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## The Lost Boys: A Phenomenological Study of Freshmen Year Failure

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THE LOST BOYS:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF FRESHMEN YEAR FAILURE

by  
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A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of the  
Doctor of Educational Leadership Department  
in partial fulfillment for the degree of  
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Doctoral research project prepared by HOLLY MIELE in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership.

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## ABSTRACT

In educational circles and beyond, there is increased concern for young men who are deemed underperforming in schools. This concern has been persistent for years, and has led to many studies exploring the growing academic divide between young men and women. Few have endeavored to investigate this phenomenon by studying young men's experiences. Using Eccles' Value-Expectancy (2000) framework as a guide, this phenomenological study explored the lived-experience of six young men who failed courses during their freshman year of high school. The aim of this study was to investigate the intersection of stereotypes, expectations, and perceptions within the context of their experiences of failure.

Data was collected through the use of a unique photo-elicitation meme protocol, a focus group, and individual interviews conducted by a teacher-researcher and a key informant. An informal use of the MSLQ questionnaire was added to the end of the data collection process as comparison point to the themes found in participants' experiences of course failure. The findings of the study reveal the complexities of stereotype threat in the classroom, a lacking academic culture, and their overall expectations of struggle and poor performance in the classroom. Their relationships with teachers also stood out as a significant element of their academic progress. These all influenced students' self-concept and understanding of their worth as a student. Implications of practice include system-wide analysis of messaging, policies, and communication expectations that perpetuate barriers for young men building a positive self-concept in schools.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Many high schools monitor their on-track to graduate statistics, and naturally focus on freshmen. As they enter a new school environment, freshmen have to navigate credits and graduation requirements for the first time. This transition time can be tumultuous, and for some vulnerable students, it can be incredibly difficult. Students who fail core courses during their first year have to find a way to make up those credits as they progress to increasingly challenging work. While tracking quantitative data for these years is informative and necessary, it is critical that researchers and educators also listen to students' experiences during this transition. Young men represent one group within schools that is tracking significantly lower as on-track to graduate (Sutton, Langenkamp, Muller, & Schiller, 2018). This study sought to better understand what young men have to say about their academic experiences, particularly course failure experiences, in light of the many messages they receive from society, peers, and their families during their freshmen year.

### Problem of Practice

In recent years, different stakeholders from teachers to researchers have expressed concern with regard to boys and young men falling behind in educational systems. This message has been so pervasive that major media outlets such as *Newsweek* (Tyre, 2006), *US News* (Bidwell, 2015), *The Washington Post* (Guo, 2016), and even TEDx talks (Farrell, 2015) have headlined this as a crisis. Research in the past decade legitimizes such extreme language. Compared to girls, boys have shown significant underperformance in test scores for language and reading (Rowe & Rowe, 2002; Voyer, Voyer, & Hinshaw, 2014). Academic success based on social behavior, work ethic, and compliance, which are often represented by grades, have also suggested that girls perform better than boys in the classroom (Buchmann, DiPrete, & McDaniel,

2008; Driessen & Langen, 2013; Houtte, 2003). College entrance data indicates a progressing trend that boys are not advancing in academic tracks as swiftly as girls advance during post-secondary education (Clark, Lee, Goodman, & Yacco, 2008; Moller, Sterns, Southworth, & Potochnick, 2013). With all of these findings, there are still many more questions than answers to the puzzle of why some boys struggle and how this affects their overall trajectory of academic learning. Particularly salient to this issue is what boys say about the significance of this experience in relation to societal, familial, and peer-based messages of who they are and how boys are “supposed” to be in school.

At the high school where this study took place, there was a significant gap in the percentage of male students vs. female students who are on track to graduate. For the class of 2022, 86% of girls, compared to 75% of boys, are currently on track (Rogers School District, 2018). In fact, this trend has existed for years with the most recent state report cards showing similar disparities between boys and girls on track to graduation: 2015-16 (boys 79.8%, girls 88.8%), 2013-14 (boys 78.3%, girls 88.0%), and 2012-2013 (boys 73.5%, girls 84.2%). While one failing grade does not lead to a student being off-track to graduate, failing several courses tied to graduation requirements results in students being deemed off track. Studying boys’ perception about course failure experiences may help to explain their mindsets toward education.

Failure can be difficult to experience, yet it is also inevitable for every human being. Failure can provide an opportunity for growth and self-assessment and the idea of a “growth mindset” has recently been emphasized in education (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). While some educators are adopting this mental shift from a fixed mindset to a more malleable understanding of growth, boys are specifically poised to benefit from shifting the narrative about failing a class from a detrimental experience to holding the potential for positive change. Studies such as this

one, which focus on student voice and experience, can offer important insight into how students experience, perceive, and move through failure.

There has been an effort to define the problems contributing to male student underachievement, particularly in popular books authored by Epstein (1998), Pollack (1999), and Thompson (2000). Some research has defined the gender-based achievement gap as the result of underachievement by boys (Houtte, 2004; Jones & Myhill, 2017) indicated by proficiency in testing, but poor performance in the classroom. Researchers considering the culture of boys at school found that an anti-school culture, or “laddishness,” might also impact boys’ performance in a negative way (Jackson, 2003; Jonsson, 2014). Perceptions of parents and teachers can contribute to underachievement for male students (Heyder & Kessels, 2015; Mullola et al, 2012; Pansu et al, 2016) by reinforcing societal stereotypes. Stereotypes of poor behavior, a general lack of study culture, and non-compliance may also contribute to how young men are perceived or how they see themselves in the classroom (Hartley & Sutton, 2013; Plante, 2013). While all of this collected work speaks to the potential obstacles young men face within education, how failure of one or many classes impacts different facets of the individual student’s self-perception is worth exploring.

### **Purpose/Rationale of this Study**

One of the most challenging times within a student’s public-school experience is the transition from middle school to high school, and is also when many students encounter failure for the first time. A phenomenological study into boys’ lived experiences with course failure during this formative time has the potential to provide some insight into this complex, multi-faceted issue. This study sought to understand the lived experiences of academic failure for a small group of young men during their freshman year of high school, and to explore the elements

of expectations, stereotypes, influences, and mindsets within their individual accounts. Their voices offer insight into how they view their place in education, which adds critical insight to current research.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study: What are the lived experiences of young men who failed one or more courses their freshman year of high school, denoting them as off-track to graduate?

- a. What do these young men say about the meaning of these failure experiences as they intersect with perceived stereotypes and personal expectations?
- b. What do they perceive about this experience in relation to the expectations of others (parents/teachers/peers) in their lives?
- c. What do their expectations of future academic pathways reveal about their resilience, growth mindset, and anticipated academic trajectories?

These questions were addressed through the use of a focus group involving a photo (meme) elicitation, and individual interviews with participants. Due to the vulnerable nature of these discussions, particular care and concern went into designing a study that also promoted self-insight and understanding for students. As the researcher, I carefully cultivated an atmosphere of shared discussion with familiar social media tools such as memes to guide the conversation. The students talked about their first year in high school, which for many has more complexities than just struggles in the classroom. For many, this transition year is one of the first major shifts in not only their academic lives but also in their personal lives as well.

One of the most pivotal times in a student's educational life is their freshman year of high school when they encounter the concept of credits toward graduation for the first time.

Some researchers argue this academic year has greater impact than any other (Neild, 2009). The consequences of underperformance could be completely derailing for young men considering that more educators are seeing this as the “make or break year” (Gewertz, 2017). This pivotal time can set the trajectory for a student’s academic journey to success or mark the beginnings of academic failure. This is also a time when students may be vulnerable to challenge and change, and this study indicates how students met these challenges, whether with a willingness to grow or a fear of not finding success because of perceived limitations. For these reasons, this study focused on sophomores who failed a course required for graduation during their freshmen year. This design decision enabled me to initiate a reflective conversation into student experience outside the immediate stress of failure, even as they navigated the consequences of that failure in their current academic year.

### **Significance of Study**

Research such as this has the potential to help school leaders discern the complexity of failure experiences and consider how a few students’ experiences could be instructive to educational practice, policy, and schoolwide procedures. While there are many studies that show the decline in academic performance of male students, this research offers a deeper look into what boys experience in school, with the potential to better understand how they navigate the choices, influences, and academic pathways of a secondary school. Their responses may also shed light on the shaping power of messages that define their own possibilities in the classroom and beyond.

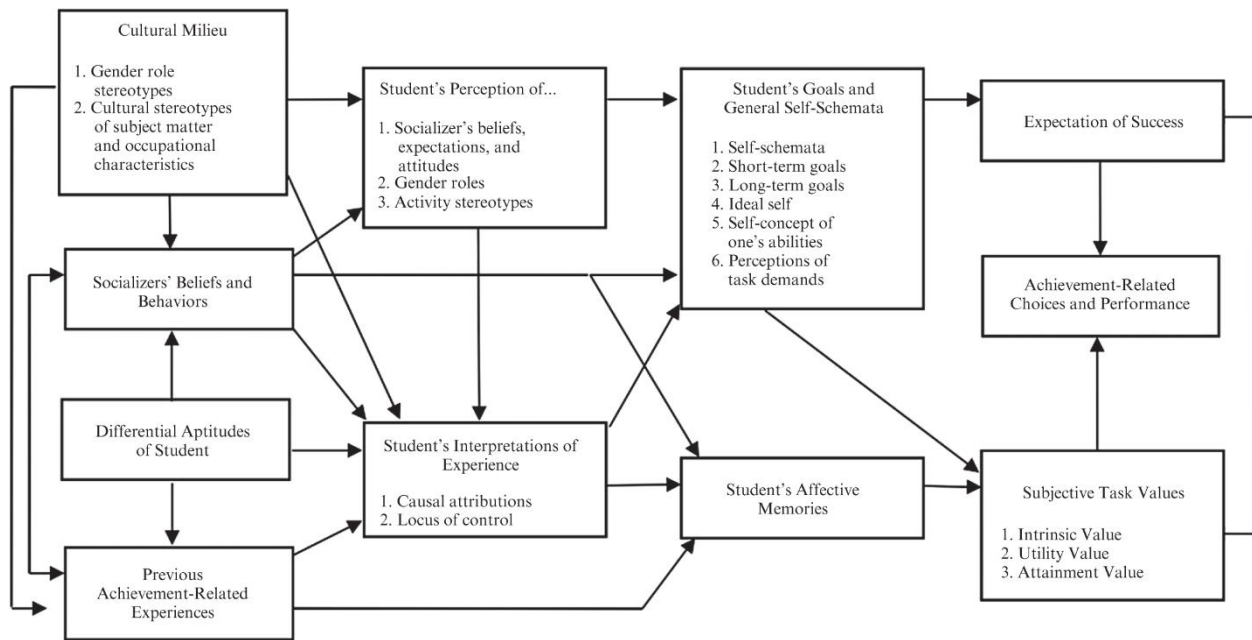
As a ninth-grade history teacher at a public high school, this study was of utmost importance to me as I see many of my male students struggling to find success during their first year of high school. My own experience as a public high-school teacher, along with data from

my school and district pointed me to this study focused on boys' academic performance. Even now, study findings are already enabling me and fellow teachers to consider how receptive boys are to a mindset that embraces challenge and how failure experiences function in these boys' lives.

### **Theoretical Framework Considerations**

Expectancy-value theory, developed by Eccles and her colleagues (Eccles & Wigfield, 2000; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002), is a useful tool to analyze a student's self-reporting of motivation, self-perceptions, and expectations. The theory posits that achievement-related choices are motivated by a combination of people's expectations for success and subjective task value in particular domains (Eccles, 2005). For example, students are more likely to pursue an activity if they expect to do well and if they find value in what they are being asked to do. This framework provides a way to consider how self-perceptions, expectations, and stereotypes all play a role in crafting a student's self-concept. Within this framework, gender plays a key role in not only informing students of cultural stereotypes, but also their developing self-perception. This framework lent insight into the work to understand how a male student grapples with failure, and what that experience can mean as they progress through their education and continue to develop their own self-concept.





