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# Student Perceptions on a Virtual Credit Recovery Program

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# STUDENT PERCEPTIONS ON A VIRTUAL CREDIT RECOVERY PROGRAM

By

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined the perceptions and lived experiences of four successful online credit recovery students in a rural high school in northwestern Oregon. Each of the students had failed at least one high school course in a traditional face-to-face setting and subsequently enrolled in and passed at least one equivalent course in an online credit recovery environment. Personal interviews were utilized to document the students' perspectives concerning their sense of community belongingness, motivation, and the effectiveness of their online credit recovery course design and delivery.

The analysis of the data identified five main themes: (a) an in-person teacher/facilitator is an important factor in online credit recovery, (b) graduation is a primary motivation to keep going in virtual credit recovery courses, (c) fewer distractions from peers in virtual credit recovery helped students' course progression, (d) constant pace and progress visibility had an impact on academic motivation, and (e) the support of personal connections is important for online credit recovery students as they progress academically. This study suggests that the support of a variety of stakeholders, a caring and engaged course facilitator/teacher, healthy peer relationships, individually tailored pace and progress data, and a focus on graduation can be crucial components of the recipe for academic success in virtual credit recovery courses.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Online education has revolutionized how, when, and where education can be provided. Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century there has been tremendous growth in elementary, secondary, as well as post-secondary online education (Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut, 2016; Gemin & Pape, 2017). Much of the increase in online course enrollments have taken place on the secondary level (Gemin & Pape, 2017; Miron & Gulosino, 2016; Queen & Lewis 2011).

On behalf of the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics, Queen and Lewis (2011) reported that there were over 1.8 million enrollments in distance-education courses in American K-12 public school districts during the 2009–2010 school year. Seventy-four percent, or over 1,340,000 students, were enrolled in high school online level courses. Between the 2012-2013 and 2015-2016 school years the enrollment rates of K-12 students in online courses grew 80% (Gemin & Pape, 2017). During that same time period the number of school districts offering online or blended courses grew by over 50% in the United States (Gemin & Pape, 2017). Virtual K-12 schools in North America have a forecasted growth of an additional 12.8% through 2021 (Technavio, 2017). This growth is believed to be, partially, a response to increased online course demand and a larger range of curriculum and content being offered in online platforms (Technavio, 2017).

The U.S. Department of Education (2018) sponsored the National Survey on High School Strategies Designed to Help At-Risk Students Graduate (HSS). The HSS defines credit recovery as “strategies that encourage at-risk students to re-take a previously failed course required for high school graduation” (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, para 3). Findings from the HSS’s

2014-2015 school year survey show that the following factors impact the effectiveness of a credit-recovery program: graduation rate, school location, school size, and school poverty (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). By 2014-2015, 89% of U.S. high schools offered at least one credit recovery course to students and at least 15% of all high school students took one or more credit recovery courses during their secondary education enrollment. HSS further reported that 71% of credit recovery classes were provided online, followed by blended courses, with the least amount of credit recovery courses offered in a traditional classroom setting (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Heppen, Allensworth, Sorenson, Rickles, Walters, Taylor, Michelman, and Clemens (2016) reported that secondary students who failed a math class in a traditional setting were likely to enroll in an online credit recovery course. This pattern is becoming more commonplace as online credit recovery courses become more prevalent.

While the drastic increase in virtual credit recovery course enrollments have risen, an equally dramatic trend has received less attention: high drop-out rates in these courses (Roblyer, Davis, Mills, Marshall, and Pape, 2008). Hachey, Wladis, and Conway (2012) even found that there was a higher drop-out rate in virtual courses than in traditional face-to-face courses. This trend represents a particular challenge for online credit recovery programs.

My professional work has allowed me to engage with over 1000 virtual high school students residing both in the United States and abroad. Many of these students have verbalized three distinct difficulties with persistence related to their course work:

- 1) Feeling a lack of school community in the virtual setting
- 2) Difficulty staying motivated enough to consistently complete virtually presented coursework
- 3) Perceived limitations with peer and instructor interactions in the virtual space

In reflecting on feedback expressed by my former students three separate groups of students that desire an online secondary education stand out and have been identified in scholarly literature. The first group consists of students who perceive traditional schools to be a poor fit for them due to social, medical, or some other non-academic reason (Foundation for Blended and Online Learning & Evergreen Education Group, 2017). The second group consists of students who are academically gifted but occasionally bored with traditional classroom settings perceived as not being academically challenging (Allen & Seaman, 2011). The third group, and the focus of this study, is comprised of students who have struggled in the traditional classroom environment and approach the virtual space through credit recovery courses (Hachey et al., 2012). As this academically vulnerable group of students is growing in the United States, the importance of understanding their perspectives on virtual education is important (Pettyjohn & LaFrance, 2014).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of a small sample of students who had been successful in an online credit recovery environment. These were students who previously failed at least one academic course in a face-to-face setting and then enrolled in and passed at least one online credit recovery course to make up the missing credit(s). This study evaluated students' experiences and perceptions of the factors that led to their successful online course completion. Specifically, I utilized personal interviews to explore students' experiences and perceptions concerning their sense of community belongingness, motivation, and the effectiveness of the online credit recovery course design and delivery. An analysis of the data offers a greater understanding of students' perceptions of what

aspects of secondary virtual education have a positive impact on their online academic experience.

Much of the literature concerning the perspectives of students engaged in virtual learning environments has focused on post-secondary enrollees (Cigdem & Ozturk, 2016; Hamm, Perry, Chipperfield, Parker, & Heckhausen, 2018; LaBarbera, 2013; Lundberg & Sheridan, 2015; McBrien, Cheng, & Jones, 2009; Parenti, 2013; Xie & Huang, 2014). There is a thin amount of literature concerning virtual secondary students in general and virtual secondary credit recovery students in particular. This study aimed to add data in this area by seeking a better understanding of the variables a sample of students attributed to their successful online credit recovery course completion. These insights will also provide schools and districts a better understanding of the factors that can help motivate and influence the success of virtual credit recovery students as they design and expand their virtual credit recovery options.

### **Background of the Study**

An increase in credit recovery courses being offered through school districts can be traced back to the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) which was passed in 2001 and signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2002. NCLB (2002) required states to set goals for improving their graduation rates. NCLB (2002) was also intended to hold school districts accountable for dropout rates by 2012 by providing financial incentives, principal evaluations, and increased salaries for teachers and administrators. Pettyjohn and LaFrance (2014) noted that more than a million secondary students drop out of high school each year, and 60% of them failed to earn one full year of ninth grade credits. In 2015, The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) updated and effectively replaced NCLB. ESSA (2015) offers student support and academic grants that provide federal funding for states and school districts that

choose to design and offer credit recovery courses specifically designed to help at-risk students master previously failed content required for high school graduation.

As the need for credit recovery courses has grown, secondary schools have increasingly turned to online learning to meet this demand (Gemin, Pape, Vashaw & Watson, 2015; Heppen et al., 2016; Pettyjohn & LaFrance, 2014; Powell, Roberts, & Patrick, 2015). Some proponents of online education indicate that online learning can supply an individualized answer to credit recovery needs and can offer courses that enable students the ability to skip through portions of the course they have already mastered via pre- and post-testing (Nastu, 2011). Online credit recovery programs may also provide students with critical mistake frameworks that can help them understand why they selected particular incorrect responses on an assessment without the need for human instructional input (Nastu, 2011).

Critics have voiced concerns regarding the academic rigor and lack of instructional assistance in online credit recovery courses. Online credit recovery courses have been described as only supplying students with the bare minimum needed to pass (Powell et al., 2015). Students who have failed traditional high school courses may need specialized and/or individualized support to succeed (Oliver, Osborne, Patel, & Kleiman, 2009). It is uncertain how these needs are met in many online credit recovery environments (Lee, Pate, & Cozart, 2015; Oliver et al., 2009). Designers of online courses have struggled to address both of these issues over the years (Lee et al., 2015; Malkus, 2018; Oliver et al., 2009). For these reasons, the findings derived from this study are especially needed to document the perceived level of academic difficulty, the nature of support the participants reported that they received while enrolled in credit recovery courses, and the impact of these factors on their success in completing virtual credit recovery high school courses.

## Research Questions

As the intent of this study was to gain a better understanding of the factors that enabled students who struggled in traditional high schools to be successful in an online credit recovery environment, the specific research questions are designed to explore a variety of issues. Three research questions served to structure and guide this effort:

### *Research Question #1*

How does this sample of students describe their experience of school community belongingness?

### *Research Question #2*

How does this sample of students describe their motivation to complete online recovery work?

### *Research Question #3*

How does this sample of students describe the effectiveness of the instructional design and delivery of their online recovery experience?

## Definition of Terms

*Asynchronous Instruction.* Instruction that can be accessed at different times and in different locations. This may include podcasts, vodcasts, recorded lectures, and/or recorded webinars (Allen & Seaman, 2011).

*Blended Course.* A course that occurs in both virtual and face-to-face settings.

*Credit Recovery.* Coursework specifically designed to help at-risk students master previously failed course content required for high school graduation.

*Credit Recovery Student.* A student who is enrolled in at least one credit-recovery class.

*Credit Recovery Virtual Program.* Credit-recovery courses that are provided in a virtual environment for the purpose of students retaking previously failed courses required for high school graduation.

*Distance Education.* Education that does not take place in face-to-face real time classrooms (Allen & Seaman, 2011).

*Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).* A law passed in 2015 that oversees public education in the United States. The ESSA replaced the No Child Left Behind Act. The ESSA offers academic grants that provide federal funding for credit recovery courses specifically designed to help at-risk students master previously failed content required for high school graduation.

*Extrinsic Motivation.* Behavior focused on the tangible outcomes of completing certain activities (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

*Intrinsic Motivation.* The behavior that takes place despite the lack of motivation from tangible outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

*No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002).* An act that authorized federal education programs to be overseen and administered by individual states. NCLB emphasized accountability and provisions for disadvantaged students.

*Online Readiness.* Having the digital skills needed to use the internet to engage in an online course and share content online (Cigdem & Ozturk, 2016).

*School Community Belongingness.* An established social bond between students, school faculty, school staff, and peers (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1990).

*Self-efficacy.* One's belief in one's own ability to complete a task (Chang, Liu, Sung, Lin, Chen, & Chen, 2014).

*Successful Credit Recovery Student.* For the purpose of this study a credit recovery student is considered successful if he or she has passed at least one online credit recovery course in a secondary school program.

*Synchronous Instruction.* Instruction that takes place in real time, but not in the same place. Synchronous instruction can take place through text chat, video chat, or in virtual classrooms (Crews & Neill, 2014).

*Traditional High School Course.* A high school course that is taught in a face-to-face classroom setting.

*Virtual.* Instructional delivery system that takes place via the internet. For the purpose of this study the terms ‘virtual’ and ‘online’ are used interchangeably throughout this report.

### **Significance of the Study**

Researchers have documented the growth of online classes being used as the main mode for secondary credit recovery courses (Heppen et al., 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2018). However, secondary online courses as a whole have a higher failure rate than traditional face-to-face secondary courses (Burzichelli, Mackey, & Bausmith, 2011; Hachey et al., 2012; Roblyer et al., 2008). These findings suggest that secondary virtual credit recovery students are among the least likely to graduate, however, many succeed and subsequently graduate. This notable finding, concerning the factors contributing to the success of credit recovery students, can be important for scholars who wish to examine the high school attrition literature as well as contribute ideas for credit recovery course design.

### **Limitations and Delimitations of the Study**

As with any scholarly study, there are a number of important limitations and delimitations associated with this investigative effort. Two prominent limitations are noteworthy regarding this study. First, the study used personal, face-to-face interviews with a small number of young adults. The intimacy of this type data collection technique created a greater likelihood of the social desirability effect (Maxwell, 2005). This is a potential difficulty that qualitative



researchers must guard against by attempting to achieve a balance between building both appropriate rapport and maintaining social distance in the interview setting (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). The researcher continually and consciously gauges the nature of the social interaction of the interview and must be careful to not encourage a social desirability effect by appearing too agreeable. At the same time, the researcher must not convey an air of clinical detachment either (Josselson, 2013).

