et. al., 2016).

Individual Perspective

Individual perspective focuses on the attributes of the learner with respects to their negative and positive life experiences, values, attitudes, and behaviors that influence their decision to quit school (Bayar, 2014). According to Bayar (2014), there are two dimensions to consider: Academic and social engagement. Bayar (2014) suggests student engagement is identified by previous learned experiences which defines a learner's attitude and behavior with respects to the formal aspects of school (classroom and school activities) and informal (peer and adult relationships). Both dimensions are instrumental in determining if a student withdraws from school.

(Tuominen-Soini & Salmela-Aro (2014) denote comprehensive student engagement and collaborative learning/working communities to be the cornerstone for students' academic and social successes. Their research study demonstrated that positive experiences of a social/school engagement had a positive impact on the learner's

academic achievement. Participants in (Tuominen-Soini & Salmela-Aro (2014). study experienced low levels of student burnout and actively participated in their learning programs/communities because they were actively encouraged and involved throughout their learning process. In their conclusion, these practitioners implied when teachers take the time to create and structure learning communities, it elevates the learner's sense of self-worth/confidence which intrinsically motivates them to give their best and to follow the guidance of their instructor. Despite contextual factors such as parental effect, teacher-administrator supports, and structured learning communities, student engagement is the primary catalyst for establishing student confidence, creating sustainable student-teacher relationships and providing opportunities for "At Risk" learners. When students feel good about themselves and are confident in their abilities/opportunities to succeed, they are less likely to display behaviors counterproductive to their overall success, within their learning environment(s) or to their instructor(s) (Partin, 2017).

Institutional Perspectives

Research on institutional perspective spotlights the interactions, relationships, attitudes, belief systems and behaviors that are shaped by institutional settings where student's live and receive academic instruction. How students and their family live, the schools they attend and communities in which they reside play-contributing factors on influencing learner behavior (Winsper et. al., 2016). According to Winsper, Wolke, Wolke, Bryson, Thompson & Singh (2016) a learner's family factor is the single most contributor to a learner's success throughout their academic career. In addition to the influence of one's family dynamic, the structural characteristics of a family such as their

socioeconomic status, parental educational level and income (employment) are considered powerful indicators of student achievement and dropout rates. In this context, when families are supportive, engaged with schools and socio-emotionally in sync and hold themselves accountable for their learners academic and behavioral outputs, there is a positive correlational-evidence between institutional stability and student-family achievement. However, when students are not actively supported, encouraged and held accountable by the families' institutional leader(s), it is likely the learner will struggle academically and socio-emotionally and transfer those behaviors into their communities and schools (Wang & Degol, 2016). Although child rearing is a significant component for shaping and molding a learner's behavior, research suggests when a learner is raised in an unstable, unpredictable home environment, the learner is likely to struggle to complete their high school education (Wang & Degol, 2016).

Schools have the autonomy to make a child's learning experience both positive and negative. Depending on the relationships established amongst the teachers, administrators and support staff, schools can prove invaluable for struggling and disengaged learners. There are five types of school characteristics that have been shown to influence a learner's performance:

1. Student Composition- the overall (social and safety) climate of a school.

(Winsper et. al., (2016), states when students feel safe, respected and valued within a learning community, they are likely to reciprocate the same courtesies offered by their teachers and school staff. However, when the learner determines the learning environment to be toxic, unstable and

unsupportive, these learners are unlikely to complete high school. School staff should make a concerted effort to build functional relationships with the learners within their learning communities in an effort to support the learners that may not be receiving the instruction, support or encouragement at home.

2. School Resources- Research by (Winsper et. al., (2016) suggests schools that provide adequate resources and support for their students achieve higher graduation rates than those that do not have such systems in place. (Winsper et. al., (2016) and Partin (2017) identified meaningful support agents as (counselors, mentors and community partners) that consistently work with their students, develop a meaningful relationship with their students and set attainable/intentional goals for their students. The Researcher concludes when schools take the time to build and establish these extended support services, higher graduation rates are obtained by their students (Winsper et. al., (2016).
3. Structural Characteristics- This component refers to the size of the building (in particular classroom sizes student to teacher ratio's), location of the school and the teachers and administrators that work in and serves their learning community. Being intentional and creative in classroom design is the hallmark of a functional learning community. School Principals are charged with many duties and responsibilities, but no duty is greater than setting the tone for their building and identifying quality talent to serve and establish positive relationships with their students and colleagues. In his study, John Dewey (1938) implied if you want to determine the effectiveness of a learning

community, look at the relationships established between that organization's students, teachers, and administrative staff. Rumberger's theory remains consistent with Dewey's and suggests that students must buy-in to the guidance and direction of their teachers and administrators. When equitable relationships are established, there's a positive correlation between student success and higher graduation rates (Winsper et. al., (2016).

4. Process and Practices- refers to the academic, social climate and discipline structure of a school. (Winsper et. al., (2016) concluded when a school's climate is toxic and the school rules are egregious and inflexible, there was excessive attendance issues and higher drop-out rates (Winsper et. al., (2016). Principals and teachers alike should consider applying appropriate consequences for violations that happen in the building/classroom. Overzealous rules for attendance, student misconduct, and grading causes contentious anxieties within the school and for learners and their families which often lead to students involuntarily withdrawing from school.
5. Predictive Properties: General Deviancy is defined as students that frequently display undesirable behaviors within their school and community settings. Antecedents that contribute to these behaviors are social-emotional traumas, substance abuse issues and overt and covert peer and community pressures (Wang & Degol, 2016). Maynard et. al. (2015), research study concludes many high school students have undiagnosed mental health disorders and struggle with substance abuse issues.

Vaughn, Salas-Wright, and Maynard studied how mental health (diagnosed and undiagnosed), physical health, substance abuse, socioeconomic status and criminology impacts students from completing or not completing their high school requirements (Vaughn, Salas-Wright and Maynard, 2014). In a research study produced by Kotok, Ikoma and Bodovski (2016), students that dislike school, struggle to get along with peers and school staff, have issues with respecting authoritative figures, are suspended frequently and appear to come to school to solely disrupt the academic and social environment are “at risk” of not completing high school (Winsper et. al., (2016). When early intervention services such as mentoring or counseling are not offered at the onset of these learner’s socio-emotional challenges, these students tend to drop out of school before their junior year of high school (Wang & Degol, 2016). Concurring these barriers can prove challenging and overwhelming resulting in the learner giving up and seeking better alternatives to getting their lives stabilized and on a specific track.

Many youth and young adults have suffered some form of trauma and have ongoing anxieties that may prevent them from becoming functional contributors to an evolving society. A huge component as it relates to an individual’s success is the “echo system” (support system) that they surround themselves by. Spencer and Basualdo-Delmonico (2014) affirmed that parental involvement and mentorship are vital elements for bridging barriers within a learner’s academic and social development. These authors proposed that programs should be tailored made to meet the needs of the aspirant, mentors should be hand selected case specific to the individual being served and that parents have a heavy hand in the involvement and development of their child. In order for

a child to obtain optimal performance of the parenting-mentoring program, there must be total buy-in and consistency from all the members involved in the treatment plan. This effort is collaborative in design and should be executed with fidelity and with the scholar's success centered at the forefront of each facilitator's mind.

As with any situation, life can prove unpredictable and provide challenges that prevent individuals from obtaining their goals. As it relates to learners that do not complete school, sometimes uncontrollable life events occur that prevent students from obtaining their high school degrees. Researchers Dupéré, Leventhal, Crosnoe, Archambault, and Janosz (2015) showed some scholars leave school not as a result of prolonged complications to the school environment but spontaneous circumstances that emerge in their lives such as health-related issues, peer victimization (bullying) or early parenting anxieties. These researchers concluded an individual's long-term vulnerabilities and proximal disruptive events such as life traumas and experiences are factors that trigger learners to abandon school Dupéré et. al., (2015).

Teen Pregnancy

Teen pregnancy is another noteworthy category of general deviancy as it relates to teen (primarily female) students that drop out of school (Sawhill, 2015; & LaForett, and Mendez, 2017). According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2017), 229,715 babies were born to teenage mothers between fifteen (15) and nineteen (19) years of age in the year 2015. Of the 229,715 babies born to these teen mothers only 50% of these mothers completed their high school requirements (CDC, 2017). There was also a significant correlation between teen mothers that drop-out of school and the likelihood

that their children would follow suit (Kim, 2014). Because teenage mothers have so many internal and external influences and stimuli to deal with, many of them decide to abandon their high school careers because the responsibilities and pressures of motherhood become too overbearing (Watson, and Vogel, 2017; & Bravo, Toomey, Umaña-Taylor, Updegraff & Jahromi, 2015). Despite a drastic decline in teen pregnancy, peer and communal influence remain major contributors to this study.

Deviant Affiliation

Deviant affiliation is defined as the impact of atypical peer connections as it relates to undesirable student behavior, peer-pressure and criminal behavior and mindset as adolescent/young adulthood (Tarantino, Tully, Garcia, South, Iacono & McGue, 2014). Research by Harnett suggests that peer groups often have a greater influence on high school degree completion than parental influence (Tanner-Smith, & Fisher, 2016). As learners grow and develop, they tend to assimilate to likeminded individuals they feel they can relate to and understand. Research by Caracelo (2016) concluded that students “at risk” of dropping out of school tend to associate themselves with other students that are considered rebellious and socially-emotionally dysfunctional. Research suggests that students who are part of these type of groups tend to negatively influence their peers to cut classes/school, join social cliques or gangs and disrupt the social and learning environments of their respective learning organization(s) (Morizot, 2015; & Boylan, & Renzulli, 2017).

Adolescents tend to congregate in groups they feel can provide financial sustainability, trust, protection and needed validation (Turanovic, & Young, 2016). When

a gang or social group accepts a student that student's behavior tend to become more antagonistic and oppositional in nature resulting in them adopting community behaviors and inserting them into their learning communities (Kulig, Pratt, Cullen, Chouhy & Unnever, 2017). As these learners adjust to their new ways of thinking and behaving, they began to lose interest in school and eventually drop-out (Partin, 2017). These students tend to have higher rates of absenteeism, perform poorly academically and socially and are likely to have some sort of felonious record (Aizer & Doyle, 2015).

Family Socialization

There is an array of factors why students choose to drop-out of school. According to Vickers, Finger, Barker, & Bodkin-Andrews, family socialization, and the lack thereof, is a critical component why learners decide to drop out of school (Vickers, Finger, Barker, & Bodkin-Andrews, 2014). According to Jennings and Niemi, students critique and compartmentalize the idea of academia based on the influence and involvement of their parents or guardian within the preliminary stages of their academic careers (Jennings & Niemi, 2015). In a study by Berzin and De Marco, these researchers stated about forty-two (42) percent of scholars that drop out of school, their parents also made the decision to drop-out of school and did not complete their high school degree (Tilleczek, Ferguson, Campbell, & Lezeu, 2014).

Another theme of high school dropouts is the lack of parental involvement or supports that are offered by the to these learners. In a study by Castro, Expósito-Casas, López-Martín, Lizasoain, Navarro-Asencio, & Gaviria (2015), when parents are actively

and consistently engaged in their child's academic development, these students are more likely to complete high school and go on to institutions of higher learning.

Structural Strains

Structural strains are internal and external stimuli that impact how a student will succeed or fail within their respective learning communities. In 2014, Stetser and Stillwell reported female students within public education posted a 7-point graduation differential between their male counterparts between 2010-2011 SY (84:77) as well as in 2011-2012 SY (85:78). ESL students are the most likely group of students to abandon high school because of English speaking barrier(s). According to Marchbanks III, Blake, Booth, Carmichael, Seibert, and Fabelo (2015), the average high school dropout rate was 7.1% in the United States. These researchers concluded that 5.0% were white, 7.3% for African American and 13.6% for Hispanic students which means on a national scale, 79.6% white students graduated high school with their high school credentials. Despite a decline in high school graduation rates by Hispanic students because of various structural (language, socio-economic and academic) strains, many of the (Hispanic ESL) learners are finding value in obtaining their diplomas because of the declining fortunes in the local job markets.

According to Fry and Taylor, since the onset of the United States recession that ended in 2007, unemployment rates among Latinos ages 16 to 24 has increased by seven percentage points, compared to their Caucasian counterparts that only had 5 percentage points. With jobs more difficult to find, more Latino students are choosing to stay in school, earn their high school diploma and enroll in college or a vocational trade

program. In 2009, the Pew Hispanic Center survey confirmed that eighty-eight (88) percent of Latinos learners 16 years of age and older agreed that a college degree is necessary to get ahead in today's local and global working markets (Fry & Taylor, 2013).

A learner's socioeconomic status is a critical component in identifying if they will complete their high school degree. In a research study produced by Parr & Bonitz (2015), suggested students with a lower socioeconomic status have a significantly higher chance of dropping out of high school as opposed their peers with a high socioeconomic status. According to Burleson (2014), almost 50% of students that dropped out of high school came from families with low socioeconomic status. Researchers Dupéré, Leventhal, Crosnoe, Archambault, and Janosz, (2015) denoted some students leave school not as a result of prolonged complications to the school environment but spontaneous circumstances that emerge in their lives such as health-related issues, peer victimization (bullying) or early parenting anxieties. These researchers concluded their investigation by suggesting, in order to identify a definitive and responsible rationalization why students leave school, educators should consider an individual's long-term vulnerabilities and proximal disruptive events that have manifested within their lives that may have triggered them to abandon school.

Academic Quandary

The academic quandary is a culmination of personal events and/ or life experiences that lead learners to the ultimate decision to leave school. Academic quandary includes students that are not interested in school, have been retained in a previous grade or grades, have a specific learning and emotional disability or have missed

a significant amount of school due to disciplinary issues or poor attendance (Joo, 2016). According to Ou and Reynolds, learners that have been retained one or more grades and are two or more years older than their academic/social colleagues are twice as likely to drop out of high school (Reynolds, Ou, Mondy, & Hayakawa, 2017). Additionally, students that struggle to pass the comprehensive end of course assessments and exit examinations are vulnerable for dropping out of school (McFarland, Stark, & Cui, 2016).

Another critical catalyst in academic quandary are students that have extensive and chronic absenteeism. The United States Department of Education defines Chronic Absenteeism as missing at least 10 percent of school days in a school year for any reason, excused or unexcused (The United States Department of Education, 2016). This plausible indicator highlights why students not only struggle academically but also is a powerful predictor of students who may eventually drop out of school. According to Rogers, Duncan, Wolford, Ternovski, Subramanyam, & Reitano (2017) between five and seven and a half million students miss 18 or more days of school each school year, (nearly an entire month or more of school) which significantly puts them “at risk” of falling behind academically and minimizes their chances of obtaining their high school credential. Balfanz and Byrnes concluded their exploration by suggesting because students miss so much school, millions of learners miss out on opportunities for post-secondary education and competitive professional careers within the global marketplace (Balfanz, Byrnes & Fox, 2015 & Robinson, Lee, Dearing, & Rogers, 2017).

In an effort to bridge the gap between academic achievements, improved student’s attendance rates and decrease high school attrition, Freeman, Simonsen, McCoach, Sugai,

Lombardi, & Horner (2016) suggested that practical interventions should be utilized when students miss 10% of their school day. Doing so would place students at a 90% attendance rate, which positively correlates with these learners obtaining their high school diplomas.

