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Parental Decisions for Virtual Education for Credit-Deficient High School Students

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PARENTAL DECISIONS FOR VIRTUAL EDUCATION FOR CREDIT-DEFICIENT HIGH
SCHOOL STUDENTS

by

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ABSTRACT

This project performed a qualitative study using in-depth interviews to determine the reasons families enrolled their students in virtual education and to collect their reflections on their experience in virtual education after enrolling. I interviewed the parents or guardians of eight credit-deficient high school students at risk of not graduating who were enrolled in a virtual high school in Oregon. The interviews used 11 open-ended questions in order to answer the two research questions: 1. What are parental reasons for choosing online education for children who are at risk of not graduating from high school with their cohort due to credit deficiency? 2. What are the parents' experiences with online education after their child has been in the program? The findings revealed that the most-referenced reason families enrolled in virtual education was due to a negative relationship with a former school setting, and that all participants reported a positive experience after enrolling in virtual education.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Virtual education has become an important topic of discussion in the educational world in the last decade. This format provides instruction delivered entirely or partially online. These programs have seen a dramatic increase in enrollment and a number of programs in public schools, much of which has been tied to the charter school movement active in many states (Waters, 2011). This development has happened quickly but not consistently, and programs and platforms vary significantly from school to school (Tyler & Hastings, 2011). The profile of the online learner also varies, as virtual programs serve at-risk students, gifted students, and those families that would have traditionally turned to home schooling (Roblyer, Davis, Mills, Marshall, & Pape, 2008). Because this development has been so diverse, families may choose online education for a variety of reasons (Reid, Aqui, & Putney, 2009).

Many school districts offer some variety of virtual education, some even requiring students to take an online class in order to graduate (Davis & Niederhauser, 2007). Virtual education can be attractive for a number of reasons: flexible scheduling, the ability for students to move at their own pace, the removal from the “mainstream” socialization of schooling, and the ability for a family to geographically relocate without interrupting schooling (Davis & Niederhauser, 2007). Because of this flexibility, virtual education draws a wide range of students with each parent or guardian having his or her own reasons for selecting virtual education.

Virtual education also offers components that are impossible to replicate in traditional schools. Through the use of settings such as “Second Life” (a virtual world where users can interact through avatars), entire scenarios and situations can be set up strictly for the purpose of

study without the potential physical or emotional risks presented in real life. Students can also access a seemingly limitless number of classes and subjects because they are not restricted to the offerings in their home schools or a traditional time schedule. The current financial reality, especially in Oregon, is causing public schools to lose programs while a successful charter school can offer almost limitless course offerings. The ability to provide non-traditional opportunities is very appealing (Houser et al., 2011). Online schools can also appeal to students with special needs, whether they are deficient or accelerated learners because the students can move at their own pace.

Statement of the Problem

Despite these attractions, the popularity of virtual education does have its challenges. Due to the diversity of the online student population, it is difficult to tailor instruction to the learning needs of a group as a whole (Huett, Moller, Foshong, & Coleman, 2008). Many parents may choose virtual education because their children were unsuccessful in their past educational setting, and may bring a host of educational hurdles to their new online environment (Limniou & Smith, 2010). Additionally, the ease in which a student can access information calls into question the academic rigor and integrity of an online education, particularly with regard to assessments, as it is impossible in many cases to determine if the student performed the assessment independently or with assistance (Ridley & Husband, 1998). Many students enroll in virtual education hoping to escape social issues in traditional schools; however, many find that feelings of isolation and lack of interaction cause them to struggle in a virtual environment (Podoll & Randle, 2005). Some online platforms attempt to address this issue through the use of interactive functions such as avatars that allow for a “shared sense of presence” with online learners (Lu, 2009); however, this does not necessarily replace the day-to-day human interaction

experienced in traditional schools.

Many families find themselves attracted to virtual education for the reasons mentioned previously, but lack the technological skills necessary to navigate programs that arise (Huett, Moller, Foshong, & Coleman, 2008). Without sufficient parental support at home, these students lack the support necessary to be successful and may struggle to stay engaged. Although many virtual schools offer to support families by lending out laptops and helping to pay for internet services, if the family lacks the basic technology skills necessary to access the online curriculum then there is little opportunity for their children to do well in an online environment.

Virtual education often requires self-motivation, so students need to be self-directed learners and have family support. Virtual schools, particularly secondary schools, often have a high rate of students who fail to succeed academically and drop out (Podoll & Randle, 2005). Many families turn to virtual education only to find that their student experiences the same or additional hurdles in this setting. Because of this, it becomes all the more important to ensure that families understand the nature of virtual education in order to determine if online education will provide an environment that will help their students succeed academically. Thus, a greater understanding of why families are drawn to this option may help that process. In particular, families are looking to virtual education as an alternative education option for their at-risk students, yet there is no solid evidence to indicate that such students are any more successful online (Booker & Mitchell, 2011). My intention in this study was to explore the thoughts and motivation that influenced a criterion sample of parents or guardians with a child at-risk of not graduating from high school to choose this alternative education option.

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study was to investigate the reasons that influence parents or guardians to select virtual education as an option for their youth. I

conducted in-depth interviewing using a criterion sample of parents. This is important because, with the increase in popularity of virtual education as an option for students, educators need to tailor their programs to best fit the needs of their diverse students, particularly parents of at-risk students that struggle academically.

Research Questions

The over-arching questions for the study are:

1. What are parental reasons for choosing online education for children who are at risk of not graduating from high school with their cohort due to credit deficiency?
2. What are the parents' experiences with online education after their child has been in the program?

Background of the Problem

Virtual education has a convoluted evolution in Oregon. For K-12 public schools, virtual education takes many forms. There are eight full-time online charter schools (at the time this is written; the number grows yearly) that serve 4,798 students statewide (Keeping Pace, 2013). Of these eight, the two largest schools are Oregon Connections Academy with 2,529 students and Oregon Virtual Academy with 563 students (Keeping Pace, 2013). Also within these eight is Insight School of Oregon, which acts as a private alternative placement and contracts with over 40 districts (<http://or.insightschools.net/>). There are also eight additional programs that offer part-time online instruction state-wide, some of which allow students to earn both high school and college credits for their coursework (www.ode.state.or.us). These schools use a variety of curriculum and platforms, some provided by private companies and some created by the schools themselves (Keeping Pace, 2013). There are two virtual schools in the state that offer virtual education exclusively to residents of their sponsoring district (www.ode.state.or.us). There are

also a number of Educational Service District (ESD) programs and programs that work with universities and community colleges that are available to Oregon Students

(www.ode.state.or.us).

In response to the various forms and platforms used statewide, there have been a number of bills and initiatives aimed at regulating virtual education. Since a number of virtual schools are charter schools, much of this regulation has been done through legislation that addresses charter schools in particular. The biggest opponent of these bills has been the Oregon Education Association (<http://www.oregoned.org/>), or the teacher's union. Due to previous statutes, virtual charter school teachers must be licensed and highly qualified, have reasonable teacher/student ratios, defined contacts with students, and curriculum must meet content standards (Keeping Pace, 2013). This contentious relationship exists between the OEA and virtual charter schools because charter schools are not under obligation to hire union members, unlike traditional public schools, and the students that attend virtual charter schools take funding away from their home district in many cases.

The history of virtual education in Oregon is relevant to this study because virtual charter schools draw students through private advertising by their privately owned host company, or are used as an alternative placement by school districts. In both instances, the schools draw students that are looking for an alternative option to traditional schooling. In cases such as K12 Inc. schools, which include Insight of Oregon School, advertising is present in social media, newspapers, and magazines (www.k12.com). With legislation that may threaten funding for charter schools and especially virtual charter schools, recruiting students has become a priority with virtual schools. Considering the number of students enrolled in virtual education, online schools are starting to serve a significant portion of Oregon students, many who have struggled

in another setting and are looking for an alternative option. In light of the number of families that may be exploring virtual education for their child without being well-informed about the potential benefits and drawbacks, and the financial damage this could potentially cause traditional schools, it is important to understand why parents choose virtual education, and to explore whether their expectations are met.

Definition of Terms

Avatar: An electronic image that represents and is manipulated by a computer user.

Avatars can often be designed by the user to represent themselves virtually. This is a technique used in online programs to increase engagement by allowing the users to create avatars that can interact with each other within the program (Lu, 2009).

Brick and Mortar: Brick and Mortar has become a term used by public education to define a school that takes place in a physical setting. This term has become so common that it is regularly referred to by the Oregon Department of Education and their public communications (<http://www.ode.state.or.us/>).

Credit-deficient: Students who are in danger of not graduating with their four-year cohort (<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs92/92042.pdf>) due to having insufficient credits. In this study, I am using the Oregon state diploma requirements which are being used by the virtual high school participating in the study (<http://www.ode.state.or.us/>).

Disabled: Students who have a mental, physical, or emotional disability that hinders their educational ability. Such students generally have an individualized education plan (IEP) if they are eligible for services, or a Section 504 plan (<http://www.ode.state.or.us/>)

Cohort: A group of students tracked from the start of 9th grade through four years of high school

<http://www.ode.state.or.us/news/announcements/announcement.aspx?id=6843&typeid=>

5). Such cohorts are tracked by the Oregon Department of Education

<http://www.ode.state.or.us/>) to determine graduation rates.

Gifted/TAG: Students who meet the Oregon Department of Education criteria for talented and gifted eligibility (<http://www.ode.state.or.us/>). According to Oregon Education law, public schools, such as the virtual charter school used in this study, are obligated to provide enrichment to serve TAG students.

Learning Coach: A parent or other adult that is responsible for monitoring the student's academic work in the home environment. This person is designated upon enrollment of the student in the virtual school used in this study, and has a set of responsibilities they agree to complete to help the student succeed. They are also the main point of contact for the school.

MOODLE: Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment- an online platform for presenting material. A very popular platform for schools to use to build online courses as it offers some free programs (moodle.org). It is a text-heavy virtual environment.

Online education: Synonymous with virtual education.

Second Life: An online virtual world developed by Linden Lab that allows users to interact through avatars (see above). It was launched on June 23, 2003.

Social Issues: In this study the term "social issues" refers to any negative associations a student has with peers or adults in a school setting that adversely affects their mental state. This can include (but is not limited to): bullying, negative peer influences, and mental health issues due to social factors at school.

Special education: Services that are available to students who are determined eligible by the Oregon Department of Education criteria (<http://www.ode.state.or.us/>). Special education in Oregon is served through highly-qualified special education teachers who collaborate with regular education teachers in order to meet the goals and accommodations or modifications outlined in the student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

Traditional schooling: K-12 public education in a physical building, often referred to as “brick and mortar” schools by public education documents (<http://www.ode.state.or.us/>).

Virtual education: Academic instruction that takes place in an online setting. This may be fully or partially online and through a public or private school.

Limitations

An inherent limitation of any qualitative study is that the nonprobability sample cannot be generalized to the entire population because of the small sample size. However, insight in these studies can be gained. Another limitation may also be that students are at-risk of not graduating with their cohort due to a number of reasons, thus this group may be very diverse in nature, and it may be difficult to draw broad conclusions based on the responses of the participants. Additionally, the research is limited to parent or guardians of credit-deficient students.