A second limitation also relates to the social desirability effect. That is, this study, common to qualitative research, used a limited number of participants to explore the issues of concern to this investigation. Obviously, the use of a small number of individuals can generate only a limited set of perceptions and cannot be construed as representative of all graduates of credit recovery programs. Thus, the findings must be accepted with the understanding of that limitation inherent in qualitative research (Daniel, 2011; Huffman, 2013; Lindemann, 2017).

Along with the limitations of the study, two delimitations served as important boundaries of the study. First, the subjects in this study were participants who were enrolled in credit recovery courses in a singular Oregon high school. This decision was based on accessibility to the participants and the ability to recruit them to the study. While there are certainly advantages in documenting the perceptions of individuals from different credit recovery programs, as this study was clearly exploratory in nature, such a delimitation in the use of one research setting is not uncommon or inappropriate (Maxwell, 2005).

A second delimitation was the decision to use participants 18 years or older who had already successfully passed at least one online credit recovery course. There are a number of reasons for this delimitation. Obviously, it is easier to conduct research with adults who can offer their own personal consent for research. However, a more important reason was that this

research attempted to examine the participants' reflections on the factors that contributed to their successful online credit recovery course completion. As this is the whole point of the research study, it would not have made as much sense to use those who have not yet been successful in completing a credit recovery course. In essence, that would be an entirely different study.

### **Bracketing**

My educational career has taken place in various environments impacted by credit recovery and/or online learning. I had the opportunity, in 2003, to serve in a high school that offered hybrid credit recovery courses to students who had not been academically successful in traditional high school classrooms. As the science department head I helped select, create, and present virtual credit recovery science curricula. Improvements and updates to the curricula were made following reviews of state standards and regular meetings with school instructors and administrators. Some assignments and presentation formats were modified for clarity following an evaluation of student feedback. The productive process of gathering, evaluating, and taking students' experiences and perceptions into account as curricular and lesson plans were designed have stuck with me to this day.

In 2008 I had the opportunity to help launch a two-pronged online school program that offered private virtual courses for high-achieving students and partnered with local school districts across the United States to introduce or add to existing secondary online course options. Many of these courses were credit recovery in nature. In 2011 the online school program partnered with a university on the U.S. east coast to start an elite online high school to serve academically-motivated students living across the world. I moved into the role of Dean of Students for the school in 2012. Part of my responsibility in that role was to design and oversee

online and offline opportunities for students to interact with each other and build a sense of school community belongingness in the face of geographical divides.

At the time of this study I serve as the Director of Technology and Data Management in a public school district in Oregon. Part of my responsibility in this role is to suggest, recommend, and support classroom technology ranging from hardware and software applications to online programs and learning management systems. I am also responsible for overseeing the submission of annual accountability reports, including those referencing graduation rates, to the Oregon Department of Education.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

The United States has a high rate of students who do not graduate from a traditional high school setting where coursework is delivered in a face-to-face format (United States Department of Education, 2018). Of these students, many enroll in virtual courses to earn credits that can count toward either a traditional public high school diploma or a virtual high school diploma. Unfortunately, there is also a low rate of secondary online course completion in the United States. Burzichelli et al. (2011) suggested that one of the main reasons students drop out of online schools is a lack of peer interactions. Hachey et al. (2012) added that students engaged in online learning reported that their chief reason for dropping out was due to difficulties in engaging in the virtual school environment. Adding to the complexity is the number of issues that merge together to create challenges for students who have struggled with traditional, face-to-face, education and who subsequently turn to online learning to achieve the goal of graduation.

This chapter will present relevant literature associated with the intricate issues facing online recovery credit education efforts. Specifically, I will review the literature related to each of the three research questions presented in the previous chapter. The literature review includes an examination of literature associated with (a) a sense of belongingness in online learning, (b) factors influencing student motivation in online academic success, and (c) the dynamics of online teacher roles and interactions.

## **Belongingness and Online Learning**

High school is a challenging time for many students. For students involved in online learning developing a sense of belongingness is especially challenging. There are a number of important dimensions associated with a sense of belongingness in the online learning context, but three stand out in the literature: the nature of peer relationships, the scale of social interaction, and the use of various teaching strategies designed to enhance a sense of belonging for students.

**Nature of peer relationships.** School age youth typically spend many years interacting and forming relationships with those in a common cohort. The nature of these peer relationships has a major impact on an initial development of self-concept, self-esteem, and even academic performance for young people (Vanhalst, Luyckx, & Goossens, 2014). Indeed, scholarly research has consistently documented the important connection between the nature of peer relationships and consequences for youth. For instance, Liem and Martin (2011) evaluated responses from 1,436 secondary students who self-reported perceptions on peer relationships' impact on academic and non-academic self-esteem. They found that peer relationships had at least an indirect role in respect to academic and non-academic outcomes via school engagement. Likewise, Jones, Audley-Piotrowski, and Kiefer (2012) evaluated data from adolescents included in the 2002 Education Longitudinal Study (ELS). The ELS monitored the transition of a national sample of students (with a demographic resemblance to the educational landscape of the United States) as they transitioned from tenth grade through high school graduation and even various post-secondary activities. These researchers sought to identify the role friendships play in the academic outcomes of students. They removed multivariate outliers from the larger sample and ultimately analyzed data from 8,040 students who were tenth graders in 2002. Jones et al. (2012) concluded that perceptions of friends' academic behaviors were positively related to academic

performance when perceptions of social relationships aligned with one's self-concept. Jones et al. (2012) further suggested that perceptions of friends' social behaviors were negatively related to math self-concept and academic performance. If the self-concept was positive, the adolescent thrived; if it was negative, he or she did not.

Consistent with these findings, Furrer and Skinner (2003) also reported a statistically significant positive connection between the nature of peer relations and various outcomes. They argued that positive peer relations were critical for students' academic and non-academic functioning. Wentzel, Barry, and Caldwell (2004) went so far as to assert that perceived support from peers appears to be more strongly related to middle-schoolers' pursuit of social goals than was perceived support from their parents and teachers.

In a review of the literature, Zheng, Burrow-Sanchez, Jason, and Drew (2010) concluded that forming positive peer relationships is essential to successful online education. Yet, they also pointed out that establishing good relations is one of the most troublesome aspects of online learning for parents and teachers. Students, however, seem to have more ambivalent feelings about the nature of peer relations and find other outlets to form connections with friends.

**Scale of social interaction.** While it makes intuitive sense that the nature of peer relationships should be associated with self-esteem and ultimate academic performance (as scholarly research documents), it is less clear how these types of social relations relate to students enrolled in online learning environments. Generally, the focus (and concern) has been on the scale of social involvement with peers for students engaged in online learning. Essentially, the concern is that online learning is frequently an isolated and highly individualized activity. As such, the prevailing notion is that online students may lack the necessary social involvement needed to create positive peer relations (Lewis, Gonzalez, & Kaufman, 2012).

Families identify a variety of reasons why they find online high school education a viable option. Students who consider themselves shy, have a medical condition preventing them from attending a traditional school, or have been bullied may take comfort in a virtual learning environment with limited interpersonal interactions (Hinduja & Patchin, 2013). Other students may have sought the virtual environment because they were getting into trouble in public school, traveled frequently, or did not feel academically challenged in the traditional public school system (Kilgore, 2013). In a comprehensive report evaluating social skills of online public school students, Sivin-Kachala and Bialo (2009) reported that regardless of the reason for seeking a virtual school venue, the majority of parents raised concerns about the quantity and quality of socialization opportunities in virtual school settings. Clearly, the scale of social interaction available to online students is an issue of concern for parents, teachers, scholars, and likely, students themselves.

In a mixed methods research approach, Kilgore (2013) found that social involvement for students engaged in online learning could be difficult, but not impossible, to achieve. The 10 high school students in her study found a variety of ways to build social interaction with others, such as online chats and even special outings. Frequently, these activities required the assistance of parents and teachers. For example, teachers sometimes deliberately built into the online learning experience synchronous sessions to assist in social engagement. This technique has also been documented by other researchers (Crews & Neill, 2014; Martin & Parker, 2014).

In a study involving 247 high school students and their mothers in China, Luebbe, Tu, and Fredrick (2018) reported a relationship between parental anxiety over the lack of social involvement for their children engaged in online learning and the anxiety reported by the students. In this instance, the anxiety of the parents was reflected in the anxiety experienced by

their children. The authors suggested that parents likely projected their concern over the nature of social isolation and lack of social interaction onto their children who then reflected the emotions of their parents. In this respect, social isolation became something of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Interestingly, some scholars warn that online students may be vulnerable to other important gaps in their education due to the socially isolated nature of online learning. For instance, Oztok (2015) contends that because online students frequently lack contact with racial and ethnically diverse students, prevailing stereotypes and prejudices may not have a chance to be challenged. Moreover, online curriculum, in his estimation, often does not engage students adequately on issues of social injustice and equity. He argued that online learning can potentially include a “hidden curriculum” of whiteness that involves an absence of meaningful discourse, both academically and interpersonally, on racial and social justice.

Parents and teachers have created a number of strategies to assuage the concern over social isolation and build the scale of social interaction for online students. These can include online social-networking tools as well as in-person field trips, proms, and clubs (Davis, 2011). The ease of accessing the internet grew exponentially in the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in western societies. This was not the case in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century when Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukhopadhyay, and Scherlis (1998) provided internet connections to 446 participants who had previously never had access. Kraut et al. (1998) sought to evaluate the effects of regular internet use on psychological well-being. The researchers suggested that high amounts of internet use were negatively associated with social involvement. In revisiting a sample of 208 participants from the original Kraut et al. (1998) study, Kraut, Kiesler, Boneva, Cummings, Helgeson, and Crawford (2002) reported that internet use could lead to fewer



positive social interactions when the virtual communication was a substitute for face-to-face interactions. Yet, more meaningful internet interactions as a supplement to (rather than a substitute for) interpersonal interactions were considered positive and could lead to increased social involvement and psychological well-being (Kraut et al., 2002). The point is that the social dynamics of internet use and online interpersonal relations are continuously evolving. Social normative behavior and expectations are changing and becoming more familiar to individuals. For the generations of young people who have grown-up in the digital age, it is likely that forming online social relations may not seem as formidable or unfamiliar as has been for older generations (Barnes, 2012). If that is the case, perhaps the concerns over the social isolation of online students may not be as alarming as frequently suggested. The perspectives of those who have successfully completed online high school education courses can offer insights into literature concerned with the role of social interactions in a virtual space.

**Teaching strategies and building belongingness.** Recognizing the need to build community into online learning, many educators are undertaking deliberate attempts to infuse a sense of belonging into the curriculum and learning experience (Davis, 2011). An example of this is the popularity of group work exercises for online students that are designed to encourage peer interactions (Akyol & Garrison, 2008). Suchan and Hayzak (2001) suggested that team members who spend time getting to know each other at the onset of a newly created group establish a greater sense of trust and work better over time. Suchan and Hayzak (2001) also noted that there appeared to be miscommunication between team members of different cultures as they interacted through technology that may have been avoided in a face-to-face setting.

Akyol and Garrison (2008) evaluated the perceptions of students who were instructed as a group in synchronous virtual sessions followed by asynchronous discussions. They found that

a sense of school community belongingness from synchronous peer interactions was positively related to student engagement in class discussions and overall student satisfaction. In their study, students who did not attend all synchronous sessions were less engaged in following course discussions than their peers who attended the synchronous sessions. The students who chose not to attend all synchronous sessions also reported a negative perception of school community belongingness (Akyol & Garrison, 2008).