Another marker in determining if a child will prove successful in their high school career is by looking at freshman year of high school. Research by McCallumore and Sparapani suggests that a learner's 9th-grade year of high school is the most critical year because their attendance is vital to determine if he or she would successfully complete high school (Robison, Jagers, Rhodes, Blackmon, & Church, 2017). According to Wood, Kiperman, Esch, Leroux, & Truscott (2017), learners in the ninth grade fail in this particular grade than any other grade throughout the duration of their high school career.

The final component of academic quandary is student engagement and internal or external impetuses. When learners find value in their education, they display behaviors that are productive for their academic and social development. Students tend to become uncoupled when they have not formulated sustainable relationships with their teachers, peers and school's administrative staff. As students become less engaged in the curriculum being delivered, they tend to display behaviors that are counterproductive to their academic and social development (Bernstein, Edmunds, & Fesler, 2014). As a result of becoming disconnected and disinterested in school, a learner's grades may begin to fail, confidence in their ability to prove successful begin to waver, attendance deteriorates and school extracurricular activities become insignificant, which provides a direct pipeline to dropping out of school (Wood, Kiperman, Esch, Leroux, & Truscott, 2017).

Ever since the reformation movement coined by John Dewey in 1936, high school drop and how to curb its existence has been at the forefront of education. Despite proceeding events in a young person's life that stem from their socio-economic status, learning, emotional or mental health issue or academic history a bridge must be created in order to provide hope for struggling and disconnected youth to acquire their high school credentials.

Social Media's Effect on Education Among At-Risk and Reengaged Learners

The academic landscape in education is transitioning from a traditional learning and teaching model to a more contemporary and innovative brand of teaching and learning. This adaptation of academia is necessary because many learners struggle to make the necessary academic connections or peer-teacher-staff relationships to prove successful within their schools. Another factor that interferes with learner development is the lack of academic adherence to real life or vocational experiences through (OJT'S) or technologies/innovations being used in classrooms to animate learning. In order for students to find value or buy-into their learning, they must understand the importance of what is being taught and find use on how they can apply this information/knowledge within the twenty-first century and beyond. Learners that contemplate dropping out or have already dropped out of high school experienced a battery of factors ranging from a lack of academic and social relevancy and boring instruction that instigated their decision to terminate their pursuit of obtaining their diploma (Ripamonti, 2017). In an effort to achieve optimal success in education, the use of technology should be at the forefront of every educator's scholastic agenda if they are interested in shifting the mental, social and

global interpretations of their learners. In particular, how social media technology can be used to navigate classroom instruction to re-engage disjointed and over-aged learners.

Effectiveness of Social Media in Education

Social media is a vehicle that drives social connectivity while creating academic, personal and relational infrastructures across various platforms. One of the attributes of this technology is that it can be utilized by anyone irrespective of their age, residential vicinity, educational training or professional merit. Social media is a vast market for informational thoroughfare that can be used to re-engage struggling learners that have decided to drop-out of high school prematurely (Collins and Halverson, 2018). For purposes of this research evaluation, social media outlets served as an instructional-communication boards designed to facilitate instruction while creating social and learning platforms to increase student participation, build collaborative learning communities and build sustainable student-teacher relationships for “At Risk” Learners (Piotrowski, 2015). While technology can be a complex component in bridging disconnected learners, the effectiveness in the creative utilization of the technology is most important within this alternative learning design.

Power of Social Media

According to Squire’s (2013) research analysis, 66% of youth and young adults had a daily average of social media intake of about seven and a half (7.5) hours per day (Kivunja, 2015). According to Carpenter & Krutka (2014) and Livingstone and Bulger (2014) 61% of adults and 73% of teenagers engage in some form of daily social media interaction. Of the teens participating in social media activities, researchers Greenhow

and Lewin (2016) discovered that 76.9% of this populace come from a low socio-economic status and average about 30 minutes per day on their page. In a research review posted by Facebook in (2010), their research engineers concluded that their users spent over 500 billion minutes per month accessing their Facebook accounts with a daily average of fifty-five (55) minutes per day (Bonus, Peebles, Mares, & Sarmiento, 2018 and Sánchez, Cortijo & Javed, 2014). This consumption ranged from personal interest to social interest to academic research, these scholars (individuals) used social media as a resource to acquire specific information to satisfy their overall needs (Bonus, Peebles, Mares, & Sarmiento, 2018). Another advantage of social media technology it can be accessed through a variety of social media tools such as computers, tablets and smart-phone devices. Flexible freelancing is what drives this learning approach, ultimately providing workable learning alternatives for “At Risk” learners that proved unsuccessful within their traditional learning prototypes. When conventional learning models continue to be proposed to non-conventional learners, it produces an obstruction in the learning and development of the learner placing them at stark disadvantages for evolving into effective a twenty-first-century critical thinker, creators and applicators Hayes, Carr, & Wohn, 2016).

In order to establish a fruitful learning community, communication and collaboration are vital to the success and sustainability of that learning environment. In an effort to be more cutting-edge (innovative), a University created a Ning (cohort) to determine the effect Twitter had on student engagement, grades, and communication with instructors. In a 2011 study, Junco, Heiberger, and Loken analyzed a group of students

aged 17 to 20 years of age, to determine how they would utilize Twitter to communicate with their cohort and instructors. Instead of employing traditional “brick and mortar” classroom discussions, Twitter was used to facilitate dialogues amongst the cohort and with their professors alike. Twitter was also used to conduct book reviews, host class discussions, served as a calendar (reminder) for assignment due dates, activities on campus, meeting places for students and professors to converse and provided tutorial and supportive services for learners struggling to comprehend specific tasks or assignments. When analyzing the effectiveness of this academic tool, these researchers determined Twitter to be a proficient academic resource when coupled with applicable educational schemes and exercises paired for twenty-first-century learning and development. Moreover, these researchers concluded Twitter was an effective instrument for increasing student engagement, improved student academic outcomes (grades) and established the immediate and continual dialog between students and their instructors. This ongoing form communication establishes a community of trust, firming the bond between both subgroups and ultimately strengthens the organization in general (Tur & Marn, 2015). In another study, researchers Roth and McCully (2010) suggested experts in education (faculty and staff) needed to familiarize themselves with social media tools such as Twitter and Facebook. These practitioners concluded when academic facilitators incorporate “learning language and technologies” in which their students are familiar with, learning becomes alive and instantaneously draws students to the subject and topic being discussed. These twenty-first-century practices offer classroom credibility for the

instructor amongst their learners and create a learning pathway that makes learning contemporary and pertinent to the student's everyday life (Osatuyi & Passerini, 2016).

Learning, Instruction, and Innovation

With the expansive variety of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Google, YouTube, Zoom and many, many more, it is imperative that educators utilize these apropos academic resources to move their learning forward especially for “At Risk Learners”. In their research exploration, Kitsantas, Dabbagh and Chirinos implied social media serves as a conduit for ongoing communication, collaboration and creative freelance within a supported learning community (Kitsantas, Dabbagh, Chirinos, & Fake, 2016). Research further suggests that students that have experienced personal, social and academic trauma's struggle building authentic, trusting and lasting relationships with peers and school's faculty and staff (Partin, 2017; Ecker-Lyster, & Niileksela, 2016). This alternative learning model provides the supports; technologies and collaborative learning infrastructures identified as best practices for “At Risk Learners (Balfanz, Byrnes & Fox, 2015; and Van Eck, Johnson, Bettencourt, & Johnson, 2017). In 2012, Jahnke called social networking “a culture of scholarly sharing necessary for learner development”. Jahnke believed virtual learning communities are necessary for building learner confidence, establishing new relationships and expanding on critical thinking skills within a protected and entrusted learning community.

Summary and Conclusions

Chapter 2 described the theoretical foundation(s) selected to drive this exploration, research-based factors on why students abandon high school prematurely,

and how social media technologies can be used to re-engage overaged-disconnected learners. Although unique in its design and structure, The New Hope learning program was created to transform the participants learning experiences and provide an “unorthodox” brand of teaching and learning tailored to meet their individual, social and technological needs where they are; while providing the necessary supports to getting the learners where they desire to be using twenty-first century innovations. As learning and technologies continue to evolve, educators should prove flexible and equip themselves with the tools and resources necessary to prepare conscientious and competitive twenty-first-century change agents.

In an effort to promote successful learning environments, teachers must create learning environments that are collaborative, innovative and applicable to student development. Technological innovations such as Facebook and “Live Text” have a successful track record of bridging academic and social paradoxes together and using these networks to develop individuals on a personal or professional base within a personal, virtual and online learning setting. Although one or two factors cannot be justified in determining why learners drop out of school, the data collected through the research presented was used to evaluate an alternative academic-vocational program for re-engaging “at-risk” young adults that have a desire to complete their high school diploma and gain a working credential. The next section (chapter 3) discussed the methods, instruments, and procedures used to evaluate this program.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to understand the school-related experiences and views of high school dropouts enrolled in a workforce development program, and how the innovation and integration of social media technologies during academic instruction can help to engage students in the program. This study was conducted using a descriptive case study approach because such an approach is focused and detailed, allowing for careful scrutiny of the phenomenon being investigated (Yin, 2017). The descriptive case study approach allowed me to capture the experiences of participants and identify themes, relational experiences, and environmental influences that led learners to drop out of high school and enroll into the New Hope Workforce Development Program. The participants in this study were 18-24 years of age and were interested in earning their high school diplomas and state-certified working credentials.

The innovation in this learning model was incorporating social media technologies during academic instruction. Because social media technologies can be used by anyone irrespective of age, residential vicinity, or educational level, the integration of social media technologies could prove beneficial for reengaging high school dropouts enrolled into New Hope Program (Osatuyi & Passerini, 2016). The goal of this learning model was to capture the academic and social experiences of participants in this program by using interviews and focus groups to collect data. Twenty participants were randomly selected to assess the effectiveness/ineffectiveness of the NHP. These students were asked to describe their academic and social experiences before entering this program,

their experiences while in the program, and the factors that caused them to drop out of school initially. Interviews and focus groups were used to collect data regarding how the structure and innovativeness of this program complemented participants' learning style and academic and vocational development.

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In this chapter, I describe the research design, research rationale, and role of the researcher. In addition, I discuss the methodology including participant selection logic, instrumentation, and data collection and data analysis procedures. I also discuss issues of trustworthiness and ethical considerations related to this qualitative descriptive case study.

Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory aligned with the problem and purpose of this study because the theory is based on the premise that students learn best through collaborative learning groups and social interactions with their teachers and peers

based on previous and newly acquired experiences. Like Dewey, Vygotsky argued that learning communities should be innovative, nurturing, and stimulating to capture and maintain students' attention. Because social media technologies were used during academic instruction to engage learners in the current study, Vygotsky's social development theory complemented and aligned with Dewey's pragmatic theory.

Chapter 3 is structured in five sections. Section 1 includes the research design, rationale, and research questions of the study. Section 2 presents the role of the researcher, functions, biases, and outcomes of the study. Section 3 contains the methodology used to capture data and to select participants for the study. Section 4 addresses validity, reliability, and issues of trustworthiness of the study. Section 5 provides as summary of Chapter 3.

Research Design and Rationale

To establish a foundation for this study, two research questions and two subquestions were developed and served as a guide for this investigation:

RQ1: How did students in the workforce development program describe their experiences before they dropped out of high school?

RQ1a: How did students in the workforce development program describe their collaborative learning experiences before they dropped out of high school?

RQ2: How did students in the workforce development program use social media to engage in learning during academic instruction to complete their high school degree?

RQ2a: How did students in the workforce development program use social media to socially construct knowledge?

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to understand the school-related experiences and views of high school dropouts enrolled in a workforce development program, and how the innovation and integration of social media technologies during academic instruction can help to engage participants in the program. I used interviews and focus groups to collect data and document participants' experiences using audio recordings to detail their academic and social experiences before enrolling in the NHP and while enrolled in the program. I chose the descriptive case study design because it is focused and detailed and allows for careful scrutiny of the phenomenon being investigated. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011) and Yin (2014), qualitative researchers can employ a broad range of methods and designs in any given study; however, most descriptive case studies include observations, interviews, and analysis of the participants words based on their personal experiences. Because these evaluative methods have been identified as providing rich information based on the personal experiences of each participant, I selected interviews and focus groups as my primary methods for capturing and documenting each participant's self-guided chronological realities (Harrison, Birks, Franklin, & Mills, 2017). This approach allowed me to identify themes, relational experiences, and environmental influences that drove learners to drop out of high school and enroll in the New Hope Workforce Development Program.

Interview and focus group questions were designed to capture the factors that forced learners to abandon high school. The questions were used to elicit participants' descriptions of their negative or positive experiences before they dropped out of high school and while enrolled in the NHP, their descriptions of the benefits and challenges of

using social media technology during academic instruction, and their descriptions of using a collaborative learning-instruction model to develop academic and social knowledge. To qualify for the New Hope program, the participants must have been high school dropouts between the ages of 18 and 24 years and had a desire to complete their high school diploma and gain a state-certified working credential within an identified job sector.

When conducting a descriptive case study, there are guidelines the researcher should follow to produce a reliable research project. According to Lambert (2018), the researcher should use specific terms to describe the functions or behaviors being evaluated. In Yin's 2015 descriptive case study fulfillment model, he suggested terminologies such as "how" and "why" should be utilized to validate the authenticity of the interviewer's statement and to avoid researcher's biases and influences of their investigation. Yin believes a reliable researcher is one that captures in "real time" the statements of the person or group being interviewed, then documents the pertinent information being sought after without adding or subtracting from the information to include their personal or professional biases. Glaser and Strauss (2009) believed a case study's primary function is to seize an interviewee's personal experiences in real time, document those experiential experiences and produce an ethical and reliable evaluation without any researcher's input or influence (Baskarada, 2014). When formulating this study, I used these strategies to protect the integrity and validity of this research project.

Role of the Researcher

The role of a qualitative researcher is to ask probing questions, actively listen and to accurately document the responses of the individual or group being interviewed.

Active listening and accurate documentation is essential when conducting a qualitative descriptive case study because the responses provided are necessary for gaining a deeper level of understanding of the experiences or perceptions of the sample being interviewed (Brinkmann, 2014). The most effective qualitative researchers establish comfortable and trusting relationships with their samples and seek to create pictures using ideas and theories from a wide variety of sources not based on their own personal experiences and understandings (Lewis, 2015).

As a researcher, my role was to conduct in-depth and thorough interviews that protected the interest of the participants being explored. As a researcher, my goal was to produce a reliable research project that protects the rights of the participant's being interviewed and maintains the integrity and ethical guidelines as outlined by Walden University. As an observer, I documented all events using written documentation and audio recordings to preserve the activities in "real time" and to ensure I did not lose or misquote any responses rendered. Once my data was collected, I reviewed my notes and recordings to ensure that no research bias, subject manipulation or influences was represented in my research summary.