Delimitations

I chose to interview only parents or guardians of students who attended a virtual high school in Oregon. This was a qualitative exploratory study using in-depth interviews of a small sample of parents or guardians with students in one of the many virtual education programs within the state of Oregon. The study was limited to eight participants selected because they

were parents or guardians of high school-age students considered at-risk based on the criteria of being at-risk of not graduating with their cohort. The parameters of the sample were also a delimitation as they limited participants to decision-making parents or guardians of credit-deficient students enrolled in virtual education.

CHAPTER 2

Review of the Literature

Introduction

There has been a dramatic increase in the research surrounding virtual education in the last decade (Young, Birtolo, & McElman, 2009). Clearly, this is a result of the increase of virtual schooling programs available to students K-12 and university age in the United States and around the world. Much of the literature addresses the fragmented development of such programs, as many are part of the charter school movement, are run by for-profit private companies, or use a variety of online platforms to present curriculum. Literature regarding parental selection of virtual education is limited, although there are some studies available on parental satisfaction with virtual programs and reported parental concerns (Tyler & Hastings, 2011).

This literature review covers the following topics related to virtual education: a) why parents choose virtual education; b) why parents choose educational alternatives for their child; c) discussion of which platforms and programs are most effective (virtual environments like Second Life, synchronous and asynchronous systems); d) how to best serve the needs of virtual students; and e) training and accountability for virtual teachers and staff. These topics surface repeatedly in studies that address student, parent, and teacher groups.

It is important to point out that, while scholarly research on parent perspectives about virtual education is sparse, virtual education is an enormously popular subject in popular sources. Publications such as *Education Week*, *Educational Leadership*, and a number of nonacademic sources have a wealth of opinion or practitioner support for schools addressing the topic of online education. This may be due to the fact that these publications can be more opinion-based,

and are not as dependent on hard data that is required for scholarly journals, as well as the fact that many of these sources have an interest in reporting on educational legislation and educational movements, which are more news and less research-based.

Literature Related to Reasons Families Choose Virtual Education

While the literature specific to reasons families choose virtual education is fairly limited, there is a great deal of research that has been done on school choice, particularly in states where public schools have offered some programs that give a greater level of flexibility to families to decide where their children attend, such as choice programs or voucher programs, prior to the development of virtual education. The information on why parents choose educational alternatives is diverse. The information in these sources often depends on what program, state, or company supports the educational program in question, as does the subgroup of parents participating. The variety of programs that exist not only in the United States, but world-wide, have produced a “body of literature that is complex, contradictory, and warrants lengthier discussion” (Davis, 2013, p. 125).

The parent choice patterns are made all the more interesting by the fact that families do not necessarily choose higher-performing schools (traditional or virtual schools) when given the choice, and are far more likely to choose an educational option that is geographically closer or more convenient for transportation, regardless of performance (Nathanson, Corcoran, & Baker-Smith, 2013). Also, those students who would likely benefit the most from school choice (those from areas with impoverished demographics and low-performing schools), were less selective in their school choice than families with higher socioeconomic status (Nathanson, Corcoran, & Baker-Smith, 2013). However, it does seem that, based on a study of a Michigan school choice program, that central city and low-income suburban districts were more likely to lose students

due to school choice, as well as school districts with larger enrollment numbers (Ni, & Ansen, 2011).

In reviewing the literature about virtual education, a wide variety of students often seem drawn to online programs as an alternative to traditional schools (Waters, 2011). Families with students with different learning needs reference the ability to customize instruction and the flexibility of online education as a benefit for students (Marsh, Carr-Chellman, & Sockman, 2009). Gifted students are also able to take courses that are not offered at their home school and can move through a course at an accelerated pace if the program allows (Blair, 2011). The limited social engagements are also seen as a benefit by some families if they feel their child is extraordinarily introverted or shy (Shoaf, 2007). As for why families are originally drawn to the idea of virtual education, Prosser (2011), found most were unhappy with their prior educational setting, and felt their child's need were not being met in their current school settings. They also felt that school officials were uncooperative about their concerns. They were also likely to feel that only a small number of students met their potential through a public school education (Prosser, 2011) and that the "social, moral, and academic climate of public schools to be unacceptable" (Prosser, 2011, p. 123). Erb (2004), found similar results, with most families being motivated to consider virtual education as a result of unhappiness with their former school, and by the perception that teachers and administrators were at fault for their student's negative experience. Erb also found that families enrolling in virtual education tended to have more than one generation of abuse by bullying, and that health and safety concerns increased their need to look for other educational options. State testing results and academic performance were not a priority for families looking at virtual options (Erb, 2004).

In the research specific to virtual education, the limited studies show that families select

online education due to a myriad of reasons, from the flexibility of the schedule, student health needs, schedules of competitive athletes, tailoring a school schedule to fit a student's most productive times of day, and avoiding long bus rides in rural areas (Revenaugh, 2006). The flexibility is important because it "changes the meaning of learning time by putting the learners themselves in control" (Cavanaugh, 2009, p. 2). It also serves a variety of student academic needs, from acceleration to credit recovery, and allows greater access to quality teachers and courses (Cavanaugh, 2009).

In examining school choice research, it appears that families from low-performing schools were slightly (2.8%) more likely to participate in school choice programs (Yin & Ahonen, 2008). In an examination of school choice program in Minneapolis (traditional physical and virtual alternative school options), it showed that there was not a strong connection between school choice and state test scores, however there was higher likelihood of families choosing a school if their neighbors attended that school (Glazerman, 1998). Another study showed a link between parent education level and likelihood to participate in school choice programs; parents with more education had a higher likelihood of considering another school (Grady, Bielick, & Aud, 2010). Parents who chose their child's school were also more likely to show higher levels of satisfaction with their child's school (Grady, Bielick & Aud, 2010). In a survey of 800 low-to moderate-income families that participated in school choice programs, families who engaged in more information-gathering activities before making their school choice demonstrated higher levels of satisfaction with their child's school (Teske, Fitzpatrick, & Kaplan, 2007). A public poll in 2009 (Bushaw & McNee) found that families were more likely to speak positively about the local school but negatively about U.S. schools in general. They were also more likely to express approval about charter schools, yet did not clearly understand the nature of charter

schools (that they were public schools, that they were free of charge -Bushaw & McNee, 2009). The most commonly referenced areas of dissatisfaction were lack of funding, overcrowding, and lack of discipline (Bushaw & McNee, 2009). For some, the very structure of public schools has become a source of frustration, referencing “the historical failure of students who are poorly matched to the school system and unlikely to succeed...suggesting major reforms and structural changes breaking away from grade-level classrooms” (Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001, p. 526) in order to support students who are unsuccessful.

There are some studies on the effectiveness and parental satisfaction done by parent companies that support virtual education. From this perspective, the important components for success in virtual education is that parents understand how the curriculum is developed so they can support their students, and that they participate in the online training, and discussion boards (Tyler, 2007).

Virtual Education Environments

Virtual learning environments are a prominent subject in the discussion surrounding virtual education. Technology is a complicated aspect of online education, as it may create yet another hurdle for at-risk students if they or their learning coach are not proficient at learning new platforms and programs. There are a variety of platforms available, the most common of which being MOODLE, Blackboard Collaborate, Desire to Learn and Aplia (http://education-portal.com/articles/Best_Online_Learning_Platform_Peoples_Choice_Awards.html), which are mostly text-based platforms. However there are other programs, such as Second Life, that provide a more interactive platform for students, and are more visual and less text-based, which can be advantageous.

Programs such as Second Life allow learners to create avatars and work collaboratively

with other class participants. These platforms also allow students to experience settings that are otherwise impossible to simulate (engineering projects, discussions with people that are geographically far away, class times that would not be available during traditional school hours). However, these platforms do present some difficulties for students, particularly for those that are not comfortable with the technology. In an examination of learning efficiency and efficacy in a multi-user environment, Hearington (2011) found that, after initial frustration and some motion-sickness, students using avatars were able to complete set tasks with increasing speed and proficiency with each attempt. Researchers also felt that these environments allowed students to feel free to make mistakes and that it created a safe place to experiment without fear of failure. Lu (2009) found that the “sense of shared presence” through the use of avatars increased student engagement despite remote distances. They also found that systems such as Second Life (which uses avatars) increased adult users sense of engagement more than systems that did not have such an agent.

Another study, conducted by Houser et al. (2011) examined programs, similar to Second Life, that were created strictly for school use. GEARS, a 3D virtual educational world, was designed particularly for use in K-12 classes, was used in an ethics course that allowed students to explore and create situations that would not be available in other settings. For example, students were able to find an entire virtual community that practiced utilitarianism, and then were able to incorporate that study into their ethics course. These platforms also brought up new, ethical dilemmas related to life in virtual worlds. For example, students had a discussion and research around the issue of being unfaithful in a virtual environment and whether that “counted” as cheating in reality, which demonstrates the ability for students to explore the ethical issues that are emerging with the development of virtual technology.

The platforms available for virtual education continue to develop and change. There are a number of different factors to consider when choosing a platform, such as if the school uses a text-based platform like MOODLE (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) or an alternative platform that is more visual and less text-based. Erlandson, Nelson, and Savenye (2010) considered a number of factors for virtual student success within the framework of a science inquiry class. They examined “perceived cognitive load” as experienced during different virtual class settings. They found there is less general stress and lower levels of cognitive load related to intake of content when the material is presented by humanized audio, and when they could respond using voice-chat instead of text-chat. In a similar study, Savin-Baden et al. (2010) propose that virtual schools allow for a shift away from academic writing in education, and that the variety of available methods of delivery of virtual content allowed for multi-modal literacies to be expressed in teaching and assessment. The study showed that text-based platforms allowed for a more passive mode of sharing information, while multi-modal literacies allowed for greater access of information for students with different learning styles and needs (Savin-Baden et al, 2010).

Student engagement with the platform and the ease of use of the platform is a large factor when addressing the needs of at-risk students, particularly those that have been unsuccessful in the past due to being disengaged with curriculum. Creating platforms that meet the needs of students and boost their engagement with their curriculum are a necessity for all students, but particularly for those who need additional support.

One concern that is echoed again and again in the conclusions of studies looking at learning platforms for virtual education is that the amount of current research is not sufficient to make definitive statements about virtual programs. This is particularly true because the concept

and technology are so new that there has simply not been enough time to examine what platforms are more likely to produce student success. The field is relatively devoid of longitudinal studies and there is little definitive evidence that one method is superior for presenting material.

How to Best Serve the Needs of Virtual Students

How to best serve students in virtual programs is a complex issue with many elements to consider. For example, we need to take into account the curriculum, how students receive feedback from teachers, the profile of a successful online student, parental involvement, and more. The rate of growth of online students makes this issue all the more pertinent. Waters (2011) found an increase from 45,000 students enrolled in at least one K-12 online course in 2000 to over 3 million students in 2009. Some states like Michigan require students to take at least one online class to graduate (Davis & Niederhauser, 2007). Throughout the nation virtual charter schools are developing in order to fill the demand for virtual education (Waters, 2011). In this competitive market, it is important to demonstrate what programs provide a quality academic experience that serves the needs of the students.