Akyol and Garrison (2008) pointed to another important teaching strategy, namely, the use of synchronous as opposed to asynchronous instruction as a means to boost student engagement and interpersonal connections. Asynchronous instruction may take place at different times and at different places and generally occurs at each individual's pace. Asynchronous tools in virtual classes often take the form of discussion posts and/or collaborative group assignments. Synchronous instruction, on the other hand, takes place in real time with students located in different places scheduled to meet together. Synchronous tools can provide a way for students and teachers to interact in real time. Synchronous interactions in virtual classrooms may occur through a live platform such as Zoom, Blackboard Collaborate, or BlueJeans. Other synchronous tools can include webinars, text chats, and video or application sharing. The prevailing notion is that synchronous instruction is more effective in motivating students and serves to improve student engagement in online courses (Crews & Neill, 2014).

Martin and Parker (2014) examined the reasons why higher education instructors chose to add synchronous virtual classrooms to their online courses and how they utilized them. A survey was sent out to two University listservs and two LinkedIn groups consisting of online post-secondary online educators. Seventy-nine online instructors responded to the survey reflecting on how and when they used synchronous online instruction. Findings from the research revealed

that most instructors chose to use synchronous instruction for the following reasons: (a) increased social presence, (b) their institution had provided them with the resources and platform for synchronous instruction, and (c) the ability to enhance the educational experience and enrich learning. Results from the survey further identified text chats and the ability to record a live session and view it later as valuable tools for teachers. Moreover, a significant number of the instructors indicated they used synchronous instruction as a means to engage students from different geographical places and to develop a sense of community and desired culture in the online course (Martin & Parker, 2014).

McBrian et al. (2009) focused on students in graduate and undergraduate courses to understand the impact of asynchronous learning as part of an online classroom. The authors of the study collected 62 surveys with four short answer questions related to the use of Elluminate, a live virtual classroom platform. Results from the study showed that students were generally satisfied with using an asynchronous tool as part of their online classroom and did not regard the lack of social engagement as a major problem (McBrian et al., 2009). However, it should be noted that this study involved older students who may have had less of a need to satisfy social connections in their online learning compared to their secondary counterparts.

Obodai (2018) addressed the issue of student belongingness in online courses in a study focused on the relationship between synchronous instruction, student engagement, and passing rates. Study findings suggested that the more synchronous opportunities offered to students in a virtual course, the higher the participation rate in the course. Additionally, students felt less socially isolated which suggested a greater sense of belonging.

Laffey, Lin, and Lin (2006) utilized two surveys with 107 post-secondary students enrolled in at least one online undergraduate course to evaluate the construct of social ability in

an online learning environment. These researchers suggested that increased opportunities for social interactions were positively associated with learning satisfaction and intentions to use technology to complete coursework. While this study used undergraduate students rather than high school students, the findings still appear to imply that when students connected with peers there was less need for teacher presence in a virtual course in order to foster a sense of community.

### **Student Motivation and Academic Success**

An important factor for anyone's educational success is simply personal motivation to succeed (Duckworth, 2016). Not surprisingly, scholars have focused research on personal motivation and success in online learning. The results of these efforts revealed the importance of personal determination to achieve in the virtual educational environment.

**Academic intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.** There are two sides to personal motivation: intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation can be defined as focused on the tangible outcomes of completing certain activities (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation can be regarded as the behavior that is internally driven and that takes place despite the lack of motivation from tangible outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Both types of motivation are important when striving to achieve academically (Lepper, Curpus, & Iyengar 2005; Shafqat, Iqbal & Ijaz, 2017). As such, this section will include literature dealing with both forms of academic motivation.

Intrinsically motivated behavior is generally derived from an overall sense of satisfaction, which serves as the incentive for specific behavior. Intrinsically motivated persons are typically motivated to complete tasks for no other reason than personal satisfaction (Deci, Nezlek, & Sheinman, 1981). Research has shown the positive impact of intrinsic motivation on school

performance, perseverance, and overall enjoyment of education for students (Bolkan, Goodboy, & Griffin, 2011; Bosch, Mentz, & Reitsma, 2019; Deci et al., 1981). Further, Gottfried (1990) identified a shift in intrinsic motivation among students as they grew older. Using a longitudinal study of students starting at age nine through the end of high school, Gottfried (1990) started with the hypothesis that students' intrinsic academic motivation stayed the same or increased throughout their secondary school years as students grew older. At age nine, it was discovered that students had developed a significant level of intrinsic motivation. However, contrary to Gottfried's hypothesis, the results also revealed that there was an overall mean decline in intrinsic motivation for students as they progressed through secondary school.

Reporting similar findings to Gottfried (1990), Gillet, Vallerand, and Lafrenière (2012) distributed a survey questionnaire that included both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational items to students between the ages of nine and sixteen. Sixteen hundred and nine students responded to the survey. An evaluation of the data showed a clear decline in both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in the older students compared to the younger students. Martinek, Hofmann, and Kipman (2016) investigated the relationship between academic motivation and age. Consistent with previous studies, the responses submitted by the 423 students between the ages of six and 20 involved in the study indicated that intrinsic motivation decreased with age.

In a study with 184 fourth through eighth grade Turkish students, Topçu and Leana-Taşçılar (2018) focused on the relationship between motivation and self-esteem. Their findings suggested that students in each grade were motivated differently. Students in fourth through sixth grade showed higher rates of intrinsic motivation than their older counterparts. Students in eighth grade had a higher desire to please their peers and be motivated by extrinsic means compared to the younger students. Topçu and Leana-Taşçılar (2018) also found that students

who were more intrinsically motivated were more likely to have a higher self-esteem compared to their peers who were less intrinsically motivated. Similar to the findings reported by other researchers, Topçu and Leana-Taşçılar (2018) noted that students were more likely to lose intrinsic motivation as they grow older. The results of these studies suggest an important implication for education in general and for online education in particular. Namely, the intrinsic motivation needed to succeed in virtual classrooms appears to decline as students age, making them susceptible to academic difficulties in online environments.

D'Lima, Winsler, and Kitsanas (2014) investigated extrinsic motivation through the lens of ethnic and gender differences. These researchers focused on ethnically diverse undergraduate students enrolled in a university setting for the first time. Over 800 undergraduate students completed the study during their first semester enrolled in the university. Their findings suggest that, similar to intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation changes overtime. At the beginning of the study, higher levels of extrinsically motivated students were found among African Americans and Asian Americans compared to Caucasian students. However, by the time the study concluded, there was no statistically significant difference in extrinsic motivation between participants representing different ethnic groups. Interestingly, the researchers did note that female participants, regardless of ethnic group, were more extrinsically motivated than their male peers.

Emmett (2013) conducted a qualitative study with 19 students from an urban high school in order to examine the impact of extrinsic motivation on student behavior and attitudes toward state standardized tests. Six out of the 19 participants indicated that extrinsic motivation positively influenced their attitude and behavior towards the standardized test. Five out of the 19 students recognized an increase in their desire for verbal praise through the program. Emmett

(2013) concluded that student attitude and behavior at a secondary level can be influenced by extrinsic motivational factors.

The findings presented in the literature are unclear whether intrinsic or extrinsic motivation is a more powerful factor in academic success. What is clear is that motivation in some form is vital for academic persistence.

**Online students and personal motivation.** Personal motivation is clearly critical in realizing educational goals. Researchers have begun examining the nature of personal motivation as it connects to online academic success (Champion, 2015; Chang, et al., 2014; Vayre & Vonthron, 2017; Xie & Huang, 2014). This section will review their findings as they relate to online education persistence.

Xie and Huang (2014) conducted a quantitative study in order to gain a better understanding of students' motivation and overall success in an online university course. An Achievement Goal Questionnaire was used to gather information from 132 undergraduate students on epistemic and self-learning beliefs. The online learning and engagement in the course were identified through the use and analysis of asynchronous online discussion questions. The results indicated that a student's self-efficacy and personal achievement goals helped predict how much he or she would participate in an online course, how much academic learning would take place, and how successful overall a student would be in the online course. In short, motivation activated the behavioral and emotional mechanisms necessary to succeed in the online course (Xie & Huang, 2014).

Chang et al. (2014) conducted a quantitative study focused on the relationship between internet self-efficacy, perception of one's own ability to complete a task, and student motivation in online learning. An evaluation of the responses from the 87 participants suggested that

students with higher levels of internet self-efficacy had higher overall academic performances in the online course and that students with lower internet self-efficacy had lower overall academic performances. Not only did self-efficacy impact student performance, it also had a positive impact on student attention, confidence, and overall online course satisfaction. This study is insightful in that it suggests a potentially important connection between personal motivation and preexisting self-efficacy.

Also using a quantitative approach, Vayre and Vonthron (2017) examined the psychological engagement and motivation of students in an undergraduate online course. A survey with questions concerning the impact of community and self-efficacy on engagement was given to participants in several online undergraduate French courses. Responses of the 255 participants revealed that teacher support, a sense of community, and self-efficacy all had a positive impact on the level of motivation to engage in the online courses. These findings are significant because they indicate that other factors connect to personal motivation to achieve.

In a study on secondary student motivation engaged in online learning, Champion (2015) evaluated the self-efficacy of online learners who had been expelled from traditional school settings in the Lafayette Public School System in Louisiana. When students were expelled from a Lafayette public school, they were enrolled into online courses. It is important to note that these online courses were not provided with teacher or tutor support from Lafayette Public School District, thus, completion of the online courses was largely dependent on the personal motivation of the individual students. The average grade for expelled students in this program was at a passing level. Champion (2015) utilized a 9-question self-efficacy questionnaire which asked students to evaluate their beliefs concerning how they would do in the virtual environment prior to engaging in it. The self-efficacy data suggested that the average expelled Lafayette



School District student believed that they would be able to motivate themselves and complete their respective online courses. Champion (2015) noted that these expelled students had a tendency to work well in an environment where they could learn on their own while being away from bullies and distractions that were often present in traditional face-to-face classroom settings.

**Parental involvement and motivation.** Liu, Black, Algina, Cavanaugh, and Dawson (2010) argued that parental engagement is not only important but especially critical when the learning environment is online. Parents/guardians of secondary students engaged in virtual education may be caught off guard by this as many of the responsibilities traditionally held by teachers may be transferred to parents/guardians. Challenging aspects for parents/guardians of secondary online students may include possessing important technical skills (Shin & Seger, 2016), keeping the child motivated (Cwetna, 2016), and keeping the student organized and on schedule (Sorensen, 2012). Despite the challenge parents/guardians may face, secondary online students often reap the benefit of parental engagement (Borup, Chambers, & Stimson, 2017; Sorensen, 2012).

Litke (1998) conducted a case study of a virtual middle school program. Over the course of two years Litke conducted interviews with students, parents, and teachers involved in the program and developed themes based on their perceptions. This scholarly effort found the main factor in students' success was supportive parents who helped motivate their children. The virtual middle school program required parents to assume a large responsibility for the motivation and engagement of their child in their online courses. Parents, students, and teachers all identified motivation as the largest factor that influenced student success in the virtual environment.

Borup, Stevens, and Waters (2015) conducted a study to learn more about the impact parental engagement has on the online education of high school students. Nine parents and 10 high school students involved in online learning took part in their qualitative study. Borup et al. (2015) identified five types of parental engagement used for high school students in an online learning environment including: instruction, nurturing interactions, organization, advising/mentoring, and monitoring/motivating the student. The researchers identified the positive impact a trusting parent-student relationship could have on student learning. One parent expressed that her son needed to trust her and her spouse before they could assist with learning strategies. The son, in turn, expressed a trust in his parents as they had been a positive influence in his past learning and was therefore open to their guidance with his online academic efforts.