According to Lewis 2015, research bias is the researchers' ability to sabotage, manipulate or have influence over the samples being evaluated in order to achieve the personal or professional outcomes desired. As a District X employee, I did not have any

personal or professional relationships with any students in the New Hope Workforce Development Program. I did not supervise, provide input or have any academic affiliation (meaning providing any academic instruction or guidance) to any participant's in NHP. In order to produce an unbiased study, I consistently consulted with my dissertation committee and Walden's URR/IRB team to ensure I was adhering and following the rules of the program. I captured all data (participant's responses) by using audio and written technologies to avoid any misrepresentation of the participant's responses in an effort to eliminate research bias from this case study. Because I have no personal or professional affiliation with the NHP, I avoided any unethical issues that will compromise or invalidate my research study.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

In an effort to gain a broader understanding of the school-related experiences and views of high school dropouts enrolled into a workforce development program, and how the innovation and integration of social media technologies during academic instruction can help to engage participants in an alternative learning program. For purposes of this research study, I used Yin's (2015) descriptive qualitative case study model to capture the academic and social experiences of adults, 18-24 years of age that previously dropped out of school, have enrolled into the NHP and desire to complete their high school and obtain a state certified working credential within an identified job sector within "District X".

According to Yin (2009), case study research is appropriate when a researcher is seeking to explore, describe, interpret, and explain the subject being evaluated or

interviewed. Another instrument used to collect qualitative data is focus groups. Focus groups were used to gain an in-depth understanding surrounding social experiences/ issues regarding a particular subgroup. Focus groups are designed to be interactive between the moderator and the selected individuals (group) to collect data from human samples in real time as opposed to statically representative samples of a broader population. Focus groups are freelance discussions with no critical assessment of the delivery or application rendered (O Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick, & Mukherjee, 2018).

Before a research exploration can move forward, the researcher must consider their interest of a phenomenon being investigated, identify what their sampling technique/strategy will be and what the criterion will be for selecting and recruiting the participants of the investigation. These steps are critical for conducting thorough and reliable case studies (Robinson, 2014).

Sampling was defined as the process of selecting a specific number of individuals (units) from an identified population/subject of interest in order to study and produce an evaluation for the larger populous of people or identified subject-matter (Guetterman, 2015). For the purpose of this descriptive case study, I used purposeful sampling to conduct this research exploration. I selected purposeful sampling because it is widely utilized in qualitative research for the sole purpose of identifying and gaining rich information of a phenomenon being investigated and of a particular subgroup being explored (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, & Hoagwood, 2015). In addition, purposeful sampling reaches targeted samples quickly, permits the researcher to use other sampling techniques to gain a broader range of non-probability for stronger conclusions

and allows the researcher to identify common characteristics or (themes) of the population/sub-group being explored.

In an effort to find participants, I contacted New Hopes program director, shared the purpose of my contact and sought permission to come onto the colleges campus to post flyers and meet with students in cohorts to identify potential participants. After meeting with the identified cohorts, I selected from a pool of 30 eligible participants and selected 20 students to participate in the study. The chosen candidates will be given a participation disclosure form, a calendar and asked to provide a date and a time in which they would be available to participate in a 30-60-minute interview. The students were not compensated for participating in this research -study in an effort to eliminate research bias and participant influence.

When determining the appropriate sample size of a qualitative case study, the researcher should consider the “information power” of the study as opposed to quantity of the participants that have been selected to participate in their study. Information power indicates that the more information a sample holds, relevant for the actual exploration, the lower amount of participants will be required (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016). Sufficient information power will be determined by the aim of the study, participants experience (specificity), applicable applied theories of the study, purpose of the exploration and the outcomes reported by the participants and the researcher.

Ten student-participants were selected to participate in one-one one interviews during the initial first round of interviews (data collection) for this study. Once complete, a second round of interview questioning were utilized to capture the informed

experiences of 10 other randomly selected student-participants enrolled in a New Hope Program cohort. Focus groups consisting of (males and females) were asked to participate in a collaborative focus group discussion to express their overall academic and social experiences before and while being enrolled into the New Hope Program. As the researcher for this study, I facilitated and guided this interactive focus group discussion.

According to Alexis Writing (2018), focus groups usually refer to a sub group of 10 or fewer individuals to participate in a session. In an effort to remain consistent and produce a thick-quality study, I interviewed 10 students individually and conducted a focus group of 10 students. I wanted to capture the varying experiences of ten females and ten males that have enrolled into the NHP to determine if the program will prove beneficial or insufficient in their academic, social and vocational development.

In order to meet the criteria, the sample participants had to be between 18-24 years of age, had previously dropped out of high school, and had a desire to obtain their high school and working credential and are currently enrolled into the New Hope Program. The data collected was used to understand the school-related experiences and views of high school dropouts enrolled in the New Hope workforce development program, and how the innovation and integration of social media technologies during academic instruction can help to engage the participants in the program. The data collected from the participants allowed me the opportunity to identify themes, relational experiences and environmental influences that potentially led these learners to drop out of high school and enroll into the New Hope workforce development Program. In an effort to eliminate saturation of data collection, only 20 participants were interviewed using 1

on 1 interviews and 1 Focus Group interview (Fusch & Ness, 2015). All data was collected using a recording device and preserved and double locked in a security file-box.

Instrumentation

My first data collection source was semi-structured interview questions. I designed and gained committee approval for my 10 interview questions. This approach granted me the flexibility to change, amend or restate the questions in order to receive a veracious response from the individual(s) being interviewed. The purpose/goal of the interviews was to identify the textual and fundamental experiential experiences of the individuals being interviewed based on their personal experiences surrounding the phenomena being explored (Hammersley, 2017). According to Yin (2011), repurposing and using probing questions to review participant responses is a reliable research method to assure saturation is attained and validity is maintained throughout the research process. All interviews ranged between 30-60 minutes and was determined by the mood, rapport, comfortability and general contributions responses offered by the interviewee (Yazan, 2015). In order to establish content validity, I developed the interview questions and presented them to my dissertation committee and gained approval to move forward with my study. I pretested the questions with several personal colleagues that dropped out of high school and obtained their General Education diploma's. My goal was not to embarrass nor prove to invasive to the interviewee but to capture their experiences and development based on their actual experiences.

Table 2

Case Study Research Questions and Interview Questions

Research Questions	Interview Questions
RQ1: How did students in the workforce development program describe their experiences before they dropped out of high school?	IQ1: How would you describe your academic experiences before you dropped out of high school?
RQ1a: How did students in the workforce development program describe their collaborative learning experiences before they dropped out of high school?	IQ2: How would you describe your collaborative learning experiences before you dropped out of high school?
RQ2: How did students in the workforce development program use social media to engage in learning during academic instruction in order to complete their high school degree?	IQ3: How will you use social media technologies during academic instruction to assist in your completion of the New Hope Workforce development program in obtaining your high school degree and vocational credential?
RQ2a: How did students in the workforce development program use social media to socially construct knowledge?	IQ4: What has been the major advantage of using social media technologies in your courses of study in the New Hope Program that has helped you with your academic and social learning development?

Focus Groups

In an effort to strengthen and provide breadth to my study, the second data collecting method used was focus groups. Focus groups were used to gain an in-depth understanding surrounding social experiences/ issues regarding a particular subgroup. The focus group interviews questions were collaborative in nature between me (the researcher) and the selected individuals (group). Because I'm interested in collecting real

time, freelanced personal data from the individuals selected to participate in this focus group discussion, the responses collected added validity and thick data for the overall study as opposed to statically representative samples of a broader population. Focus groups are freelance discussions with no critical assessment of the delivery rendered or how the application is presented (O Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick, & Mukherjee, 2018). To establish content validity, I developed the protocol for the focus group questions and vetted the protocol and procedure with my dissertation committee and gained approval to move forward. I pretested the questions with several personal colloques that dropped out of high school and obtained their General Education diploma's. The goal of this study was to capture the overall experiences of the participants in the NHP without embarrassing or proving too invasive during the interview processes.

Focus Group Protocol

The introduction of the focus group included the following: (a) have student-participants make formal introduction to one another, (b) ask each student-participant to state a fun fact about them (icebreaker), (c) explain and establish the ground rules and purpose of this research activity, and (d) answer any questions of the student-participants and proceed to section II.

The participants were then asked to respond to interview questions. I asked a battery of questions until all questions were exhausted. I asked the participants to share specific examples regarding their personal, academic, family, and overall relational experiences. I asked for any final thoughts before transitioning to Section 3.

The students were asked what they liked and disliked about the New Hope Program. The students were asked to provide specific examples of their likes and dislikes. The students were asked if and how social media impacted their overall experiences. The students were asked to rate and describe their overall experiences of the NHP:

1. How would you describe your experiences in the NHP opposed to your previous High School experiences?
2. How would you describe your social and relational experiences of the NHP as opposed to your previous High School experiences?
3. What components of the NHP do you believe should be added or removed from the program?
4. If this program was introduced in High School, do you believe it could have prevented you from dropping out of high school prematurely?

I thanked the focus group for their time and responses provided. I also told the focus group how they could access the study once completed. I then terminated the focus group interview.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

In an effort to conduct this qualitative descriptive case study, I used the identified research questions, face to face interviews and focus groups to guide this study to address the academic, social-relational and social media components identified within this exploration. In order to conduct this study, I contacted the New Hopes program director, shared the purpose of my contact and sought permission to come to their campus, post

flyers and meet with various students/classes to share the purpose of my visit and expound upon the goal of this research study. After meeting with the identified cohorts, I selected 20 students (10 from Cohort A, and 10 from Cohort B) from a pool of 30 eligible student-candidates, that volunteered and are willing to participate in this study. Because this is my research study, I was the only individual responsible for collecting data and conducting interviews. In order to increase the reliability and validity of my study and to prevent research bias, I used a software program entitled “Rev.com” that recorded and transcribed the student-candidate’s responses.

The chosen participants were given a participation disclosure form, a calendar and asked to provide a date and a time in which they would be available to participate in a 30-60 minute interview. In the event that a student-candidate canceled or withdraw from wanting to participate in this study, I randomly selected another eligible candidate(s) from the sample pool of 30 participants previously identified. I followed the same steps (protocols) provided to the student-candidates that volunteered and agreed to participate in this study until my goal of 20 student-volunteers were interviewed. All 20 interviews were recorded using the “Rev.com” software and no student-candidates was compensated for volunteering and participating in this research study in an effort to eliminate research bias and participant influence.

Twenty student-participants successfully participated in the 1 on 1 and focus group interview. According to Alexis Writing (2018), focus groups usually refer to a sub group of 10 or fewer individuals to participate in a session. When determining the appropriate sample size of a qualitative case study, the researcher should consider the

“information power” of the study as opposed to quantity of the participants that have been selected to participate in their study. Information power indicates that the more information a sample holds, relevant for the actual exploration, the lower amount of participants will be required (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016). In an effort to remain consistent, I interviewed 10 students individually and conducted a focus group interview with another group of 10 students using the same criteria, protocols and methods previously used to recruit the initial participants.

Data Analysis Plan

Data collected from participant interviews and focus group responses were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Rev.com software to identify themes and patterns. I used Yin’s inductive coding technique to capture the data/responses that is provided by participants in the study. This process proved intricate because the responses provided were not derived from pre-conceived hypotheses from a previous study but solely emerged from the life experiences of the participants being interviewed. According to Belz and Binder (2017), inductive coding is advantageous because it ensures no misconceptions can be inferred to advance the exploration because the responses provided are in real time and based on the participants experiences only. The research questions used in this case study served as the principal foundation for finding gaps in traditional learning environments and help to uncover the rationale for why these learners have abandoned traditional or charter schools and decided to continue their education in the New Hope program.

In an effort to address the manner of treatment of the discrepant cases, open-ended interviews were used to identify specific factors and themes to describe why these individuals dropped out of high school initially and enrolled into the New Hope program. Kaplan and Maxwell (2005) denotes, identifying and analyzing discrepant data is critical for testing the validity and reliability of qualitative research (Lee, 2018). To ensure the elimination of research bias and influence, I used Rev.com and anthocodial written records to capture/identify themes and patterns as described by the participants participating in this descriptive case study.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Precision and dependability were the primary pillars to any research study. Yin (2011) sites that qualitative case studies require firm and precise methods for securing accuracy within a researcher's exploration. In order to establish these principles, I found patterns in behaviors and comments, categorical themes and relational components throughout the study to establish validity.

A key component for creating a quality research investigation was establishing credibility of the research project being manufactured. For purposes of establishing and maintaining project credibility, I used triangulation method to establish research validation. According to El Hussein 2015, he defined triangulation as the use of multiple methodologies to study a phenomenon for the purposes of increasing the studies credibility. Triangulation enables the validation of data through cross verification from more two or more credible sources. Triangulation allows the researcher to analyze the

consistency of their outcomes obtained when utilizing various instruments to detect specific threats (causes) that may negatively impact their studies results. The primary function of triangulation is to identify themes of an identified subgroup based on their experiences and personal perspectives (Flick, 2014). The goal of this case study was to gain a deeper understanding of the school-related experiences and views of high school dropouts enrolled into a workforce development program, and how the innovation and integration of social media technologies during academic instruction helped to engage participants in the NHP.

Transferability

Transferability in qualitative research is the researcher's ability to display general or external validity outcomes to their readers (followers) by providing evidenced based practices that could be remanufactured in a similar or future study (Fusch & Ness, 2015). The primary function of transferability is for the researcher to provide a thick-detailed description of their experiential experiences while collecting data for their research project. During the construction of their study, the qualitative researcher should make clear connections to the phenomena being examined (ex: cultural, social or behavioral constructs). During this process the researcher explicitly shares where the interview will take place, who the participants will be, the criterion established for the investigation and any other data collection techniques utilized to provide a full and rich understanding of interview setting (Noble & Smith, 2015). The following paragraph established how I achieved transferability for this exploration.

In an effort to find participants, I contacted New Hopes program director, introduced myself, shared the purpose of my contact and sought permission to come on campus to post flyers and meet with students in cohorts to identify potential participants. After meeting with the cohorts, I selected from a pool of 30 eligible participants and selected 20 students to participate in the study. The chosen participants was given a participation disclosure form, a calendar and asked to provide a date and a time in which they would be available to participate in a 30-60 minute interview. The students were not compensated for participating in this research study in an effort to eliminate research bias and participant influence. In an effort to eliminate an over saturation of data collection, only 20 participants were interviewed using 1 on 1 interviews and focus groups (Fusch & Ness, 2015). All data was collected (preserved) using a recording technology.

Dependability

According to Shenton (2004), a reliable qualitative study uses techniques to reflect the work of an identical investigation to include the same context, methods/practices and sample population (participants) with end goal of achieving similar outcomes/results. Simply stated, future researchers should be able to replicate an investigation and achieve very similar results. Before an investigation can be simulated, its outcomes (data) must be dependable and verified by an independent researcher (El Hussein, Jakubec, & Osuji, 2015). Within a research study, the researcher has 2 primary goals, establish dependability and to have another researcher to reproduce their project and achieve similar outcomes (Chuang, Oliva, & Liu, 2016). Dependability validates the trustworthiness of the researcher's findings as creditable, consistent and repeatable; this is

critical for ensuring the initial investigators (researcher) work was not misleading, biased or produced limited to no validity (Anney, 2014).

In an effort to produce appropriate strategies for establishing dependability, I used triangulation and utilize outside researchers to conduct an external audit of my descriptive case study. External audits are an external analysis of collected data that's reviewed by an independent outside researcher not affiliated with the designated study. The external researcher's primary function is to confirm the accuracy of the conductor's findings and to ensure the results are supported by the data provided in the study (Chuang, Oliva, & Liu, 2016). External audits are reliable because they allow external researchers to challenge, defend or scrutinize how a researcher reports their data outcomes in their research studies.