*Figure 1: Eccles Expectancy-Value Theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2000)*

Another useful framework for this work was derived from the work of Dweck (2012), indicating two mindsets that shape a person's perspective on learning. The first is a fixed mindset, where a person views one's qualities and capacity to learn as set in stone, finite, or fixed. Alternatively, a growth mindset indicates one believes their qualities and ability to learn are malleable and based on one's own efforts (Dweck, 2012, p.17). This framework proved useful in helping me to interpret participants' responses regarding their experiences of course failure.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms were important ones for this study; definitions were derived from various studies that discussed the meaning of the specified term. In some cases, the definition is defined further by the context of this study's use of the term.

*Underachievement* – Hoffman (2018) defines this as school performance, such as measured by grades which fall below what is predicted by standardized tests of mental/cognitive ability. For cases in this study, some participants may have tested in the proficient range of standardized testing, but their course grade did not reflect that. This could also mean that, based on teacher or counselor observations, the student was more capable than what they demonstrated in the classroom.

*Stereotype threat* – This term was discussed by Steele (1995) as a situational predicament in which people are or feel themselves to be at risk of conforming to stereotypes about their social group. The danger of this threat is that students may feel an academic outcome is inevitable for them based on others' perceptions. The other potential danger is that students come to believe these stereotypes about their social group and create self-fulfilling cycles of predicted outcomes.

*Academic achievement* - Student success is defined as academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, and attainment of educational outcomes (York, Gibson, & Rankin, p. 5).

*Failure* - Specific to education, this term refers to a student not receiving grades or evaluations at the proficiency mark of an educational program. Specific to this study, a student who received an F (59.99% or below) either one or both semesters in an academic year, received a failing grade in that course.

*Growth mindset* – This is a concept developed by Dweck (2006) to represent the belief that a person's most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work. This mindset can foster a love of learning and the resilience that is essential for navigating difficulties

and challenges. This concept also can overflow into the development of grit, resilience, and drive in a student if they see hardship or failure as an opportunity to try again and continue the pursuit of learning.

*Self-concept* - This term is typically defined as a person's general composite or collective view of themselves across sets of domain-specific perceptions, based on self-belief and evaluation of value or worth of one's own capabilities formed through experiences, societal stereotypes, and environment (Eccles, 2005).

### **Organization of Study**

This study was designed to explore boys' experiences of course failure and the perceived consequences of that experience to their academic trajectory. This chapter presented the research questions, the significance of the study, and defined theoretical frameworks and definitions offer the major elements of the study. The literature presented in Chapter Two further discusses the gender-based academic gap, perceived elements of boys' underperformance in schools, relevant stereotypes of boys in education, and some collected voices of boys and teachers regarding educative experiences. The rationale of a phenomenological approach, data collection and analysis choices, and ethical considerations are addressed in Chapter Three, along with reflections on my positionality within the role as a teacher-researcher. Chapters Four and Five discuss the findings from the study and point to insights worth considering.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This review touches on four major themes of the research literature related to this topic: a) the gender-based achievement gap, b) elements and evidence of boys' underperformance, c) the surmised relationships between underperformance and societal stereotypes, and d) precedence in qualitative research focusing on boys in the classroom. Sources span over thirty years of research, while giving special focus on research from the past decade, which indicate the historical and relevant nature of some young men's struggle in school.

### **The Achievement Gap**

Researchers point to gender-based achievement gaps at the secondary level (Buchmann, DiPrete & McDaniel, 2008; Legewie & DiPrete, 2012; Voyer, et al., 2014). While quantitative data continues to show specific statistics of disproportionate success between the genders, there are other indicators that school culture is not as advantageous for boys as it is for girls (Kretschmer, Leszczensky, & Pink, 2018; Wang & Eccles, 2012). There is no simple answer for why an achievement gap exists between the genders, but the fact that it is persistent in many different approaches of educational research is concerning.

For many decades, researchers have been tracking the markers of academic progress for all students. In the early 1970s, many were concerned with the underperformance of girls in particular disciplines, specifically math and science (Parker, Van Zanden, & Parker, 2018). Many worked on correcting the underrepresentation of girls in these areas and also to bolster their overall academic achievement. Concerted effort to address inequity in science and math curriculums have created a positive change for the numbers of girls finding equal success in the classroom (Wang & Eccles, 2012). Yet in the past few decades, it has been verified by both qualitative and quantitative studies that boys are falling behind in academic achievement

(Driessen & Langen, 2013; Houtte, 2004; Rowe & Rowe, 2002, Voyer & Voyer, 2014).

Achievement in this discussion is defined by grades, cognitive tests, and observations by educators. Overall, trends emerge that highlight significant differences in the performance of young men and young women at the secondary level.

### **The Specific Gaps between the Genders**

One of the most common measures of academic achievement are grades and cognitive testing, usually numeric representations of proficiency in different subject areas. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, boys continue to fall behind girls in national cognitive testing (NAEP, 2018). While the gap is slowly narrowing, there is still a significant difference in testing outcomes especially in the areas of reading proficiency (Voyer et al., 2014). Studies of large-scale school districts, like the work of Clark, Lee, Goodman, & Yacco (2008), show that the cumulative GPA of young men can be a whole point behind (on average (3.0 vs 2.0) their female counterparts. Recent findings in a meta-analysis of academic achievement (Voyer et al., 2014) revealed the same results; young men did not score as well overall on cognitive tests as young women, and their grades were consistently lower.

One potential explanation for boys' imbalance of academic success in the classroom could be defined as underachievement. There are studies that show that boys are still testing higher than girls in the disciplines of math and science, while trailing girls in reading and language (Heyder et al., 2017). These tests also show that the achievement gap between these subject areas are not as considerable as they once were, but they are still persistent (Voyer et al., 2014). The concern that young men are underachieving is also apparent in their cognitive mathematic test scores versus their acquired grades. As a group, young men perform better than young women on standardized math tests, yet young women's collective grades are higher

(Buchmann et al., 2008). The more concerning issues involve the other findings of underachievement in grades and post-secondary education. Overall, girls consistently receive higher grades than boys throughout primary and secondary levels, and that directly impacts the future prospects of both genders. Class ranking, GPAs, and overall rigorous course load are key indicators for qualifying for college acceptance, scholarships, and internships. As boys fall behind in these significant indicators, their future options could be further limited.

However, two areas of testing indicate young men are not underperforming: mathematics and science (Bauchmann et al., 2008). Also, one non-cognitive measure that has highlighted a strength of male students as a whole is in the domain of self-concept. Female students were found to have a lower general self-concept in math and in society compared to male students (Parker et al., 2016). This is important to note in that when a large number of boys are testing well in an area, such as math, their self-concept is positive. While there are areas of strength in cognitive testing, the overall conclusion that researchers have constructed is that there is a persistent gap in grades and overall academic achievement of young men and it has been apparent for decades.

These findings are also echoed by other national scale cognitive testing results collected in Australia, Holland, Germany, and Spain at the secondary level (Driessen et al., 2013; Marcenaro-Gutierrez, Lopez-Agudo, & Roper-Garcia, 2017; Rowe et al., 2002) in that boys test well in math and science, but fall behind in languages and reading comprehension. In the Netherlands, nation-wide non-cognitive assessments revealed that young men scored lower than young women on social behaviors and work ethic/attitude (Driessen et al., 2013). Similar findings show young men have pronounced lagging skills in non-cognitive tasks such as work completion and working independently (Jones & Myhill, 2004). Many have come to categorize

this gender disparity as boys' underachievement (Clark et al., 2008; Hartley & Sutton, 2013; Heyder, Kessels, & Steinmayr, 2017). This is where underachievement becomes intertwined with the concept of underperformance, and both terms are becoming stereotypical of young men in education.

Another outcome of underachievement is the growing number of young men not choosing academic tracks within their education. Researchers have also found that some young men lack a study culture that enables them to adequately prepare for the demands of academic coursework (Houtte, 2004; Marcenaro-Gutierrez et al., 2017). More young men are shying away from an academic track that would increase their ability to get into post-secondary institutions (Heyder et al, 2017), and are not developing or participating in a study culture that helps to foster success at the secondary level (Moler, Stearns, Southworth, & Potochnick, 2012). The outcome of this underachievement has now manifested itself into a disproportionate number of young women being admitted and entering into post-secondary education compared to young men (Buchmann et al., 2008). This also translates to young women qualifying for more scholarships and funding because of their superior grades (Clark, et al., 2008; Jackman, et al., 2019). While this is rightfully earned by female students, it suggests a snowball effect of boys' underperformance in the secondary grades.

### **Failing or Dropping Out**

Nationwide statistics also show that young men are failing out of educational systems in greater numbers than young women (Clark, et al., 2008; Jackman, et al., 2019). Studies show that boys are being referred to special education, involved in discipline referrals, and found to be credit deficient in their graduation requirements in far greater numbers than their female counterparts (Clark et al., 2008; Driessen et al., 2013; NCES, 2018). Educational systems do

have an impact on the constructs of grades, behavior policies, and reinforcing stereotypes that directly affect the perceived achievement or underachievement of any student groups, but no matter the system, boys seem to not be thriving.

Graduation and drop-out rates are key indicators of attaining academic success or not in public schools. Specific to this study, in the state of Oregon where this study takes place, there is a gap of on-time graduation rates between young men and women in secondary education of over 3% (ODE, 2018), with graduation rates considerably lower than the rest of the nation. Across the United States, young men are dropping out at a rate of 5.4%, compared to 4.1% of young women (NCES, 2018).

### **Elements of Boys' Underachievement in Schools**

There are numerous dynamics affecting students' ability to navigate educational systems and find academic success. Some are grounded in realities outside a student's control, such as ethnicity, socio-economic class, stability at home, and culture; others, such as students' own stereotypes and biases can prevent them from perceiving their capabilities.

#### ***Anti-school Culture***

Underachievement can be perpetuated by the ways modern masculinity is at odds with achievement in education (Cobbett & Younger, 2012; Houtte, 2004; Jackson, 1998; Jonsson, 2014). Fewer male students are enrolling in academic track courses in secondary education, and sometimes males are disruptive in their classes with an overall anti-school mentality (Jonsson, 2014). Both of these phenomena can be attributed to what researchers have identified as "rowdy boys" and "boys will be boys" stereotypes. This means that, before they even enter a classroom, young men are seen as potential behavior issues or disengaged students.



### ***Feminization of Schools***

Over 76% of teachers in the United States are female (Loewus, 2017), and the overall feminization of schools could be perpetuating these gender constructs and misunderstanding. Male students have fewer male academic role models and educators in their school culture. In a study that directly asked the question, *Is school feminine?*, Heyder and Kessels found that “the more strongly boys associated school with female and the more they ascribed negative masculine traits to themselves, the lower their grades” (2013, p. 605). The overwhelming majority of teachers and their approaches to education are distinctly feminine and may create an unintentional barrier between male students and academic success.

### ***Poor Study Culture***

Other researchers find that boys have a poor study culture compared to that of girls (Houtte, 2004; Jackson, 1998). This can not only derail their academic pursuits, but undermine teachers’ efforts to educate them. A disproportionate number of young men are removed from the classroom due to behavior, yielding less academic time for young men (Jackson, 1998). Culturally, boys are less likely to develop social groups with a focus on academic achievement and instead construct social groups based on similarly shared activities such as athletics, gaming, and work (Kretschmer, Leszczensky, & Pink, 2018). This creates social constructs that impede male students from developing academic habits and mindsets.