The study also found that many parents positively assisted their high school children to transition from a brick and mortar educational setting to an online learning setting by helping them get organized and adopt a different rhythm of learning. Furthermore, the study found it was important that students be monitored and motivated by their parents while enrolled in online classrooms. Some parents in the study indicated that many of their attempts to engage in their children's learning were counterproductive as they could lead to irritation and verbal conflicts. The study identified four specific roadblocks to parent engagement: (a) conflict with their child, (b) lack of time, (c) ambiguity towards their responsibilities, and (d) perceived 'un-welcomeness' from their child's online teachers (Borup et al., 2015).

Cwetna (2016) researched the role of parents in an online mathematics course. Eighty-seven parents, whose children were enrolled in an online high school mathematics course, took part in this mixed methods study. One of the goals of the research was to learn more about how parents defined their role in their child's online learning. Two themes emerged from the data.

First, parents believed part of their role was to monitor and motivate their child's progress and make sure assignments were completed in the course. Second, parents believed part of their role was to help by re-teaching math concepts their children were struggling with or to encourage them to reach out to their teachers for help (Cwetna, 2016).

Borup et al. (2017) gathered data on the importance of parental engagement in online student success on behalf of the Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute. Twelve on-site mentors from schools with high passing rates in online programs were interviewed in order to find out what they believed parents of online students needed to do in order to motivate and encourage student academic success. They found that students were most likely to succeed in their online environment when parents advised on student course enrollment, monitored their children work in the course, motivated their children to be fully engaged in the course, helped organize and manage their children at home, and assisted them with their assignments. Borup et al.'s (2017) findings suggested that a transfer from face-to-face to online learning increased the need for parental engagement.

### **Teacher Influence and Online Education**

It goes without saying that education depends on the quality and quantity of the instruction provided to students. This is as true for online education as it is for traditional, face-to-face education. This section examines the scholarly literature on the influence teachers have on online learning.

**Teacher presence.** Teacher presence in an online course can have a large impact on the engagement and success of students (Hamm et al., 2018; Vayre & Vonthron, 2016). Zhang, Lin, Zhan, and Ren (2016) engaged 218 middle school English teachers enrolled in an online professional development course in an effort to learn about the impact of teacher presence.

Quantitative data were collected through a survey to answer the following questions: (a) how does teacher presence impact learners' passive engagement in an online course?, (b) how does teacher presence impact learners' active engagement in a course?, (c) how does teacher presence impact constructive engagement behavior?, and (d) how does teacher presence affect learners' interactive engagement behavior? Findings from the study showed strong relationships between teacher presence and positive effects on interactive and constructive engagement with learners. Survey data also suggested that teacher presence impacted the perceived learning of students and the overt behavior of students in the course (Zhang et al., 2016).

Lundberg and Sheridan (2015) conducted a study to learn how different forms of teacher presence impact the college experience of an online learner. Their sample consisted of 812 students enrolled exclusively in online classes. Three dependent variables central to their study included gains in general education, practical competence, and personal development. These dependent variables were examined with three independent variables including student engagement in learning, student engagement with one another, and teacher presence as defined by interaction with faculty. The researchers employed a survey using Likert scale items to measure the responses on sixteen different questions. Results found that a third of learning gains were due to a supportive campus environment, increased contact with students from different backgrounds, and a desire to meet high expectations set by teachers. Their findings further indicated that the frequency of interaction between teacher and student increased student personal gains.

**Teacher engagement and feedback.** Two significant factors associated with the academic success of students in online courses are engagement of the teacher and the type (and quality) of teacher feedback provided to students (Lemmon, 2014). Lemmon (2014) identified a

positive relationship between the level of teacher feedback students received and the overall perception students held regarding the quality of the course. The study involved 83 students from three different Missouri school districts. Lemmon (2014) found that the more teacher feedback was provided to students, the higher overall satisfaction students had in the course.

LaBarbera (2013) addressed the relationship between teacher engagement in the form of feedback on assignments, emails, interaction and support with general student satisfaction in an online course. This study was comprised of students in southern California who were part of a teacher preparation study over three different semesters. Students in all three courses received personalized feedback each week on all completed assignments. However, in one course, instructors also provided students with an email address and informed them they could email with requests for additional assistance with any assignment. In this course all of the instructor emails were individually personalized for each student. Results from the study found strong relationships among the type of feedback students received, the timeliness of the feedback, and the interaction time between students and teachers. Students who were sent personalized email correspondence from their instructors were more likely to be satisfied with their online course compared to peers who did not receive personalized emails.

**The role of teachers in online credit recovery.** Online Credit recovery courses can take place completely in the virtual space where students are not required to have face-to-face contact with their instructor or their peers (Picciano, Seaman, Shea, & Swan, 2012). In many U.S. public schools online credit recovery classes take place in a physical classroom where students work independently (Levine, Johnson, and Malave, 2017; Vigilante, 2019). In these situations, a teacher/facilitator is present to oversee students in the classroom, but not to teach the content in the credit recovery courses (Vigilante, 2019). Levine, et al. (2017) conducted a four-year study

of 12 Massachusetts high school online credit recovery courses set up in this manner in an effort to identify the best practices of the teachers in these classrooms. Best practices included reducing distractions, strategically placing computers, managing student behavior, making decisions about technology, and advocating for credit recovery courses (Levine et al., 2017).

Vigilante (2019) conducted a study focused on ten teachers who facilitated virtual credit recovery courses. Vigilante (2019) found that there was a positive impact on student support and motivation from the facilitating teacher being present in the classroom as students worked independently on their credit recovery courses. Though teachers did not physically teach students the content, they communicated with the parents and students about progress being made and encouraged students to stay engaged in their courses. Teachers were also able to provide technological support when needed (Vigilante, 2019).

## **Conclusion**

Burzichelli et al. (2011) highlighted the need for traditional public schools in the United States to establish dropout prevention programs in order to reverse the declining graduation rate present at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. During this same time period virtual secondary schools, both private and public, experienced an increase in enrollments (Allen & Seaman, 2011). However, within only a few years into the new century it became apparent that virtual school programs had followed the trend of their face-to-face counterparts with a noted difficulty in retaining students through graduation (Roblyer et al., 2008).

This literature review reveals the research on factors influencing the sense of belonging in face-to-face and virtual school communities. Traditional school settings excel in areas related to opportunities for peer interactions and activities to enhance a sense of community. Burzichelli et al. (2011) reported that students who sought scheduling flexibility, whether it was a faster or

slower pace, often struggled to engage in traditional classroom environments. Virtual schools are able to offer students scheduling flexibility, but they have limited options to establish a sense of belongingness in the school community with peers they have never met in person.

Kraut et al. (2002) found that virtual interactions are not a substitute for in-person interactions and can be detrimental to an individual's health. Kujath (2011) reported that the use of web-based communication, such as Facebook or Instagram, acts as an extension, rather than a replacement, for face-to-face interactions for most users. The scholarly literature indicates that a student's sense of belonging is a significant feature of his/her education, but that online schooling environments may be problematic in this regard.

One of the supposed strengths of online education is the flexibility it offers students. There is a gap in the literature addressing traditional schools' ability to incorporate asynchronous tools as a means to increase student flexibility and retention. Additional research in this area may be beneficial to the modification, or development, of successful dropout prevention and/or credit recovery programs. There is also limited literature addressing the motivation and perceptions of students who have successfully completed secondary virtual credit recovery courses.

Taken together, the existing literature provides some insight on the potential strengths and weaknesses of online education, yet the literature remains thin in some areas. This study helps add to the existing literature and seek a greater understanding of the factors that increase student success in online credit recovery courses from the perspective of those who have successfully completed such courses.

Previous scholars have used quantitative survey measures to record the state of online course enrollments over a period spanning several years (Gemin & Pape, 2017; Queen & Lewis,

2011; Seaman, Allan, & Seaman, 2018). Researchers from these studies consistently pointed out the impressive and consistent growth in online education. In quantitative studies such as these, researchers do not explore individual and personal perceptions of participants to a great extent. Mertens (2014) suggested that qualitative research can be used to identify and collect more personal and nuanced data that tend to be lacking in quantitative research. The research questions in this study required in-depth, rich descriptions about student experiences in their online credit recovery efforts. Due to this research goal, a quantitative research method was not appropriate. Instead, a qualitative approach more adequately documented the personal perceptions of the participants.



## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODS**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the methodology that was used in the study. Roblyer et al. (2008) identified the need to study online learners in order to develop practical procedures to predict and promote success in virtual school environments. To date, little research has been done concerning what factors online credit recovery students believe assist them on their path to earning a high school diploma. Personal interviews with open-ended, semi-structured, questions were presented to a sample of virtual credit recovery students who had successfully passed at least one online credit recovery class. The interview offered participants the opportunity to share perceptions concerning their virtual credit recovery experience. Specifically, the students were asked to share their perceptions of the virtual school community, motivation, and the effectiveness of the instructional design and delivery they received. Students were also given the opportunity to share any other contributing factors that helped them be successful in their online credit recovery experience.

#### **Online Credit Recovery**

The White House, Office of the Press Secretary (2016) reported that despite an increase in graduation rates during the 2014-2015 school year, almost 20% of students in the United States still failed to graduate from high school. Warning signs of students who are more likely to drop out take place long before high school students' senior year. Failing one core academic course during a student's first year of high school is a primary warning sign that a student may drop out of high school prior to graduation (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Neild, 2009).

NCLB (2002) accountability requirements have encouraged school districts across the United States to seek new ways to provide students with opportunities for academic success. Common barriers to earn credits from a traditional high school course include numerous absences and/or a failure to earn a passing grade (Ferdig, 2010). Many schools and school districts have turned to online credit recovery as an option for secondary students to pursue the opportunity to make up past credits for courses they previously failed (Frazelle, 2016; Malkus, 2018; Powell et al., 2015; Tyner & Munyan-Penney, 2018).

The potential to individually tailor courses to each student's academic need (Gemin & Pape, 2017; Nastu, 2011), allowing students to work at their own pace (Dessoiff, 2009), providing students multiple opportunities to show mastery on given assignments (Zinth, 2011), along with the ability to access course content, syllabi, and supplemental materials 24 hours a day (Coyner & McCann, 2004) can be attractive features of online credit recovery courses. High school administrators appreciate that online courses can be cost-effective (Piccano & Seaman, 2009) and that online credit recovery courses have the potential to boost graduation rates (Gemin & Pape, 2017).

Asynchronous teaching is often utilized in online credit recovery courses. These courses allow students to interact with the content one-on-one through text, videos, graphics, podcasts, etc. Online credit recovery courses are designed so that students can demonstrate content mastery at their own pace. The asynchronous online format of these courses offers students the opportunity to revisit and repeat information at their pace, in order to gain a greater understanding of content as needed (Singh & Pan, 2004).

## **Pilot Study**

A pilot study can help ensure that interview questions are appropriate and well-formulated (Yin, 2017). For this reason, a pilot study was held prior to conducting the formal interviews in order to evaluate each question for clarity and relevance. Jessica, a pseudonym, was 29-years-old in March 2019 and failed two semesters of algebra 1 and one semester of biology in a traditional high school when she was younger. Jessica later graduated after she passed both of these courses in an online credit recovery setting which had an in-person course facilitator. Jessica agreed to meet, reflect on her successful online credit recovery experience, and evaluate the clarity of the letter of consent and interview questions for this study. The interview took place in a local coffee shop that Jessica identified as a convenient place for her to meet.