In order to preserve the fruitfulness of this study, I used individual interviews and focus groups to triangulate my data in an effort to produce consistent and reliable outcomes (El Hussein, Jakubec, & Osuji, 2015 and Yin, 2011). All interviews were recorded, transcribed and then fed through the Rev.com software for output. All anecdotal records were reviewed and stored securely to detour misrepresentation of the information collected and destroyed after my research project.

Confirmability

I will used reflexive journaling to take notes and document the responses of the interviewees. I reviewed audio recordings to ensure that I did not overlook or eliminate any exchanges offered by my research participant. The ultimate goal of this section was to eliminate (reflexivity) research bias by the researcher conducting the interview/study.

Yin (2011) denotes reflexivity as unwarranted research bias within a research analysis. In order to establish confirmability, the researcher should maintain an objective position when documenting and transcribing their data. I ensured that I documented every statement, interaction and responses in first person recordings. Establishing this position is critical because it details the feelings, perceptions and experiences of the interview without researcher's input/personal-professional biases (Yin, 2015). Reflexive Journaling and audio recordings was fundamental instruments for capturing participant responses. To delineate any research influence or biases during my transcription process, I used brackets to delineate my personal and professional biases or experiences.

Ethical Procedures

The Director of the New Hope Program was contacted and was eager to allow me to conduct my study on her campus. After I presented my oral defense, I completed the informed and institutional site form(s). Once approved, I completed my IRB application and schedule a meeting with the director of the New Hope Program and explain the goal and purpose of my project. After receiving written permission from the director to conduct my study on this campus, I initiated my process. I identified 4 class cohorts, introduced myself, explained the purpose of my visit to their campus and classroom and extended an opportunity for them to participate in this project. Once potential participants were identified, I provided voluntary consent forms to all participants that volunteered and agreed to participate in this study. I obtained the consent form/ template from Walden's website. In an effort to secure the privacy of each participant, they were given pseudonyms (P1, P2, P3 etc.) and a Master's list with all names and associated

pseudonyms were stored separately. Pseudonym were created prior to transcription so no identifiers could be connected to a participant.

Additionally, I recorded all data using an audio recording device that captured the recorded the responses of each participant. As an extra layer of data collection, I used written notes for my personal tracking of participant information/documentation. I crossed referenced my notes with audio recordings and written notes to ensure I did not create any research bias and manipulation in this study. Once I completed all 20 interviews, Rev.com was used to transcribe the collected data. I kept all research information locked up in my personal home office, on a protected computer that was protected with a secured password. All field notes were secured and stowed in a locked cabinet in my personal home office. All consent forms were secured and stowed in a locked cabinet in my home office. Lastly, any and all digital recordings and flash drives were secured and stowed in a locked cabinet in my home office. At the completion of my research duration (5years) all documents collected will be shredded and destroyed to prevent a confidentiality breach.

Summary

Chapter three included a description of the research method for this study. I discussed the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, the methodology, and issues of trustworthiness and ethical procedures. I provided information about participant selection logic, data collection instruments, data analysis plan as well as discussion about issues of trustworthiness and ethical procedures. In Chapter 4, after data

collection and analysis, I presented the results of this study, based on implementing this descriptive case study design.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to understand the school-related experiences and views of high school dropouts enrolled into the New Hope Workforce Development Program, and how the innovation and integration of social media technologies during academic instruction can help to engage participants in the program. This study findings may be used to inform educators and community stakeholders of the experiences of the participants enrolled in this program. Findings may also be used to create and implement more innovative and sustainable academic supports and services to reduce high school dropout rates in a Midwest city.

I used two research questions and two sub questions to explore how the infusion of social media technologies during academic instruction influences reengagement and experiences for the participants of the New Hope Workforce Development Program. Understanding what supports and innovations are needed to reengage overaged high school dropouts was the cornerstone of this investigation. I gathered data from participants enrolled in the New Hope Workforce Development Program in a Midwest city. The research questions were the following:

RQ1: How did students in the workforce development program describe their experiences before they dropped out of high school?

RQ1a: How did students in the workforce development program describe their collaborative learning experiences before they dropped out of high school?

RQ2: How did students in the workforce development program use social media to engage in learning during academic instruction to complete their high school degree?

RQ2a: How did students in the workforce development program use social media to socially construct knowledge?

I used the descriptive case study approach to conduct this study because it is focused and detailed and allows for the careful scrutiny of the phenomenon being investigated (Yin, 2017). This approach yielded rich data that captured the participants' experiences and perspectives, and also environmental influences that led them to drop out of high school and enroll in the New Hope Workforce Development Program. By following the descriptive case study approach, I was able to identify common factors and themes that helped me gain a deeper understanding of why students decide to drop out of high school. In Chapter 4, I present the demographics of the participants, the data collection methods used, the data analysis procedures, and evidence of trustworthiness. I conclude Chapter 4 with my research results describing the themes and patterns found throughout my interview and focus group responses.

Setting

I conducted one-on-one and focus group interviews in the library of a community college in a Midwest city where each participant is enrolled. I contacted the program director to identify an appropriate time to meet with the student participants to host an information session with both cohorts/classes. Once in front of the students, I introduced myself, discussed the purpose of my study, and addressed all questions or concerns. At the end of each information session, I provided each group with my contact information and asked all interested student participants to contact me via phone or e-mail regarding next steps. To ensure confidentiality and respect privacy, I asked each student participant

to e-mail and call me to ensure I did not violate any ethical standards of this study. After meeting with each student, I asked them if they felt comfortable with everything discussed and presented. I then asked each participant if they wanted to move forward and reminded them if, at any time, they decided to discontinue the process I would terminate all activities immediately and remove them from the study. I reminded each participant their responses would be audio recorded to prevent any clerical errors on my behalf. Lastly, I e-mailed a copy of everything discussed and reviewed during the group consultation and asked each student candidate to take 7-14 days before making a decision to move forward or decline with participating in this study.

I did not discover any personal or organizational conditions that influenced participants or their experiences at the time of the study, which may have proved counterproductive to the interpretation of the study's results. Furthermore, each one-on-one interview and focus group was consistent regarding the questions asked, but results were different based on the individuals and their collaborative perspectives. Based on my analysis of the data collected, there were several congruities and parallels between Cohort A and Cohort B. The student participants in Cohort A (one-on-one interviews) and Cohort B (focus group) reported that their social and relational experiences were influenced by communal and academic factors. The environmental influences included residential upbringings, socioeconomic challenges, and a longing for positive student-teacher-staff relationships. Despite these admissions, 100% of the student participants reported that they wish they would have completed their high school requirements and not dropped out of high school. Table 3 shows the participant demographics.

Table 3

Demographics of Participants in the New Hope Workforce Development Program and Highest Grade/Last Year Attended

Participants	Gender and age (years)	Program choice	Highest grade completed before dropping out
A-p1	Male student 21	New Hope Program (A)	11th
A-p2	Female student 19	New Hope Program (A)	11th
A-p3	Female student 20	New Hope Program (A)	10th
A-p4	Female graduate 21	New Hope Program (A)	10th
A-p5	Male student 20	New Hope Program (A)	11th
A-p6	Female graduate 24	New Hope Program (A)	10th
A-p9	Female student 19	New Hope Program (A)	10th
A-p10	Male graduate 20	New Hope Program (A)	10th
A-p11	Male graduate 21	New Hope Program (A)	10th
A-p12	Male student 19	New Hope Program (A)	10th
Bp1	Female student 18	New Hope Program (B)	11th
Bp2	Male student 19	New Hope Program (B)	11th
Bp3	Male student 20	New Hope Program (B)	12th
Bp4	Male student 21	New Hope Program (B)	11th
Bp5	Male student 21	New Hope Program (B)	10th
Bp6	Female student 21	New Hope Program (B)	10th
Bp7	Male student 19	New Hope Program (B)	10th
Bp8	Female student 19	New Hope Program (B)	11th
Bp9	Female student 20	New Hope Program (B)	10th
Bp10	Female student 23	New Hope Program (B)	12th

Data Collection

The data collection process involved 20 student participants. Group A included 10 student participants (five female and five male) who voluntarily participated in a 30-60 minute one-on-one interview session. Group B included 10 student participants (five female and five male) who voluntarily participated in one 30-60-minute focus group interview session. To protect each participant's identity, I applied pseudonyms as A (p1-p10) and B (p1-p10). The participants were currently enrolled and had graduated from the

program, were between 18 and 24 years of age, and had previously dropped out of high school and enrolled into the New Hope Workforce Development Program to earn their high school diploma and state-certified working credential. The data collection process, conducted on a local community college campus, was a joint venture between an urban Midwest public school and a local workforce development program/organization. After receiving Walden University IRB approval (No. 03-14-19-0472087), I contacted the chief research and accountability officer of a Midwest public school and the faculty and staff of the New Hope Workforce Development Program assisted in the identification of eligible participants. After meeting with the program director, I was granted permission to post flyers regarding my research project on the community college campus and met with the students enrolled in the program. After explaining the purpose of my study, I addressed all questions from the potential student participants and provided my contact information for any interested candidates. Student participants interested in taking part in this study were encouraged to e-mail me their intent to participate and identify which platform of the interview process they would like to participate in (one-on-one interview or focus group). Upon receipt of participants' email or phone call, I in turn emailed them a copy of their identified consent form and asked them to read over the information and to contact me with any questions or concerns before making a definitive decision. I encouraged each candidate to take between 7-14 days to think it over before deciding to move forward. Each consent form explicitly detailed the time commitment and student-participants' role in the interview process and included all my pertinent contact information to include email and telephone contact information. Once I received final

notices from the student-participants wishing to proceed, I provided each participant with a calendar and asked them to identify a date a time that was convenient for them. All interviews were conducted and completed within a two-week period based on each student's identified class and work schedule, personal availability and at a designated location on the local community college campus in "District X."

The data collection for this descriptive case study involved a sample size of 10 student-participants for one-on-one interviews and 10 student-participants for the collaborative focus group. In total, 20 past/present female and male New Hope Workforce Development Program student-participants were interviewed for this study. The data collection process took approximately 1.5 months to complete.

According to Yin (2009), case study research is appropriate when a researcher is seeking to explore, describe, interpret, and explain the subject being evaluated or interviewed. For this study, I logged all data using a two-pronged approach of audio recordings and personal handwritten notes. As an extra measure for reliable data collection practices, I utilized rev.com to record, transcribe and produce a printed transcription of each student-participant's interview. Using varying colored highlighters, I meticulously searched for varying codes, themes and statements shared by each student-participant in an effort to decode and develop a deeper knowledge of the participants' shared experiences. As a student researcher, I have complied with all policies, procedures set forth and required by Walden's Institutional Review Board and Walden University. No student-participant was compensated for their contribution to this study. The recruitment of student-participants, the interviewing process, and coding of recorded and

transcribed data was securely protected and stowed in a secure location in my home and only shared with the committee members, as instructed. In an effort to maintain the integrity of this study, no information will be discussed or shared with “District X” or students or staff of the New Hope Workforce Development Program until this study has been approved and confirmed by Walden University’s CAO. In order to assure and protect the privacy and identities of the student-participants, pseudonyms were used, as explained through the interview protocol. I will store all collected and recorded data for the five-year period, and at the end of that five-year period, I will destroy all collected data to ensure the overall confidentiality of the research members involved in this study.

My initial goal for collecting student data was to identify 10 males and 10 females (one- on-one interviews and focus groups) for both sets of my interviews in an effort to provide balance and impartiality to this study. To my surprise, I received an overwhelming response from student-participants who were willing to volunteer their time and responses to participate in this study. In an effort to minimize bias, I used purposeful sampling to identify each contributor because it is widely utilized in qualitative research for the sole purpose of identifying and gaining rich information of a phenomenon being investigated and of a particular subgroup being explored (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, & Hoagwood, 2015). I achieved my goal of identifying 20 student-participants and was able to collect all my data. The data collection process took approximately 1.5 months to complete. All appointments scheduled remained as scheduled, were on time and provided rich-thick data.

Data Analysis

In this qualitative descriptive case study, after completing my interviewing and transcription process, I transitioned my focus to identifying codes and themes that materialized from the participants' varying descriptions of experiences during the interview process. Based on the two theories identified to outline the framework of this study, I compared and analyzed participant responses based on John Dewey's *Pragmatism Theory* (1938 & 2017) and Lev Vygotsky *Social Development Theory* (1978). I wanted to ensure a clear alignment was established between the participants' responses and Dewey's *Pragmatism Theory* on how humans learn best through negative, positive and hands on experiences and Vygotsky's *Social Development Theory*, for detailing how human capital (through relationships) and environmental influence(s) can shape an individual's behavior. To ensure accuracy of the data collected, I hired a transcription software company (rev.com) to record, transcribe and provide the verbal responses of each participant in written format.

For the coding process, I reread each transcript to obtain an emerging theme derived from repetitive words, expressions, statements, and experiences that were similar among individual/group responses, as suggested by Rubin and Rubin (2011). Using a color-coding process, I used multiple colored highlighters to highlight recurring and similar participant responses to identify key patterns and to assist in the identification of emerging themes. This process helped to find common threads of information from the interview process. Additionally, this type of coding helped me gain a deeper

understanding of the varying challenges and experiences each participant had to endure throughout their academic, relational and personal journeys.

The coding process utilized provided essential rich-thick data necessary for helping to better compartmentalize and gather solid conclusions based on each participants' experiences in real time and in their voice. The data collected and recoded proved exceptionally valuable because it instantly eliminated researcher bias and speculations and definitively captured each participants' feelings, thoughts, expressions, and overall experiences. Every participant's narrative-experiences were unique; however, many of the participants shared many of the same challenges and barriers thus making this study extremely valuable.

In this section, I used 2 research questions and 2 to sub questions to provide a summary of the themes and codes recognized in the summary of data collected as it relates to the data analysis and my research questions. The identified codes represent the aspects of the data to capture the crux of the emerging 55 themes that inherently formed the consistent theme descriptions of the students' experience in the successful participation and completion of the New Hope Workforce Development Program. Based on RQ1, how did students in the workforce development program describe their experiences before they dropped out of high school? All of the students in this study admitted having negative school related school experiences before deciding to drop out of high school. These negative experiences were based on poor student-teacher relationships, unconcerned teachers and administrators and teacher's ability to create and maintain a safe and structured learning environment. All student-participants in this study

admitted if they would have had more caring adults throughout their initial high school careers, they would not have dropped out of high school. Of the 20 students interviewed, only 4 students shared that they had a teacher or school staff that showed a genuine interest in them; so, when they stopped caring, we stopped caring and wound hanging with friends or peers that didn't make a lot of good choices and resulted in all of us dropping out of high school.

The second research question (RQ1a.) How did students in the workforce development program describe their collaborative learning experiences before they dropped out of high school? Similar to RQ1, all of the students in this study admitted that their collaborative learning experiences was nonexistent throughout their high school career. When asked to elaborate to their responses based on their experiences each participant reported that they did not feel the teachers, administrators and counselors cared or acted like they cared about their overall well-being or success. The student-participants shared that school staff did not care if you skipped class, came to school or did not come. "They only cared about getting payed, so we wound up just hanging with each other, not learning much just hanging out and skipping classes and dropping out of high school. With respects to collaborative learning, each participant shared not much learning went on when they were in school, so they participated in behaviors and activities that proved detrimental to their academic careers. These behaviors included using drugs, alcohol and hanging with friends and peers that were not very goal oriented.