There are many benefits for virtual learners. Franklin (2011) points out that the online environment gives students increased access to educational resources, and empowers them to take control of their own learning. It allows students to work alone, in groups, or at their own pace. It also allows for continual access to material. It allows for them to create and share documents and record lectures and experiments for later review. However, it does generally require an independent ability to work and stay on task, as well as requiring motivation on the part of the student without a physical presence of a teacher, which may be difficult for at-risk students.

Teacher presence can vary depending on the program. Online schooling can use synchronous and asynchronous instruction depending on the format; however, studies have shown that when synchronous instruction is available, many students do not access it (Barbour, 2011). Teachers also struggle within this format, and attempt to do all relevant instruction during the short synchronous sessions, and rarely assign substantive, content-based work during asynchronous time (Barbour, 2011). This can have dramatic results for students, and in one study of students in a virtual program, participants were found to have 10% lower grades than in similar classroom-based courses (Barbour, 2011). While these studies did not have definitive information on what caused these trends, they did feel that the amount of teacher presence and ability for students to access them directly affected their academic performance.

The profile of the “typical” online student accounts for much of the literature around the success of online school as researchers try to determine what kinds of students are enrolled in virtual education and who is successful in this learning environment. Many times students enrolled in virtual school have been unsuccessful in other settings. This is cited as a challenge in a number of studies. Limniou and Smith (2010) found that 30.3% of teachers and 48.7% of students in an online school cited their background knowledge as a limitation for their success in online school. There are a number of studies that attempt to develop tools to predict student success with online programs. Rice (2006) concludes that further research is needed in this area in order to accurately and validly develop systems to identify successful virtual learner attributes. The diversity of online students is often heralded as the biggest stumbling block for virtual programs—the fear being that these programs often become a “dumping ground” for credit recovery students and that this student population may be “the least homogenous group of learners of any other modality or learning environment” (Huett, Moller, Foshay, & Coleman,

2008, p. 97), thus making it difficult to address the wide range of student needs.

The nature of online schooling further complicates the issue of the “typical” learner profile. Online programs have large percentages of “at-risk students,” yet after enrolling in online programs, students often report high feelings of isolation in virtual education and find the program to be more challenging than anticipated (Aqui & Putney, 2009). Isolation is also noted in a study examining the major components of online learning, which cites lack of face-to-face interaction as a struggle for 37% of participants (Podoll & Randle, 2005). Isolation is also noted to be a major indicator for students dropping out of any alternative education placement and that drop-outs from such programs are far more likely to be incarcerated and live in poverty (Pane, 2009).

In reviewing the literature on alternative education, online education appears to offer some benefits for at-risk students but also some hurdles. For at-risk students, virtual education is often presented as an alternative education option. In a literature review conducted by Flower, McDaniel, and Jolivette (2011) on effective alternative education practices virtual education does not necessarily fit the criteria for an effective program. This study demonstrated eight effective practices for alternative education: low student-teacher ratios, high structure, positive behavior reinforcement, school-based adult mentors, functional behavior assessments for students (FBA), social skills instruction, effective academic instruction, parent involvement and use of the Positive Behavior and Intervention Support (PBIS) system. Based on these criteria, virtual education lacks many of the effective practices that at-risk students need to be successful, and some are yet undeveloped (such as how to implement PBIS in a virtual setting). Additionally, some studies show that the flexibility of online education may be a major benefit for at-risk students who struggle with attendance due to work schedules or family issues (Sawchuk, 2010).

Another limitation of online education may be the ability of parents or learning coaches to assist students in solving problems related to the online platform or content. In research examining the role of the learning coach, who is often a parent or guardian, online education seems to report mixed experiences. Many coaches report having positive experiences and appreciate the ability to communicate with online education teachers. However, the nature of online education is often overwhelming for learning coaches who feel the technology and virtual education, in general, is outside the scope of their experience in school which makes it hard to relate to and support their students (Sorensen, 2012). Parental involvement is often absent in the lives of at-risk students. In a study of parental involvement in virtual schooling, researchers found strong relationships between parental modeling and reinforcement with success in virtual schooling (Liu, Black, Algina, Cavanaugh, & Dawson, 2010). This can be a consideration for virtual schools as they often set the parameters for contacting parents and define the role of the parent in virtual education. The ability for the parent or guardian to navigate and regularly log into the learning management sites was also a strong predictor of student success (Liu & Cavanaugh, 2011).

The ability or inability of parents and students to access online systems also points to the fact that technical logistics can also be a component in the success or failure of at-risk students in online schools. Lack of proper computers, software compatibility issues, and internet access are noted in various studies as a reason students drop out or struggle in online programs (Podoll & Randle, 2005). Orienting students to the program at the beginning was shown to be a predictor of success in a study about promoting success in virtual schools (Roblyer, Davis, Steven, Marshall, & Pape, 2006). In this study dropout rates spiked in the first few weeks after enrolling; however, students who were active in the first few weeks were far less likely to drop out.

Finally, another issue with online education is the disproportionate percentage of

minority students who are enrolled due to discipline issues (Booker & Mitchell, 2011). This is true for both virtual education and traditional alternative school settings, which have a disproportionate percentage of male students and minority students when compared to local schools (Booker & Mitchell, 2011). There is the additional concern of these programs being “revolving doors” in terms of students moving in and out of programs (Booker & Mitchell, 2011). With virtual education being in its initial phase of development, it is difficult to say if this trend will carry over; however, the transient nature of the student population in alternative (both traditional and virtual) programs may indicate that paying specific attention to the needs of students may retain students better than in past programs.

Effective and Efficient Approaches to Successful Online Instruction

The issue of staff training is also a theme throughout the literature available on virtual schooling. A main concern is that many online schools are run through charter schools, which have a great deal of independence and are not held accountable to the same teaching certification standards as regular public schools. This raises questions about consistency in teacher training, curriculum standards, and creates a great deal of variance among virtual schools. Additionally, teacher training in virtual education in the universities is still very new, as the teacher licensure programs have been slow to catch up with the boom in virtual schools. In Oregon, Portland State University offers a certificate for online educators, but it is not a formal component of the licensure program (www.pdx.edu). Concordia University offers a strand within their teacher licensure program that concentrates on online learning (<http://www.cu-portland.edu/coe/graduate>). The general lack of training raises questions about the quality of instruction students receive in virtual schools—a subject that is examined from various perspectives throughout the literature.

Online teaching demands different strategies for teachers. Many of these strategies are beneficial for students in any setting, such as increasing communication with students and families and re-evaluating assessments to ensure that they truly assess student proficiency (especially true when students are in the home with access to various resources during tests), but the teacher training must be tailored for an online environment. If done correctly, some teachers have reported that their experience with virtual schooling has actually made them better classroom teachers and increased their empathy for their students (Roblyer, Porter, Bielefeldt, & Donaldson, 2009). This was especially true with regards to how they incorporated technology into their teaching when they returned to a traditional school environment.

Because they lack the daily face-to-face interaction with staff, the role of feedback is an especially crucial component of meeting the needs of students in a virtual environment. In one study on student and teacher perspectives on online learning environments, lack of feedback was cited as a challenge by 39% of students (Limniou & Smith, 2010). Additionally 55% of students considered individual feedback a requirement in order for them to be successful in online schooling (Limniou & Smith, 2010). Even feedback that is as routine as regular teacher comments on homework was shown to be very important to the success of students in virtual education (Liu & Cavanaugh, 2011). Teacher knowledge of their students and their demographic background was also linked to student success, particularly with those working with a low socioeconomic student population (Liu & Cavanaugh, 2011).

Technology training for teachers can help bridge the gap between the students and teachers in online education. Oftentimes teachers are more comfortable with text-based platforms for online learning (PowerPoint, MOODLE); however, students found the virtual learning environments to be more engaging and more conducive to learning (Limniou & Smith,

2010). This is an ongoing issue, as teachers can be hesitant to use new platforms, but research seems to indicate that it provides a richer environment and helps build relationships with online students (Limniou & Smith, 2010). Teacher reticence about new technologies can only be remedied through training and building comfort with teaching in different formats. This is still a component that is largely absent from teacher training programs.

In order to support effective instruction there are factors that have to be taken into consideration for teachers as well as students. For example, online classes allow for a far greater number of students in each class, which can be a challenge for online teachers, especially when many of these students are struggling to stay on track to graduate. Teachers (as well as students), can also feel isolated in online environments, in a study of 596 online teachers, the lack of community was reported as a hurdle with online education (Archambault & Crippen, 2009). This isolation can also result in a perception of a lack of support from administration. However, teachers do appreciate that online education can remove some of the constraints of a traditional classroom, such as a bell schedule or classroom management (Archambault & Crippen, 2009).

There is additional literature on teacher training for online education from the Oregon Department of Education (www.ode.state.or.us) through the Oregon Virtual School District development, which is a resource for educators wishing to learn more about virtual education or to add more technology to their traditional setting (<http://orvsd.org>). This resource provides professional development, video conferencing and how-to videos to help train online educators. Again, recommendations from this source encourage moving away from trying to incorporate traditional strategies into an online environment (such as PowerPoint for notes), and encourages training teachers to use more engaging platforms for learning (Ribble, 2010). There is a strong recommendation to focus on teaching practices, regardless of the platform being used, in order to

encourage student engagement and success (Johnson, 2012).

There are also a number of outside resources available for schools and districts trying to accommodate the needs of their students by creating their own virtual programs or working with an outside company. This is particularly appealing to school districts who are concerned with the lack of funds they will receive should their students decide to enroll in virtual schools outside of their district (Johnson, 2012).

Accountability in Virtual Education

Another theme throughout the literature is accountability for virtual schools in terms of academic success for students. Many studies call for accountability of virtual schools to be based on student outcomes, which is difficult because data is not consistently collected in online schools as it is in traditional schools (Dillon & Tucker, 2011). Collecting such data is further complicated by the fact that virtual schools have many different models, from purely online to blended models where students still attend regular classrooms. Different delivery platforms influence a teacher's ability to give assessments that can be guaranteed to be done independently. In addition, assessments such as participation in state testing can be difficult to administer when students do not regularly attend school in a particular location.

Academic integrity in the virtual school environment is an ongoing issue for online teacher training and accountability. For many reasons, cheating is a critical issue for virtual schools. The task for online educators is to create assessments that can demonstrate student learning without having students simply look up answers. A traditional testing environment is not usually a viable option for virtual schools. In a study of Michigan online teachers (Michigan has been very progressive about incorporating online schooling into public education), academic integrity and identifying students in crisis were identified as two major issues for online teachers.

Forming a common understanding of how to address these issues as well as providing teachers with ongoing training has been the most helpful in this task (DiPietro, Ferdig, Black, & Presto, 2010).

Some studies have been done to investigate the validity of academic integrity concerns in online education. Ridley and Husband (1998) found that the concerns surrounding the academic integrity of online education is twofold: one concern is that the standards are not as rigorous as traditional schooling, and thus students receive credits for classes that are not equitable to their traditional counterparts, and the second is that students have a greater ability to cheat in an online environment. Based on these concerns, the researchers proposed the hypothesis that, in two similar classes, one online and one in a traditional setting, there should be considerable grade inflation in the online grades. However, their study of the grade distribution of 100 online and 100 traditional biology students found quite the opposite, with the grades being considerably lower in the online setting. However the researchers noted that this could be due to a number of factors, including: academic skills, amount of time spent on the classwork, and access to instructors to ask questions and get additional support.