Proper permissions were obtained before the pilot commenced and the interview was recorded. After the interview Jessica was asked to evaluate the clarity of each question. Following a short discussion, Jessica concluded that all questions were clear and understandable as they were initially written. Before the pilot study concluded, I asked Jessica an additional question that I did not ask the following study participants. I asked Jessica what information she believed I was primarily looking to learn from the given questions. Jessica stated that she thought that I wanted to know what “caused me to pass my online classes, how the classes were different from regular classes, and if my friends or teachers had anything to do with it.” Based on this feedback I did not modify any of the interview questions (Appendix A) nor the letter of consent (Appendix B). In my field notes I did write that even though a public coffee shop may be a safe and comfortable environment it was not ideal for this study. The noise level of the coffee shop forced me to repeat one of the questions as Jessica initially did not hear it, and on

two occasions I asked Jessica to repeat her responses for clarity. There were also a lot of things going on in the coffee shop that could potentially be distracting. During the formal interviews it is important to have the participants' undivided attention; therefore, I made a note to pursue a different venue in which to conduct the formal interviews.

### **Research Design, Participants, and Sampling Strategy**

This study explored the factors that influenced a targeted sample of students' success in completing online credit recovery courses. Three research questions were designed to structure and guide the investigation with the objective of gaining nuanced personal accounts of experiences with successful credit recovery completion:

#### *Research Question #1:*

How does this sample of students describe their experience of school community belongingness?

#### *Research Question #2:*

How does this sample of students describe their motivation to complete online recovery work?

#### *Research Question #3:*

How does this sample of students describe the effectiveness of the instructional design and delivery of their online recovery experience?

A small purposive sample was obtained consisting of four young adults who successfully completed at least one online credit recovery course after they had failed a course in a traditional face-to-face high school setting. I worked with the principal and the 12th grade school counselor of a rural public high school, with approximately 400 students, located in northwestern Oregon to assist in identifying potential subjects who met the research criteria. For the remainder of this study the high school will be referred to as "Viking High School" rather than the real name of the school in order to protect the privacy of the study participants.

In November 2016, Bob Salazar, Standards and Instructional Education Specialist at the Oregon Department of Education, recognized Edmentum's (2016) adaptive intervention solution as a great tool to meet individual student's learning needs in a variety of alternative learning environments throughout Oregon. Viking High School utilized Edmentum curricula to offer virtual courses as an alternative option for their high school students who had a need to make up academic credits. All Viking High students interviewed in this study were enrolled in at least one online credit recovery course on the Plato Learning Management System owned by Edmentum during the fall 2018 semester. Viking High School typically has a lower than state average drop-out rate and boasts a graduation rate that is consistently above the state average.

There were 33 students enrolled in at least one online credit recovery course at Viking High School during the 2018-2019 school year. Out of these students eight were above the age of eighteen. Out of these eight students, five had passed at least one online credit recovery course at the conclusion of the first semester. These five students were individually approached and given the opportunity to participate in the study.

The initial meeting with each student took place in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade high school counselor's office. The counselor and I were both present during each of these meetings. Four out of five students did not have a full schedule and a time to meet with each of them was scheduled during one of their late start or early release periods. The fifth student met in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade counseling office following the conclusion of a regular school day to discuss study participation. During the initial conversation a brief description of the nature and purpose of the study was given. This included the research method, the setting of the interview, and clarification of the voluntary nature of participation in this study. Each potential study participant was provided with an

informed consent letter (Appendix B) and was asked to contact me within two school days to let me know whether or not they would participate in the study.

All five students agreed to participate in the study. Study participants were reminded that their participation was completely voluntary, and that they were permitted to cease to participate at any time. Unfortunately, one of the five students was in a serious car accident shortly after agreeing to participate in the study. Understandably the student withdrew from the study. Thankfully the student was expected to recover fully. The remaining four participants and I signed the informed consent form, and each of us kept a copy.

### **Data Collection and Analytical Procedures**

Following the George Fox University approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) application to conduct the study, a copy of the signed IRB document was provided to the Superintendent of the District where the study was conducted. Alongside the IRB document, the Superintendent was also provided with a copy of the interview questions (Appendix A), and the informed letter of consent (Appendix B). A meeting was held with the superintendent regarding the nature and purpose of the study and the possible impact it may have on various stakeholders in the district. The superintendent had no objections to the consent letter or any of the proposed interview questions and gave approval for the study to take place at Viking High School. The superintendent did ask that all interviews take place outside of the participating students' school hours so that they would not interfere with their scheduled class time. This was a very reasonable request, and it was accommodated.

An additional meeting was held with the Viking High School principal who reviewed the same forms provided to the superintendent. The principal gave approval to work with the 12<sup>th</sup> grade school counselor and credit recovery course facilitator to review credit recovery student

data and to identify potential study participants. The principal asked that each potential study participant be given the opportunity to take home the consent form and review it prior to being asked to sign it. This request was consistent with the voluntary nature of the study and was accommodated. The principal granted permission to use one of the back rooms in the school library for the interviews after school hours in order to comply with the request from the superintendent that the interviews would not interfere with the students' class time.

Data was collected through personal, face-to-face interviews. The interviews were conducted in a way that sought to maximize the validity of each given response. I did not just ask a question from the personal interview guide questionnaire (Appendix A), wait for a response, and then immediately move on to the next question. After participants spoke on a topic, I reflected back what I heard, asked clarifying questions regarding what they stated, and invited them to add additional information to what had already been stated. This process provided participants the opportunity to expand on their responses and correct any inaccuracies in my initial understanding of their perceptions and experiences. Given the nature and number of questions included in the interview, only one session with each participant was initially scheduled. During the time of each interview, the participants agreed to potentially schedule an additional interview session in case any items needed further clarification. For the sake of this study, one additional interview was scheduled with one of the participants. During this second interview a single topic was discussed to see if the participant had anything to add regarding a topic that each of the other participants had talked about, but he had not addressed. This second interview is referenced in chapter 4, where "Steve" was asked if he would like to add anything regarding theme 4.

The interviews took place in a back room of the Viking High School library which had a

door and three large windows facing the main library room. This was a public location with one or more staff members present in the main library throughout interviews. The door connecting the main and back room remained open during each interview. The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed by a third party.

An analysis of qualitative data is an ongoing process that begins as soon as the researcher first collects data and continues as the researcher attempts to interpret the meaning within the data (Mills, Chapman, Bonner, & Francis, 2007). According to Marshall and Rossman (2016), there are seven phases to analyzing qualitative data including data organization, immersion into the data, creating categories and themes, coding the data, analyzing the data, seeking alternate understandings of the meaning, and documenting the findings. The goal of qualitative coding of data is to focus on the emergence of patterns and meanings within the descriptive data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). That is, qualitative research involves the search for themes in the experiences and perspectives shared by the participants (Maxwell, 2005). The general framework identified by Marshall and Rossman (2016) was followed in order to identify the themes related to each of the primary research questions addressed in this study, along with any additional important findings.

Data analysis involved following specific steps to organize the data and process the information until identifiable themes emerged. Immediately following the conclusion of each interview, I recorded initial thoughts from the conversation in handwritten field notes. The field notes included impressions of the participant, their perspectives on the research questions, along with anything else that stood out.

As each interview was completed and written transcripts of them were generated, the formal coding process begun. The interviews were transcribed by a third party. Two sets of



transcribed transcripts were printed one set to identify and address comments related to the research questions and one set to highlight perceived themes. Each research question was assigned a color, and highlights were made on the physical transcripts. The same procedure was conducted on the second transcript set where frequently used words and potential themes were color coded. As the initial reviews of the transcripts were completed, I engaged in more extensive comparisons between interviews conducted in the same manner described above. These procedures continued until I was satisfied that the relevant themes were identified and no further insights could reasonably be attained (Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Maxwell, 2005).

### **Research Ethics**

The Letter of Consent to Participate in Research (Appendix B) outlined assurances related to the security and confidentiality of all gathered materials and the right of participants to withdraw from the study at any time. All study participants were above the age of 18. Pseudonyms were used to identify the student, pilot, and staff participants in order to protect their personal identities. Audio recordings of the interviews have been password protected, encrypted, and stored on a USB-C memory stick. All research materials, including signed informed consent forms, field notes, memory stick, and transcriptions have been placed in a secure lock box where they will remain for at least five years, at which time they will be destroyed.

Confidentiality is as important as anonymity in social research. I was cautious to report the findings in such a way that the participants are not identifiable. This involved not including personal incidents, attributes, etc., that are unique to an individual and could reasonably lead to their anonymity being compromised (Lindemann, 2017; Tracy, 2013). For these reasons the specific school district, high school, and specific staff members within the district where the

study took place were also not identified.

## **Conclusion**

The qualitative research design scheme was an effective means by which to collect and report data for this study. The stories shared by study participants provided insights into the students' experience with, and perspective of, the factors that helped them be successful in an online credit recovery program. The results of the research are discussed in the ensuing chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

#### Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the lived experiences of four successful online credit recovery students in a rural high school in northwestern Oregon. Each of the students had failed at least one high school course in a traditional face-to-face setting and then enrolled in and passed at least one equivalent course in an online credit recovery environment. The following research questions guided this study.

*Research Question 1:* How does this sample of students describe their experience of school community belongingness?

*Research Question 2:* How does this sample of students describe their motivation to complete online credit recovery work?

*Research Question 3:* How does this sample of students describe the effectiveness of the instructional design and delivery of their online credit recovery experience?

I interviewed four successful credit recovery students in order to address these research questions. The questions used for the interviews were piloted with a student who had successfully completed several secondary online credit recovery classes and graduated. The next section in this chapter presents a profile of each of the four study participants. The profiles provide context for the quotes expressed by participants. The profiles also add to the descriptions of this study for the purpose of transferability. Following the introduction of the participants, the research themes are examined. The themes were identified through field notes and an analysis of the data gathered in each of the interviews through coding of the transcribed

data. Chapter 4 concludes with a summary of this study's research themes and findings.

With the assistance of the Viking High School principal and the 12<sup>th</sup> grade school counselor, I was able to identify and gain access to student participants and locate a suitable location on campus in which to conduct the interviews. The 12<sup>th</sup> grade school counselor agreed to schedule a meeting with each potential study participant in his office where he could introduce me to the students and provide an opportunity to outline what study participation would entail. During this initial meeting the goals and voluntary nature of the study were discussed. Consistent with the request from the high school principal, the potential study participants were not asked to participate during this initial meeting. Instead, the prospective participants were provided with a copy of the letter of consent (Appendix B) so that they could take it home and consider whether or not they wanted to participate in the study. Each student returned with a signed form within three days after receiving it during the introduction meeting.

A convenient time for each participant to conduct the interview in the school library after school hours was scheduled. The school library had a back room with a door and several large windows angled towards the main library room. The back library room appeared to be a great location for the interviews to as it offered a private area to converse in the middle of a public space. Study participants could speak freely in the back library room without any concern that their statements would be overheard from anyone in the main library area. During each interview the door connecting these two library rooms remained open. District students and staff members were free to enter and exit the library at any time during each scheduled interview. The 12<sup>th</sup> grade school counselor further agreed to be present in the main library room during each interview.

## **Profiles of Participants in the Study**

The participants of this study were four 12<sup>th</sup> grade students attending Viking High School, a rural high school in northwestern Oregon. Participants were between the ages 18-and 19-years-old in March of 2019 when the interviews took place. The participant group consisted of one Latino and three Caucasian students. The participants for this qualitative research study were selected using purposeful sampling as they were all successful online credit recovery students. Pseudonyms are used here in lieu of participants' real names in order protect their anonymity.

**Student one: Steve.** Steve comes across as a very friendly young man. He lives with his father, two of his brothers, an uncle, a cousin, and a grandfather in a three-bedroom house. Steve has not had consistent contact with his mother or step-siblings who have lived out-of-state for several years. Steve's father earned a GED and his mother dropped out of high school when she was a sophomore. Steve failed both semesters of algebra 2 in a traditional classroom. However, Steve passed the first semester of algebra 2 in a virtual credit recovery course during the fall 2018 semester. At the time of this study, Steve was enrolled in the second semester of algebra 2 presented in the same format as the first semester. Steve's goal is to be the first in his family to graduate from high school. Steve is not sure what he wants to do after graduation. He is currently considering community college or the armed forces.