My third research question (RQ2) focused on how social media technologies was used to engage learners during academic instruction. RQ2: reads, how did students in the

workforce development program use social media to engage in learning during academic instruction in order to complete their high school degree? All of the student-participants in this study reported they had a positive experience and thoroughly enjoyed using social media technologies during their academic learning experience. All of the participants shared they enjoyed how they various technologies and programs were relative to their everyday living experiences and learning styles. The overall consensus was of each participant was the technologies allowed them the flexibility to log in at their leisure and to work at their own pace. The participants also shared whenever they had a question or got stuck on a problem, they could go into a private chat or group chat to get an explanation on how to solve a particular. The greatest benefit reported of this technology use was access to communicate directly with peers and instructors on the social media platform entitled “Remind.” All of the participants shared they thoroughly loved “Remind” because it held them accountable, allowed them the access to check on one another and if they missed classed for whatever reason the dashboard would remind them of a task or an assignment that was due or coming up. Each participant shared they really appreciated this technology and believe this social media technology was critical for their academic and social-learning achievements.

My final research question (RQ2a) read: How did students in the workforce development program use social media to socially construct knowledge? All 20 participants stated they communicated and learned a great deal from one another and their instructors because they were in constant communication with one another. Each participant shared this experience was completely different from their previous high

school experiences because people actually cared, we held each other accountable and became on big family. Several of the participants reported that there were no ego's, no drama, no hate just constant support and encouragement by peers and teachers through the various social media platforms. One unique function of the workforce development program is the graduates of the program frequently come back to visit their peers, classmates and offer tutoring support when needed. Many of the graduates still access the social media platforms to engage and communicate with peers still enrolled into the program. All of the participants shared they thoroughly enjoyed this part of the program and that this social media engagement component helped them to socially construct academic knowledge.

Several words and phrases emerged that demonstrated each student-participants relational-connection and experiences to the New Hope Workforce Development Program *to include what social media technologies proved helpful with their academic successes, how the structure of the program supports their learning styles and personal-vocational schedules and why the program feels more like a family as opposed to a traditional learning and social school model.* Despite only having a Program Director (lead teacher) and an Assistant Director, the innovative structure of this program seemed to appeal to the varying learning styles and social interactions of each community member. Also, family, motivation, support-systems, like minded individuals and maturity levels was consistently used making a connection to the New Hope Workforce Development Program. Other phrases such as: previous dropout, poor student-teacher relationships, uneducated parents-families, poor school attendance and unsafe learning

environments were common themes to emerge when describing their experiences before enrolling into the New Hope Workforce Development Program.

The second theme of *intrinsic and extrinsic motivation* emerged when discussing their desire to complete the New Hope Workforce Development Program. The intrinsic motivating factors included, *I will be the first in my family to earn my high school diploma; I need to be a positive example for my younger and older siblings and friends; I need a better job; I have plans of going to college; I always wanted my diploma; I don't want to be considered a dummy and I want the respect of my family, friends and coworkers.* The motivation themes that indicated the extrinsic aspect were indicated by the following phrases: *I have to do this for me; I want to leave a legacy for my children and the rest of my family; and, I promised my best friend and my grand-parents I would not quit this time around until I earned my diploma.*

The participants identified specific challenges and barriers they encountered along their academic and personal journey and the specific resources and strategies they used to get them to their present academic and social destination. The emerging codes for the third theme of challenges were indicated through the following key words and phrases: *you gotta ignore the haters; connecting to past/present peers of the New Hope Workforce Development Program; following Ms. McDonald's lead and trusting her process; connecting and staying around like-minded individual; using "remind" to remain encouraged and to check on classmates; opening up and learning from others' experience; and, never get too high or too low on yourself - find a balance.*

The strategies for personal and academic success were equally noted and conveyed through the coding process, representing the fourth theme. The student-participants expressed the following phrases that supported this theme: *positive relational experiences; mature mindset; focused; determined; no excuses; by any means necessary; sacrifice; trust the process; using the advice of former New Hope Workforce Development Program graduates; sharing helpful social media technologies with classmates and instructors; and, swallowing foolish pride and asking for help when you get stuck or don't understand something.* Within the use of consistent interview questions regarding recommendations for program enhancements, codes identified to support the fifth theme of program improvements included the following: *need more instructors; have more accessibility to program counselors and better advertisement/marketing as opposed to traditional word of mouth; the introduction of this program earlier in a student's academic career; and, the need for more New Hope Workforce Development Programs.* Several of the student-participants reported they would not change a thing about the structure of New Hope Workforce Development Program format. The participants report: *the program is perfect in its design and in its delivery; the accessibility in the structure of the scheduling; and, how the collaborative learning model is implemented and encouraged.* All of the student-participants interviewed believe if this program was introduced earlier in a student's academic career, more students would reconsider dropping out of high school prematurely.

For the final theme of advice to a potential student considering whether or not to drop out of high school prematurely and an alternative learning program, the code

phrases expressed contained the following: stay committed; stay determined; ignore the haters even if they're family members; remember this is your journey; you've come too far; you have people that are supporting you and depend on you; you got this; and, failure is not an option. All of the student-participants in this study were eager to share their stories and experiences and concluded if it wasn't for the support of their instructors, classmates and social media technologies introduced and utilized, they do not believe they would have made the gains or earned their high school diploma from the New Hope Workforce Development Program. Several of the students in this study are responsible for sharing their experiences with the program and, as a result, several of their friends and family members have enrolled into the New Hope Workforce Development Program in hopes of pursuing the completion of their high school requirements, as well.

Figure 1. Themes identified from Research Question 1.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

According to Hadi and Closs (2016), there are four strategies a researcher should consider when determining the rigor and trustworthiness of a qualitative research study. These factors include the credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability of the research projected being constructed and explored. In an effort to produce a quality study, during the data collection and data evaluation process, I integrated the four pillars noted to ensure the trustworthiness of this study was clearly demonstrated and defined.

Credibility

For an accurate record of data recording and to eliminate research bias recording, I included an actual transcript verification receipt provided by rev.com to ensure the accuracy of the data collected was from an actual student-participant. In an effort to adhere to and assure compliance to the interview and transcription process, I reviewed all written and collected data with each participant to confirm that the information collected/presented was reflective of their academic, personal and relational experiences. Additionally, I used a research log to delineate and document the interview process for those who participated in the one-on-one interviews and the participants in the focus group interview. This process provided triangulation to the two programs explored, an added value to my study, while establishing credibility.

Transferability

For data collection purposes, I utilized 20 students from two varying subgroups that were and are currently enrolled in the New Hope Workforce Development Program. The two subgroups identified were 10 one-on-one interviews and one collaborative focus group consisting of 10 student-participants. All 20 students involved in this study were former public and charter high school dropouts in a Midwestern city located in the United States. This concerted effort between “school District X,” a local community college and a workforce development program is transforming lives and providing the necessary skills and academic opportunities for young adults 18-24 years of age who dropped out of high school initially, but have decided to reenroll into the New Hope Workforce Development Program to earn their high school diploma and state certified working

credentials. The sample size consisted of 10 males and 10 females and ranged from program enrollees to program graduates. The battery of carefully vetted and tested interview questions along with key probing questions helped to gather rich-thick descriptions of each participant's experiences and expressions of successful completion and participation within the New Hope Workforce Development Program.

Dependability

Connelly (2016) defined dependability in qualitative research as the degree of confidence in the data collected, interpreted and the methods used to ensure the quality and sustainability of the study produced. Guest, MacQueen, and Namey (2012) defined dependability in qualitative research as the constancy and strength of the data collected over a period of time, the conditions under which the study was administered, and the methodologies used. In an effort to prevent the issue of repeatability, I used the dependability criteria and ensured I used the identical research data collection processes with each student-participant. To ensure accuracy and dependability of this study, I asked each participant the same questions and audio recorded and wrote down their responses. At the conclusion of each interview, I reviewed the questions and responses of each student-participant in an effort to ensure the data collected was accurate, authentic and memorialized based on each participants shared academic, personal and relational experiences.

Confirmability

To address this benchmark, I used the process of the rev.com audio audit trail, verbal student-participant transcript verification, and my own personal reflective journal

log to retrace the steps I implemented and utilized during the interview processes and reflected on any biased or compromised data that would invalidate my interpretation of data presented in this study. After a thorough examination of my research policies and procedures, I discovered the validations of my findings from the one-on-one and focus group interviews to be reliable, credible and without error based on the student-participants' transcript reviews and the audio recordings delivered by rev.com auto software. Because this case study is a qualitative descriptive case study based on each student's academic, relational and social experiences, my biases were not influenced or inserted in this study. My personal research notes documented my initial thoughts and beliefs before conducting any research and collecting any data. To ensure the prevention of research bias, I only chronicled the data provided by each student-participant while conducting the interview and during my coding process. I did not deviate from the policies and procedures approved/outlined by my dissertation committee, URR and the consent forms provided to each student-participant

Results

I determined the results of the data analysis upon completing my one-on-one and focus group interviews based on a summation of 20 student-participants (10 females and 10 males). The parity of this sample output was six out of the 20 students have already graduated from the New Hope Workforce Development Program; another seven are scheduled to graduate in May, 2019; and the seven remaining students are scheduled to complete the program in July, 2019. Despite having the potential opportunity for a change (based on the final end of the course or Hi-SET assessment outcomes), each

student-participant appeared optimistic and confident they would successfully complete the New Hope Workforce Development Program. Each participant described their overall experiences while enrolled in the program, their individual connection to the program, extrinsic and intrinsic motivations, challenges experienced throughout the program, identified social media technologies they utilized during their enrollment and relationships established and strategies applied to help them prove successful throughout the program. Additional themes that materialized during the interview process involved participant suggestions for better marketing/advertisement for the New Hope Workforce Development Program and the need to incorporate this program earlier in a learner's academic career. The description of the above-mentioned themes about these experiences was chock full of expressive value and mentioned consistently, as is evident through the interview process and responses to the research question: How do students in the workforce development program describe their experiences before they dropped out of high school? All participants in the individual one on one interviews would be referred to as (A-p1-12) and focus group interview participants would be referred to as (Bp1-10) based on their assigned pseudonyms.

Theme 1: Connection to the Program

The program choice and connection stemmed from a need for an alternative learning program for many young adult learners who were overaged and under-credited. The design of this program targeted young adults 18-24 years of age who had a desire to complete high school and earn a state certified working credential. The New Hope Workforce Development Program was housed on a local community college campus and

provided each student-participant a monthly bus pass or a gas card as long as they remained active participants in the program, completed in and out of class tasks and assignments and completed job functions and duties, as defined, in their respective work/job packets. The student-participants reported that because the college campus was centrally located, offered an abbreviated academic school schedule, provided meaningful subject focused tutoring, incorporated relevant social media technologies during academic instruction and structured a nurturing and supportive learning community, their experience was well worth it. In addition, the New Hope Workforce Development Program combined traditional schooling with online learning supports and virtual classrooms based on each student's credits earned or credits needed to complete their high school requirements. The only prerequisite to enroll in this program is all student-participants were required to pass their preliminary Hi-Set reading and math assessment on or above a 9th grade reading level. Once accepted, each student meets with their assigned counselor and an individualized school plan is created with an anticipated road map for when each student should complete the program. Despite having similar responses/reflections on their desire to complete their high school and vocational requirements, several of these scholars' responses were unique and consistent with their individualized situations and life circumstances. The situations included homelessness, frequent transiency, unexpected family emergencies/loss, poor student-peer-teacher/staff relationships and financial insecurities. Before deciding to drop out, all 20 participants reported seeking information/programs on other alternative learning programs so they could acquire their high school diplomas. During the one-on-one interview sessions, five

out of 10 (50%) of the student participants admitted to enrolling in multiple programs before finding value and participating in the New Hope Workforce Development Program. One example was (A-p6), who shared her experience when attempting to find an alternative learning program to complete her high school requirements. She stated,

I actually attended four other programs before I enrolled into the New Hope Workforce Development Program. In fact, this is my second go around with the program because of family and personal issues. Ms. McDonald (lead teacher) was much of a mother figure that wouldn't/didn't give up on me or allow me to quit. When I told her I was struggling, she told me to take some time off and come back when I was ready and here I am. I have two more classes and test to pass and I will be graduating in May with my diploma.

(A-p9) shared she enrolled into the New Hope Workforce Development Program because she was 19 years of age and was placed into all freshman classes within a traditional public-school setting. (A-p9), a student refugee, reports she was embarrassed because of her age and realized she would not have earned her diploma until she was 23 years of age if she remained in the traditional school setting. Despite being a hard worker, having good teachers and classmates, (A-p9) believed it would be in her best interest to enroll in the New Hope Workforce Development Program in order to obtain her diploma so she could enroll in college and pursue her dream of becoming a nurse. "Everyone in this program is well connected. We support/encourage one another, and Ms. McDonald is Amazing! She's a mother, a friend and I wouldn't be in my position without her."

(A-p2) stated she enrolled in the New Hope Workforce Development Program because traditional high school was full of drama and she wasn't as focused as she should have been. (A-p2) says her gift was being popular. It was "all about being popular," "being in the mix," and "caught up on my own self."

(A-p2) reports her connection to the New Hope Workforce Development Program is "there is no popularity in this program. Everyone's equal and we're all on the same track - meaning we're all trying to cross the finish line together. "I never met anyone/teacher like Ms. McDonald. Ms. Mac holds us to a higher standard and challenges us to be great, and I love her for that."

(A-p1) shared he enrolled into the New Hope Workforce Development Program because he was forced to move on multiple occasions (in and out of state) due to family situations and, as a result, his grades suffered. (A-p1) shared he always had the ability to do the work academically; however, had difficulty developing lasting relationships with classmates and teachers. After experiencing homelessness, (A-p1) had to get a job and eventually dropped out of school to help take care of his family. (A-p1) shared his connection to the program is "the friendly and nurturing environment. I like how we all get along and push and support one another. The participants in the New Hope Workforce Development Program are mature and focused individuals."

(A-p5) shared he enrolled because he did not feel supported by his teachers and school staff within the traditional school setting. He reports in the New Hope Workforce Development Program he gets the attention and support he needs and believes this is why he's experiencing the success he has attained. When asked what his greatest connection

to the program was, (A-p5) said, “We are one big family. The teachers are amazing, especially Ms. McDonald. Ms. Mac is tough, but in a good way. We know she loves us, and we love her the same.”

Theme 2: Motivations

The 20 participants selected for this study described the unique factors that impacted or motivated them to enroll, engage and cooperate with the staff of the program. These motivational factors have been defined as intrinsic and extrinsic influences; responsible for shaping the way each member of this learning community immersed themselves into this alternative learning pathway.

Intrinsic factors. Each student-participant, using their own words, described the unique internal motivational factors that led them to enroll and remain in the New Hope Workforce Development Program. Despite similar responses, several of the students reported unique factors to their specific situations. For example, (A-p6) described her intrinsic motivational influences:

I wanted to do this because none of my siblings graduated from high school and I can/will be the first to get my diploma. In fact, neither of my parents have their diplomas either. I figure if I get my diploma, it would be the start of me getting a better job and going to college. Because of family issues (homelessness), I dropped out my senior year and I realize I’m too close not to get my diploma, so I’m here to finish and get this paper (diploma).