### ***Socio-economic Status***

Underachievement issues become more complex with data dispersed by ethnic or socio-economic subgroups. African American and Latino male students are at a higher risk of dropping out of school compared with any other subgroup (Bristol, 2015). The rates of failure or delayed academic achievement of young men are also strongly correlated to their socio-economic class

(Croizet, Desert, Dutrevis, & Leyens, 2001). Our education system has struggled to create parity for all subgroups, but young men of minority groups or low socio-economic status have particularly low levels of academic achievement and elevated percentages of failure. A student's economic status and identity can compound barriers in education, and perpetuate cultural stereotypes that young men will sacrifice academic pursuits in order to maintain their appearance of "coolness" (Houtte, 2004).

### ***Teacher Bias and Perceptions***

Also noteworthy are the biases of educators in regard to young men's academic abilities (Heartly & Sutton, 2013). Research has shown that teachers' expectations influence young men's achievement (Gentrup & Rjosk, 2018; Heyder et al., 2017). In other words, the beliefs of teachers and parents that their male students will underperform, especially in reading, can become a self-fulfilling prophecy that undermines achievement.

In a recent large-scale study in Finland, researchers found that teachers generally perceive male students as having less maturity, greater temperament issues, and being less "teachable" than female students (Mullola et al., 2012). In another study, teachers perceived young women as being more motivated and utilizing better work habits than males (Gentrup & Rjosk, 2018). Jones and Myhill (2004) found that 80% of educators stated that they expected male and female students to equally achieve academic success in their classrooms, but they typically labelled the male students as underachievers. They go on to say, "teachers have formed a strong set of concepts and opinions in relation to the underachieving boy" (p. 538). These mindsets can compound the barriers for male students seeking academic achievement.

The research explored from the past two decades collectively supports the perception that male students are struggling to find equal success in academic achievement compared to their

female counterparts. Large-scale quantitative analysis of grades and cognitive testing, as well as large- and small-scale qualitative studies have provided a solid basis of understanding the scope of underachievement in young men's academic attainment. However, the factors contributing to this global phenomenon are not as easily identified.

### **Addressing Stereotypes of Male Students**

It is complex to consider how teachers, parents, and peers describe boys' behaviors in the classroom, and the ways these stereotypes shape boys' academic failure (Buchmann et al, 2008; Carrington & McPhee, 2008; Driessen & Langen, 2013; Jones & Myhill, 2008; Voyer et al, 2014). Whether perpetuated by teachers, parents, or peers, boys are confronted with many messages that shape their perceptions of personal ability in the classroom.

### ***Stereotype Threat and Boys in the Classroom***

In 1997, Steele created the term *stereotype threat* to describe a situational threat that can affect the members of any group about whom a negative stereotype exists. While his study focused on girls within mathematics courses and African American students, current research (Hartley & Sutton, 2013; Pansu et al, 2016; Wei, 2012) indicates that this is also true for male students. Reading and language is one such area where stereotype threat is evident for young men (Pansu et al., 2016). This study showed that male students underperformed under threat conditions, but performed as well as their female peers in reduced threat conditions. One group of students was told that they were going to be evaluated on their "ability in reading" while another was told they were going to complete a task called "the animal-fishing game," an interaction designed for a fun magazine (Pansu et al., 2016, p.27). The boys who were told they were to be tested on their reading abilities scored lower than the boys in the other group, despite the fact that the task was exactly the same. Researchers concluded that the boys'

underperformance was directly connected to their fear of confirming a negative stereotype; they were feeling the pressure of a stereotype threat.

These stereotypes are not limited to the perceptions of reading. In a study on competence beliefs and task values, researchers found that students' academic performance was predicted mainly by their competence beliefs (Plante, de la Sablonniere, Aronson, & Theoret, 2013). This becomes problematic if male students expect to struggle with a task or subject before they even begin their academic work. These stereotypes can become self-fulfilling prophecies (Steele, 1996). In a study of pre-adolescent children, researchers found that the boys within their sample group increasingly endorsed the stereotype that girls are academically superior by ages 7 to 8 (Hartley & Sutton, 2013). Prior to this age, this same sample group believed that they were the same academically. Somewhere in these children's academic experiences, they begin to believe a stereotype that inhibits their own expectations of academic achievement.

This message of "smart girls, dumb boys" is exactly what Latsch and Hannover (2014) sought to research in examining the impact that public discourse of "failing boys" had on male students within the German educational system. PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) tests in Germany led to contentious public debate that male students were well behind their female counterparts, a news story that was widely covered throughout Germany. Within the German system, boys disproportionately filled the lowest school track, and were underrepresented in the highest school track. Many more male students did not receive their diplomas compared to females. In four experimental studies, these researchers examined whether or not students had acquired stereotypes about males failing at school and how these viewpoints affected their motivational goal orientation in both math and reading. The researchers found "that threat emanation from the negative portrayal of boys did not operate like a general negative self-

fulfilling prophecy, but rather impaired male student's performance only on tasks for which their social group membership is considered a liability" (Hannover et al., 2014, p. 123). They concluded, "male students who are directly exposed to negative expectations from the portrayal of 'failing boys' in the media underperform on tasks that are connoted as female and focus their learning goals on tasks that are connoted as male" (p. 124).

### ***Stereotypes and the Role of the Teacher and Parents***

Some teachers are beginning to research teacher and male student relationships to create better methods and practices for teaching young men. In an extensive qualitative study, a Teaching Boys Study Group was formed by researchers (Raider-Roth, Albert, Bircann-Barkey, Gidseg, & Murray, 2008). This group of teachers met to specifically discuss how teachers' relationships with boys can be central to bolstering boys' resilience and connection to their work in the classroom. One significant finding was the perceived barrier of a female teacher trying to connect and identify with the meanings that boyhood holds for their male students. Researchers concluded, "the ways teachers come into relationship with boys shape and are shaped by teacher's identity, the extent to which the boys express resistance to the school and classroom culture, and the forces of the school culture on the teacher and the boys" (Raider-Roth et al., 2008, p. 476).

The role of the teacher on behavioral engagement of young men and the support they receive from their teachers was the focus of a study by Lietaert, et al., (2015). These researchers specifically wanted to explore the idea that the gender achievement gap, particularly in language classes, was directly impacted by the teachers' mindset. After accessing feedback from students, teachers, and observers, they found that their data confirmed that boys are at risk of lower behavioral engagement than girls and this is related to lower perceptions of teacher autonomy

support and involvement (Lietaert et al., 2015, p. 512). This indicates that teachers have power to directly impact male students' engagement and feelings of support. Lietaert et al. concluded that the gender gap could be reduced with a teacher focus on autonomy support for all students. As Wang and Eccles (2012) describe, teachers can convey a sense of caring, respect, and appreciation for their students that may lead to students' greater engagement in school, but only if stereotypes are examined and dismantled.

Some male students encounter unfair judgements in pre-service teachers. This was addressed in a similar study which focused on teachers in training and the expectations of behavior they held for students based on gender (Heyder & Kessels, 2014). They stated, "Our results indicate that in line with the stereotype of lazy and troublesome boys, teachers expected male students to show less behavior that fosters learning and more behavior that impedes learning than female students" (p. 478). If incoming teachers already have a preconceived idea of what behaviors describe male students, and especially if the descriptors of "lazy" and "troublesome" are used, male students face significant yet subtle challenges.

Male students can also be stereotyped by those closest to them. In a study that looked at the underachieving of academic-track male students in their language classes, researchers Heyder, Kessels, and Steinmeyr (2017) found that parents' assumptions play a role in the self-concept of their sons. They conclude "our study showed that at the end of secondary school, parents' beliefs were still useful for explaining gender differences in language achievement favoring girls" (Heyder et al., 2017, p. 217). It is sobering to consider how both teachers and parents can inadvertently widen the gender gap by fostering assumptions and stereotypes about their male students. Eccles (2011), a long-time researcher in gender differences within education, found that positive parent social support directly impacted school engagement; parents are a

critical source of social support throughout adolescence. Whether it is possible for parents to provide support without projecting stereotypes onto their sons is worth considering.

Regardless of whether stereotypes are imposed in the classroom or at home, some young men carry the label of underachiever with them into the workforce and post-secondary educational programs (Moller, Stearns, Southworth, & Potochnick, 2013). Students' formal education spans the most formative time in their lives as they develop fundamental skills, abilities, and self-concept.

### **Collected Voices of Boys in Education**

While research offers important insights into larger trends related to boys' experience in school, the lived experiences of boys who have failed emphasizes general disengagement as a normal part of school culture, along with prioritizing "coolness" over competency. Teachers have also given voice to behaviors of boys and concerns for their progress in literacy. These collected voices constitute the focus of the next section of this literature review.

### ***Disengagement as School Culture***

In a qualitative study that focused on working-class boys and their views on academic success, many students revealed their total disdain for general education (Ingram, 2009). The study interviewed boys from both a secondary and grammar private school in Belfast, Ireland. A Year 12 student explained, "I hate it, you don't learn nothing. I'd rather be out working. I can't learn. If you want to do something you'll learn about it. If you don't want to do it then you won't learn" (p. 429). This student verbalized an element of anti-school culture, specifically his feelings of frustration and general pointlessness he felt about what he was learning. Ingram later concluded that the secondary school boys in her study mostly conformed to the institutional

habitus of their school, where opposition to schooling was a taken-for-granted disposition both by the pupils and the school (2009).

Anti-school behavior was also observed by Jonsson (2014) in his narrative perspective of two ethnographic studies of two secondary schools in the suburbs of Stockholm, Sweden. As he spent time with students, he focused on what he termed “male anti-school culture” and “the rowdy boy” stereotypes that have been widely discussed in the national media. Jonsson describes specific situations that point to the issues underlying underachievement and disengagement. In one example, a male student was asked a question that he could not answer. The teacher came back and asked a similar question that remained unanswered. Finally, the student responded with the comment, “I don’t care.” Rather than maintaining his “coolness” in front of classmates, Jonsson saw this response as a way to escape the notion that he was failing at school by not being prepared for class (p. 285). At the same time, telling the teacher, “I don’t care” helped to perpetuate the anti-school narrative connected to underachievement.

### ***“One of the Boys”: Coolness in the Classroom***

This feeling of disengagement has helped to define behavior that has been identified as a “one of the boys” culture (Grønberg, 2013, p. 1194). In an auto-ethnographical study, a female psychologist joined a predominantly male group of auto mechanic students. She used the term “*one of the boys*” to describe the social dynamics in the peer group culture, giving recognition to their need to display a certain kind of “coolness” that inevitably affected the expression and construction of disengagement. Based on the classroom culture she observed, she concluded that these students believed that the less one showed visible interest or engagement in coursework, the more one fit in with their fellow male students.



One of Grønberg's (2013) key observations were that the mechanic teachers were viewed as role models to the students because of their professional background. She observed that the female teacher of other required classes (language, IT, and math) was not treated the same way. The students frequently provoked her in ways that they never did with their male teacher. Grønberg observed that non-participation became a legitimate form of participation in these classes, stating "the more engagement the students 'invest,' the more there is at stake for them including risk of failure" (p. 1203).

While Grønberg (2013) focused on young men in a vocational track, Walker (2014) targeted her research on underachieving boys at a high-performing high school campus. She described how disruptive masculinity is in resistance to the perceived "feminine" nature of classrooms today. Specifically, it is "uncool to work," which means that to be cool and popular, students must generally avoid overt academic work (p. 185). When asked about their disengagement, the boys reported that they preferred work that is a challenge. Specifically, a student responded that classwork was "too easy to bother with" or "insulting" (Walker, 2014, p. 191). While those students opted out of work because it lacks challenge, other students opt out because of being overwhelmed.