A similar study of 439 online undergrad psychology students found that even with clear expectations of academic honesty, students were equally likely to cheat in an online environment regardless of honor pledges or stringent consequences (Mastin, Peska, & Lilly, 2009). They did find that students were more likely to be academically dishonest towards the end of the semester. These studies examine a complex issue. It is undeniable that academic integrity is at risk in an online environment and that traditional testing measures and verifying that a student's work is indeed their own becomes far more difficult; however, the nature of the online student demographic and the failure rates in such classes (<http://www.ode.state.or.us/>) call into question

whether this particular group of students is using the looser supervision of online education to be academically dishonest.

The counseling component for at-risk students is also important. It is the responsibility of the counselors or other recruitment staff for online schools to inform families of the “fit” of online education for some students. Online schools must also serve as a resource for at-risk students when they struggle, and if the role of the counselor involves social counseling as well, then these must be provided in a way that is effective without face-to-face communication. Some strategies that have been examined have been the effectiveness of chat room counseling, email counseling and videoconferencing. Of these, the videoconferencing has been the most comparable to face-to-face interactions, and audio builds trust and empathy more than a text-based conversation (Currie, 2010). There is also therapeutic software available that can be used for personal and social problems, but these programs are too new to make evaluations of their effectiveness.

More accountability for virtual schools has been demanded by school districts, state and federal educational bodies. Behind this demand is the concern that the standards and accreditation requirements for virtual charter schools are be more lenient than for those of regular schools. A study of virtual schools’ accreditation and leadership has suggested that virtual schools examine the following seven standards in order to guide their school improvement as well as to consider for the external reviews required for accreditation: vision and purpose, governance and leadership, teaching and learning, documenting and using results, resources and support systems, stakeholder communications and relationships and commitment to continuous improvement (Salsberry, 2010). A similar study aimed at identifying priorities for distance education in the United States found the following priority areas in order of importance:

1) evaluation of course design and delivery, 2) best practice, 3) accountability, 4) access, and 5) online learning/learners (Rice, 2009). This study examined experienced stakeholders in the area of distance education and centered questions around the areas of research, policy, and practice for distance education over the next five years.

Summary

Virtual education provides a new arena for learning and it is evolving every day. As technology continues to progress, so do the resources for online students, families, and teachers. In order to support at-risk students in online education, teacher training, curriculum, and accountability for virtual schools must adapt to meet help such students succeed academically. Virtual schools need to create a learning environment that is competitive, engaging, relevant, and challenging, while ensuring academic integrity and providing interventions for struggling at-risk students. This is a task that is daunting in traditional schools, and all the more so when coupled with changing technology that may be intimidating for teachers and families who lack training and experience.

CHAPTER 3

Methods

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore which issues influenced a sample of parents or guardians of at-risk students to choose virtual education. At-risk students were defined as those who are at-risk of not graduating with their high school cohort due to credit-deficiency, in that they do not have the appropriate amount of credit for their grade. Understanding some of the reasons that parents choose virtual education for their children could influence how educators in the virtual education arena might best serve this population of students. I conducted interviews of parents or guardians of at-risk students in order to find patterns that could guide future development of programs that support families of students who are considering alternative options for their students, and to gain the perspectives of these parents after having enrolled. In reviewing the literature it seems that, although students enrolled in online learning are not a homogenous group, they do share a common theme of feeling underserved by traditional brick and mortar schools.

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What are parental reasons for choosing online education for children who are at risk of not graduating from high school with their cohort due to credit deficiency?
2. What are the parents' experiences with online education after their child has been in the program?

Setting

The participants were the parents or guardians of students in 10th, 11th, or 12th grade in a virtual high school that draws students from throughout the state of Oregon. This school is a free

public charter school available to any resident in Oregon, and serves students across the state. It is one of many public charter virtual schools in Oregon available to students statewide (<http://www.k12.com/participating-schools/oregon>). The parents or guardians selected to interview were the self-identified primary decision-making parent (mother, father, or guardian) of high school-age students. Within the network of K12 Inc. schools in Oregon there are two high school options: one school for students on track to graduate, and another for students who are credit-deficient. After discussing the school with the administration, I decided to draw the participants from the school for credit-deficient students, as this best fit the needs of the study.

The participating school is a part of the network of K12 Inc. schools throughout the nation. K12 Inc. is a corporation that creates the platforms and curriculum for virtual schools that choose to purchase their services. They are the largest provider of these services in the nation ([k12.com](http://www.k12.com)). Their curriculum is provided by K12 through their Aventa online courses (www.aventalearning.com), which is one of their curriculum options for schools. The school markets to any student who is interested, and K12 Inc., a publically-traded company, runs the marketing campaign throughout the nation. Their advertising is regularly seen in social media such as Facebook, in print materials such as magazines and newspapers, and even in movie theaters and on television (<http://www.k12.com/participating-schools/oregon>). All teachers for the school live in the state of Oregon and are state certified through the Teacher Standards and Practices Commission for the State of Oregon (www.insightschools.net), which is a requirement for Oregon virtual schools, although this is not the case in every state. The school is accredited through the Northwest Accreditation Commission (www.insightschools.net). The school is available for students K-12, but this study drew only from the high school student parents. The schooling is provided entirely online; however, the school does offer periodic social events and

gatherings for students (www.insightschools.net).

Participants and Sampling Strategy

The study used criterion sampling (<http://www.sfu.ca/~palys/Purposive%20sampling.pdf>) to select eight decision-making parents or guardians of at-risk students to interview, based on the criteria sent to the principal and counselor of the virtual school used in this study. This sampling and methodology was selected because I felt it would best give insight to the reasons this specific group of parents and guardians were interested in virtual education rather than a random sample of virtual student families, as the population is so diverse. Participants were selected based on the recommendation of the virtual high school principal and school counselor who suggested families that fit the criteria of being the decision-making parent or guardian of a child identified as at-risk of not graduating with his or her cohort due to credit deficiency. The parent or guardian was self-identified as the decision maker in enrolling his or her child in virtual education and being the learning coach for the student and primary communicator with the school. The students were at least sophomores in order to meet the criteria of “credit-deficient” because at the time the interviews took place in the fall of 2013, freshmen would not have yet failed a class. Additionally, the students must have transferred from another high school prior to enrolling in online education, so that the parents or guardians would fit the criteria for “making the decision to enroll their credit-deficient” student.

The study was first cleared by the University IRB process to ensure that the safety and welfare of the participants was protected. A list of potential participants fitting the criteria was created and the parents or guardians received an email explaining the study and asking if they would like to participate. By completing the permission form in the email, they agreed to participate in the study and acknowledged that they understand the purpose and nature of the

study. More than eight invitations were sent because there was the assumption that some candidates would not respond or decline to participate. Of the ten responses in the positive, the first eight received were chosen to participate. Of the eight participants interviewed, six were the mother of the student, one was a custodial aunt, one was a custodial guardian. No fathers elected to participate in the study. The participants had a total of six female and two male students. Three were sophomores (based on years in attendance in high school, not credits), three were juniors, and two were seniors.

Research Ethics

Parents or guardians were sent information regarding the study and an invitation to participate, including how the results would be used and how participant confidentiality would be maintained. In the information received, parents or guardians were informed that by agreeing to participate they were giving their informed consent. Interview information was confidential and no names or information were connected with the results. Participants were labeled with letters (such as “Participant A, B, C, etc.”) rather than by name. In order to protect the data, they will be kept only by me in a secure and locked location where it will be maintained for three years, after which time it will be destroyed. While the study did examine information such as gender and asked for information about the choice to enroll students in virtual education, it did not ask for individualized information such as social security numbers, or addresses. The names of the participants provided by the school will be kept by me for a period of three years after the completion of the study and then destroyed. Participants were informed that they could opt to not answer any question on the interview they did not feel comfortable with and could choose to stop the interview at any point.

Because of my professional background as a teacher in traditional and online

environments, as well as currently serving as a virtual school principal, I am very familiar with virtual education. In order to be objective there was a conscious effort to keep my own opinions, experiences, and preconceptions regarding students enrolled in virtual education separate from any part of the interview by not adding my own information or comments to interview responses. I did ask probing questions if the response was short, but I did not add anything from my own perspective. This was particularly important because I work for a public charter school affiliated with K12 Inc. and I was familiar with the curriculum and policies. I was also careful not to let my own experiences with credit-deficient students or parents change my objectivity, or my personal opinions or bias about the responses during the interviews. I have had a number of interactions with such families and students, and have some passionate opinions about serving these students, which is why I selected this topic for research, but I did not let this influence my interviews.

Research Design

This was an exploratory qualitative study using in-depth interviews. The study was exploratory because there is little existing research on what influences parents or guardians to select virtual education. A qualitative methodology was selected because I wanted to establish meaning from the views of the participants as they reflected on their experience of selecting virtual education (Creswell, 2007). I felt that such information would not be accessible through a survey or other quantitative methods. Additionally, I did not want to limit the responses to my research questions, and by conducting a qualitative interview study I could approach the interviews through an open-ended question format. It was possible that the responses would reveal themes, ideas, and experiences that I had not anticipated when designing the study.

I used in-depth interviewing as a methodological strategy for this study. The interviews

consisted of eleven questions (Appendix A) focused on what influenced the parents or guardians to enroll their student in virtual education. The interview questions were the same for each participant interviewed; however, the interview was semi-structured so I had the ability to deviate from the questions in order to ask follow-up questions to gather more information or greater detail. Initial interviews were anticipated to take roughly one hour; however, they actually only lasted roughly twenty minutes due to the short responses, despite probing questions. Each of the parents or guardians was interviewed on the phone. All of the interviews took place on the phone and all of the participants responded to all of the questions despite having the choice to skip any questions or stop at any time. In addition to my note taking, the phone interviews were audio recorded. I then transcribed the interviews verbatim and interpreted them.

Shortly after the initial interview, a brief follow-up interview via phone took place after the interpretation of the initial interview was shared via email. Participants were asked to review the interpretation previous to the follow-up phone interview and were asked if my interpretation accurately represented their responses and gave them a chance to expand their responses if desired. None of the participants added additional information aside from a general comment regarding their overall satisfaction with virtual education, which concurred with their original interview responses (addressed in a later section). This was done to check for accuracy in how the interviewee intended their responses to be interpreted and to check for potential bias.

Procedures

I contacted the administration of the virtual school that I used for my research and explained my study and its goals. I shared all of the documentation that would be communicated with potential participants. After the school administration gave consent to collaborate with me

on gathering participants, I obtained a list of potential participant emails from the principal and school counselor based on the criteria of the study.

An initial email explaining the study went out to potential participants. If interested in participating, parents or guardians were asked to respond to the email and completed an attached consent form (Appendix B). The purpose of the study, how the information would be used, and kept confidential was clearly outlined in the permission letter through email. After I obtained the eight participants, I contacted them to schedule phone interviews at a convenient time for them. Parents or guardians were asked to participate in two interviews, both by phone. Initial interviews took about twenty minutes to half an hour during a mutually agreed upon time and date. The interview questions differed slightly if participants or I wanted to expand on a response.