(A-p10) reports “I had to move around a lot because my mother was single mother raising 4 babies all alone. Because I watched her struggle and work so hard, I

knew I had to get my high school diploma. My parents divorced, and my father passed and none of my siblings have their diplomas, so I have an opportunity to change that narrative and I will, I promise.”

(Bp3) shared he didn't know what to expect from the program. He reports he knew he wanted to get his high school degree but said his friend (a recent graduate of the program) told him about the program and that he had to meet Ms. McDonald. (Bp3) stated:

After going through orientation with my counselor, I knew this experience would be different. I mean from day one, everyone was participating and paying attention and helping each other. The teachers actually seemed to care about us and listened to us. Having this type of support makes you want to give your all and try, and if you get stuck with something you have your teachers, Quizlet (social media technology) or one of your homies (classmates) right there to help you out. I knew this go around I had to do it because with all this support, there are no more excuses. I would be the excuse and I can't have that.

(A-p4) described the New Hope Workforce Development Program “as a second chance at life to get your life and priorities in order. I'm 21 and have a daughter I have to look after now so, I want to be the best role model I can be for her besides, I can't preach you gotta get your education if I don't finish mine.”

Extrinsic factors. The student-participants also described the extrinsic factors that remained constant while enrolled in the New Hope Workforce Development Program and helped these participants earn their high school and working credentials.

Each student-participant noted the nurturing and inviting learning community created/maintained, the words of affirmation and encouragement provided by the instructors and peers, the immediate feedback provided by the social media technologies utilized and from class mates and instructors, the individualized attention provided by the director of the program (Ms. McDonald), and the encouragement that was provided by biological and extended family members.

The primary extrinsic factors that influenced (A-p6) to participate in the New Hope Workforce Development Program was the affirmation and encouragement from her peers, teachers and friends/family members. (A-p6) reported her daughter was a huge motivating factor for completing the program. In addition to her daughter, (A-p6) reports another motivating factor is her younger sister who will graduate from the same school she dropped out of. They will both graduate this school year. (A-p6) shares without the support of her mother and sisters, she does not know how she would have made it this far.

(A-p2) shared not having her high school diploma bothered her because neither of her parents graduated from high school but lead her to believe that they completed high school. She shares: “For years, my mother and father would make up stories about school and how difficult their academic journey was. In fact, my father told me he was a college professor and always would preach the importance of completing high school and getting an education. It wasn’t until I dropped out of high school that I learned from my grandmother that my dad was lying to me because he was too embarrassed to share that he and my mother never completed high school. I love my parents very much, but they

have always had their struggles and that's why I was forced to stay with my grandmother. My grandmother did complete high school and has some college, but I want to complete this program and get my diploma as a gift to my parents and to let them know I did this for us.”

(A-p11) also described how not having his high school diploma impacted him. He stated:

Not having a high school diploma sucks, especially when I was trying to get a job that paid a decent wage. The frustrating thing about my situation is that I had the ability to do my work while I was in school; however, making poor decisions, hanging around negative people and not pushing myself is what lead me to drop out of school. When I graduated last year, I felt empowered, accomplished and super proud of my accomplishment because I was the first person in my immediate family to graduate from high school. I have 4 siblings and 2 parents that did not finish. But my greatest claim to fame is one of my sisters is going back to get her GED because I got my diploma. She told me because of me she decided to go back and that makes me feel really, really good. Although I'm not in school right now, I feel good because I often come back to the program and help my friends to get their diploma. We are one big family and I let them know if I did it, you will too.

(A-p9) reported that extrinsically, her mother, her father, brother, sisters and classmates helped her stay focused and provided the necessary motivation and support to participate in the New Hope Workforce Development Program. (A-p9) also expressed a

special thanks to Ms. McDonald for her leadership, her sense of humor and for instilling in her the confidence that she could conquer this challenge of obtaining her high school diploma.

(A-p12) reported that his mother had been a tremendous support system for him and his sister. He notes Ms. McDonald was an extension of his mother because she would constantly remind him to complete his work, remember your academic and life goals and to never forget where he came from because he's come too far. (A-p12) admitted if it wasn't for the support of his mother, his sister (also a student-participant in the program) and Ms. McDonald, he doesn't know where he would be. (A-p12) stated:

“Since I was a young man, I always wanted to own my own business. It wasn't until later in life that I realized I wanted to join the military (Air Force) and own a construction company. I come from a single-family household in which my mother dropped out of high school at 17 years of age, but completed her GED. My father dropped out of school in the sixth grade and lives in Mexico. Both parents taught me a lot, but my father taught me labor and my mother taught me the value of getting an education. Despite making some mistakes, I realize I have the best of both worlds and now it's up to me to continue in the right direction. I'm grateful for a loving and supportive family and I don't know where I would be without them. Because of my past legally, I know I have an uphill climb especially with joining the military, but I'm confident if I stay strong, get my education and work hard all my dreams will come true.”

Theme 3: Challenges

Each student-participant shared their challenges and limitations while participating in the New Hope Workforce Development Program. These challenges included getting reacclimated to school, balancing school, job and family responsibilities, learning how to study again and pushing themselves when they found themselves getting overwhelmed and frustrated after failing a practice subtest. Several of the students admit experiencing the same anxieties experienced in traditional school; however, the difference now was their instructor, Ms. McDonald. All of the students admitted that Ms. McDonald motivated and encouraged them like no other previous instructor and threatened violence if she thought they were slacking and not working to their full potential. (A-p2) shared, “the thing I appreciated most about Ms. Mac was she kept everything open and honest with us; she was 100. If we were not giving 100%, she would let us know and even call parents/family members letting them know the same thing. If we missed class she called and emailed us to find out the deal (if everything was ok with us). My greatest challenge when I first enrolled was my selfishness, it was all about me. Ms. Mac showed me a different way and told me if I expected to be successful in this program, I would have to learn to work as a member of the community and not be the community. Man was she right and I’m grateful for her many life lessons.”

(A-p10) described his challenge was getting to class on time after working an overnight shift. He shared, “I had good intentions of working hard, paying attention and doing my best in class but the sleep monster would always jump on my back about 15-30 minutes when I would get to class. I struggle with math and ironically, that was my first

subject when I first got to school. I had to make a decision which was more important work or school, so I decided to let that job go and focus on school. I can't lie and tell you I wasn't nervous because I had bills and a lifestyle I had to maintain. I shared my challenges with Ms. McDonald, and she reminded me the program came with a vocational component and classes only lasted for 4 hours. This was a huge relief and I never missed a beat."

(A-p6) described her experience as challenging because she was the oldest in the class and had childcare challenges initially. She shared "This is my 4th program and attempt to get my high school diploma. Despite having day care challenges and occasional transportation issues, I was determined to finish this program. I already been down this path before and understand the emptiness you feel when you don't complete or give up, so I was determined to finish and give all I got in order to finish this time. "I can't lie, I almost gave up, again but Momma Mac, helped get my childcare in order and I'm only 2 subtests away from completing this program. I'm almost to the finish line and it feels good."

Theme 4: Strategies for Success

As described by the student-participants, each challenge lead to successful strategy developments that were learned through collaborative learning experiences, various life lessons or social media technologies introduced in the New Hope Workforce Development Program. Each selected participant shared their experiences and resources used to build their confidence, maintain a positive attitude and help them become active contributors within the program.

(Bp6) revealed that math has always been her Achilles heel and how unsuccessful she was on her initial assessment. After several unsuccessful attempts, she contemplated giving up before Ms. Miller and Ms. McDonald introduced her to a social media software entitled “Odyssey Ware.” (Bp6) reports “Odyssey Ware was a game changer and helped me increase my test scores with every practice assessment.” In addition, (Bp6) shared “Remind,” a social media tool used to communicate with classmates and instructors, proved to be a tremendous asset in helping with her academic development, organizational skills and mathematical comprehension. Because of the social media technologies introduced/utilized in the New Hope Workforce Development Program, (Bp6) reports she scored an 11 of a needed 10 on her math assessment. After all of her struggles with math throughout her academic career, (Bp6) shared she yelled with excitement when her score posted. (Bp6) said she’s eternally grateful for her instructors but especially for Odyssey Ware and Remind, the social media technologies introduced which helped her pass her math subtest. As a result, she’ll be able to graduate from the program in May, 2019.

(A-p12) shared the structure of the program and social media technologies utilized is what helped him prove successful in the New Hope Workforce Development Program. When he was asked to expound, he shared “the collaborative learning groups, Remind (social media platform used) and the tutoring offered by recent graduates is what helped him the most. (A-p12) shared “having timely-real time access to individual(s)/technologies that can thoroughly explain how to solve and answer my question directly is what helped me the most. Especially, having peers that recently

passed the exam is super beneficial. It gave me the necessary confidence I needed to complete my work and pass my test.”

(Bp5) reported he is an introvert and enjoyed working and completing projects/assignments by himself. He acknowledged that he had to change his mindset because the structure of the program is set up to be a collaborative learning experience and working individually is not a best practice for the student-participants. (Bp5) reports that after he let his guard down and trusted the process, he realized the benefit of utilizing this collaborative learning approach. As a result of trusting and following this process, (Bp5) said he has scored significantly higher marks in language arts and he’s looking forward to taking his exam in a few weeks. If he passes, he will graduate with several of his classmates in May, 2019. (Bp5) stated:

When I first entered the program, I was determined I was going to keep to myself and make it on my own. After about 30 minutes into the program, Ms. McDonald said, “Excuse me, I know you’re new, but you’re going to have to get involved and participate if you want to successfully complete this program and get your diploma.” Her response kinda threw me off because it didn’t take her long to figure out, I was being a bump on a log or having a bad day. She didn’t care. She wanted me to be active, participate and not waste her time or mine. Before I left, Ms. McDonald pulled me in her office and had her infamous momma talk with me, and after that conversation I knew she cared about me and I absolutely appreciated that. I never had a teacher show they cared about me that quickly or even seem to care about their students that much. Ms. McDonald is so special, I

don't know where I would be without her. She has opened my eyes to so many things and I'm working hard to complete this program because she's working hard to make sure I get what I need to graduate.

(A-p12) shared one challenge or hurdle he had to clear was a legal situation he encountered before he enrolled in the program. He reported that challenge opened his eyes and forced him to develop an intentional plan for success. He shared his thoughts on the situation:

As I reflect on that situation, it changed my life for the better. Although it has impacted my personal criminal history, I believe I needed this experience to get me on track. This experience has forced me to choose better friends, forced me think more seriously about my future and life goals and what my academic and career path will be. I know with a conviction on my record it's going to be challenging but I believe once I get my diploma and enroll in college, I will be in a better position to help my family and get a better paying job.

(A-p9) reported her strategy for success in this manner:

I was a complete mess when I was in the traditional high school setting. I was selfish, I embraced drama and I felt as if I had to be in the middle of everything in order to be popular and to be accepted by my peers. One day I was a freshman and the next day I was a sophomore in high school struggling in ever since (sense) of the word and realized I was wasting a lot of time. After I dropped out, I went into a deep depression and realized I had to do something with my life. A friend told me about the New Hope Workforce Development Program, and I enrolled. I

have to admit, I struggled a lot when I first entered because I was too proud to ask for help and too stuck on stupid that I was only hurting me. For whatever reason, I learned to humble myself and to work within the lines of the program and to follow Ms. McDonald and my classmates' lead. Once, I got outta my own way things became so much easier. I grew as an individual and student and I feel so good and I'm proud of me. Without the support of my family, classmates (my other family) and Ms. McDonald I don't know where I would be. As a result of me working with everyone collaboratively, I am one step closer of completing high school and should graduate in May, Lord's Will.

The ability of these student-participants to build strategies and persevere through many of life's obstacles and academic challenges have created a pathway for their success based on outcomes obtained and personal testimonies shared.

Theme 5: Program Improvements

During the interview process, I asked each participant in sub group A and B follow-up questions to gain a deeper understanding from their perspective/experiences. The questions were: What suggestions they would submit for program improvements? What social media technologies would they like to see incorporated? What role did relationships play in their academic and social development? and, what were the primary differences in this program compared to their traditional high school experiences? All of the student-participants reported they would not change anything about the program. Each participant stated the structure of the program, resources offered, social media technologies utilized, and the instructors selected made their experiences worthwhile and

noted no recommendations are needed at this time. All of the students reported they had positive experiences in the New Hope Workforce Development Program and would highly recommend this program to family and friends.

Despite engaging in an overall experience, students in subgroups A and B expressed they wished they were introduced to the program earlier within their academic careers because they believe it could have potentially prevented them from dropping out of high school prematurely. All students interviewed in subgroups A and B expressed they would like to see this program duplicated on local and national levels because it would not only improve high school dropout rates, it would provide future generations of students an opportunity to change the trajectory of their lives and the lives of their families. Eight out of the 10 student-participants who participated in the one-on-one interviews reported, they will be/were the first members in their families to graduate from high school with their diplomas.

Theme 6: Overall Program Experiences

In an effort to conceptualize the participants' overall experiences in the New Hope Workforce Development Program and derive what advice they would offer to prospective students interested in the program, students were asked the following: How would you describe or what would you consider the main difference between the New Hope Workforce Development Program and your initial academic experiences when you were enrolled within the traditional school setting? After their responses were recorded, follow-up questions were asked: How significant were peer and staff relationships, or the lack thereof, in your initial decision to drop out of school? Have those relationships

improved since enrolling into the New Hope Workforce Development Program or remained the same? What was the difference?

All student-participants involved in this study provided input. (Bp2) stated, “My experience has been amazing! I’m grateful for what this program has done for me and for the relationships established. I will never forget my family.”

(A-p4) shared the following information:

The major difference between the program and the traditional school setting is that the teachers actually cared about us. Not by their words only but through their actions as well. There were many days when I was dealing with personal and family issues in which I could confide in Ms. Mac and she would assure me things would be ok and she would help me with whatever I needed. Whether it was a housing situation, creating a better resume or getting a dress for an interview, Ms. Mac had my back. In traditional school this would never happen. Teachers didn’t have the time to do these kinds of things because classes were overcrowded, students were out of control and I just think they were just overwhelmed. To me, we were just paychecks, and they were only there to babysit and get paid. Here, Ms. McDonald and Ms. Miller really care about us. That’s why so many of us that have already graduated come back and help students in the program get their diplomas as well. We are one big family and will be connected forever.

(A-p9) reports her experience within the traditional school setting was traumatic and embarrassing. As a student refugee from another country, it was already hard being

in an unfamiliar country, having to have to learn English, a different culture, and start school all over. I'm 19 years of age and the traditional school put me in all 9th grade classes because I had limited or broken English which meant I wouldn't graduate with my diploma until I was 23 years old. While the staff was friendly, the students were mean at times and made a lot of inappropriate comments. Teachers would hear them but would not correct them, so I eventually gave up and looked for another route. I did not want a GED so I was referred to this program by my counselor. It was the best thing that could happen to me. My classmates were my age and striving to get their high school diploma as well. We all came from different walks of life, so no one looked down on another. The main difference was Ms. McDonald, she was absolutely terrific. Ms. McDonald was more than a teacher she was like a second mom, a counselor, therapist or whatever I/we needed her to be. I can say without a doubt because of Ms. McDonald, I will have an opportunity to graduate in May and I'm so grateful and excited. The difference between traditional high school and this program is my classmates and teachers care which created a family like learning community. I believe this is necessary for all students to succeed."