Regardless of which side of the challenge coin students resist, the male students in these studies demonstrated their frustration by opting out in the classroom. Many students also describe what Roberts (2012) refers to as "pushing the boundaries" in their recollections of schooling. These students recalled such moments with a great deal of humor, but later described them as atypical compared to "just getting on with it" and doing what they needed to do in the classroom. One reflected, "My teachers obviously, like, always said I could do better, but I wanted to push myself, a bit, as much as I could have done" (p. 212). This student made an

interesting omission that he wanted to push himself, and that his teacher felt that he did not push himself enough. From the teacher's perspective, this young man was underachieving compared to the potential that he possessed and his disengagement appeared to be underperformance.

While some categorize these sentiments as underachievement, others such as Jackson (2003), see these attitudes coming from a fear of failure in the classroom. In her in-depth ethnographic study of early adolescent male students, she coined the phrase "laddishness," defined as behavior and the fears that these students had of not measuring up or standing out to peers. In one interview, a student was asked if they hide the fact that they work on their schoolwork. The student responded:

Yes, sometimes. Like I got a high level on my geography and nobody else did, so I said, "well I didn't do it that long, I was only half an hour on it," just to say that I'm not like a swot or a geek, that I say home doing all my homework. (p. 589)

This student was in conflict of wanting to do well in his classwork, but not wanting to lose any of his "coolness" or acceptance within his peer group. To him, appearing too smart could be a social problem. Between a fear of failure and a fear of appearing too smart, these students defaulted to average or nonparticipation to avoid the social pitfalls that might arise. These voices repeatedly focused on their behaviors, rather than their learning itself.

### **Teachers' Experiences with Boys in the Classroom**

The role of the teacher is paramount to students recognizing their individual abilities in the classroom. In a case-study approach to explore boys' perceptions of learning, researchers interviewed Year 2 (children ages 6-7) teachers specifically asking if they believed girls and boys have different learning styles, preferences, and behaviors. One teacher continually used ADHD, fidgeting, and lack of focus as descriptors for boys in her classroom. Although she was

asked to describe their learning, her comments were only descriptive of their behavior. While she stated that she believed boys were equally keen to learn at this stage of their education, she repeatedly categorized the boys as being behavior problems compared to girls. She later said, “It can be difficult to decide whether children are being ‘naughty’ or whether it is ADHD” (Hamilton & Jones, 2016, p. 249). When discussing these young boys’ learning, this veteran teacher constantly kept referring to their behavior above anything else, indicating that measures of academic achievement could be skewed by conduct preferences rather than true performance in the classroom.

Two researchers specifically addressed the “feminization” of teaching and boys’ underachievement. In this context, “feminization” meant the continuing under-representation of men in the teaching profession (Carrington & McPhee, 2008). They sought to understand practitioners’ opinions of the need to hire male teachers, their understanding of teachers as role models and the potential difference male and female teachers might have on their students because of their gender. A sample of 51 primary teachers (25 men, 26 women) in England were interviewed with questions that specifically addressed perceived underachievement and disaffection among male pupils. Overall, the majority of teachers welcomed the idea that more men should be hired within the teaching profession. Almost all the teachers attached considerable importance to role modeling and saw it as a crucial part of their professional practice. Almost half of the interviewees described themselves as symbols of academic achievement for their pupils (p. 115). However, only a minority of the teachers believed that a teacher’s gender had an impact on children’s learning experiences.

## **Growth Mindset and Resilience**

Despite potential hardships, stereotypes, and adverse school cultures, many young men find a way to navigate through these challenges while others do not. Recently, researchers have studied mindsets, or implicit theories, and human nature. One of the greatest shifts in thinking has been moving from the idea of a fixed mindset (entity theory) to a growth mindset (incremental theory) (Dweck, 2011). In essence, this shift challenges the notion that learning is not built in and fixed by nature and therefore limited, but rather that learning can be developed through nurturing and persistent effort. Overall, a growth mindset could prevent negative stereotypes from undermining achievement (Good et al., 2012), helping to negate the influence of stereotypes and self-perceptions that limit a male student's potential.

Growth mindset language and instruction could be a key to forming academic resilience in students. Researchers Yeager and Dweck (2012) conducted a study with 9<sup>th</sup> grade students and showed how their mindsets can be incrementally transformed toward a growth mindset with constructive incremental encouragement. They showed how students slowed their decline in grades when exposed to language that supported a growth mindset shift, which over time could lead to long-term academic achievement. Dweck (2000) explains that students' mindsets can drive their educational goals and influence continuous learning if they believe their learning capacity is unlimited. Those who are led to believe that their intelligence is fixed begin to have overriding concerns about looking smart and begin to sacrifice learning opportunities when there is a threat of exposing their deficiencies (Dweck, 2000, p. 26). This could prove to be a double negative if male students approach their academic life with a fixed mindset *and* feel like both teachers and parents have a negative stereotype about their academic potential.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

Many of these qualitative studies are beginning to shed light on the culture of boys in schools. While much of this research has been conducted in Europe, their society is grappling with the same conundrum of boys underperforming in their classrooms just as in the United States. As boys struggle with changes in school culture and their value within the classroom, teachers are also becoming aware of the potential stereotypes and inadvertent feminization of learning that may contribute to that struggle. Studies such as this one promote student voice to illuminate boys' academic experiences and the ways they view course failure in relation to their larger academic trajectories.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This study explored the lived experience of male students who are navigating schooling after failing a class their first year of high school. As indicated in the literature review, there is substantiated concern over how boys are faring in educational systems. Student voice about how failure affects young men's academic experience offers further insight into these issues.

The following research questions guided this study: What are the lived experiences of young men who failed one or more courses their freshman year of high school, denoting them as off-track to graduate?

- a. What do these young men say about the meaning of these failure experiences as they intersect with perceived stereotypes and personal expectations?
- b. What do they perceive about this experience in relation to the expectations of others (parents/teachers/peers) in their lives?
- c. What do their expectations of future academic pathways reveal about their resilience, growth mindset, and anticipated academic trajectories?

#### **Research Approach**

A phenomenological approach, which Saldana and Omasta (2018) define as the study of the nature and states of lived experience, offers a useful window into the experience of a few.

This methodology prioritizes participants' voice. I specifically utilized interpretive phenomenological analysis, which allowed me to gain insights in my role as a teacher and researcher while being mindful of my own assumptions of student experience and perspective (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

## **A Teacher-Researcher**

As a teacher in this community, my insider understanding of the school climate and routines offered me an opportunity to engage with students as a member of their community, and as an observer who understands the context of their daily lives. As a teacher-researcher, I had opportunities of access and situational understanding that many researchers are not afforded; it was a privilege to bring student voice into current research discussions and honor their lived experience. As Wolff (2002) explains, phenomenological research emphasizes the lived experience not only of the research participants, but also of the researcher. Accordingly, I took extreme care in exercising my role as teacher and researcher, staying mindful of how my work in these areas intersected with and informed the other.

At the time of this study, I was also a member of a history teaching team devoted to creating content and skill development in a required world history course. We focus on student-centered curricular interactions, informed by student choice, critical thinking, and problem solving as key components of our pedagogy. As a team, we intentionally examine our work with a critical eye to support young men. In initial preparation for this study, each team member fully endorsed this study concept, knowing that student feedback would help inform us how to better support students. We understand that our classes are one of the more rigorous courses in their freshmen schedule, with many reading and writing assignments. Anecdotally, we see young men experiencing elevated challenge. All of these factors contributed to the decision to conduct this particular study.

## **Bracketing of Bias**

Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) stress that researcher bias occurs when the researcher has personal biases or a priori assumptions that they are unable to bracket. This bias may be

subconsciously transferred to participants in such a way as to inadvertently affect participants' behaviors, attitudes, or reported experiences. This compelled me to acknowledge my biases and perspectives, even as I seek to keep an open mind so as not to inadvertently influence data with my personal opinions and preconceptions (Terrell, 2016).

As a white, middle-aged female teacher who has always enjoyed schooling, I acknowledge my tendency to see things differently than the male students who participated in this study. I had many ideas of why particular students might be struggling, but I committed to being present for the explanations and insights that participants shared. My two greatest concerns were crafting questions that facilitated responses that opened the door to the truth of each participant's experience, along with creating an atmosphere where students felt comfortable and willing to participate. My own subjectivity played a role in this research, especially as a teacher-researcher. To limit bias that could have been detrimental to this study, I utilized a key informant, who was present for the focus group and every individual interview, to help audit my coding of student responses and the summaries of their collected experiences for authenticity. I also kept an audit trail for the research in the form of a journal to monitor my process of collecting and understanding data. Jansen and Peshkin (1992) encourage the use of journaling because it allows for the researcher to better distinguish between emotions that are generated from the situation and those that may be self-generated and irrational. As Peshkin (1988, p. 710) explains, "the purpose of this systematic monitoring of self is to keep one's lines of subjectivity open and to avoid the trap of perceiving just that which one's sentiments seek out and serve up as data." I self-monitored as carefully as possible throughout the data collection and analysis process to produce a study that is true to my participants' intentions and messages.



## **Setting**

This study was conducted at a single high school in a small, semi-rural community in the state of Oregon. The school represented a convenience sample, in terms of researcher access and insider knowledge, however it was nevertheless a useful site of exploration for this topic, as a public high school typical of others in the region. There were over 1,400 students in grades 9-12, with a graduation rate of 84%. Half of the student population qualified for free or reduced lunch. In the 2018-19 freshman class, 79% of the students were on-track to graduate, indicating that this school was behind the 82% national average of other schools in academic attainment (NCES, 2019). While 84% of girls in the freshmen class were on-track to graduate, only 75% of boys were on-track (Rogers School District, 2018).

While this setting constituted a convenience sample, my role within the school offered access and positive rapport, which were essential components for this phenomenological study. As a teacher in the building, I had the ability to use a small conference room in our counselor's office to facilitate data collection while making it possible for students to participate in the study conveniently and more privately. I also possessed relational capital with school personnel, students, and parents that enabled me to ethically operate with sensitivity to needs and systems.

## **Participants**

Purposive sampling offered a way for me to ensure I could understand this phenomenon through the eyes of students who were willing and able to make sense of this experience alongside me. All participants were male students who attended their entire freshman year at Rogers High School (RHS) (pseudonym) and failed their freshman world history course (a grade-level requirement). The world history course is aligned between all teachers, meaning we each provided similar curricular experiences for all freshmen world history students. This course

was a significant indicator of students' on-track to graduation status because it was one of two required courses that all freshmen had to take. All students were graded with aligned rubrics, tests, and projects. Subsequently, students' final grades for this course offered points of comparison to their peers.

I sent general invitations to students who met the criteria by asking the key informant to contact them via private messages. The key informant and I held a face-to-face informal conversation with potential participants in the counseling office, and eight potential participants came. For ethical reasons, none of my past students were eligible to participate in this study. My hoped-for number of participants was five individuals, which represented approximately 20% of the male students who failed core courses during the 2018-2019 school year. We were able to get six students who were willing to join the study. Table 1 offers brief demographic information on participants, which is further unpacked in Chapter Four.