Data Collection and Analytical Procedures

The data were collected and analyzed by looking for patterns and themes related to choosing online education. While reviewing the data I looked for shared themes among the participants. This included common perceptions and shared experiences among participants regarding their choice for virtual education. In order to organize these developing themes, I first went through the transcripts and interpretations and pre-coded by highlighting noteworthy or repetitious pieces of text after the interpretations had been approved and/or expanded in the second interview. In the initial coding process I went through each interview and developed categories of responses. I did so by looking for responses that were similar in nature. I also highlighted words and phrases that were relevant to the research questions.

The next step was focused coding in which these categories were combined into larger themes. I looked for themes as a general group as well as by subgroups as appropriate. I closely

examined the repeated phrases and responses to see which were repeated the most and to see if that was due to a specific experience or idea that was present in the this participant group.

For the final thematic coding process, I looked for common themes from which I could begin to make some conclusions about the responses. I looked for those themes that were repeated the most frequently and which the participants had had the most experiences. I examined the data through the lens of the research questions, with the intention of looking for patterns or quotes from interviews that spoke to these questions. However, I was not limited to this area of focus, and as additional themes or ideas emerged from the interviews, that was noted and recorded and became a part of the interpretation.

Role of the Researcher

I am a graduate student completing the doctor of education program at George Fox University. I served as the interviewer for the study and was responsible to check for bias through the follow-up phone interview with participants. Additionally, I have been a virtual teacher for an online K-12 charter school in Oregon, and am currently an administrator for that school. I have experience teaching social studies, health, PE, and special education in both online and face-to-face settings. I have also worked extensively with at-risk students in both settings. While my experience gives me insight into both approaches with education, it also creates preconceived beliefs and opinions about why students are or are not successful in virtual education. In order to balance my own experience and preconceptions, I avoided expressing personal opinions or experiences with any participants, so that my background did not influence their responses.

Potential Contributions of the Research

While the amount of literature and information around virtual education has increased

considerably in the last ten years, there is not a great deal of research regarding why parents or guardians select this option for their children. One potential contribution of this study for online educators and administrators is that it may provide insight as to why families choose this option, and this may help educators address the needs of at-risk students in light of that information.

For administrators of virtual schools, this research can provide some parental perspective and thus help them better understand the populations who choose virtual education. Similarities in the interview responses may provide a deeper understanding of online students and families. This research may also provide insights that will help virtual school administrators and educators provide better support and resources for their students and families. It may also give information about where parents have misconceptions or lack information about virtual education.

The potential benefit for students and virtual schools is that, with a greater understanding of a difficult-to-serve group, this online environment can be adapted to help students be more likely to graduate. In addition, students who are at-risk of not graduating are concerning for any school system, as they effect graduation rates and can be especially detrimental to charter schools, which depend on student enrollment remaining steady in order to stay in operation. It may also provide information that will help virtual schools retain students.

CHAPTER 4

Findings

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of this study. The goal of the investigation was to explore the reasons that families of credit-deficient high school students select virtual education and their resultant experiences. The overarching research questions were:

1. What are parental reasons for choosing online education for children who are at risk of not graduating from high school with their cohort due to credit deficiency?
2. What are the parents' experiences with online education after their child has been in the program?

In this chapter, I describe the research by addressing: a) a description of the participants, b) a discussion of the data analysis process, and c) an explanation of patterns and themes for each research question that emerged from the interviews.

Participant Profiles

Participant A was actually two people, a mother and a father. This was unanticipated as they had originally indicated that just the mother would be interviewed. However, they did want to do the interview together, and thus both their responses were included in the responses and both were used for the data analysis. In future studies, it would be made clearer in the original letter that only one person could participate in the interview. They were the parents of a senior male, who had special needs (vision and dyslexia), and who had considered a GED instead of a high school diploma. The parents were concerned about his needs not being served in his former school setting (the local high school) and felt that the pace was overwhelming. The family talked about virtual education and came to the decision to enroll together in collaboration with

their child.

Participant B was the mother of a sophomore girl. The family had started to investigate virtual education because they were very concerned about their daughter's social issues in her former setting, which was the local high school. She had been a good student in middle school but during her first semester in her public school she became distracted by social issues and her grades suffered. She did not attend her second semester freshman year. She had issues with attendance because she did not want to go to school because of these social issues. They investigated local alternative schools but did not like the peer influences. The family made the decision to enroll in virtual education together with their student.

Participant C was the custodial aunt of a junior male. They originally looked into virtual education because they felt that he was being bullied to the point that he was suicidal and was failing academically. In this situation, the student drove the decision to enroll because he was so unhappy in his school setting, which was the local public school. Attendance was a major issue for him because he did not want to go to school because of social issues. This family has noticed a significant lessening in the student's depression and suicidal tendencies since enrolling in virtual education.

Participant D was the mother of a junior female. The family made the decision together to enroll the student in virtual education. They were unhappy with her former school (the local public school) because of social issues with other girls, "drama," and bullying, which led her to her skipping school and her grades dropping. They also liked the flexibility of the schedule because the family travels a lot. They felt like the format gave her faster feedback from teachers and helps her with organization. They had a number of concerns about her teachers in her former school, feeling that they did not communicate well and were "cocky." They hoped that

the ability to work ahead would help her with credit recovery.

Participant E was the mother of a sophomore female. They initially looked into virtual education as a homeschool option because the student was struggling academically and was interested in a GED rather than a diploma, which was concerning to the family. The student was diagnosed with ADHD and dyslexia, issues that had caused her to fall behind in school. The parents selected virtual education for the student, although they did talk to the student about it before making the decision. They see dramatic improvement in her grades since enrolling, and feel that she is academically successful for the first time. They were dissatisfied with the former setting, which was the local public school, because they felt that they “battled the administration” over her IEP.

Participant F was the custodial guardian of a junior female. He was interested in virtual education because he felt that they are “a conservative home with good morals” and that his student was not receiving an education that aligned with those values at the local high school. The flexibility of the schedule was also a big concern because they travel and online education allows the student to go with them and not lose instruction. In her former setting, the father felt like her social concerns were overriding her academics and she was succumbing to negative peer pressure. The participant indicated that he made the decision to enroll his student together with her.

Participant G was the mother of a sophomore female. The mother’s interest in virtual education stemmed from her interest in her daughter being able to work at her own pace and on her own schedule. The daughter had been getting into social problems in her former setting, which was the local public high school. The mother reported enrolling her student in virtual education as a way to punish her for poor decisions. She also felt that the former school

dismissed parent concerns and that there was very little communication.

Participant H was the mother of a senior girl. This student had been homeschooled before spending some time in a local public school. Family travel and social issues created problems for the daughter, which made her grades drop. The mother talked to the daughter about enrolling but felt that it was really her, not her student, who drove the decision to enroll. The participant felt that the student's needs were not met at all in the former setting, and that her concerns were not addressed by the school.

Data Analysis Process

As described in chapter 3, interviews were transcribed and field notes were taken during the interviews. After transcribing the initial interview, summaries of the responses were sent to participants for member-checking and a follow-up interview was given to see if the summaries accurately represented the responses and if there was anything they wanted to add. The participants did not choose to add additional information during the follow-up interviews. The transcriptions were then taken and separated into responses by questions and read and reread for thematic patterns. Once these patterns were identified they were coded by the identified patterns, which were highlighted and grouped by themes within each research question. These themes were examined in the framework of the research questions to draw conclusions to those questions. A profile for each participant was also created to set some of the context for the responses.

Research Question 1

In evaluating the data for repeated patterns with regard to the question, "What are parental reasons for choosing online education for children who are at risk of not graduating

from high school with their cohort due to credit deficiency?” the following patterns emerged: social issues, academic issues, and a negative relationship with a former school.

Social Issues

Social issues were referenced as a reason to enroll in virtual education throughout the interview responses. The concerns included bullying, negative peer influences, and attendance. Oftentimes students had experienced negative social issues in a former school setting, which prompted the family to pursue enrolling in virtual education. Participant C stated that, “he [the student] was bullied by teachers and the principal” to the point that “he didn’t want to go to school anymore.” Participant D stated that when her daughter tried to separate herself from negative peer influences, “she was bullied by them and that’s when she really didn’t want to go to school.” Participant C also stated that the student had a lot of friends in middle school but then those friends ended up joining the bullies in high school. Participant C gave the most severe description of bullying, as it caused her student to become “suicidal” and not want to attend school.

Negative peer influences were another commonly-referenced social issue. For example, two participants mentioned that the negative peer influences that their students had experienced in traditional schooling were simply “overwhelming” (Participant B and F), and the parents were trying to help their kids “avoid social pressures that they felt were inappropriate” (Participant F), or they felt there was “too much drama and bullying, skipping and other bad behaviors” (Participant D). Social issues dominated the responses of Participant D, who stated “high school kids are mean, always girl drama, kids get lost even in smaller schools” and that her student was being bullied by those students who were participating in inappropriate behaviors. Participant B also mentioned “girl drama,” citing that as a reason to leave a traditional school setting.

Participant F who had been in virtual education the longest (three years) said, “The social concerns of the student far outweighed the academic concerns, it was polluting her morals and ethics.”

Even students whose families had attempted to address negative peer influences had not been successful in removing their student from these peers. Participant D stated, “during her freshman year there were times where she seemed to adjust to her new school but...she was hanging out with people that were skipping and doing other bad behaviors.” Participant G explained, “she was hanging around with some kids that were getting into bad things and [she] was following those things” despite their attempts to discourage these behaviors. “There was a lot of her getting into trouble.” Participant B even visited their district alternative school in an attempt to remove her from those influences but “We didn’t like the crowd in the traditional alternative school.” Participant B’s student was also succumbing to “bad influences, skipping and not doing work.” Participant H saw her students tendency to be “overly social at times” to interfere with her classroom and relationship with teachers. There were 18 references to negative peer influences throughout the interviews.

Due to these social influences, five participants referenced attendance as a hurdle for their students, some to the point where the student had considered dropping out (Participant A, B, C, D, and H), and cited this as a reason to enroll in virtual education. Participant A’s student had a great deal of anxiety about school and the social issues he faced there, to the point that, “after only two months he hated it, and it was a challenge to get him to even go to school.” Participant B’s student attended one semester and then refused to attend “because she was so overwhelmed by the social aspect of it all.” Participant D referred to their former school as a “bad environment.” Some mentioned that attendance created the social issues, such as

Participant D, whose child was away at her father's house so often it prevented her from regular attendance and making normal social bonds, which resulted in her reluctant to go to school.

Participant H mentioned that family travel interfered with attendance and created social issues.

Participant C referred to constant bullying as being a reason her child did not want to attend school anymore.

Academics

Academics were often referenced by participants as a reason to enroll their students in virtual education. The primary concerns that came out of the references to academic concerns in the interviews included: past failure in the student's former school setting, a discussion of the advantages and drawbacks of virtual education, and credit recovery/graduation.