(Bp7) stated, "The teachers in the traditional school setting didn't give a damn about us and Ms. McDonald does. Because she believes in us, we now believe in ourselves, and when you believe, there's nothing that you cannot do. Besides, she might kill us if we don't do what's expected of us."

Final Thoughts

Several students provided their thoughts, feelings and overall experiences of the New Hope Workforce Development Program. In this program, there was a culmination of

students seeking to earn their high school diplomas and students that had already earned their diplomas. All of the student-participants projected a great sense of accomplishment, personal pride and high self-esteem for their participation in the program and for the many outcomes achieved. Four of the 10 participants who participated in the one-on-one interviews already graduated from the New Hope Workforce Development Program and the other six students successfully passed their core assessments and graduated with their high school diploma and state certified working credential on May 7, 2019. Eight of the 10 participants who participated in the focus group interview earned their high school diplomas and will also graduate May 7, 2019. The two students who did not graduate recently enrolled in the program and will have an opportunity to graduate in the summer semester of 2019. (A-p4), (A-p20), (A-p10) and (A-p11) are currently working and are scheduled to begin college classes during the summer of 2019. Each of the four graduates shared that they are excited and nervous at the same time but are ready to move on to the next chapter of their lives. When asked what they would improve about the New Hope Workforce Development Program, all four report they would not change a thing about this program except for having the program duplicated and introduced earlier with a student's academic career. They all reported that if this program was duplicated or introduced earlier within a student's high school career, they believe it could potentially reduce the high school dropout rate in "District X" and nationally.

(A-p6) noted that she was so grateful for the New Hope Workforce Development Program and especially for Ms. McDonald. She added that perhaps the timing of her participation was a good fit for her life today. (A-p6) stated:

I'm grateful on so many levels, I honestly don't know where to begin. I'm so proud of myself because several months ago, I was in a bad space mentally, emotionally and financially. It was bad and I had to share my issues with Ms. McDonald, because at that time I felt as if she was the only person that would understand and give me solid advice. As only Ms. Mac could do, she encouraged me to take some time off until I became more stabilized and was in a better space emotionally. She told me not worry about my work and that we would catch up on everything when I returned at the beginning of this semester. While not in school, Ms. Mac continued to call me, email me on Remind and connect me with community resources. In addition to Ms. Mac, my peers would reach out to me on Remind and check on me and send me words of encouragement. That truly meant a lot and honestly probably what kept me going. I dropped out of this program before, but this time was different, I felt connected and loved and that made a world of a difference. As a result of staying connected, I completed my course work, passed my test and got my diploma. I'm still floating on cloud nine and have created a legacy to share with my baby and my family.

(A-p10) shared "Without this program I don't know where I would be. I'm blessed and I know it. (A-p10) reported: I raised the bar in my family by being the first to graduate from high school with my high school diploma. Not a GED, not to say there's anything wrong with a GED, but I'd rather have my diploma. Because, I earned my diploma, my older sister recently enrolled into a GED program and my best friend is inquiring about this program. I'm creating a legacy, and that's what life is all about. I

can't wait to get into college and get my degree, I'm going to consider myself a king and encourage others to get their education like me.”

(A-p11) reports, “When I was giving my graduation speech, I messed up and locked eyes with my mother and became overwhelmed with so many emotions, I broke. While speaking I was thinking of all the sacrifices my mother made for my family and I to get me to this point. Her patience, her words of encouragement, her having to work multiple jobs to keeps a roof over our head and her tolerating my selfish BS, is what my diploma represents. The reason I come back a volunteer is because I want to give the new students the same things that were given to me by Ms. MacDonald and the program, hope, an opportunity and love. Now I have an opportunity to continue my education for free and fulfill my dreams of becoming an engineer. I'm grateful and blessed and I'm excited about my future.”

Summary

The data collected during this interview process lead to the six themes that provided the rich-thick descriptions from the student-participants regarding their overall experiences in the New Hope Workforce Development Program. Those themes identified were memorialized based on the verbal expressions shared during the one-on-one and focus group interview process. The student-participants expressed their intrinsic and extrinsic personal motivations which kept them involved within their academic and social development process. Despite encountering various challenges along their academic journey, each participant shared specific experiences, resources and strategies that helped them successfully attain their high school diploma and program completion. Lastly, the

student-participants provided their personal perspectives and experiences of the value of the New Hope Workforce Development Program. Each student shared the importance of fruitful and sustainable relationships, the bond formulated between their peers and their instructors and the relevancy of useful social media technologies during academic instruction to assist with socially developing knowledge. Lastly, each student in this study reported the foundation of a functional learning community begins and ends with a conscientious and compassionate instructor. Because of the relationship they shared/experienced with Ms. McDonald, they feel more empowered and responsible to continue their education and build upon the many life lessons and examples she instilled in each of her students.

In Chapter 5, I linked my research findings to the empirical literature outlined in Chapter 2 and provided a final analysis and researcher's interpretation associated to the conceptual framework, and limitations to the study. Lastly, I provided recommendations for future research regarding this alternative learning program and described the positive social changes based on individual responses and societal perspectives produced by the data collected in this study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to understand the school-related experiences and views of high school dropouts enrolled in the New Hope Workforce Development Program, and how the innovation and integration of social media technologies during academic instruction can help to engage participants in the program. Study findings may be used to inform educators and community stakeholders of the experiences of the participants enrolled in this program, and to create and implement more innovative and sustainable academic supports and services to reduce high school dropout rates in a Midwest city.

Interpretation of the Findings

One barrier to this study was that very little was known about participants' school-related experiences before they enrolled into the workforce development program, and what factors may have caused them to drop out of high school (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). I used the descriptive case study approach to develop this study because it is focused and detailed and allows for careful scrutiny of the phenomenon being investigated (Yin, 2017). This approach yielded rich data and captured the participants' experiences and personal perspectives as well as the environmental influences that led them to drop out of high school and enroll into the New Hope Workforce Development Program. I was able to identify common factors, and three themes emerged that helped me gain a deeper understanding of why students decided to drop out of high school.

Encourage Parent Involvement to Promote Stronger Family-Student Relationships

The results of my investigation indicated that 7 out of 10 student participants wished their parents played a more active role in their academic development. All of the participants acknowledged that they believed their parents loved and cared for them; however, the parents' lack of education, their busy work schedules, and their lives in general prevented them from playing a more active role in their children's academic development. Campbell (2017) noted that parental involvement is a critical component for promoting the success and academic achievements of a child early in their academic career. As an end result based on my data analysis from this study, parents and custodial guardians should always invest time and play an active role in their child's education (Campbell, 2017). To reduce high school dropout rates, a parent or guardian could communicate with the child regarding how they feel they are doing in school, cross-reference their responses with their teachers, and check grades regularly. Parents and guardians should exercise frequent collaborative dialogue with the student and teachers to ensure all members are on the same page (Campbell, 2017). This practice would also ensure that if a problem arose (i.e., behavioral concerns or grades dropping), the issue could be handled in a timely fashion and early interventions could be set in place to promote learning and the student's success. When parents/guardians remain active participants in their child's academic development, it holds each contributing member accountable for the overall successes and failures of that student. By remaining active and vigilant, parents and students can keep track of grades and credits throughout the school year so there are no unexpected surprises when it is time to graduate (Campbell, 2017).

According to Bubić and Tošić (2016), family involvement is a critical factor in determining whether a learner will complete high school or drop out.

The results of my investigation indicated that 7 out of 10 student participants wished their parents had played a more active role in their academic development. All of the participants acknowledged that they believed their parents loved and cared for them; however, the parents' lack of education, their busy work schedules, and their lives in general prevented them from playing a more active role in their children's academic development. If high school graduation rates are to improve, educators, community partners, and business leaders must identify sustainable methods to get parents more involved in their children's academic and social development. By providing the necessary training and resources, these interventions could reverse and eliminate high school dropout in District X. According to Campbell (2017) and Bubić and Tošić (2016), when parents or guardians take the initiative to become more active in their students' academic development, students are more likely to complete high school.

Develop Positive Student-Teacher Relationships

When students believe their teachers value them wholeheartedly, students are more willing to follow their teachers' lead (Buka, 2013). Effective, relevant teachers take the time to get to know each of their students individually and build learning communities that are inviting, safe, and stimulating (Buka, 2013). An educator's primary responsibility is to educate; however, before that task can be accomplished, they must master the art of being an effective and intentional leader by delivering curricular content in a practical and contemporary manner (Gardner, 2017). Teachers who display

consistent classroom management and use a reciprocal learning and teaching approach tend to have stronger student-teacher and parental relationships as opposed to those who do not take the time to establish this foundation (Buka, 2013). If the culture of the learning community is unstable and unpredictable, the outcomes of that community will produce the same results. One of the findings from this study supported the results from Buka (2013) and Gardner (2017). All of the students in my study reported that if they had had a caring and motivating instructor earlier in their academic career, they would not have dropped out of school. All of the student participants shared that a caring teacher makes all the difference of staying in school or dropping out of school.

Offer Students Alternative Learning Technologies, Platforms, and Evaluative Tools

The days of pen-and-pencil assessments to measure student knowledge are almost over. To make learning inviting and relevant, teachers must incorporate some form of familiar technology into their daily lessons. Doing so will not only engage the learners by keeping them on task longer but will drastically decrease off-task behaviors that interrupt the learning environment (Rashid & Asghar, 2016). Additionally, when teachers use attentive measures to assess mastery, it empowers the student to display the mastery of their newly acquired knowledge in their own unique way (Nasab, 2015). To promote reciprocal learning and development, educators must use technologies and alternative assessments for measuring student comprehension. These tools are essential to keep students engaged in their learning progression and to avoid content that is irrelevant, boring, and not applicable to everyday life (Nasab, 2015). When students determine their learning experiences to be irrelevant and a waste of time, they have a higher tendency to

drop out of high school (Buka, 2013). One of the findings of my study supported the results of Rashid and Asghar (2016) and Nasab (2015). All of the participants in my study reported that the social media technologies used in the New Hope Program helped them master the concepts of the presented content. The participants also reported that their interaction with one another and the application of the technologies used in the program were valuable in enhancing their social development and academic progress.

Limitations of the Study

This qualitative descriptive case study research design had three limitations. The first identified potential limitation were the unknown variables and conditions at the place where the participants took the program that could create bias within the responses of the participants such as peer or facilitator influences. According to Yin (2014), one or two case studies can generate exact reproductions of an exploration however; four or more similar studies are necessary for adding deeper and thicker value to create theoretical replication. Because this study only investigated one alternative learning program in a Midwestern city, only literal replication is achievable, and theoretical reproduction cannot be attained. The second identified potential limitation was keeping students who have previously dropped out motivated and connected to supportive resources, so they can complete their goals of obtaining their high school and working credentials. Based on the data collective practices of interviewing the “focus group” the responses rendered may have been inflated or influenced by their peers. As a result, the responses submitted may or may not have been as authentic as the one-on-one responses submitted thus potentially negatively impacting the transferability size of this studies outcomes.

The third potential limitation was identifying capable and willing facilitators interested in constructing innovative-relational learning communities that will thoroughly prepare these customers for their career endeavors. The limitation with this instructional format was only two instructors were utilized during the delivery of instructional activities. No other baseline of data was collected/explored to see how differing instructional teaching styles or personalities could affect the relational and academic comprehension of the student-participants of this learning community. By exploring similar alternative learning programs with more instructors could provide a more in-depth review on how multiple instructional personalities could impact the overall functions, relationships and program completion rates.

Recommendations

The ongoing phenomenon of students dropping out of high school prematurely will continue to be a precarious area of research for the anticipated future. Additional research needs to be conducted to help identify other alternative learning programs that work with overaged, under credited young adults that experienced similar challenges. Based on the overwhelming positive responses provided by each student-participant and the request made by enrolled and graduated students of the NHP, to duplicate this program speaks to the value and appreciation of this alternative learning model. I believe if more programs like the NHP were established, it would not only improve high school graduations in this Midwestern city but provide hope for those young adults once considered hopeless and unmotivated to succeed.

Analyze other qualitative descriptive case studies that explored factors, perceptions and experiences of other young adult high school dropouts and determine what medium challenges those participants experienced and how both outcomes can be used to move this discussion/research further. When educators and researchers have a solid foundation of understanding to build upon, less time can be wasted speculating and more time and energy can be used to create sustainable programs that are intentional and tailored to meet the learners' need. This case study speaks specifically of the varying challenges these learners met and overcame. Having this baseline of data could prove for future explorations serving this population of learners and researchers.

Compare and Contrast this program to similar programs on a local, national and international platform. The structure, implementation of services and communal partnerships played a vital role into the success of the program as well as the student-participants that participated in this study. I believe this research project/program has the potential to change the alternative academic landscape for how we serve "at risk" learners and overaged and under credited learners.

More descriptive qualitative case studies such as this study need to be explored to potentially provide educators and researchers alike with tangible student's self-described experiences for why they dropped out of high school and what pro's and con's the NHP offered them throughout their academic, social and vocational development. In addition to providing these learners with the opportunity to develop academically, socially and vocationally, once credentialed these learners will become more marketable which will

enable them to become functional contributing members to their local and national financial markets.

One quantitative methodology that could be used for this type of exploration could be a correlational design. A correlational design explores the relationship/connection between variables using statistical analyses. In this methodology the researcher seeks to understand the specific relationships that naturally occur between variables and how those variables impact and relate to one another (Curtis, Comiskey, & Dempsey, 2016). Based on each of the participants responses, this methodology could be extremely beneficial because it examines the causes and effects of the antecedent and the displayed behavior by the sample. The methodology is also cost effective and produces immediate feedback and can be easily documented. This type of methodology could prove beneficial for collecting real time data based on the participant responses and by cross referencing that data with the actual experience of collecting data by the researcher themselves. Because my study did not utilize this methodology, this approach could prove beneficial for other researchers because it would definitively display how different variables have different relationships with each other. As a result, leading researchers will be able to better understand why these students dropped out of high school and what pros and cons the NHP offered them throughout their academic, social and vocational development.

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of high school dropouts (18-24) years of age enrolled in a workforce development program and to determine how the innovation of social media technologies during academic instruction

can help to engage participants in a Mid-western city. By using a quantitative correlational design method, future researchers could focus their time and energy on the identified variables and how those variable(s) can project the sample behaviors or responses to a potential outcome. Based on the findings of my study, the quantitative correlational design would be a good alternative methodology to be used in future explorations for this topic.

Another qualitative methodology that could be used for this type of exploration could be Ethnography. When utilizing an ethnographic research design, this methodology allows the researcher to immerse themselves into the targeted samples environment in order to gain a deeper understanding of the participants goals, culture, challenges and motivations (Parker-Jenkins, 2018). Instead of utilizing interviews or surveys, the researcher has an opportunity to experience the samples environment first-hand as a participant-observer and recorder. The challenge with this research approach is twofold: 1). This approach may prolong the researcher's study; 2.) this form of investigation may prove too invasive for the participants and their family making them uncomfortable thus producing untruthful responses (Taylor, 2017). Based on each of the participants responses, this methodology could prove beneficial because it would allow the researcher to immerse themselves into their samples natural environment in an effort gain a deeper understanding of the participants goals, culture, challenges and motivations that are based on their own words and experiences. Because my study did not utilize this methodology, this approach could prove beneficial for other researchers because it would provide researchers with an in-depth look/understanding of how their samples live, communicate

and function on a day to day basis within their natural environments. This definitive summation would provide researchers a realistic platform to build upon the future exploration of this population of learners. As a result, leading researchers will be able to better understand why these students dropped out of high school and what pros and cons the NHP offered them throughout their academic, social and vocational development.