**Student two: Peter.** Peter enjoys spending time trying to figure out how different machines work and are put together. As we met for the interview he showed me his latest creation. The item looked like a small table lamp but was in fact a cordless Bluetooth speaker created from parts of a broken speaker, pieces from a cell phone, a large bottle cap, and a

cigarette lighter. As he showed me how the device worked, he stated that “machines sometimes make more sense than people.”

Peter is 19-years-old and passed his first credit recovery course in health during the fall 2018 semester. Peter was enrolled in the first semester of U.S. History, a virtual credit recovery course, at the time of the interview. Peter was hopeful that the online version of the course would go better than the face-to-face equivalent that he failed the previous year. Along with the completed health course and the first semester of U.S. History, Peter also needed to pass the second semester of U.S. History in order to graduate by the end of the spring 2019 semester. In order to accomplish this goal Peter enrolled in two sections of virtual credit recovery. Once the first U.S. History course is completed, he plans to enroll in the second semester and work on that for two periods a day until he earns a passing grade in the course. Peter is not sure what he wants to do after graduation.

**Student three: Bruce.** Bruce is 18-years-old and describes himself as being very social and someone who just “likes to have fun.” Bruce is “really into sports” and spends much of his free time playing football or basketball. Immediately after high school Bruce plans to “really enjoy” the grad party and a couple of weeks of relaxation. After that he would like to go to college. Specifically, Bruce hopes to enroll in a local community college and take courses which will help him fulfill his dream of becoming a firefighter and paramedic. Bruce failed his second semester of algebra 2 in a traditional setting, so he enrolled in and passed a virtual credit recovery version of the course during the fall 2018 semester.

**Student four: Carol.** Eighteen-year-old Carol is currently a senior at Viking High School. Carol plays basketball and softball. Following graduation, she hopes to go to community college and play softball. Her long-term goal is to study physical therapy at a local

university. Carol did not pass her first semester of sophomore English. Carol did pass her second semester of 10<sup>th</sup> grade English and both of her 11<sup>th</sup> grade English courses. When she was signing up for 12<sup>th</sup> grade classes Carol was reminded that she would not be able to graduate unless she earned credit for her failed semester of English 10. The 12<sup>th</sup> grade counselor gave her the option of enrolling in a traditional course with underclassmen or in an online credit recovery course. Carol opted for the online credit recovery option.

### **Thematic Overview**

During the course of this study I had the privilege of speaking with four adult students at Viking High who failed a face-to-face high school course and responded to the failure by enrolling in, and passing, an equivalent virtual version of the course. Following the conclusion of each interview I took a few moments and started the process of organizing the collected data. This was done by writing hand-written field notes outlining my initial impressions of how the interview went and adding anything that stood out in reference to the research questions or potential themes. I then made sure that the recording of the interview was intact and password protected the file.

As all the interviews were completed they were transcribed by a third party and two copies of the complete transcripts were printed. The first copy of the transcript was color coded for frequently used words and the second for potential themes. The frequently used words were used as a guide as I immersed myself deeper into the data to seek potential themes between the interview transcripts. Three solid themes expressed by all four participants emerged from this process.

Three of the participants expressed strong opinions concerning a topic that the fourth student did not address. A second interview was scheduled with the fourth participant to see if

he wished to add anything concerning the topic. A fourth theme emerged from this process. Each of these themes initially came to light largely through color coding exercises of the transcribed interviews. As the data was further analyzed it appeared to be an underlying theme in each of the participants stories that had not yet emerged from the initial transcript reviews

The coding for the fifth and final theme for this study did not come to light through individual word frequency as the previous four themes. The reason for this was that *personal connections* referenced by students included a variety of individuals which would not have noticeably emerged from a single word count exercise.

Each of the study participants made comments concerning the support of individuals that helped them stay motivated in their virtual credit recovery ventures. When an anyone outside of the virtual credit recovery classroom (individuals such as school staff members, family members, and/or friends) was mentioned as being supportive by a student, the reference was marked with the same color in one of the printed transcripts. When the color markings were tallied a fifth theme concerning came into view.

After a thorough analysis of the collected data collected from these interviews, five themes central to their stories emerged: (a) an in-person teacher/facilitator is an important factor in online credit recovery, (b) graduation is a primary motivation to keep going in virtual credit recovery courses, (c) fewer distractions from peers in virtual credit recovery helped students' course progression, (d) constant pace and progress visibility had an impact on academic motivation, and (e) the support of personal connections is important for online credit recovery students as they progress academically. The thematic coding that helped identify the five themes woven through the participants stories are identified in Table 1.



Table 1.

*Coding of Successful Virtual Credit Recovery Student Themes*

Code	Frequency of Occurrence	Successful virtual credit recovery student themes based on code
Teacher/Facilitator/ Name of teacher/facilitator	22	An in-person teacher/facilitator is an important factor in online credit recovery
Non-virtual credit recovery instructional personal connections*	17	Personal connections are important for online credit recovery students as they progress academically
Graduation/graduate	16	Graduation is a primary motivation to keep going in virtual credit recovery courses
Distraction	12	Fewer distractions from peers in virtual credit recovery had a positive impact on course progression
Progress bar/Pace Timer	8	Constant pace and progress visibility had an impact on academic motivation

*\*Individuals recognized by participants as being supportive of their virtual credit recovery enrollment. References included: school counselor (4), friends (4), mom (2), dad (2), parents (2), girlfriend (1), grandma (1), coach (1), face-to-face teacher (1). Note: The themes represented by the frequently used words expressed by successful virtual credit recovery students reflecting on their virtual credit recovery experience.*

The following section highlights the study participants' stories as they relate to these five themes.

**Theme one: An in-person teacher/facilitator is an important factor in online credit recovery student success.** The positive impact of having a face-to-face teacher/facilitator in the room as they worked through the course was positively referenced by all four study participants. The main role of the teacher/facilitator was not to provide academic support, but rather to provide classroom management and assist with technical and motivational challenges expressed

by students as each was working individually on their specific credit recovery course(s) and content. A Viking High School administrator, who was also a certified teacher, served as the virtual credit recovery course teacher of record. The teacher of record oversaw all virtual credit recovery course activities and spent time in the credit recovery classroom on a regular basis. The main teacher/facilitator in the room was a librarian, Mr. Kent a pseudonym, who used part of the library to offer virtual credit recovery courses. Mr. Kent has worked in the school district for several years and his youngest son is currently a 12<sup>th</sup> grader at Viking High. Much due to his personal and professional involvement in the District Mr. Kent has known several credit recovery students since they were in elementary school. The interviewed virtual credit recovery students did not have an online content teacher for any of their virtual credit recovery courses. Content was primarily presented online through short video clips and text.

All of the successful credit recovery participants made positive comments regarding Mr. Kent. Steve identified Mr. Kent as a person who helped keep him stay motivated and on track. “If I didn’t have the teacher in the classroom I probably wouldn’t do it. They can encourage you to do it or not to do it, and in my case, they helped me out.” When asked about the role of the facilitator in the class Carol stated, “We have Mr. Kent we can go to when we need anything, he is right there to ask for help.” When asked about the course facilitator Peter said, “Mainly it was the librarian [Mr. Kent], and mainly it was for like help understanding something and what I actually have to do. So, like with clarifying, yeah, when some of it was confusing with the wording.”

Bruce described the ways in which Mr. Kent helped him each day:

He wouldn’t give us his own example. He would try to help you through it to make sure you understood what was going on, he would make us read it over again. It's hard to do

what he did because there were six people in here doing different classes except for me and my friend, but he figured out how to do it well. He pushed me but I still had that inner motivation, it went hand-in-hand. I wanted to do this and complete it, but then when I was struggling he would help me move forward. If anything, it made it better.

Steve also identified Mr. Kent being in the classroom as a motivating factor for him to complete the course. “The teacher that is in there, he just told you you’re not going to graduate if you don’t do this, and he doesn’t do it in a mean way or anything, just straight-up, the way I like it.”

The physical presence of a teacher/facilitator in a face-to-face classroom positively impacted all four study participants to move forward with their virtual credit recovery course work.

**Theme two: Graduation is a primary motivation to keep going in virtual credit recovery courses.** When asked about motivation, all four study participants identified graduation as one of the main motivating factors that kept them going in their credit recovery courses. Each student identified different aspects of exactly how graduation was motivational. Though each student was motivated in different ways, it remained an important motivational aspect of their success in their virtual credit recovery endeavors.

Steve stated that “my main motivation to pass this [algebra 2] class is so that I don’t have to graduate with my girlfriend.” Steve’s girlfriend was a junior at the time of the interview. Carol stated that “graduation is a few months away...and I wasn’t going to let one semester of failed English stand in my way.” In reflecting on the virtual credit recovery English course that she passed during the fall 2018 semester, Carol also mentioned that success in her credit recovery course encouraged her to work harder in her other courses as well, since they “all lead

to graduation in the end.” When asked about motivation Peter stated, “I think motivation is the same for me as a lot of students; mom saying if you don’t graduate I’ll kill you.” Peter clarified that his mom is very supportive and really wants him to graduate. Bruce repeatedly stated that he believed that his “mindset” towards graduation was the main variable that made him successful in his virtual credit recovery course:

I think it’s the mindset and wanting to graduate. Some people come to school and think they have to be there. By no means does anyone have to be here, but it’s hard to do something in life without a high school diploma. I just think that some people are driven to get a good education, get a diploma, and then some people have a lazy mindset and don’t do anything.

After making the above statement Bruce was asked if he wanted to expand on his thoughts concerning “the mindset” that helped him to be motivated in his virtual credit recovery course. Bruce continued:

Well, before I enrolled in the class just because I failed second semester of algebra I wasn’t motivated. I felt like if I can’t pass algebra 2 how am I going to graduate? I had a closed mind about it. I didn’t really open up to thinking about this and then [school counselor] told me to take credit recovery in order to graduate. Then when I came here and understood it and realized I just needed my own space or not just a big class and basically being my own teacher then my motivation got higher. It went from feeling like I was failing to completely succeeding. This class helped my motivation be good towards graduation.

When asked what kept him going to finish the class Bruce stated that:

College is my future. I want to go to college and I told myself if I can't pass algebra 2 how the hell am I going to pass college math, so I used that as a motivation. That was another thing besides graduation.

Regardless of how it was referenced, graduation as an end goal to keep going in their respective virtual credit recovery course(s) was a consistent theme throughout each participant's narrative.

**Theme three: Fewer distractions from peers in virtual credit recovery had a positive impact on course progression.** All four students reported being distracted by peers in the traditional high school course they failed prior to enrolling into a virtual credit recovery course to make up the credit. Carol stated that:

in my regular class there were a lot of distractions, there were a lot of people in the class.

I was in a big class. It was constant chatter and it was never really quiet. Having all my friends around me was distracting and played in with me not completing the class.

Peter and Steve seemed to agree with Carol's sentiment. Peter stated that "for the most part online schooling seems to be the same as normal schooling without annoying kids," and Steve exclaimed that "if I got my friends in there it's going to be more distracting, but if I have others that I don't associate with I'm going to feel more like 'Oh, I want to go and just get this done.'"

Bruce reported that he was distracted by friends in his traditional algebra 2 class and initially in his online class as well. Bruce originally enrolled in the credit recovery version of the course with one of his friends who failed the course at the same time Bruce did:

Me and my friend sat next to each other, and we would try to go at the same pace. We took the same exact class, so we tried to work together. We thought if we go at the same

pace and if I don't understand a question he might, and the other way around. I think it went okay, but then my friend got sick and wasn't coming to school, and I was there still doing it, and when he came back he was way behind compared to me because he was sick for a couple of weeks, and then it basically sucked because he was pressuring me to give him all the answers. Going back to the test I've already done, which I did for some of them. I didn't want to see him fail; I was better at math than he was.