Past failure was discussed in every interview, although what the student experienced was different in each case. For Participant A, the parents explained, "they'll move you down a level in math if you're not doing well...they would just move him down until he would pass, even though he wasn't learning anything new." Participant D stated, "she did fail most of her classes in her 9th grade year." Participant H shared a similar experience, simply stating, "her grades were really bad." Participant E explained they were "looking for a homeschool option because she was getting poor grades. She talked about getting her GED when she was in 3rd grade...that was very alarming." The references to past failure overlapped with a negative relationship with the former school and attendance. For example, Participant B shared, "she didn't want to attend school so her grades certainly suffered because she was more focused on what was going on and became very anxious about school." Participant B also expressed frustration that there were "40 kids in each class...I really feel like class sizes are too large...teachers focus on those students that demand more attention." Participant B also noted that her student "was failing since 6th

grade.”

When discussing academic hurdles in a former setting some of the students had problems since middle school. Participant E noted, “she was struggling and failing 6th grade core classes, but was being passed on to the next level...she would fall further behind.” Participant A said, “he wanted a GED instead of a diploma,” which they did not feel represented a successful alternative to a high school diploma. Another parental concern surrounded the validity of classroom assignments. Participant G, for example, noted that her student “would pass all the tests but do nothing in class.” Special needs were also a focus of academic concerns, with participant E stating that the student was failing “because the teachers and administration battled over the IEP” and that “she was failing most of her classes.” Participants A felt that their child’s abilities were not reflected in his performance, saying, “even though he is smart, his grades were not very good and he was failing classes.”

Participants A, E, F, G and H felt that their students’ academic needs were not being met, which was causing their failure. Participant F said, “her academic needs were not even close to being met in her old school” while Participant G explained, “I do not think her needs were met at all because the teachers did not listen to parent concerns...[they] only complained about how many students they had in their class.” Participant C felt the academic needs were met but, regardless of that, “he felt stupid and wanted to be left alone,” and was thus unsuccessful. Participant E felt the student’s academic needs were not met at all, as did Participant H.

Graduation and credit recovery was discussed by participants as a benefit of virtual education, with many of the participants D, E, and H feeling their student would not have achieved a high school diploma without the support of virtual education. Participant D stated, “I hope she can restore the credits she is missing...I hope she will graduate.” Participant E stated, “I

want her to graduate from high school and not get a GED.” Participant H shared “[she] is going to graduate and wouldn’t have” in her former school.

In talking about their hopes for credit recovery and graduation, participants also referenced specific skills that they hoped their student would gain from virtual education in order to attain those goals. Independence, motivation and self-discipline were a positive part of the academic discussion after enrolling in virtual education. With motivation and self-discipline, most of the comments were structured around helping students become more independent and confident in their education (Participants A, C, F and G). More specifically, virtual education was an appropriate structure for this because “he is more motivated to drive his own education: He has learned a lot because he has to go through the lessons instead of just showing up for class” (Participant A). Participant F hoped that this increased independence and confidence would “help her to build a solid foundation to gain a competitive advantage in the modern day work environment globally.” Participant B stated that, in addition to graduating she hopes her child will “gain skills like self-management, problem-solving, and becoming a better person by managing her own environment.” Participant D had a similar comment, saying that in addition to recovering credits, she hoped her student would “let herself reach her full potential. She was a good middle school student and so she has the potential to be a good student again.” Finally, Participant H hoped that in addition to a diploma, her student would “learn to organize her time better to meet her goals, especially since the school provides so many tools.”

Negative Relationship with a Former School

Negative relationships with a former school were also often referenced as a reason for deciding to enroll in virtual education. Negative relationships with former schools were brought up 26 times throughout the interview response, which was by far the most commonly discussed

concern. These occurred throughout the interviews, although the comments were most dominant in discussing the students' past educational experiences. These references involved academics and social issues, or a general frustration with the former school. Based on the data above, those questions that asked about past educational experiences or meeting the needs of students or reasons for selecting virtual education produced the greatest frequency of references of negative relationships with former schools.

The nature of these negative school experiences varied by participant: Participant A started by explaining "we really don't like the local school here" then expanded by describing "you see, my son has vision issues and is dyslexic and so he takes longer to read and write his assignments. At his local school they were not willing to work with his disabilities even though he was in the top 15% of his class; they would only work with the bottom of the class with the same disabilities." Their concern deepened when they discovered that "teachers don't know how to help him with all the other kids in the class, so sometimes he was just ignored or he would just sit and they wouldn't know he needed help. It was really frustrating." They felt that he was not receiving an adequate education because "the old school lessons would just skip through the curriculum so he wasn't learning what he should have; he was just going through the book." This lack of attention caused this family to seek out other education options.

This sentiment that students did not receive adequate attention from teachers was echoed by Participant B who noted, "if a child excels, the teachers do not pay attention because the child is already meeting expectations. I really feel class sizes are too large for teachers to provide an individual service like they can at this school" and by Participant G who also voiced concerns about class sizes saying, "the teachers did not listen to parent concerns. The teachers only complained about how many students they had in their class, and didn't seem to care about what

their kids were learning.” She added that her daughter was “bored in the classroom, because she was not challenged, I do not think her needs were met at all.”

Some of the negative relationships were based on the perception that the school was actively detrimental to the student emotionally or academically. Participant C shared the most extreme case, saying, “when he was in junior high he was bullied by teachers, and the principal... it was emotional, they picked on him because they knew they could.” Participant D felt that “also some of the teachers were not personable, and some were even cocky, which is not good for students or parents.” Participant H even felt that their student’s academic failure was due to the fact that “the teachers were trying to pass her along so they did not have to deal with her the next year.”

Research Question 2

I also looked at the interviews for repeated issues that pertained to the second research question: “What are the parents’ experiences with virtual education now that their child has been in the program?” The following themes recurred throughout the interviews: academics, social issues, communication, serving special needs, and flexibility. In some cases, the issues were stated as both reasons to enroll in virtual education (research question 1) and reflections on their experiences, so there was some overlap.

Social Issues

When reflecting on their experience since enrolling in virtual education, participants discussed both advantages and disadvantages in terms of social issues in virtual education. Overall, participants were happy with the change of social environment for their child, and often felt that social issues were a large reason their students were unsuccessful in their former setting;

however participants also brought up some drawbacks about the lack of social interaction in a virtual environment.

Participant C referenced an improvement over social issues to the point that “he is no longer suicidal because he is away from other students. He’s no longer depressed and he is very successful since moving to online education.” Participant D mentioned that her student “was no longer negatively influenced by other students,” and Participant E mentioned that the student “likes school again and has become more independent.” Participant B said, “she had taken steps back since she was no longer depressed and was more independent in school.” Participant C stated, “I wish we had done it years ago; it has been the best thing for him.” Similarly, Participant D said, “it is an excellent opportunity for kids who are not making it in traditional school because of drama, bullying, or distractions. Online eliminates all of that.” Participant H was positive to the point of saying, “I am going to continue it for the whole family; my student is going to graduate and wouldn’t have in brick and mortar.” Participant A mentioned that the improvement of the social environment with virtual education is “we can structure his academic work in times and places that work for us, there aren’t any distractions and it allows us to balance our lives.” Participant C also mentioned the lack of distractions with virtual education “she would never get work done at school; virtual education allows us to supervise her study time and make sure she is doing her work.” Participant F appreciated the lack of “social pressures” and “negative influences by other kids.” Participant G felt that being “removed from those kids that were making bad choices” was large part of their child’s success since moving to a virtual school.

Social issues were also stated as a drawback of virtual education by some participants because of students feeling isolated. Participant B mentioned that her student “misses having

peer social interactions and misses being around her friends.” Participant F stated that her student “feels like she has no social outlet, although there are outlets such as sports.” Participant G stated that she is “not being social in school and around friends, yet with technology today, students can be social online” and added, although she “is not around her close friends, social,” this did lead to improvement, because “she doesn’t have those bad influences on her.” Participant H stated that the student “misses all her friends,” however also shared that “I think it helps her focus a lot better, because she doesn’t have all the social issues going on around her.” Participant C explained that “the kids he meets online don’t live near him, so it’s hard to develop peer relationships” and that this is especially hard because “he longs to have friends.” Participant D also mentioned her student does not like the non-social aspect of virtual education, although it does help “having her removed from all that girl drama.”

Academics

Participants described other advantages of virtual education besides credit recovery and graduation. For example, Participant A felt “he doesn’t have to just read it like he did before, he can discuss it with us and there’s lots of videos in the virtual class.” Participant B had a similar statement saying “there’s hardly any lectures, so much of it is reading...and that’s all very short and you can pause it.” Participant D also liked that “there’s way more to read and examples, and not a lot of lectures because they don’t have to sit in class and listen to a teacher like her old school.” Participant B also liked that “she gets a personalized education...she gets a lot more attention from teachers.” Participant C liked that she could “supervise study time and make sure he’s doing his work.”

Participants saw that their students responded better to the online format, which helped them be successful academically. Participant E shared that “this is the first time she has ever

gotten A's and B's at school...I am amazed at the growth she is making as a student.”

Participant G saw advantages to virtual education in that it is “great for rural areas where students have access to limited curriculum and programs.” Similarly, Participant H explained that traditional schools are “always losing programs and downsizing due to budget cuts. Virtual education is always offering something new and pushes students academically.”

There were some academic drawbacks after enrolling that were referenced during the interviews. Participant A mentioned that “math classes are the hardest for the parent to coach and he needs to see it visually, so without the face-to-face availability it makes it hard to understand concepts.” Participant E, whose student has special learning needs, noted that, “when a student doesn't understand the material they only have one way of learning the material. There are not alternative assignments to help understanding.” The structure can also be a hurdle, as Participant D explained that their student has to “work on being organized and getting things done” in order to be successful.” Participant H also felt that “I think it's hard for her sometimes when she doesn't see the teacher every day.”

When reflecting back on their experiences, participants also anticipated that other students, not their own, might find potential drawbacks in virtual education. Participant A, based on their experience, stated, “I don't feel that virtual education is for everyone,” because they felt that that if a student did not have parental support that student would be unlikely to be successful. Participant C had a similar reflection, saying, “I don't think it's for everyone” despite the success they have seen in their own student.

In terms of academics, participants identified many traits or skills related to academics that they hoped their child would gain from virtual education. Participant D felt her student “was starting to get a handle on how being organized and using her time helps her.” Participant B also

hoped for increased organization as well as “motivation...to stay on top of it” for schoolwork. Participant C hoped her son would “gain his self-confidence back and I would like him to become an independent person.” Similarly, Participant B hoped her student would realized that “she has to be the one that does the work and knows what’s going on, I am seeing her do that more and more on her own.” Participant F also wanted his student to “become more independent and confident” as well as to “build the skills to work independently without someone standing over them, like in a regular classroom. Participant G also hoped for independence and confidence, which she hoped would eventually help her student graduate. Participant H also hoped that virtual education would provide the students the skills to “organize their time so they can meet their goals.”

Communication

Improved communication between home and school was another recurring theme as participants reflected on their experiences with virtual education since enrolling. Communication issues also impacted their decision to enroll in virtual education. There were 17 references to communication, or lack thereof in the interviews. Communication with the school and the ability to monitor student progress was one of the benefits participants reported in virtual education. The ability to login at any time and check student progress was referenced as an advantage by Participant A and D. Increased communication via teacher phone calls and emails was stated as a benefit by Participants A, D, and H.