Table 1

*Participant Characteristics*

Participant	Student Data	Demographics/ Behavior/Passions
Cody 15 years old	5 course failures 1.0 GPA 100% attendance rate Oregon SB ELA Level 2 (37) Oregon SB M Level 1 (44) 1 referral	White, No Free/Reduced Lunch Living with grandparents Rogers SD resident/student whole life Close with family Significant death in the family Loves wrestling, basketball
James 16 years old	3 course failures 1.5 GPA 90% attendance rate No test data 0 referrals	White, No Free/Reduced Lunch Rogers SD resident/student whole life Close with family Loves Subaru cars

Steven 16 years old	3 course failures 1.286 GPA 93.8% attendance rate Oregon SB ELA Level 1 Oregon SB M Level 1 3 referrals (fighting, defiance)	White, No Free/Reduced Lunch Rogers SD resident/student for whole life Close with family, particularly dad Loves wakeboarding and competes internationally
David 15 years old	7 course failures .01 GPA (last of class) 90.8 attendance rate Oregon SB ELA Level 3 Oregon SB M Level 2 9 referrals (defiance, vulgar language, disrespect)	Hispanic, No Free/Reduced Lunch Partial Schedule Freshmen Year (2nd semester) Rogers SD resident/student whole life Rough home life, tough relationship with dad Likes video games, being with friends
Nick 15 years old	4 course failures .9 GPA 93.1% attendance rate Oregon SB ELA Level 2 Oregon SB M Level 1 1 Expulsion (tobacco use) 6 Referrals (truancy, defiance)	White, No Free/Reduced Lunch Lives with grandma Rogers SD resident/student his whole life Home life is rough, dad and mom struggle with drugs and being there Loves skating, sponsored
Antonio 15 years old	3 course failures 1.286 GPA 97.7% Attendance rate Oregon SB ELA Level 2 Oregon SB M Level 2 1 referral (bullying)	Hispanic, No Free/Reduced Lunch Rogers SD resident/student whole life Good family relationships Likes video games, soccer, hanging out with friends

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I asked a fellow colleague to operate as a key informant for this study because of ethical issues and district policy regarding an adult being alone with students. I was very fortunate to get an approachable, well-liked counselor, Mrs. Stovers (pseudonym), to join this study as my key informant. The technique of using a key informant is often used in health care qualitative research due to their role in a health care community (Marshall, 1996), and more social science

studies are utilizing this approach for qualitative research. Mrs. Stovers offered key observations and insights into interactions among participants and personal interviews throughout the study. Her presence also provided legal protection for both of us to ensure that a student was never alone with an adult at any time, in keeping with school and district policy. To mitigate the intimidation that a student might feel by being interviewed by two adults, we emphasized building rapport from the very beginning and selected school spaces that were comfortable for students. I conducted interviews in her office, which provided a sense of normalcy for students. We tried to not only schedule their interviews during the least critical part of their school day, but also communicated through common school notifications as to not draw unwanted attention to their participation.

One of my concerns with being a teacher in the building was getting students' real thoughts and feedback. The positive rapport I have in the building, coupled with students' familiarity with me, was an advantage to open and honest communication. I also ensured that none of the participants were former students of mine; and both the key informant and I worked hard to build a low-stakes environment to cultivate honest feedback. We often reminded students of the confidentiality of their comments during the data collection process, which hopefully minimized their reticence to be fully candid. Both the key informant and I found it easy to ask clarifying questions, joke, and maintain a constant flow of conversation in each of the interviews and focus group.

I perceive that my unique role as the activities coordinator and a classroom teacher helped me gather unguarded responses from students in my own building compared to conducting this study with students from another school. If I had been an unknown individual, I

believe the students would not trust me as much. I sensed that the level of trust and advocacy that Mrs. Stovers and I possessed made us people whom students could share their experiences.

### **Data Collection**

The data collection process was informed by phenomenological ideals, feasibility, and student need. Prior to initiating any data collection, I piloted questions and discussion topics with willing students who were unrelated to participants to help hone the questions for clarity and natural flow of conversation. I used focus groups, individual interviews, and artifact collection in the form of student-selected memes to support a deep understanding of student experience.

#### ***A Focus Group***

Once all participants assented to the study and their parents gave informed consent, I conducted a focus group with all the participants as a way to introduce the study and utilize the PEI protocol (Appendix A) as an “icebreaker” activity. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) stress that the prime concern for a focus group is to encourage a variety of viewpoints on a topic. In the case of sensitive or taboo topics, such as failing a class, I knew I needed something to get the conversation going, and the meme protocol proved to be very instrumental in beginning the discussion. Since group interactions can facilitate expression of viewpoints usually not accessible in one-on-one interviews, the focus group proved to be highly effective in hearing what topics were collectively discussed. The decision to use a focus group first was intentional; it was informed by the idea that participants may collectively recall particular aspects of their experience and speak to the similarities and differences of those lived experiences (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). Focus group questions (Appendix B) guided this meeting, which I recorded, transcribed, and coded.

### *Photo-elicitation Protocol Using Memes*

Memes have become a mainstream form of cultural communication for young people, and a key means of self-expression and understanding (Shifman, 2013). I asked students to choose and share memes as part of the focus group which opened up the conversations about failure into vastly different avenues than a simple, direct discussion of a difficult topic. The memes also served as a conduit for discussion around the messages and meanings associated with them. Visual sources of data, especially non-traditional forms of cultural information, have great potential for educational research (Fischman, 2001). Leonard and McKnight (2015), researchers who used photo-elicitation methods while working with teenagers, found that photos can enhance interactions and provide deep insights for participants.

The meme protocol that I used was loosely based off of the protocols developed by Copes (2018), Epstein, Stevens, Mckeever and Baruchel (2006), and Phelan and Kinsella (2013), with the main difference being that this research asked students to select photos/memes rather than using researcher-selected images. Utilizing visual tools in qualitative research can help to address challenges of interviewing by helping participants talk about difficult topics in a “safe” way, by eliciting deep insights and building good relationships between participants (Glegg, 2019). The goal of utilizing meme collections within a data-interpreting phenomenological interview was to build rapport with participants by analyzing visual messages that were meaningful to them in relation to the experience of course failure. This proved to be the case. Participants selected a wide variety of memes, revealing different perspectives, interesting banter, and a natural segue to our focus group questions.

### ***Individual Interviews***

I used a conceptual interview (Appendix C) to uncover the essential nature of the phenomenon of failure through the participants' retelling of their experiences. The questions served to explore their meanings and conceptual dimensions of failure, but also offer ways for them to give concrete descriptions of their lived experience. Brinkman and Kvale (2015) stress that data produced in qualitative interviews depends on the quality of the interviewer's skills and subject matter knowledge; I took great care to craft quality questions and follow conversation threads as they naturally progressed. After the focus group was complete, I scheduled individual interviews with each participant in order to gain more depth and details about their experiences (van Manen, 2014). Part of the semi-structured interview included what van Manen describes as data-interpreting, which seeks participants' interpretive insights through objects such as photographs. I did this by revisiting the memes chosen in the focus group activity as both a bridge from our previous discussion and a diffusing object to dive into the deeper, more vulnerable questions of the study.

These pathways of data collection offered different approaches enabling participants to open up about the experience of course failure. I worked hard to be mindful of my own subjectivity throughout this process; to be aware of my own impact on the collection and culmination of the data (Peshkin, 1988). These data sources point to triangulation priorities within my data collection process. Cohen and Manion (1994) argue that triangulation allows for the complexity of human nature to be explained more fully when it is studied from more than one data point. Triangulation also becomes the means by which an alternate perspective can be used to validate, challenge or extend existing findings (Turner & Turner, 2009). Various data

sources helped me speak to the similar or divergent experiences expressed by participants, and approach the essential questions of this study from different angles.

### **Data Analysis**

I used a general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) to analyze data from the focus group, individual interviews, and meme collections. This approach began with transcribing every interaction of the focus group, the PEI process, and the individual interviews. I used various rounds of condensation, moving raw data into analytic summaries, and constructing analytic memos of interpretation throughout the data collection process. Coding was another integral part of understanding the essence of participants' lived experience. Saldana (2007) describes this as an interpretive act rather than an exact science, but it was a crucial element to preserving student voice.

### ***In vivo Coding***

This method of coding included reading the transcripts and siphoning down to short phrases and key words. In vivo coding enabled me to prioritize students' words without interjecting my interpretation over their comments. While coding is not an exact science, it is heuristic (Saldana, 2009) and in vivo coding prioritizes the intentionality of discovery on the participants' words. In some areas of the transcripts, this became the most simplistic way of identifying common themes between the student responses (See Appendix E).

### ***Values Coding***

I used values coding to siphon down the categories present in the transcribed data because of the nature of the questions I asked participants. Throughout the course of the PEI process, the overall focus group questioning, and the individual interviews, it was important to record what value participants gave to different aspects of their failure experience. Saldana



(2009, p. 20) also discusses the need to have a cyclical process of recoding, which “further manages, filters, highlights, and focuses the salient features of the qualitative data record for generating categories, themes, and concepts, grasping meaning, and/or building theory.” The different rounds of coding and recoding were essential to the process of developing themes and trustworthiness in the analysis.

### ***Analytic Memos***

Throughout the data collection process, I composed analytic memos to document insights and questions after each interaction with participants, along with occasional meta-memos to support an overarching composite analysis (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). These memos served as moments of theme building and analysis of the data, but primarily informed analysis around my research questions and as sense-making moments after the meme protocol, focus group and interview questions. The data from these memos become part of the overall data set, constituting an iterative process of data collection and analysis. I found the meta-memos (Appendix F) to be the most fruitful means to synthesize not only what was said, but to reflect on how my insights as a teacher in the building helped me interpret students’ responses. Conversations with critical friends and my key informant were also vital supports for the analysis process. Through these various means, I was able to verify overarching themes that resonated with the data. I also maintained an audit trail of decisions made along the way to support trustworthiness and transparency of the study (Appendix H).

### ***Member Checks***

I conducted member checks with student participants during the data analysis stage to verify credibility and reliability of the analysis of the interviews and meme collections. I asked the key informant to help me verify the analysis of insights gleaned from the focus group

specifically, due to the volume of information that was shared in that space. These member checks helped ensure the trustworthiness of the research.

### **Ethical Considerations**

I am a teacher-researcher who proposed a research study within the place that I work. This demanded my utmost attention to caution and sensitivity at all times. As a teacher in the building, I understood the significance of the trust placed in me to conduct this kind of study and secured IRB approval from George Fox University (Appendix G), the district, and my administration before approaching potential participants. Ethics led me to ensure that I would not include a former or current student of mine to be a participant in this study, as I would never want my influence as their teacher to make them feel obligated to participate, or to shape what they might feel comfortable to share.

Prior to the study, parents were asked to sign informed consent letters (Appendix D) and students were asked to sign informed assent letters (Appendix E) which specifically addressed the aim of this study, the interview procedures, and the confidentiality maintained during the study (Appendix B). Parents also received copies of the parent and student consent forms, and I made myself available to answer questions through phone calls and email.

I was very aware that this study would be taking a close look into a topic that many students might try to avoid discussing openly. I was very cautious to minimize students' feelings that they were being singled out or targeted outside the confines of this study. The times and locations of the focus group and interview were considered specifically to eliminate stress or unwanted attention for participants. I also worked to collect the data early enough in the school year that students were not feeling the pressure of grades that come with the end of a semester.

All questions used in the interviewing process were carefully vetted for nuances that could shame or heighten participants' stress.

I ensured that my key informant, Mrs. Stovers, was always present with me during the data collection process. This not only addressed the practical consideration of not having a female staff member alone with a student, but it enriched the study to have her professional expertise in navigating this difficult topic with sensitivity. Her role within the study required that she sign a confidentiality agreement affirming she would not discuss participants' identities. Participant confidentiality was ensured by the use of pseudonyms in all written work. All collected transcripts, field notes, and findings were stored in a locked space and password-protected device for a minimum of three years before being destroyed.

To help participants feel more enthusiastic about joining the study while reducing undue inducement, I utilized normal tokens of appreciation commonly used at the school, such as pizza and coffee gift cards as a thank you for their participation. According to district policy, the dollar amount of the appreciation gift for each student was \$25 per student. I carefully considered ethics in the work and communication required in this study.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

My highest priority was to elevate participants' voices, and a phenomenological approach supported this aim. As a teacher-researcher, I proceeded with great care and consideration to the ethical considerations and situations that participants encountered as they engaged in this study. The decisions made in constructing this study reflect the sensitivity of the topic and the appropriate communication considerations for the participants' age group.