Bruce continued his reflection with an insightful statement concerning the fact that he progressed faster in the class when his friend was sick and then "it slowed down a little when [friend's name] came back to class." Bruce stated that "the social part was awesome but having someone sit next to you and you being social is going to create distractions."

**Theme Four: Constant pace and progress visibility had an impact on student motivation in online credit recovery courses.** Each day when students logged into their virtual credit recovery course through Plato, a screen appeared on their courseware home page that notified them of their course progress to date. Additionally, students could see where they were supposed to be in the course in order to stay on track and how much remaining material they had left to complete. When asked about the impact of course design during the initial interviews, three of the four students referenced the effects of being able to see how they were doing in class at any time. Two of the three students saw it as a positive impact and the remaining student felt stress and pressure upon seeing a pace and progress bar.

Bruce felt strongly about his ability to have constant progress and pace visibility in his course:

So, in a normal class a teacher sits down and teaches you and you have no idea what's going to happen a month from now, they just give you the day-to-day basis. But on Plato

you could see every assignment the first day of class so you know what you are transitioning to... and the slides were simple and easy to explain. Some teachers have a hard time explaining what you have to do in class for everyone. With Plato it was easier because every time I read a transcript and work through the steps it made sense and clicked.

When asked to describe a normal day in class, Bruce added more specific details on how the progress and pace were presented in the course.

You sit at computer, sign in, and a really cool thing about Plato was the progression bar, if you were on pace, off pace, or above pace. Some days I would slack off if I was above pace. I would sit there on my phone and do assignments here and there. But I never let myself get off pace. I would sit down, start right away with what I need to work on get going. Most days I would grind it out. And sit there and get in my zone and try to go through it as fast possible at a point where I still knew what was going on.

Carol also thought that pacing and progress visibility was helpful in her English course.

The pace timer has been a good thing. It tells me where I'm at and it's kind of been a motivation thing. It tells me like, yeah, this is where you are and how far you have to go and I kind of like to just keep going and don't slack.

Peter had a different perspective concerning the presence of the progress bar.

Definitely a disadvantage is the whole progress bar, you won't get this if you don't know. You don't know what's going to happen, it's a daily reminder. I think it actually has one for your overall program... It has the grade on top and then in the actual class it will have a little bar on top that changes color depending on if you are overdue on it, behind work, on time, and stuff like that that. Frequently with me it was orange red because I was a

little behind on stuff... I already knew I have a lot to do and don't need the computer to tell me that too.

Steve did not mention the progress bar in his initial interview. Since the progress bar made an impact on each of the other study participants, I scheduled a second interview with Steve in the back library room at the end of one of his school days. During this follow up meeting I reminded Steve of our earlier conversation when I mentioned that I may contact him in case I had any additional questions concerning his online credit recovery experience. I also reminded Steve that it was still completely voluntary for him to answer any of my questions. Steve stated that he was happy to answer any other questions that I had. I told Steve that the second interview would not take long. Steve responded that he was not worried about it as he had lots of time on his hands that day. Steve and I sat across from each other by a table in the back library room with the door open to the main library in the same fashion that we had during our previous interview. For this interview the 12<sup>th</sup> grade school counselor was not available. The virtual credit recovery teacher/facilitator agreed to stay in the main library during the interview. Mr. Kent sat by a desk working on a computer in the library during the entirety of the second interview. The interview was recorded and later transcribed and color coded.

I asked Steve if he had any thoughts concerning the progress bar in his math classes. Steve stated it was nice to see how he was doing and it "was helpful at times." Steve added, "I didn't worry about it [the progress bar] too much, although sometimes it reminded me that I should do stuff." Following this response, I clarified with Steve that it sounded like he thought the progress bar was helpful at times and that he did not worry too much about it. Steve verified that this was consistent with his thoughts about the progress bar. I then asked him if he could tell me anything else. Steve stated that he didn't think so. I told Steve that those were the only



clarifying questions I had for him and concluded the second interview. I thanked Steve for once again being willing to sit down and speak with me.

Following the second interview with Steve I wrote in my field notes that the progress bar had “a very interesting way to relate to each of the participants.” To Carol and Bruce, the progress bar appeared to be a good friend that encouraged them to move forward; to Peter the progress bar was more of an annoyance and constant source of stress. To Steve, the progress bar appeared to be referenced more as an acquaintance that was good to see from time to time. Big or small, positive, or negative, the impact of the progress bar was present, yet varied, for each study participant.

**Theme five: The support of personal connections is important for online credit recovery students as they progress academically.** Throughout the interviews, all students identified individuals who played important supportive parts in their sense of community, belongingness, as well as their willingness to proceed in their virtual credit recovery courses. This community came from individuals within the school such as fellow students, significant others, teachers, coaches, and school counselors. Other support came from outside the school community in the form of parents, siblings, and extended family members. The sense of having a supportive community positively impacted all the students’ success in their credit recovery courses.

For Steve a sense of community came from family members as well as peers and teachers in and outside the classroom. He stated,

We had a base teacher in there all the time and if you need any help he is willing to give it to you. If you’re having a struggle and he’s not there even people around you will try to help.

Steve added that “sometimes when I got stuck I could be excused to go ask Mr. S. [pseudonym for Steve’s previous traditional face-to-face course math teacher] for help.” Steve also mentioned that he wanted to show his girlfriend that he can graduate and that his grandmother would be very proud of him if he completed high school.

Bruce made reference throughout the interview to several school community members who encouraged him to progress in class. These individuals included a friend who was in the same class as him, his credit recovery teacher Mr. Kent, his 12th grade counselor, and his coaches.

Peter found a sense of community from both Mr. Kent and the other students in the course.

We had Mr. Kent here, and whenever we had a problem with something Mr. Kent knew a lot of the kids here, and if he didn’t understand it and couldn’t help me the first thing he would do is look around the room and see if there was someone there that could help me. He wouldn’t just look at the answers on his computer. If he saw someone who was like that, he would have them come over and talk me through it. He did a good job helping everyone understand it rather than give us the answers.

Carol identified a sense of belonging with other students who were in the same course. Most days I do put in my music and work on the computer but when I don’t do that I do engage in conversation. It’s actually really nice because there are a lot of kids here that I didn’t think I would ever socialize with or build a connection with but know that we are all there for the same reason makes it easier to get along. In a way, yes. There’s a variety of different personalities and hobbies people like to do. At the end of the day no matter how different we are we can just remember that we are all here for the same thing, I think

it's good. There were definitely people here I wouldn't be able to see myself creating a friendship with outside of this class if it wasn't for this class. Most of the time it's, "Hey how is it going? How is the progress going in class?" We have small discussions and people chime in here and there. There's no judgement, there's just support, none of us planned to be here anyway so we might as well support each other.

Carol also made reference to how supportive both of her parents were of her academics. Carol stated that they "understood why I failed my class the first time... and they were all for me taking the class online so I could move on." Peter also referenced the importance of support from school, Mr. Kent, and from home. In response to the clarifying question, "What kept you going to finish your [online] health class?" Peter simply stated, "My mom." Supportive communities may not have looked the same for each of the study participants. Yet, they did not have any difficulty identifying individuals in their lives who encouraged their virtual academic endeavors.

## **Summary**

This study intended to examine the perceptions and lived experiences of four successful online credit recovery students in a rural high school in northwestern Oregon through the use of open-ended, semi-structured questions. The students responded to the questions in a very individualized fashion. Despite the diversity of responses, five themes emerged as the data was analyzed in regards to their successful credit recovery experience: (a) an in-person teacher/facilitator is an important factor in online credit recovery, (b) graduation is a primary motivation to keep going in virtual credit recovery courses, (c) fewer distractions from peers in virtual credit recovery helped students' course progression, (d) constant pace and progress visibility had an impact on academic motivation, and (e) the support of personal connections is

important for online credit recovery students as they progress academically. Through these themes that emerged from overall positive responses provided by the study participants one insight is clear: in the estimation of the successful students enrolled in the program, Viking High is doing something right with their virtual credit recovery program. Exactly what will be analyzed further in chapter five.

## **Chapter 5**

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

#### **Introduction**

This study sought to learn from the lived experiences of a small group of virtual credit recovery students and the factors they attributed to their successful virtual course completion. It involved the traditional steps common to scholarly research including conducting a review of relevant literature, gathering data, coding the data, and identifying themes that emerged from the data. This chapter summarizes the key findings of the study, presents conclusions drawn from the findings, outlines suggestions for policies and practice, and discusses the implications for scholarship while providing recommendations for future research.

It involved the traditional steps common to scholarly research including conducting a review of relevant literature, gathering data, coding the data, and identifying themes that emerged from the data. This chapter summarizes the key findings of the study, presents conclusions drawn from the findings, outlines suggestions for policies and practice, and discusses the implications for scholarship while providing recommendations for future research.

#### **Discussion of the Findings**

There is a sheer variety and diversity of online learning environments which require differing research approaches and methods in order to gain a better understanding of them. This study involved a specific type of educational experience where students accessed their online credit recovery course work from a physical classroom guided by a physically present course facilitator. This discussion, along with following implications and recommendations, are based on findings made in this specific online environment.

Three basic research questions guided the investigation into the perceptions and experiences of the participants. This section offers a summary of the answers to each of those guiding research questions. While the summaries make some connection to the literature, a more complete discussion on the implications of the findings to educational practice and scholarship follows later in the chapter.

**Research question one: How does this sample of students describe their experience of school community belongingness?** Each study participant identified multiple individuals within the Viking High School community to whom they felt connected. Several study participants mentioned that they felt supported by peers both in their virtual credit recovery course and fellow students who were enrolled only in traditional courses. Every student interviewed also referenced support they felt from the face-to-face teacher/facilitator in their credit recovery classroom. The teacher/facilitator was able to answer technical questions, keep students on task, encourage students to move forward, connect students with peers in their class who might be able to answer questions, and/or provide basic assistance with learning targets that they were stuck on. Additionally, school administrators, staff members, and one traditional face-to-face teacher encouraged study participants to enroll in credit recovery and/or offered encouragement as well as practical and emotional support as students worked through their virtual credit recovery course(s).

What is especially interesting about the findings related to this research question is what school community belongingness seemed to mean to the participants. A common concern found in the literature relates to the potential for social isolation among students engaged in online education (Kilgore, 2013; Lewis et al., 2012). Yet, the participants in this study did not articulate these types of challenges. Perhaps because they engaged in online learning from a

brick-and-mortar school, that also provided the majority of their schooling in traditional face-to-face environments, they did not experience social isolation. It is revealing, however, that the participants did define school community belongingness in terms that made sense and was relevant to their educational circumstance. As a result, for them school community belongingness meant having visible and ready support available or assist in achieving their immediate goal of completing the online recovery course(s) and graduating.

**Research question two: How does this sample of students describe their motivation to complete online recovery work?** The desire to graduate was a driving force for each participant to successfully complete and keep going in their credit recovery course(s). Consistent with previous studies reported in the literature, a combination of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation appeared to be important to the participants (Gillet et al., 2012; Lepper et al., 2005; Shafqat et al., 2017). Some students expressed intrinsic reasons to graduate, such as a wish to earn a high school diploma, have the option to go to college, or to graduate on time ahead of a significant other. Each of the participants gave examples of extrinsic motivators in the form of a variety of peers, family members, and/or Viking High School personnel. Each student believed that in order to graduate, they must first successfully complete their credit recovery course(s). Reminders of this motivated participants to persist in their online credit recovery work.

All four study participants expressed that peer distractions played a part in their respective traditional course failure(s). Participants also attributed part of their credit recovery success to the near absence of distractions from peers in their online credit recovery setting. Due in part to the low level of negative distractions, time on task increased. Time on task led to students proceeding through their online credit recovery course work, which in turn led to curricular success that boosted confidence and motivated them to keep going.