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of high school dropouts (18-24) years of age enrolled in a workforce development program and to determine how the innovation of social media technologies during academic instruction can help to engage participants in a Mid-western city. By using a qualitative ethnographic research design, future researchers could focus their time and energy on definitive outcomes based on witnessed documented accounts as opposed to inserting speculation and unfounded-hypothesis into their study. Based on the findings of my study, the ethnographic research design would be a good alternative methodology to be used in future explorations for this topic.

One final qualitative methodology that could be considered for this type of exploration could be a narrative approach. The narrative methodology weaves together a sequence of events from the perspective of one or two individuals of an identified subgroup in an effort to form a cohesive story. In this methodology the researcher seeks to understand the specific relationships that naturally occur between variables and how those variables impact and relate to one another (Curtis, Comiskey, & Dempsey, 2016). One benefit to using this research design is the final narrative does not need to be described in sequential order however; should fully describe and capture the events in

their entirety while identifying the varying tensions or challenges of the identified participants. Based on the findings of my study, the narrative approach methodology could add rich-thick value to this study because it examines the causes and effects of the antecedent and the displayed behavior by the sample. This methodology approach is also cost effective, produces immediate feedback and can be easily documented. Because my study did not utilize this methodology, this research design could prove beneficial for collecting real time data based on the participant responses and by cross referencing that data with the actual experience of collecting data by the researcher themselves.

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of high school dropouts (18-24) years of age enrolled in a workforce development program and to determine how the innovation of social media technologies during academic instruction can help to engage participants in a Mid-western city. By using a narrative approach, this method affords future researchers an opportunity to report their interactions, observed events and hands on experiences by preserving them through a written or audio recorded format. Based on the findings of my study, the qualitative narrative approach design would be a good alternative methodology to be used in future explorations for this topic.

Based on the findings of this study, The New Hope program transformed the academic and working life style trajectory for all the students that enrolled into this program. Because of the multiple academic, social and technological innovations that were implemented in the New Hope Program, all of the student-participants reported the New Hope Program changed their lives for the better. Community stakeholders should support this program because it is innovative, nurturing and makes real life learning

applications for once struggling young adults. As a social change agent and research scholar, I recommend that the NHP continues to be duplicated locally in effect to help other overaged under credited learners achieve their academic and vocational goals. Lastly, each learner reported enjoying their overall experiences of the New Hope Program. Each student concluded their most appreciative for the relationships they developed, the academic progressions made and for the opportunities this program provided.

Implications

Several implications for positive academic and social-relational change in alternative adult education emerged from this qualitative descriptive case study. In order for social change to occur, there must be a collection of collaborative efforts by students, families, educators and other community stakeholders to acknowledge the factors/problems causing high school dropout, and the negative financial implications this phenomenon is/has on the local and national economy. Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela (2016) suggested when learners abandon high school prematurely, there was positive correlation of results and implications that negatively impacts the academic, vocational and overall health of this populous of individuals on a local, national and global scale. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, a non-graduate will cost the economy approximately \$250,000 over his or her lifetime in terms of lower tax contributions, greater reliance on Medicaid and Medicare, greater rates of criminal activity, and higher reliance on public and state assistance (neces, 2017). Over a lifespan, this study showed that one high school dropout could miss out on a lifetime earning a potential of \$670,000

in comparison to those individuals that acquire their high school diploma or credential (Stark & Noel, 2015). The Alliance for Excellent Education (2010) reported, “more than 12 million learners who drop out of high school could cost the United States about \$3 trillion” (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore, & Fox, 2010). Based on this analysis, the New Hope Program is needed to decrease student dropout rates, prepare students on how to contribute academically/vocationally in an evolving society and decrease the financial burden being placed on the local and national markets.

According to the Graduation Alliance (2018), 3.3 million high school students in the United States drop out of high school in one year. In 2014, (6.5%) or 50,468,456 American High School students failed to complete or dropped out of High School. In a study produced by Northeastern University, for every high school dropout, it costs taxpayers \$292,000 over the course of their life time. Lastly, over 80% of the nations incarcerated are high school dropouts and will cost the American taxpayers an estimated \$38.7 billion per year. Based on this analysis, the New Hope Program is needed to decrease student dropout rates, prepare students on how to contribute academically/vocationally in an evolving society and decrease the financial burden being placed on the local and national markets.

Individual

In relation to the individual impacts, when students abandon high school prematurely, it negatively directly impacts the local and national economy. Because many of these students are underprepared and lack the necessary skills to obtain/maintain a meaningful and supportive job wage, they often have to apply for public assistance and

participate in criminal activities in order to survive in today's society (Parr and Bonitz, 2015). As a result of their decisions, several of the students in this study admitted to being depressed, hopeless and participated in activities/behaviors that proved counterproductive to their overall development. Despite being embarrassed, over aged and under credited, all of the student-participants admitted to regretting that they dropped out of high school prematurely but knew they wanted better lives for themselves and for their families in general. Discovering specific factors as to why student's choice to abandon high school is essential for addressing this epidemic and for developing a deeper understanding on how to properly address more students needs based on their individual and collective experiences and perceptions.

According to the Alliance for Excellent Education's "Graduation Effect" if more innovative/student-centered classes were created, learners would be less likely to leave school without satisfying their high school requirements (Mitra, 2017). When educators take the time to understand their students' needs and create stimulating and meaningful learning experiences, graduation rates would improve and learners would be better prepared to enter higher institutions of learning or enter the workforce (The America Promise Alliance, 2018). As a result, The United States would see a \$3.1 billion increase in annual earnings, create more than 14,000 new jobs, and save \$16.1 billion in health care costs (The America Promise Alliance, 2018). Because the nation's economy depends on skilled labor, creating more programs like the New Hope Program would prove extremely valuable because business leaders report difficulty identifying enough

qualified individuals with the skills, training and education to meet their companies' overall needs (The America Promise Alliance, 2018).

Family

In relation to the individual impacts, family dynamics and parental participation plays a critical role in a learner's development. McDermott, Donlan, & Zaff (2019) conducted a study and discovered the lack of parental involvement and family support played a major contributor as to why student's students' dropout of high school. Many high school dropouts struggled to build lasting appropriate relationships with teachers and peers which is a direct result of not having the parental nurturing and support from a caring parent or adult. Because this relational foundation has not been established, this populous of student-learners have a tendency to struggle academically and social-emotionally as a result; many students exhibit counterproductive behaviors which makes them more vulnerable to being disciplined or suspended from school. Because of these experiences, these students have a higher tendency to dropout. In addition to having the lack of parental involvement, families that do not have positive communication with one another have a tendency to display these deficits when communicating with the school's faculty and staff (Ross, 2016). Parental involvement is necessary for a learner's social and emotional development. Parental involvement promotes a learner's self-esteem, builds confidence and encourages positive behaviors.

Organizational

In relation to the individual impacts, positive learning and social experiences coupled with a nurturing learning community is essential for a student's success. Earning

a high school diploma and state certified working credential in the New Hope Program is without cost. The work of social change is an ongoing and evolving process and should consider communal stakeholder partnerships to increase the strength and sustainability of such programs. Jia, Konold, and Cornell (2016) underscored that tracking academic progress can have both positive and negative implications on some students at the expense of others. Therefore, it is essential that educators, business leaders and community stakeholders develop more alternative learning programs for overaged-under credited students in “District X”. If more opportunities and programs like the New Hope Programs are established, there is a possibility that high graduation rates would greatly improve.

Society/Policy

In relation to the individual impacts, Local, national and global, government agencies have highlighted the consequences of not improving high school graduation rates. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2017), a non-graduate will cost the economy approximately \$250,000 over his or her lifetime in terms of lower tax contributions, greater reliance on Medicaid and Medicare, greater rates of criminal activity, and higher reliance on public assistance. Over a lifespan, this study showed that one high school dropout could miss out on a lifetime earning potential of \$670,000 in comparison to those individuals that acquire their high school diploma or credential (Stark & Noel, 2015). In order improve this data, educators with the support of community partnerships need to create specific criteria’s and interventions that targets “at-risk” learners early within their academic careers and provide the appropriate wrap

around services to deter these students from dropping out. High school dropout rates are relevant to social change because it impacts the financial and vocational infrastructure of the local economy. By educating and producing more qualified candidates, would not only improve the lives and legacies of many of these student-participants but produce members that can become fiscally responsible members/contributors to their local society.

Implications for Methodology

Qualitative research methods allow the researcher an opportunity to ask participants to answer open-ended questions, record their responses and to categorize those responses into codes and themes (Ngulube, 2015). The role of a qualitative researcher is to ask probing questions, actively listen and to accurately document the responses of the individual or group being interviewed. Active listening and accurate documentation is essential when conducting a qualitative descriptive case study because the responses provided are necessary for gaining a deeper level of understanding of the experiences or perceptions of the sample being interviewed (Brinkmann, 2014). Thus, it is critical for the researcher to establish a comfortable and trusting relationships with their identified participants and conduct in-depth and thorough interviews while protecting the interest and privacy of the participants being explored. Throughout this qualitative descriptive study, my goal has been to obtain and document the experiences and proceptions of the student-participants enrolled in the New Hope Program.

Implications for Practice

In an effort to decrease high school dropout rates, preemptive and intentional measures must be exercised by educators, families, business leaders and community stakeholders. In order for these partnerships to develop and grow, it is essential that each identified agent become more involved and execute their assigned responsibilities and duties. When this happens, students and family's needs are met, communities and school systems become stronger and local economies will thrive because the local vocational job markets will have well trained and qualified candidates working in such desired capacities. Providing more alternative solutions and programing will not only improve high school graduation rates but produce qualified and responsible citizens that can positively contribute to the local society (Rice, 2018).

Lastly, a final implication for practice would be for schools, families and community partnerships to engage in ongoing meetings and dialog to discuss the varying challenges presented to this targeted population. By providing early intervention techniques and engaging in fruitful communal dialog will likely decrease undesired tensions and frustrations of the students, teachers and community stakeholders. In an effort to promote healthy lasting relationships representatives on both sides must be willing to come together, meet and share what strengthens and limitations this program presents. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study is to understand the school-related experiences and views of high school dropouts enrolled into the New Hope Workforce Development Program, and how the innovation and integration of social media technologies during academic instruction can help to engage participants in the

program, while ensuring the continued growth, development of this alternative learning program. According to the national center for educational statistics, the percentage of high school dropouts among 16 to 24 years of age declined from 10.9 percent to 6.1 percent in 2016 (nces, 2018). Despite an improvement in national graduation rates, collaborative partnerships are essential in “District X” to ensure the needs of these students are being met and their graduation rates continue to improve.

Conclusion

This qualitative descriptive case study of *Understanding the Experiences of High Drop-outs in a Work Force Development Program* explored the perceptions and experiences of students enrolled in the New Hope Program located in a Midwestern city in the United States. Based on the participants responses, each student-participant reported they had an amazing experience in this program and believed it should be duplicated on a local and national level. Using the conceptual framework based on John Dewey’s, *Pragmatism Theory* (1938/2017) and Lev Vygotsky’s *Social Development Theory* (1978), I was able to corroborate the key themes that emerged through the interview and analysis process and structured my study to detail the collective stories and experiences of the young adults who participated in this alternative learning program. Each student willingly shared their academic journey, personal and family challenges and provided motivational factors for their resiliency and hope. Each response was moving, inspiring and rich in thick data. There were many personal take-aways for me from this study; one being the appreciation, respect and heartfelt admiration these young-adults had for their instructor Ms. McDonald. Each member of this learning community expressed

what this instructor meant and has done for them individually. Their responses perfectly aligned with the theories of John Dewey (1938/2017) and Lev Vygotsky's (1978) because without healthy and viable student-teacher relationships, everything else in that learning community will be obsolete. My last take away is the value of an opportunity. Each student in the New Hope Program, made poor choices, learned from those choices and chose to enroll in a non-traditional learning community. As a result of taking this and graduating from this program, the President of this local community college gifted this year's program graduates with all expenses paid college tuition to include free books. Opportunities and gestures like these could potentially change the lives and legacies of future generations; this is why alternative learning models such as the New Hope Program are necessary for struggling, overaged and under credited young adults.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. 1.How would you describe your academic experiences before you dropped out of high school?
2. 2.How would you describe your collaborative learning experiences before you dropped out of high school?
3. 3.How have you used social media technologies during academic instruction to assist in your completion of the New Hope Workforce development program in obtaining your high school degree and vocational credential?
4. 4.As a participant in the New Hope Workforce development program, how will you use social media technologies to help you socially develop knowledge?
5. In your experiences and understanding how would you describe the academic, financial and vocational experiences of people that dropped out of high school prematurely?
6. What was your experience growing up in a household in which several of your family members did not complete high school? What impact did that have on you?
7. How difficult has it been to obtain a competitive wage on your job because you did complete high school?
8. What has been the major advantage of using social media technologies in your courses of study in the New Hope Program that has helped you with your academic and social learning development?

9. How you describe and consider the main difference between The New Hope Program and your initial academic experiences when you were enrolled within the traditional school setting?
10. How would you describe the significance of peer and staff relationships that caused you to drop out of school initially? Have those relationships improved since enrolling into The New Hope Program or remained the same? What was the difference?

Content validity has been reviewed and approved by dissertation committee. The questions referenced in this section will be utilized during the 1 on 1 interviews conducted between the selected participants and I. The data collected will be transcribed using the “Rev.com” software an in effort to capture themes from each of the 10 participants’ responses.

Appendix B: Focus Group Protocol

I. Introduction of the Discussion to the identified Focus Group

- Have student-participants make formal introduction to one another.
- Ask each student-participant to state a fun fact about them (icebreaker).
- Explain and Establish the ground rules and purpose of this research activity.
- Answer any questions of the student-participants and proceed to section (II).

II. Focus Group Agenda

- The participants will be collectively asked an interview question and asked to respond.
- I will continue to ask a battery of questions until all questions have been exhausted.
- I will ask the participants to share specific examples regarding their personal academic, family and overall relational experiences.
- I will ask for any final thoughts before transitioning to section III.

III. Student-Participants input regarding the New Hope Program

- The students will be asked what they liked and disliked about the New Hope Program.
- The students will be asked to provide specific examples of their likes and dislikes.
- The students will be asked if/how social media impacted their overall experiences.
- The students will be asked rate and describe their overall experiences of the NHP.

IV. Innovations in the NHP that differ from traditional high school experiences.

- How you would you describe your experiences in the NHP opposed to your previous HS experiences?
- How would you describe you social and relational experiences of the NHP as opposed to your previous high school experiences?
- What components of the NHP do you believe should be added or removed from the program?
- If this program was introduced in High School, do you believe it could have prevented you from dropping out of high school prematurely?

V. Closing

- Capture in closing remarks or input from the student-participants.
- (I) the researcher would thank the focus groups for their time and responses provided.
- (I) the researcher would inform the focus group how they could access the study once completed.
- Terminate the focus group interview.