## Chapter 4: Findings

This study explored the lived experiences of male high school students reflecting on the ways they navigated the personal and academic impacts of course failure during their freshman year of high school. The following research questions guided this study: What are the lived experiences of young men who failed one or more courses their freshman year of high school, denoting them as off-track to graduate?

- a. What do these young men say about the meaning of these failure experiences as they intersect with perceived stereotypes and personal expectations?
- b. What do they perceive about this experience in relation to the expectations of others (parents/teachers/peers) in their lives?
- c. What do their expectations of future academic pathways reveal about their resilience, growth mindset, and anticipated academic trajectories?

### Participants

All participants were recruited through a voluntary introductory meeting with the key informant and myself. In our first meeting together, we discussed study, emphasized the casual conversational tone that would characterize our meetings, and shared that food and coffee gifts cards. I asked participants to obtain signatures and parent confirmation within a week's time to secure their spot. A few students were not interested, but six participants signed up to participate. We scheduled meetings for the least amount of impact on students' classes, but with teacher permission, each student missed two class periods for a portion of our focus group and their individual interview. This provided us with a 90-minute focus group that took place on 12/4/2019. I conducted individual interviews during an elective class period throughout the following week (12/5/2019-12/10/2019), with each participant's interview lasting between 40-50

minutes. In general, students were fairly enthusiastic about participating in the study, and submitted their paperwork on time. Initially, the promise of pizza, coffee, and missing a class period seemed to fuel their engagement in the project more than their desire to share their experiences, but overall, their contributions to the discussions showed they had much to say of their experiences. In the paragraphs that follow, I offer a brief sketch of each participant before describing what happened in the focus group.

Cody was the first to sign up for the study and he was a student who had 100% attendance during his freshman year. Despite being at school every day, he still had five course failures during his freshman year, and most were core courses for graduation. When asked about what his life was like during that year, he said the death of a close family member became a very derailing experience for him and his family. He was very open about discussing this difficult subject, and he could make clear connections to the struggles he had during his first year in high school to the upheaval his family experienced. Cody had lived in the school district community his entire life, but qualified for financial assistance because his whole family was living with his grandparents. He had one referral, or discipline record, during his first year at the high school. He was very friendly, approachable, and had a clear friendship with Steven and James, who were other participants in the group.

James was the next student to join the study. During his freshman year of high school, he had a 90% attendance rate and failed three courses. He described himself as being close to his family and said he considers his parents to be some of his best friends. He also had lived in the school district community for his whole life and attended all public schools throughout his education. During his freshman year, James did not qualify for any services from the district and had zero disciplinary referrals. He was soft-spoken, funny, and tended to listen to other students'

comments before sharing his own observations. At the time of this study, he was using his expertise in Subaru cars to rebuild a Subaru Impreza that would become his very own when he gets his license. While he was often quiet and just listening, he had many side conversations with other students in the study and seemed to already have a friendship with Steven and Cody. He arrived late to our focus group, and seemed visibly relieved to see both of them in our meeting.

The third participant, Steven, had an attendance rate of 93.8% and also had three course failures from his freshman year. He was very passionate about wakeboarding, and described positive and supportive family relationships. He loved joking around in the focus group, and his humor helped to move our conversation along even through difficult topics. Steven was the most outspoken out of the group and had many opinions about most topics; he seemed to have friendships with all of the other participants. Naturally gregarious, he liked to share ideas and memories, helpfully naming commonalities with other students' comments on a particular topic. His friendly nature kept everyone talking. In seeming contrast to his friendliness with this group, he had three referrals for fighting and defiance on his freshman year record.

The fourth participant was a student named David, who had an attendance rate of 90.8% throughout his first semester, and scored higher on state testing standards compared to his fellow participants. He had only a partial schedule at the high school during second semester of his freshman year, due to failing all seven of his courses during his first semester. At the time of this study, he had returned to school full time. Like others, he had lived in the school district his whole life. While David was more reserved than other participants, he had much to say and did not hold back on his use of rough language or emotions. During many moments in our group meeting, the other guys would look to him for a final word or approval for something they said, which showed me that he was respected or admired by the others. During interviews, David

revealed that he has had a difficult home life, with an absent father during some of his key years in middle school. David had nine referrals for defiance, vulgar language, and disrespect.

Nick was the fifth student to join the study. He was living with his grandma because his parents had ongoing struggles with drug abuse, and he could not live with them any longer. He has been a resident in the school district his whole life, and was one of the best skateboarders in the local skate park, often competing in skating events. He had a passion to do well in the sport, and mentioned a few times that he needed to film his skating more and that he had sponsors who helped to support him. Nick was talkative with other participants and humorous, but he showed a more sentimental and thoughtful side compared to other participants. He was self-deprecating and revealed that he had been diagnosed with different learning disabilities. Throughout his freshmen year, Nick had an attendance rate of 93.1%, with one expulsion for tobacco use and six referrals for truancy and defiance. He failed 4 courses during his freshmen year.

The final student to participate in the study was a student named Antonio. He was the only student who came into the district from a different community, when he was in the third grade. Throughout his first year of high school, he had three course failures with a 97.7% attendance rate, and one referral related to bullying and defiance. Antonio was also very talkative, humorous, and seemed to be friends with everyone in the focus group. He had a laid-back way about him, and would stretch himself out comfortably as he talked. He possessed a quiet self-confidence that made him seem a little older than some of the other students. Antonio described having a close family that supported him and who was eagerly anticipating the birth of another sibling.

Nearly all of the students grew up in this school district throughout their entire lives. Of the group, James and Steven were the oldest, each 16 years old with birthdays in December.

David and Cody, both 15, had birthdays in April. Nick and Antonio had birthdays in August, making them considerably younger than the other 4 students despite also being 15 years old. Most of them played sports as children, but only two students played any sports for the high school. Two of the young men lived with grandparents, but all of the participants commented on having a family member as one of their closest relationships and the person that they could talk with about difficult issues. Some of them really struggled with behavior issues, as indicated by their referral numbers, and others seemed to have no issues with behaviors at all. While there are some commonalities shared by all the students, they all had unique perspectives informed by their different ethnicities, socio-economic situation, and home lives.

### **The Meme Protocol**

Data collection began with the meme protocol (Appendix A). On the day we did this together, participants arrived to the room at different times, and only four of the six students were able to select and discuss memes representing their experience with failing a course as freshman. While selecting their images, the boys joked and compared their selections to one another. This set a jovial, relaxed atmosphere for the focus group. The selections varied from the inappropriate to complaints about an unfair grading system. The goal of this exercise was to begin a conversation with student-selected representations of failure. Memes seemed to help students speak about a complicated experience they all shared. This led to discussions about the boys' preoccupation with girls, their feelings of inadequacy and not feeling prepared, and the ways they viewed the causes of their failures in school.





Figure 2: Meme selected by Steven, 12/4/2019

Steven was the first to pick out a meme, and he immediately threw back his head in laughter. He seemed to want to share the joke with someone, and slid his phone over to David who also laughed. The meme shows a character from a popular reality show that chronicles the deals and research on items in a pawn shop in Las Vegas (Figure 2). The

character has a laughing face and the meme reads, “I’m pretty sure you’re retarded, but hang on, let me call my buddy who’s a retard expert.” As Steven was offering an explanation for his choice, he said he often understood the topic being covered in world history, but felt that there was so much work to do that he could not get it all finished. When he described not being able to finish an assignment, he said, “I kind of just kept going under and under.” The meme does not specifically talk about being overwhelmed or getting behind work. Instead, Steven’s choice of it suggests he had internalized the inability to finish his work or getting behind as evidence that he was retarded. His meme choice was self-deprecating and humorous, but it might also reveal an aspect of how harshly he views himself because of his struggle and eventual course failure.

When Antonio was first looking at possible memes, he started laughing and blurted out “So I’m going to say, there was a pretty cute girl in my class, so I’m going to say, it’s her fault.” He kept scrolling through memes until he blurted out, “we did it boys, virginity no more!” which came from the first meme he chose (Figure 3). The meme referenced a popular animated movie with penguin characters all saying the quote he blurted aloud. His mind was definitely on girls and their presence in school, and in a half-joking manner, he claimed that their presence alone



we did it boys

Figure 3: First meme selected by Antonio,

12/4/2019

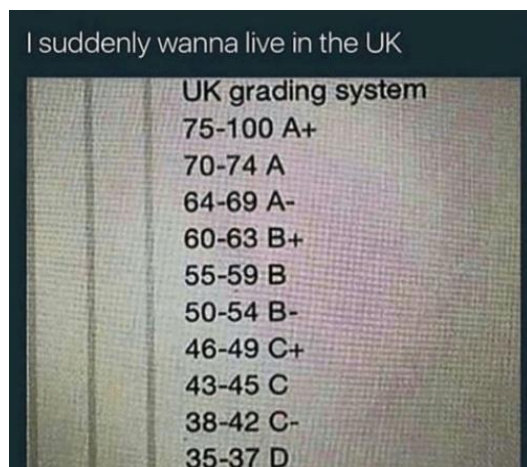


Figure 4: Second meme selected by

Antonio, 12/4/2019

was the reason for his course failure. Upon reflection, his meme seems to reveal something much deeper. In both his comment about cute girls and “virginity no more,” I wondered if he was making a clear point about his masculinity more than diving into why he actually failed the course. His responses could have been an effort to make a joke, but it might also have been his way of making his sexual orientation clear to the other boys in the group.

Within a minute or so of making his choice,

Antonio appeared to recognize that some of his

peers were taking the task a little more seriously than he was. He went back to scrolling on his phone before coming over to me to show his “real” selection. The new meme was a snapshot of a supposed UK grading system with a 75-100-point value representing an A+, and lesser values equaling an A or an A- (Figure 4).

When each student shared their choices, Antonio

explained his choice this way: “my main thing was

about grades. So that’s all it comes down to, a better

grading system.” Knowing where his head was with his previous selection, I found it interesting

that Antonio chose grading systems as the reason for his course failure. In his mind, failure

indicated a problem with the grading structure, rather than with his actions. It seemed like this response, which deflected personal responsibility, was almost a default statement. Whatever the motivation, he also felt the need to switch from an excuse that focused on girls and virginity to that of an unfair grading system.

During this focus group discussion, David was the quietest person as students searched for memes on their phones. As each student found a meme they thought was funny, they would each run the image by David and share a laugh. Without any words, these actions made him seem like a leader; each student touched base with him about their selection in one way or another. Within a few moments, he had selected his meme and quietly shared it with Antonio and Nick. When he explained his choice, he said, "I just didn't care if I failed that class. And so I just didn't do it." David sat back after sharing his meme and just observed the rest of the guys talking about their choices. All of the other students were more than willing to share the image they had selected with me, but he held back. I had taken pictures of the memes as they were being chosen by the students, but the meme I had recorded as David's selection did not match what he said in the transcript of the protocol. Later, while doing member checks with the students, I asked David if I had the right image. He said could not remember exactly which one he had selected, but offered the meme depicted in Figure 5 as a good representation of his views on course failure. During the member check, I realized that his first choice might have been too crass to show me. When I asked if this was true, he smiled and said, "Maybe." The meme he selected shows three

guys facing the camera making a hand gesture and reads, “Literally nothing, we just standing.”

This does reflect the “I just didn’t do it” comment he made in the focus group discussion, but I wondered what his original meme was and why he did not want to share it with me. In some ways, I saw David pushing boundaries of appropriateness with his language and I wonder if he self-censored the image because he knew it would be offensive to me. Regardless, his message seemed clear. He failed because he chose not to do anything.



Figure 5: Second meme selected by David,

Nick’s meme choice (Figure 6) was a complete departure from the others and showed an image of Benjamin Franklin with the words,

3/4/2019.