Contrary to peer distractions, the support of positive peer connections can be an important motivational factor for students as they progress through their virtual course work. Consistent with findings from Obodai (2018), many of the personal connections that were identified by study participants as being supportive of their course progression were from peers in their virtual credit recovery courses. Family members from outside the school community also provided encouraging words to study participants as their school work was discussed. The teacher/facilitator and progress bar also played important motivational roles, including encouragement to reflect on things accomplished and reminders to focus on not yet completed course work.

**Research Question three: How does this sample of students describe the effectiveness of the instructional design and delivery of their online recovery experience?**

All Viking High virtual credit recovery students were constantly reminded of their individual pace and progress by the courses themselves. As soon as they logged into class, the students were informed by the Edmentum system how much of the course materials they had completed, how much they were supposed to have completed, and how many units and assignments were left in the course. Two of the students considered this to be a good motivational tool, one did not believe it made much of a difference, and another viewed the progress and pace information to be overwhelming and stressful.

Motivation to progress in academic work is a constant issue for virtual credit recovery students (Powell et al., 2015). Several students indicated that physically seeing what they had left to do and/or what they had already completed in the class motivated them to continue forward (Champion, 2015; Chang et al., 2014; Heppen et al., 2016; Obodai, 2018). It was also acknowledged by one of the students, Bruce, that this information could backfire on occasion,



and he would use his viewable progression in class as an excuse to “slack off.” Peter took this one step further as he referred to the progress bar as a “definite disadvantage” and considered the daily reminders as demeaning rather than encouraging.

As referenced in the above section regarding research question two, the presence of a teacher/facilitator had a positive impact on the students’ virtual credit recovery experience. The presence of and interactions with Mr. Kent played a big part in the successful delivery of the online credit recovery curricula. This finding supports LaBarbera’s (2013) contention that the connection to an instructor or facilitator who projects a significant presence in the online learning environment is crucial for student success.

### **Implications for Scholarship and Suggestions for Policy and Practice**

Consistent with multiple studies, participants identified both positive and negative impacts of peer relationships on their academic achievement (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Jones et al., 2012; Vanhalst, Luyckx, & Goossens, 2014; Wentzel, et al., 2004). All participants referenced distractions from peers in their traditional classrooms as often being a negative source on their academic productivity (Bryant, Schulenberg, Bachman, O’Malley, & Johnston, 2000) and three of the four participants considered their virtual credit recovery peers to primarily be sources of support for their academic advancement (Zheng et al., 2010). Study participants also gave examples of peer support from students in the face-to-face courses they struggled in and examples of distractions that took away from academic work in their virtual credit recovery courses (Liem & Martin, 2011). The comments concerning peer interactions expressed by the participants highlight the importance of having a study environment that encourages constructive peer interactions, whether the course is virtual or face-to-face (Akyol & Garrison, 2008; Davis, 2011; Martin & Parker, 2014; Obodai, 2018).

McHugh, Horner, Colditz, and Wallace (2013) suggested that student-to-student, as well as teacher-student relationships, positively influence student performance and future academic success. A teacher/facilitator can play a crucial part in motivating students to access and progress in secondary online curriculum (McHugh et al., 2013). Vigilante (2019) suggested that the mere physical presence of a facilitator in a virtual credit recovery classroom could have a positive impact on student support and motivation. This finding was consistent with the experiences expressed by the participants as they referenced the positive influence their face-to-face teacher/facilitator had on their learning environment and academic progress. Consistent with McHugh et al. (2013), Mr. Kent aimed to create a safe learning environment where he supported students and they, in turn, were encouraged to support each other. The implication for other institutions of learning is to consider doing likewise.

Several studies have highlighted the powerful effect parents can have on their secondary online students' general well-being and online achievement (Borup et al., 2015, 2017; Cwetna, 2016; Liu et al., 2010; Sorensen, 2012). Beyond the scope of the research questions in this study, several study participants echoed this sentiment and attributed at least part of their success to parental support. Current and future virtual credit recovery programs would do well to consider the prospect of allocating resources aimed at involving parents/guardians in their children's academic support teams.

Much of the motivational literature referenced in Chapter 2 focused on the impact of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation among online students (Champion, 2015; Chang et al., 2014; Vayre & Vonthron, 2017; Xie & Huang, 2014). Xie and Huang (2014) suggested that a student's self-efficacy and personal achievement goals greatly predicted how much he or she would engage and be successful in an online course. Pettyjohn and Lafrance (2014) highlighted

the negative impact that failing one or more courses in ninth grade has on the likelihood of graduating on time. The keyword in each participant from this study's response when asked about motivation was unequivocally "graduation." As schools and districts review credit recovery options with vulnerable student populations, it may benefit them to consider at what age and in which ways to introduce graduation as a motivating factor to engage/re-engage with academic work (Rickles, Heppen, Allensworth, Sorensen, & Walters, 2018).

Graduation can be both an intrinsic motivation (I want to graduate) and an extrinsic motivation (others offer me encouragement to graduate). Having set graduation as an internal personal achievement goal helped push study participants forward in their credit recovery courses. Thus, while extrinsic motivation was important to them, the participants expressed greater emphasis on intrinsic motivation to complete online credit recovery courses. Nevertheless, as mentioned, each of the study participants also identified some extrinsic motivators in the form of parents (Cwetna, 2016; Liu et al., 2010;), peers (Vanhalst et al., 2014; Zheng et al., 2010), and a variety of school staff members (Stewart, Goodson, Miertschin, Norwood, & Ezell, 2013).

Instructional design in an online environment is an important aspect to consider as it has an effect on the likelihood of academic success of the students who enroll in the course (Cole, Shelley, & Swartz, 2014). One instructional design aspect that stood out in Edmentum's Plato virtual credit recovery courses utilized in this study was the pace and progress bar. Having a constant reminder of how fast and how well they progressed in their online credit recovery courses was viewed with a wide range of emotions and opinions by participants.

Automatic course pacing was introduced in Plato courses in 2017. The pacing visibility appears on students' screens when due dates are added from the teacher's end as the "system

divides the number of activities within the course by the number of available learning days” (Edmentum, 2017, para. 2). This feature is presented as a helpful tool for students and course facilitators to have constant visibility into each student’s pace and course progression. Several study participants echoed this sentiment, although not all of them did so. One thing to consider for teachers/facilitators as they consider how to communicate pace and progress visibility within virtual credit recovery courses is to what extent they are helpful for students who may be stressed and/or overwhelmed with reminders of where they are academically. Two of the strengths of online learning are (1) the possibility to individualize course curriculum (Gemin & Pape, 2017; Nastu, 2011), and (2) the ability for students to work at their own pace (Dessoiff, 2009). With this in mind it may not always be productive to prescribe students a pace and then visually alert them that they are not measuring up to it each time they attempt to log in and move forward.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This qualitative effort sought to shed light on the perceptions and experiences of a small group of adult students who succeeded in a virtual credit recovery effort in a rural high school following academic struggles in a face-to-face classroom. In order gain a fuller knowledge of the perspectives of successful credit recovery students, future researchers should consider including a larger sample from a rural setting. A greater sample size could challenge and/or validate the themes presented in this study and/or see if any additional themes would emerge.

Future researchers may also seek to replicate and/or expand this study by incorporating an urban sample highlighting one or several demographic variables such as (a) gender, (b) ethnicity, (c) parental education level, (d) family size, (e) socioeconomic status, and/or (e) age. Considerations of a larger and more diverse sample may reveal participants with different

academic motivations than those that emerged in the present study. For example, without the immediate need to graduate, students in grades 9-11 may have different motivations to succeed academically than the 12<sup>th</sup> graders in the current study felt (Emmett, 2013; Gillet et al., 2012; Gottfried, 1990). Findings from such a study could help inform virtual credit recovery course design for students who are not on track to graduate during their initial years of high school.

In this study Mr. Kent played an important motivational role for each of the study participants. Mr. Kent provided an educational environment where students felt safe and encouraged to re-engage with academic materials they had previously failed. Further research into the nature of virtual credit recovery student-course facilitator relationships may provide helpful data to utilize in virtual credit recovery course facilitator trainings.

The *personal connections* theme discussed in Chapter 4 suggested that personal relationships between students and a variety of individuals in their surroundings including teachers, coaches, and family members can be, and often are, positive motivational factors for students to pursue academic excellence. As such, future researchers may seek to learn more about supportive methodology implemented by parents, mentors, coaches, and other stakeholders that promote virtual credit recovery student success. Such data can be pursued both through qualitative and quantitative means.

## **Conclusion**

The mere presence of virtual credit recovery programs suggests that a one-size-fits all approach to secondary education is not adequate. As the demand for virtual credit recovery courses increase, the need to understand the experiences and perspectives of diverse groups of students who enroll in these courses increase proportionally. This study suggests that the support of a variety of stakeholders, a caring and engaged course facilitator/teacher, healthy peer

relationships, individually tailored pace and progress data, and a focus on graduation can be crucial components of the recipe for academic success in virtual credit recovery courses.

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## APPENDIX A

### Personal Interview Guide Questions

1. Please describe the reasons why you enrolled in your first online credit recovery course
2. How would you describe the difference between taking courses online and courses in person?
3. Please describe what a regular school day in credit recovery was like.
4. How has your experiences as an online student influenced or not influenced your thoughts of online schooling? [Prompt – Please explain]
5. A concern that some have regarding online learning is the social isolation students may experience. Can you talk to me about your experiences? Did you feel a sense of belonging or a sense of community? [Prompt – Please explain]\*
6. Please describe your interactions with other students in your credit recovery class(es).\*
7. What kept you going to complete your online course recovery class(es)?†
8. How would you describe your personal motivation before and after enrolling in online credit recovery courses/an online credit recovery course? [Prompt – Please be specific in your description]†
9. Please describe what stands out to you in your interactions with your online teacher(s).‡
10. How would you describe an effective online teacher? What roles, practices, behaviors, or attitudes make for an effective teacher in an online credit recovery program?‡
11. Is there anything you have not mentioned that you think helped you succeed in your online school?
12. Is there anything else you would like to add?

\*Directly relates to Research Question #1

†Directly relates to Research Question #2

‡Directly relates to Research Question #3

## APPENDIX B

### Letter of Consent

Dear Participant,

My name is Max Sigander and I am a student in the Doctor of Education program at George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon. I am conducting research on the experiences of young adults who have successfully completed high school courses with the assistance of online credit recovery material. I would like to invite you to engage in a personal interview (about a half hour to an hour) regarding your perceptions and experiences with online high school education.

This study promises many social benefits. I believe there is much to be learned from your experiences that will inform researchers, educators, and policymakers about how to better serve students who are relying on online credit recovery courses to complete their high school education. By engaging in honest, forthright conversation, this research will document the views, concerns, and advice that you and others can provide.

The risks associated with this research are minimal. The personal interview questions are innocuous and should not create distress. Nevertheless, please be aware that your participation is completely voluntary and you may decline to continue at anytime or decline to answer any question at your discretion.

The results of this study will only be used for research purposes, most notably as part of my doctoral dissertation. The findings may also be used for presentations at a professional conference and/or academic publications. Personal interviews will be audio recorded and later transcribed. Information will be analyzed and presented in an anonymous fashion and no individual will be personally identified and personal information will be kept confidential.

All research materials (i.e., audio recordings, transcriptions, and signed consent forms) will be locked in separate, secure locations for five years. I will be the only individual who will have access to these materials. After five years, I will personally destroy all relevant materials and delete the audio recordings.

I thank you for your time in considering this project. If you choose to participate, please be aware that you are making a contribution to the furthering educational research. If you have any questions regarding this research, please contact me at xxxx@xxx.xxx. If you have any additional questions you may contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Terry Huffman at xxxx@xxx.xxx.

If you understand the use of this research and agree to participate, please sign below.

Participant signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_