Communication was most referenced as a negative experience at a former educational setting (four participants mentioned this issue). Participant A mentioned marked improvement in communication since enrolling in virtual education, saying “we found there is way better communication with teachers at [current virtual school] than there was before.” Participant

described this improved communication as “they do a really good job with calling us and emailing us and also the parent can login anytime to know where he is in each class.” The virtual setting had advantages for students as well, as in the in the case of Participant B whose student “can ask questions and she’s not shy about it because it’s through email or the phone, not in front of other kids.” Participant D’s student also felt there was improved communication because “one thing she likes is that she gets feedback from teachers and can see her grades on assignments right away.” Participant B also pointed out “her counselor contacts her once a week, and she has not had that experience at any school.”

Lack of communication in tradition school settings was described as a drawback for by Participant G, who reported that “teachers did not listen to parent concerns, did not have a relationship with teachers and there was very little communication with teachers.” In contrast, Participant B said, “a student can email a teacher any time and the teacher will email right back. The school provides conference calls.” Dismissal of parental concerns by the traditional school was expressed as a concern by Participant H, who said that “online teachers addressed concerns and communicated a lot better” whereas at the old school, “when I asked the teachers questions at parent-teacher conferences my concerns were dismissed.”

Serving Special Needs

The issue of how schools serve students with special needs occurred in reference to both research questions. When participants reflected on their experience since enrolling, the ability of online schools to serve the special needs of students was brought up repeatedly. But the lack of services for students with special needs was also mentioned by Participants A, C, and E in connection with traditional schools. Among the participants’ children, student special needs varied from formally identified disabilities to learning styles that were not compatible with

traditional school structure.

In examining the scope of special needs among the participants' students, two students were described as having documented disabilities and receiving special education services (Participants A and E). Two others were described as visual learners (Participant B and F). Two were described as having no special needs (Participant C and D), and three were described as having problems with focus (Participant F, G, and H described as having trouble with focus and being a visual learner). Participant A's documented disability was "vision problems which make writing and reading for long periods of time difficult" while Participant E's disability was "ADHD, medicated for focus, dyslexic and cognitively slow."

Talking about her student's visual learning style, Participant B said, "needs things in front of her, reads on the screen and the board," while Participant F was merely described as being a visual learner. Regarding focus, Participant F said, "she has no disabilities, but her learning style is independent, and she lacks focus." Participant G referred to her student as "very lazy, very talkative and she wants to learn at her own pace." Participant H stated that her student "focuses better when she has attention from teachers and administration. Her learning style is that she likes figuring out things on her own and she loves technology, which is why virtual education is such a great outlet." Even the participants that claimed their student had no special needs or learning styles did have some additional comments about them. Participant C stated that "he does not have a style, he sits and works until he's done, he is determined to finish and prove to everyone that he can do this." Participant D described her student as "she doesn't have a style, but she does need to be told what to do. She doesn't do well with lectures, she needs someone to describe and show examples."

Participants A, C, and F talked about the former school not serving their child's needs as

a point of dissatisfaction. Participant E blamed teacher ability as a reason her student was not making progress, saying, “the teacher didn’t know how to present the material to her because of her learning disability” and explained that “academic needs were not even close to being met in the brick and mortar setting because the teachers and administration battled over the IEP.” This family felt the very structure of traditional school was too much for their student, explaining that even when teachers made accommodations, “it wasn’t enough; he still had to do the work in class, and he still couldn’t focus or read.” Participant E agreed, saying that the online environment “would let her work at her own pace because she is slower in school. What I mean is, she gets the material eventually, but it takes her awhile to process it” which she could not get in a traditional setting.”

Participants A, B, E, F, and G referenced meeting the needs of their students as an advantage to virtual education. Participant B stated that “it is a personalized education, the child feels like they’re accomplishing something and achieving goals, building a stronger person and self-motivation.” Participant E stated that “I wish there was a version for students with learning needs. It’s an awesome curriculum for enrichment and much better than brick and mortar, but it could be difficult for kids with special needs.” With a completely positive response, Participant F said, “it is a fast-paced environment that tailors to the individual and allows for a diverse population of learners that don’t need to fill in the dead time like in brick and mortar.”

Flexibility

When reflecting on their experiences since enrolling, flexibility was referenced as a significant advantage in virtual education settings, as well as a reason for enrolling in virtual education. The flexibility of the online schedule was referred to as a major reason to select virtual education because students were able to participate in their schooling on their own

schedule and at their own pace. Flexibility in virtual education was said to be beneficial for students who had special learning needs that required them to work at a different pace, or for students who simply worked better when they had more flexibility in their work time. It also allowed participants a greater ability to travel as a family without being concerned about falling behind due to attendance. The online setting also gave participants a greater ability to supervise their students.

Some participants mentioned their student's ability to work faster and "not have to wait for teachers to go so slow and control the class" (Participant A). Participant E mentioned that the ability to go slower was a benefit saying, "we liked the online because it allowed her to move at a slower pace and still get a good education." Participant A stated that "he likes to get right to the point and feels that there's no mumbo jumbo in between." Participant F felt the real advantage was "the mobility and flexibility cannot be replicated in brick and mortar. It is also closer to what the real world is seeing in regards to technology." Participant G also felt that "I think the flexible schedule is the biggest benefit" and that "the flexibility helped her learning style, and they don't have that in brick and mortar."

For scheduling, the student's learning pace was also referenced as a benefit by Participant B, who said, "she can begin and end when she's done with work, schedules are posted online and organized and if she's done she doesn't have to sit in class." She also appreciated that "she can go at her own pace, she doesn't feel like she's slow or behind or the only one not getting it." Participant B also added, "sometimes she's more motivated and she gets more done, and when she's like that she can work ahead, and it makes up for times when she isn't so motivated and doesn't accomplish much. I think it is more like real life—some days are more productive for everyone, that's just how people work." This ability to tailor one's schedule was also shared by

Participant F, who said, “it allows the student to move at a pace that is conducive to her learning curve. She can take two weeks off and come back and learn at a fast pace to catch up with the class: Time is not wasted by having to sit in classes for eight hours when she can do it efficiently in two or three.” Participant D stated, “she can work ahead for credit recovery.” Participant E added, “she is on an IEP and has the freedom to move at her own pace.”

The flexible schedule was also seen as an advantage because it taught students how to budget their time and meet deadlines independently. Participant G explains that this helps because “her work at her own pace, instead of having to just wait for everyone to go through the book at the same time. I like the online school because she has a personalized schedule that is flexible, and she seems to be more motivated with it.” Participant G also appreciates the online format because “the online work is available 24 hours a day so they can work on it at any time. She has to manage herself to make sure she gets things done. In a regular class they might work on projects during a class, but in this school she has to meet deadlines on her own.” Participant F felt that this format fostered independence and stated, “I expect my daughters to build the skills to be able to work independently without someone standing over them, like in a regular classroom.”

The ability to travel while being enrolled in virtual education was referenced four times, as a benefit in relation to academics and social issues. Participant D explains “I have to travel out of town for business, and so she goes with me now, and does not miss any school that way.” Participant G shared a similar experience saying “it’s also nice to be able to leave town, which we do at times, and she can come along and I do not have to worry about her missing school.” Participant F also mentioned travel as an advantage saying “we travel a lot, and my job takes me out of the country, and so she doesn’t always have access to the internet so it is really important

to be able to work at a fast pace to catch up at times so she doesn't fall behind." The ability to supervise students to support their social and academic success was referenced seven times.

Travel and supervision were not mentioned as often as other themes, which have been discussed earlier, but they did present note-worthy frequency.

Conclusion

In the interview responses definite patterns emerged, with parents or guardians choosing virtual education due to a negative relationship with a former school. In general, participants reported satisfaction with their experience after enrolling. The majority of the parental concerns with previous educational settings had to do with academics and social issues, with participants seeing improvement after enrolling in virtual education in both areas. Most of the negative relationship with the former school seemed due to a lack of communication and a feeling that their child's needs were not being met, both of which improved after enrolling in virtual education. Participants saw both benefits and drawbacks to virtual education, yet the majority felt positive about their experience and had seen growth academically and socially in their children since enrolling.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusions

Introduction

After a discussion of the limitations of the study, the following conclusions will be discussed: 1) The main reasons families selected virtual education had to do with a negative relationship with a former school setting, which involved both academic and social issues for their child; 2) Participants were generally pleased with their experience in virtual education and saw improvement in both academics and social issues for their students; 3) The biggest benefits of virtual education were the flexibility and increased communication; 4) The biggest drawbacks were feelings of isolation and difficulty of staying organized.

Limitations of the Study

Although I used a criterion sample of parents or guardians of credit-deficient high school students, I found after the interviews that some of the students transferred into virtual education in middle school and some in high school, indicating that some had become credit deficient in virtual education. All of the participants reported improved academic performance in their children since enrolling, some had still failed classes. If I were to conduct this study again, this consideration would be added to the criteria for potential participants when approaching the school. In addition, I would attempt to draw out more background information from the parent or guardian to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of that student or family.

Another limitation in this study was my inability to interview participants in person. Although this would have been difficult geographically, as they were located all over the state, I do feel that I would have gotten more detailed information from the participants had we met in person. I also would create a more structured second interview, asking them about specific questions or statements they might want to expand on. Another limitation was that the length of

the interviews was far shorter than anticipated, thus providing less information than I would have liked to give a more comprehensive picture of why families select virtual education and their experiences in virtual education. I believe this was due to this being my first interview study. I did not draw enough information from the participants when they gave me a short answer. Also, I did not anticipate the participants being able to answer the questions so succinctly. I would create questions that would have required more explanation if I were to do such a study again.

The study only drew from one model of virtual education, and may have provided different results had the study investigated families who students were in multiple models of virtual education (hybrid schools with some classroom components, or models that require face-to-face sessions with teachers). Finally, the study only examined families that were currently enrolled in virtual education. The overall satisfaction expressed by the participants had to do with the fact that because their student is successful in virtual education; however, it is likely that there are a number of students that are not successful and went back to traditional school, and those families may have a different set of responses.

Conclusion 1: The main reasons families selected virtual education was due to a negative relationship with a former school setting, which involved both academic and social issues for their child.

All eight participants referenced a negative experience in a former educational setting. Many referenced multiple negative experiences in many different areas. Negative prior experience was by far the most commonly-occurring reference throughout the interviews, with a total of 26 references. However, the reasons for dissatisfaction with past educational experiences varied between participants. This negative relationship was often referred to when reflecting back on the decision to enroll in virtual education. Many of these negative relationships dealt

with students' special needs or special education services, which will be further discussed in later conclusions. When considering the first research question regarding what influences families to enroll in virtual education, special needs seems to be one main reason families choose virtual education, and is one thing they seem to be more satisfied with after enrolling in virtual education. This reflects past findings such as Prosser's (2011), which found that parents left traditional school settings because they felt that these settings were not meeting the needs of their students and because the social climate was not conducive to their child's success. Erb (2004) found the same results, stating that the "push" factors from the former setting (dissatisfaction with the school and staff), outweighed the "pull" factors of potential benefits of virtual education in families that made the decision to enroll in virtual schooling.