“Come to class prepared. By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail.” Nick began searching

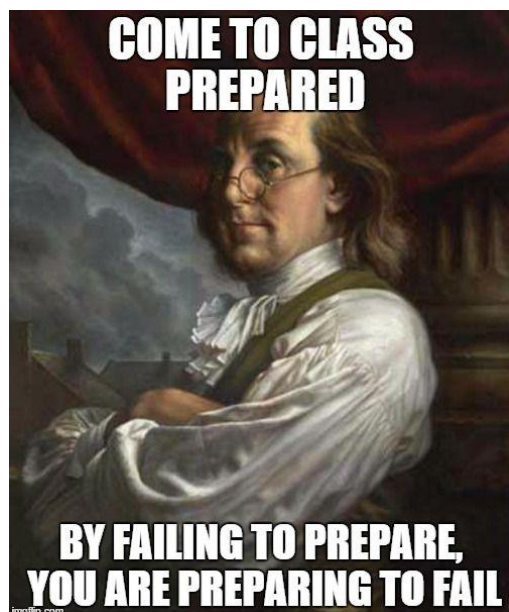


Figure 6: Meme selected by Nick,

12/4/2019

for his meme from the moment I asked the students to find one, and while he shared laughs about humorous memes that the other guys showed him, he did not choose any other memes besides this one. In my view, his choice reflected a more serious effort to represent why he failed his course than those of his peers. Nick was more reflective throughout the whole focus group than some of the other students, with a defeated tone.

When asked to share his explanation, Nick said, “I wasn’t prepared. I don’t know how to explain that.” He

was not laughing, and he shook his head with a bit of resignation in not being able to explain how he felt unprepared to do well in his class. After a moment's hesitation, Antonio asked him with laughter in his voice, "Were you ever prepared?" Nick just laughed a little and leaned forward to touch his head to the table. He sat back up and just shook his head again. The weight that this young man carried was palpable and I could sense the heaviness of what he was feeling in his physical response.

Using the meme protocol offered advantages and disadvantages in beginning a deeper conversation about course failure, stereotypes, and boys' perceptions of self. One significant advantage was students' readiness to find a meme that represented them in some significant way and share their selections with each other. It was also helpful to use humor as an entry point into a serious topic. From the beginning, students were laughing first, then sharing their memes with others around the table. Humor helped students move into a deeper conversation about a sensitive topic; they maintained a tangible lightheartedness in their back-and-forth banter.

Humor also proved to be a slight disadvantage in that students were actively competing with one another to have the funniest or most provocative meme. This gave me a sense of the different topics that came to their mind when trying to communicate about the experience of failing, but participants rapidly moved from one topic to another trying to out-do each other. It was difficult to anticipate how distracting the memes were to their own ideas and thoughts. Exposure to the memes may have influenced the topic they discussed, but the level of engagement with the meme protocol was so focused, I sense that any influence was nevertheless worthwhile. Humor became a tool for better understanding not only the boys' ability to connect with one another, but how they were able to build relationships (or not) with their teachers. Humor also created a low-stakes, engaging atmosphere for the whole focus group discussion.

Due to time constraints and two students showing up late, I was not able to include two participants in the meme protocol. It would have been interesting to see how these other choices might have revealed other aspects. One of the participants has a quiet, introverted personality, and I feel like the humor and chatty conversation of the meme protocol may have helped to put him at ease.

Overall, this opening activity was a great beginning to communicating with the students. It helped us get the conversation started before pivoting to a focus group discussion that addressed the questions of this study. Follow-up individual interviews allowed me to hear from each student in a slightly different way than they participated in the focus group.

As a teacher and activities director in the building, I was a very familiar face to these young men even though they were never in one of my history classes. My key informant, a counselor in the building, was also a very familiar and known person to these students. I sense that our roles within the building allowed them to be at ease and the laughter that accompanied the meme selection helped to solidify a rapport between us all. In some ways, the protocol became a testing ground for participants to see if they could speak freely with rough language or crass jokes without penalty or correction. I also reminded them that all information would be anonymous and not shared with others in the building, as outlined in their consent letters (Appendix D). Based off of the consistency of what was discussed by the students in their group discussion and what they shared during their individual interviews, I feel confident that the students were comfortable enough to give authentic, uncensored descriptions of their lived experiences as they wrestled with failure; the meme protocol effectively opened the door for that raw communication.

## **The Focus Group**

From the meme protocol, our discussion flowed directly into questions tailored for the larger research questions of the study. Participants' body language was positive with most students leaning into the conversation, and only one student with a chair pulled away from the table and semi-closed position.

While listening to the side conversations, there was one moment when a student who actively engaged in talking about memes had a quick exchange with a student who had just joined the group. Although Antonio had just contributed specific analysis of his disdain for our grading systems, when another student asked him what they had been talking about, he responded with, "Not sure. I'm just here for the pizza." I mention this to highlight the complexity of participation for these boys; Antonio kept Cody from knowing about his participation by denying his engagement and suggesting he could care less about the activity, despite actually being engaged just moments before; this was a significant reflection of how academic participation might have gone for these students.

In general, students were very respectful of one another and rarely talked over anyone else. They monitored the conversation well and were quick to include someone if they thought that person had not spoken up in some time. The focus group showed threads of commonality across participants' experiences with their freshmen world history course, but also wide differences in their perceptions and emotions associated with the class. Throughout the rest of the discussion, students spoke to every question the key informant and I asked of them and brought in additional topics they felt were connected to the issues we were discussing. That being said, the students were still high school male students. For some questions, a few students had a great deal to say while the others just nodded their head in agreement. Other times, only

one student responded and the rest took the conversation in a different direction. This naturally made for more commentary on some topics than others.

### **The Individual Interviews**

I conducted individual conversations with participants in a school counselor's office, intentionally providing a neutral and smaller space to help students feel at ease. The rapport we built with the focus group carried over to these interviews. Every participant appeared to relax and willingly contributed specific stories and insights. Although there were structured questions that built on the themes of the questions in the focus group, the key informant and I freely asked clarifying questions and continued the conversational tone with each participant. This helped the students to just talk, without the formal expectation of a particular length or “correct” response. The freedom to just say what was on their mind and have us respond with supportive comments or questions to clarify our understanding of what they were saying seemed to create natural and unguarded feedback from all the participants, even if some were more reserved than others. For some students, they offered little elaboration on certain topics. Steven, Nick and David freely talked in their interviews, while Cody, James, and Antonio gave generally shorter responses or offered the bare minimum of descriptions to situations and experiences. As a result, the voices of Steven, Nick and David are more prominent in the findings of this study.

At the end of the interview, I asked each participant to verbally respond to the first 31 questions of the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ). They were asked to provide their Likert scale of response (1 to 7) to each question that I posed to them verbally, and students responded in varied ways to this task. Some answered without hesitation, while others pondered their choice of numbers and seemed to be at a loss of what number they should use as an answer. It was common for most respondents to get less chatty and have a more serious,



thoughtful tone during this portion of the interview. For some, there were also more pauses of contemplation compared to the quick responses and few pauses in responses to open-ended questions. The change in behavior and concentration could be attributed to a shift from our relaxed, conversational interview to a more formal task. Some of the statements from the questionnaire were also lengthy, and at times the students would ask for the question to be repeated. Overall, their behavior and noticeable seriousness that most of the students displayed was in contrast to the ease of discourse. This was the most significant moment of discomfort I observed from the participants and it was directly connected to the use of a formal, itemized questionnaire.

### **Themes in Answer to Research Questions**

It should be noted that these participants responded to questions about their lived experience that began a year ago, and that results of course failure were still being lived out as we engaged in this study. In our discussions, it was common for them to bounce back and forth from what they were currently experiencing as sophomores to what happened during their freshmen year. There were clear areas of continuity and change as they dealt with the effects of freshmen year failure. The themes of this study are built on the irrevocable tension between moments that were uniquely experienced by each participant and the shared understanding they revealed as a group. It is my hope that both the individuality of their lived experiences is honored, as well as the group cognizance created during our focus group. To ensure that this was the case, each student has read and member-checked this section of the study. Only one student, David, offered a correction to the findings, which I noted in the meme protocol discussion.

From the data collected from the meme protocol, the focus group, individual interviews, and MSLQ responses, there was an abundance of data informing each theme. I spent a great deal

of time combing through transcripts to weave explanations out of what students explicitly said and what they implied by their reactions, grunts of approval, and underlying messages in their continuous side comments and jokes. This particular group was quick to talk, but they did so in abbreviated sentences or quick comments. I used constant comparison analysis (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007) to analyze the multiple sources of data collected in this study to develop emerging themes and find the meaningful relevance to my guiding questions. I most commonly used keywords-in-context analysis to keep the words and phrases of the young men at the forefront, but also utilized in vivo coding and values coding to distill the data down to four basic themes: (a) an anti-academic male culture, (b) the significance of the role of the teacher, (c) a sense of overwhelm and fear, (d) and an openness to learn from one's mistakes. The themes are derived from the lived experiences and the re-telling of these experiences by the participants, which is the basis for a phenomenological study.

### **Theme 1: Lacking Academic Culture in the Classroom**

One of the clearest themes throughout participants' responses was their view of disparate academic culture and aptitudes between males and females. In the focus group, all the students responded with a resounding "yes" when asked if there was a difference between young women and young men academically. Overall, they viewed girls as members of a superior academic culture, describing them as key distractors and intimidators in the classroom. They also agreed that boys and girls as groups behaved differently. This discussion dove into many different aspects of how the participants viewed their own self-attainment and self-perception as a student. I unpack this theme across a few sub-themes designed to help the reader ascertain the nuance of these boys' perspectives, including the ways they saw girls as very different, and indeed, intellectually superior to themselves.

### *Disparate Academic Groups*

Steven described girls' academic culture by indicating girls are "straight-working" and "never off-topic." He expressed frustration that while guys also spend time working, they often get on their phones or want to talk to others around them. He emphasized that the girls are constantly at work and on-task. In his mind, academic culture comes down to behavior, and girls focus on work, compliance, and extra effort. He described any guy with work to do as wanting to "just get it done" but girls "write three paragraphs on each subject." Steven continued to explain how this academic divide, in his opinion, created a rift between young men and teachers. He observed, "The teacher expects us to all be like the girls."

When Antonio talked about his class, he described how the teacher expected them to just do the work and get passing grades. If he got distracted, which he said was "often" in that class, the teacher would tell him to get back to work like everyone else. Antonio explained that everyone else was "the girls. They just were the ones doing the work."

I sensed that there was more that the group wanted to say on why they found it hard to just sit down and get to work, so Mrs. Stovers and I asked them what expectations teachers *should* have of them. Cody immediately replied with "Get more hands on. More than just writing it down on a piece of paper." He finished with saying, "give us more breathing room!" Most of the time, the students described having to sit down and get to work on paper, or having to sit and take notes while they listened to a teacher talk. This was what David referred to when he said, "Some classes have only one way to teach. They just stand up there for like a fucking hour and just say the same shit over and over again and that is just boring." Nick added, "I just don't understand any of it." These frustrations compounded when they contrasted most girls' behavior. They seemed to sit there diligently listening, taking notes, or completing the work they had been

assigned. For many of these boys, what was working for girls in the classroom was not working for them at all.

### ***Intellectually Inferior to Girls***

Other participants referenced the struggle to maintain the workload as a matter of being inferior to girls. James spoke in frustration of how it seemed to be easy for many of the girls to keep up with the assignments while the assignments just piled up for him. David, in very rough language, described all guys as “fucking stupid” compared to girls while Steven stated, “not going to lie, the girls are smarter.” He implied that their relative ease in handling the workload came from their superior intellect, rather than their diligence to complete learning tasks. It was routine in these conversations to hear the participants see their academic aptitude as less than the girls.