Six of the participants referenced that their children's academic needs, whether they received special services or simply had different learning needs, were not being met in their former setting, with one participant stating that the child's needs were somewhat being met, and this generated many of the references to negative relationships with the former school setting. The variety of needs in the virtual student population had also been noted in the literature, as Huett, Moller, Roshay and Coleman (2008), and Waters (2011) described virtual education as having a far more diverse student population with a far greater variety of learning styles than traditional schooling.

Families referenced a number of reasons for selecting virtual education. This is consistent with research that has found certain features of virtual education attractive to families: flexible scheduling, the ability to move at the student's own pace, the removal from the "mainstream" socialization of schooling, and the ability for a family to geographically relocate without interrupting schooling, (Davis & Niederhauser, 2007). However, upon analyzing the

reasons given by participants in this study, academic and social issues were the two predominant themes. These were the two areas that families struggled with in their former setting, and the two areas that they felt were most improved upon when reflecting on their experience in virtual education.

Academics and social issues were often intertwined in the interviews. Many families cited social issues as interfering with academic success in the former school setting and that students improved in virtual education academically because of removal from their peers. Social issues with peers were often described as distracting. Families hoped that virtual education would allow their child to be successful in gaining credits and graduating. They also hoped that their children would gain academic as well as other skills such as organization, self-discipline, motivation, and confidence. In a study of digital interfaces that support student success, Franklin (2011) also found that families felt that alternative options empowered students to take control of their own learning through such life skills.

With regards to social issues, bullying and “drama” were the most common complaints about negative experiences in former schools. Participants reported seeing a marked improvement in their children’s mental health (no longer depressed or suicidal) as a result as a removal from the traditional school social environment. This is also consistent with the literature that found that mental health and safety concerns (such as bullying) were a major factor in families’ decisions to enroll in virtual education (Erb, 2004).

Conclusion 2: Participants generally pleased with their experience in virtual education, and saw improvement in both academics and social issues for their students

When the participants reflected on virtual education now that they had experienced it, all eight participants had positive reflections. All of them were pleased with the decision, although

they did have some ideas about how it could be improved. This parental satisfaction reflects what is seen in the literature surrounding school choice. For example, the school that was used in this study is not necessarily academically stronger than the traditional schools that the students had attended previously, which was similar to what was seen in other studies of school choice programs in which parents were not necessarily drawn to academically stronger schools, but were more attracted to convenience (Nathanson, Corcoran, & Baker-Smith, 2013). The high level of satisfaction the participants expressed with their choice to enroll in virtual education is not atypical according to previous studies on school choice (Grady, Bielick, & Aud, 2010), especially when considering that many families involved their student in their choice to enroll in virtual education (Teske, Fitzpatrick, & Kaplan, 2007).

Conclusion 3: The greatest benefits of virtual education were flexibility and increased communication

When reflecting on their virtual education experience, all of the participants felt that their student was more successful in the virtual setting. An interesting note was that frequently the format of the education was cited as being the most useful aspect of online education. In other words, the flexibility of the schedule, the ability to work at one's own pace, the physical removal from peers, etc., were cited more frequently than the curriculum and teaching as benefits of virtual education. The online curriculum and the difficulty of changing it to fit students with special needs was mentioned as a drawback (due to the fact that the curriculum is pre-created by an outside company and cannot be changed by the school), but was clearly not enough to cause families to feel that virtual education was a lesser choice for their child. Some participants did express that their they and their children were happier with the online curriculum than with their

former school curriculum, and that it was more interesting for their child, but it was more often the flexibility of the platform that was appealing.

In the literature communication from teachers in virtual education settings was found to be a major indicator of virtual student success (Liminou & Cavanaugh, 2011; Limniou & Smith, 2010). Communication was especially found to be a factor for at-risk students' academic success (Baubour, 2011; Booker & Mitchell, 2011; Currie, 2010). With this in mind, it stands to reason that parents would feel this increased communication was a major support for their children. The communication was also tied to the format of virtual education, as participants reported teachers were more proactive about emailing, answering concerns and calling in the virtual environment.

Conclusion 4: The biggest drawbacks of online education were feelings of isolation and difficulty staying organized

The largest drawback of online education reported by the parents interviewed was the feeling of isolation, which was noted by Participants B, F, G and H. Participants A and E mentioned a lack of face-to-face interaction with teachers made it difficult to clarify difficult concepts, especially in math. This is also seen in the literature. Reid, Aqui and Putney (2009), Limniou and Smith (2010), and Shoaf (2007), noted that isolation and limited social engagements created hurdles for success for virtual students. This is interesting because this isolation from peers was noted as a benefit in previous responses, yet was still referred to as a drawback of online education.

Implications of this Study

The findings for this study will directly affect me as a virtual high school principal. The majority of the students enrolled in my school are credit-deficient, and have had a previous

academic experience where they were unsuccessful. While I do communicate with families a great deal, I do not always know what made them decide to enroll their student in virtual education or have a detailed history of their past educational experiences. Based on this limited sample, I can begin to see trends in why families choose virtual education and what have been major concerns in the past. I do see that academics are a major concern for my students, since a number of them continue to struggle, and social issues are something that are regularly discussed with our students, including the problems they have had in the past.

From my perspective as an administrator, this information helps me consider what social supports and resources we have in place for students, especially since at some point they may return to a traditional school environment or the workforce. I feel my school needs to do some work to ensure that students have the social skills they need to be successful. Also the number of references to the lack of communication in former settings (which led to enrolling in virtual education for some participants), need to be a consideration for virtual educators, in order to increase communication to support student success.

Recommendations for Future Research

As virtual education grows and evolves, the implications for future research are almost endless. The gap in the literature regarding family selection of and experience with virtual education were among the reasons that I opted to conduct this study. This is especially important considering the wide spectrum of needs in the virtual education student population. I believe that the best way to address those needs is by understanding why families enroll and what they experience.

This study looked only at high school students and their families. The reasons for enrollment in online schools and the experiences with it may vary in elementary and secondary

student families. Additionally, the students in this sample were credit-deficient and at-risk of not graduating, which may tie into their negative experiences with former schools and thus color their experience of online education. Researching the same questions with TAG or “average” students may provide different results. Speaking with students directly would likely provide for different information as well.

In conclusion, virtual education is still fairly new and learning about how to best meet the needs of its diverse students should be of paramount concern for teachers and administrators in these schools. Without accurate information about the students we serve, these credit-deficient students run the risk of being unsuccessful in yet another school setting and not graduating. While this is a limited study, the recurring themes in the responses do point to some areas that the participants shared in their experiences both in their past settings and in virtual education, This is an excellent starting point from which to begin to better serve the needs of these families.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

1. What is your relationship with the student (mother, father, guardian)?
2. What gender is your child? What year in school (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior)?
3. What do you feel were your reasons in selecting virtual education for your child?
4. Who do you feel drove the decision to enroll in virtual education (you, your student, his or her former school)?
5. What do you feel are some of the benefits of virtual education?
6. What are some of the drawbacks?
7. Describe your student's past educational experience: Do you feel their academic needs were met? What type of school did they attend before virtual education?
8. What do you hope your child will gain from virtual education?
9. What are your child's special needs or learning styles?
10. Do you feel that virtual education is serving your child's needs/learning style better than brick and mortar education? Why or why not?
11. What are your reflections about virtual education now that your student has experienced it?

APPENDIX B

Outreach Email to Schools for Participants

August 26, 2013

Dear JD McMahan: Head of School, Insight of Oregon

My name is Todd Schweitzer and I am a doctoral student in the educational leadership program at George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon. I am conducting research about the reasons parents or guardians select online education for their child. I am requesting to interview 8 sets of parents from Insight of Oregon that will last approximately 60 minutes and will take place at a public library near their home. The interview will be a series of questions that focus on their decision to enroll their child in online education. The findings of the research will be used to better support the students and families in their decision to enroll in an online education program.

Following the initial interview an interpretation of the interview responses will be shared with them via email followed by a brief phone interview to verify the accuracy of the interpretation and to give them a chance to expand on any of their responses.

The risks associated with this research are minimal. The personal interview questions are designed in such a manner to allow them to reflect on their experiences with selecting online education. Their participation is completely voluntary and may decline to continue at any time or decline to answer any question at their discretion.

The results of this study will only be used for research purposes in relation to the completion of my dissertation at George Fox University and may be used for presentations at a professional conference and/or academic publications. The personal interviews will be recorded and later transcribed. The information received from the interviews will be analyzed and presented in a manner that maintains their confidentiality. No individual will be personally identified. I will work to maintain that their personal information and identity be kept confidential and anonymous.

All research materials (i.e., audio recordings, transcriptions, and signed consent forms) will be locked in separate, secure locations for a period of no less than three years. I will be the only individual who will have access to these materials. After three years, I will personally destroy all relevant materials and delete audio recordings.

I truly appreciate your consideration in helping with this research and if allowed to do so, you are making a contribution to future families considering online education. If you have any questions regarding this research, please contact me at 541-306-1395. If you have any additional questions, you may contact my dissertation chair at George Fox University, Dr. Sue Harrison, sharrison@georgefox.edu

If you understand the use of this research and agree to allow me to conduct these interviews with Insight of Oregon parents, please respond by signing this letter.

Signature _____

JD McMahan

Signature _____

Todd Schweitzer

APPENDIX C

Consent to Participate in the Study and Acknowledgment Form- This form was sent to potential participants. By responding to the email they are agreeing to participate. A signed copy of the form was given to me at the initial interview.

Date _____

Dear families,

My name is Todd Schweitzer and I am a doctoral student in the educational leadership program at George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon. I am conducting research about the reasons parents or guardians select online education for their child. You are invited to engage in a phone interview that will last approximately 60 minutes. The interview will be a series of questions that focus on your decision to enroll your child in online education. The findings of the research will be used to better support the students and families in their decision to enroll in virtual education.

Following the initial interview an interpretation of the interview responses will be shared with you via email followed by a brief phone interview to verify the accuracy of the interpretation and to give you a chance to expand on any of your responses.

The risks associated with this research are minimal. The personal interview questions are designed in such a manner to allow you to reflect on your experiences with selecting virtual education. Your participation is completely voluntary and you may decline to continue at any time or decline to answer any question at your discretion.

The results of this study will only be used for research purposes in relation to the completion of my dissertation at George Fox University and may be used for presentations at a professional conference and/or academic publications. The personal interviews will be recorded and later transcribed. The information received from the interviews will be analyzed and presented in a manner that maintains your confidentiality. No individual will be personally identified. I will work to maintain your personal information and identity confidential.

All research materials (i.e., audio recordings, transcriptions, and signed consent forms) will be locked in separate, secure locations for a period of no less than three years. I will be the only individual who will have access to these materials. After three years, I will personally destroy all relevant materials and delete audio recordings.

I truly appreciate your consideration of participation in this project. If you decide to participate, please be aware that you are making a contribution to future families considering virtual education. If you have any questions regarding this research, please contact me at 541-306-1395. If you have any additional questions, you may contact my dissertation chair at George Fox University, Dr. Sue Harrison, sharrison@georgefox.edu

If you understand the use of this research and agree to participate, please respond to this email so we can set up a time to begin the process. Please bring a signed copy of this form to the initial interview for me to hold on file as your consent to participate.

Participant Signature _____

Researcher Signature _____