In general, most participants compared themselves to girls’ academic abilities in this binary way. In their half-joking way of handling the meme protocol, participants conveyed a serious feeling of inferiority of intelligence. As a teacher, I know that in each classroom, there are girls that are struggling just as much as these young men. However, these young men did not see the girls’ struggle and only perceived their own hardships. They spoke of this inferiority as obvious truth, which makes me wonder what school and classroom systems perpetuate this idea such that they are absolutely convinced that girls have a higher intellect.

### ***Intimidated in the Classroom***

Taken together, girls’ superior intellect and academic culture contributed to participants feeling intimidated. This suggests the boys’ actions to be on their phone or wanting to talk with other guys gave them a way to separate themselves from that academic culture on their own terms. While no participant expressed this directly, their examples revealed rejection of the

embedded expectations of girls' academic culture. For Steven, "every guy's goal is just to get the answer to get done so you can either talk to your friend or be on your phone." When describing group projects or presentations, all the boys talked about how one or two kids who do all of the work and implied that those students were often girls. James described standing in front of the class not saying anything so that he would not look stupid. He said, "You feel like you're just not as smart as everyone else. They're all just smart." James was one of the shyest guys of the group, and it was not difficult to imagine just how hard it was for him to present in front of a group, let alone feel compared to girls. In all of their descriptions, the girls constituted one distinct academic group, separate from the guys.

Participants also referenced how distracting girls could be because of their looks. Steven mentioned girls more than most of the young men, but as soon as he mentioned a "cute girl," many of the boys would just chuckle and laugh in agreement. At the very beginning of the meme protocol, Antonio joked that there "was a pretty cute girl in my class." As he was trying to find a meme about the experience of failing a class, he blurted out, "it was her fault!" Steven described a moment when a girl stood up, and he simply could not concentrate any longer, illustrating the larger point that he was aware of cute girls at all times while class was underway.

If a guy seems like they're not paying attention or they seem like they're zoning just zoning out, don't call him out. Any guy in that class knows exactly what you're thinking. Every guy understands what is happening so being called out is like the worst! (Steven, FG- 12/4/2019)

For young men like Steven and Antonio, the presence of a cute girl was enough to derail their attention. While they openly admitted this, they never wanted any attention drawn to them about it. If they wanted to get a girl's attention, and since they never felt that they could measure

up to the girl's intelligence, they would goof off instead. Whether by their intelligence or attractiveness, girls were incredible intimidating to this particular group of young men.

In an interesting exchange during the focus group, one participant referenced a fellow student named Zander that they all seemed to know who challenged this notion of guys being less academic than girls. They talked about him in the following exchange:

Steven: You know Zander?

Nick: Yeah.

Steven: Yeah. I feel everyone expects for guys to be like him.

Nick: Yeah. I know. Once you like...

Steven: Yeah, if he is not talking like to his partner, he's reading, and he's like never off-topic. Yeah, to the point like some guys are like working and they'll stop for like a couple of minutes and just chit chat and then go back. It's like a rotation.

Antonio: Yeah, he never does that.

Steven: Yeah, like it almost gives like all the teachers a bad idea of the guys, like a better impression than we're actually going to be if that makes any sense.

(FG, 12/4/2019)

This exchange was accompanied by nodding agreement for everyone. It was interesting to note the ways this discussion of Zander revealed him as an exceptional guy, rather than the norm. From his diligence to work, read, and fully engage in his studies, Zander was set apart from the others because of his academic behavior. This collective description of the one academic guy they knew was characterized by disdain and contempt. Every other description of academic culture referenced girls; there was no accepting or approving tone to their descriptions

of the same behavior in Zander. Just like the girls, Zander was intimidating and they viewed him as an outsider.

### ***A Risk to their Masculinity***

In the focus group, David agreed with other students who were talking, but rarely expanded on what he was thinking. His preference seemed to be to sit back and observe. In his interview, however, David was full of insights and explanations of why he struggled to do well during his freshmen year. When I asked him to describe the risks for guys behaving in academic ways, he said,

I think it probably has stuff to do with us wanting to impress our friends and shit. It is not wanting to be seen like that. Like with doing our work and like turning it in sometimes will be seen as, I guess the best way to put it is, softer like a pussy or some shit, or like a fucking nerd or something like that. That's the best way to put it because like, yeah, no one wants to be seen like that. (David, individual interview, 12/9/2019)

The harsh language conveys just how strongly he felt about boys who choose to participate in the academic culture. This corresponds with what Steven indicated when he said a “real guy guy’s goal is to answer all the questions not to the bare minimum, but just answer the question to get done really fast.” Both students perceived an inherent risk in being too academic. For them, true masculinity did not include academic efforts.

### ***Attention in the Classroom***

While the boys wanted attention and felt like someone was observing them at all times, they wanted that attention on their own terms. In some cases, they worried about how girls noticed them; they also struggled with receiving attention from others. This exchange was from our focus group:

- Mrs. Miele: Do you guys like when the attention of the class is on you?
- Antonio: It depends. If we're presenting, no. If we are clowning around, yeah.
- Mrs. Miele: Whoa, so give me that distinction one more time.
- Antonio: If you're giving a presentation, I don't want that attention on me. But if I'm clownin' around, I want people to pay attention.
- Cody: When you go up there, I really want to sound smart, but if I choke up, that would definitely be the worst.
- Steven: But it's okay in my opinion if you're there with the boys. They are all around you. But when you're up front, like, in front of everyone, like, let's say there is a cute girl in that class and you're like, oh my God....
- Cody: And your grades are on the line...
- Steven: Exactly. And then if you're clowning around, like you're grades still on the line, but it's just not as bad.
- Nick: You just stand up there knowing you're not as smart as everyone else so you just goof off. (FG, 12/4/2019)

In this exchange, participants were discussing the many pressures they feel when they do engage. Most did not want any attention on them if it involved academic scrutiny, such as when they are required to present information. To control situations where they felt this pressure of judgement, they goofed off or stayed in the safety of their friend group. They laughed in common agreement of how a cute girl added stress and meant they needed to direct attention away from their academic performance to their "clowning around." It was safer to be a fool playing to a crowd than to feel the pressure of appearing smart. This exchange highlighted a serious predicament for these young men: if they had the class's attention, they needed to appear



smart while not acting too academic. This double bind seemed to be a situation they encountered often.

### ***Different Treatment***

The greatest difference that participants most commonly discussed between themselves and girls was how teachers treated them differently than the boys. James described one example of a male friend who needed to use the restroom, but was told to wait because another student had already asked. A girl asked to use the restroom at the same time, and was allowed to go and did not return to class for at least 15 minutes. Students chimed in with other examples of young women being allowed to go in and out of class with much more leniency than the young men. The boys perceived this as the girls having more freedoms and privileges than them, even though they equally abused time out of class. This was a blatant double standard to them. For James, there was a marked difference in how the teacher treated the same need between a boy and a girl and viewed it as happening all the time.

In another account, Nick described sitting with another guy and watching a video while sharing earbuds when the class was told to be quietly working. A group of girls were talking loudly in the corner of the classroom while being on their phones, but it was the boys who got in trouble. Nick summed up the inconsistency with, "I feel like they're just so much more lenient toward girls." It is possible that teachers allow privileges to girls because of their normal compliance, and boys see that and internalize the difference as favoritism or preference between the genders. Despite both genders being off task at times, or abusing class time, the young men reported that they are corrected in those behaviors while the young women receive leniency.

### ***Reflections on Lacking Academic Culture***

This theme synthesizes the ways participants viewed their own behavior, performance, and abilities compared to their female counterparts, as they made sense of their own academic efforts. I sense these beliefs became a self-fulfilling prophecy; they believed they would not measure up to other students and reinforced those beliefs through their behavior. This theme also points to stereotype threat and the ways participants navigated the social pressures of maintaining masculinity in academic settings where it was not encouraged. For them, compliance, diligence in work, and “never being off topic” were hallmarks of academic, feminine culture; they used the power they had to reject the academic behavior associated with girls in order to clearly define their masculinity to their peers.

The ways these students used gender stereotypes to explain their underperformance became a cover for their choices. For Nick, goofing off was a way to hide that he did not know material. These boys perceived enough dissimilarity between the genders to warrant the frustration and inequities that continue to divide the two groups. It is also possible that these differences create a false narrative that makes it convenient for them to believe it is acceptable and possibly even preferable for them to underperform. I turn now to the second theme, which is built around participants’ perceptions of their teachers, and the ways these beliefs shaped their educational experience.

### **Theme 2: The Importance of the Teacher**

Students referenced the teacher of their failed World History course as the person who had the most control over their ability to succeed or fail besides themselves. For them, teachers had the ability to draw a student into their class through questions and humor, or sideline them with impatience or frustration. Their relationships with teachers set the tone for their overall

feelings about class and the possibilities that existed for them in that space. They vacillated between describing the teachers that they liked and the ways those teachers built rapport with describing the ways other teachers made them feel like outsiders or a burden.

### ***All About Respect***

Humor and respect seemed to be key ways to help these students let down their guard. Humor was their most comfortable communication tool; one I perceive from their interactions with me that is undervalued in classrooms. Since teachers set the tone for communication, participants indicated how teachers' communication style had the power to either make them feel accepted or make them feel they were a potential problem waiting to happen. In the focus group, the students spoke about their teacher and how they influenced their willingness to participate:

Antonio: When I don't like my teachers, I just kind of, like, don't care about the work. If I like the teacher, I'll do the work for them because it is all about liking the teacher.

Steven: Yeah. Some teachers expected us to give them straight respect. And, yeah, I think from, like, the kid's point of view, they kinda have to earn it. In a certain sense, they make a nice little class when they have, like, no favorite kids and not a lot of pressure. But when certain students who only work when other students aren't doing it, or if they just target one student it doesn't work. (FG, 12/4/2019)

Throughout this exchange, other participants nodded their heads in agreement. For these students, liking the teacher determined how much effort they would put into a class. There was a sense that when teacher demanded respect from students, but showed favoritism or inconsistency in their treatment of student behavior, participants felt it was reasonable to not give that teacher

respect. Favoritism and pressure are two things that teachers can communicate to their students without words.

Nick explained that he felt “targeted” by his teacher within the first few days of his freshmen year. He described being upbeat and excited to start the year with a clean slate and a hope that this year would be different than his middle school experience. He summed up his relationship with his teacher as “like it went from her being super nice to boom, I’m on your ass.” He described her calling him out for being disruptive, and from that moment on they “got off on the wrong foot.” Nick recalled telling her that she was not treating young men fairly: “I got mad at her for which it wasn’t obviously my place, and that is where I kinda screwed up.” His frustration came from what he viewed as her unfair treatment of kids and he admitted that his behavior towards her was not helpful. In speaking about teachers in general, Nick commented, “They’re just way more lenient towards girls than they are to boys. I can’t really pinpoint why but it’s just a thing.” He received a referral for his actions and had to serve a detention and complete two hours of community service. Within a few days of this, he stopped doing work in her class. The frustration Nick felt seemed to stem from his feelings that he was not being respected, which he countered with his own disrespect.

### ***Positive Teacher Relationships***

The importance of the teacher/student relationship was also evident when students discussed a particular teacher who was “a cool teacher and funny” but “he has no acceptance of dinking around.” The most poignant statement about this teacher came from James: “in that class I can feel comfortable asking questions.” He clarified that in other classes, teachers can get mad or frustrated with students’ questions, especially if they just went over the information. Cody

mentioned students can feel they should not bother their teacher with questions because of how the teacher may respond to them.

In contrast, this teacher, who was a current teacher during this study, connected with them through humor and created a comfortable environment where questions are welcome made all the difference. They named topics they found interesting and how they really loved history this year. This teacher came up multiple times in the focus group and in a few individual interviews and each time, it was positive. They did not mention how he handled behavior, which leads me to believe he does not encounter many issues with it. Instead, students mentioned their enjoyment, interest, and positive relationship with him. It was clear that this educator had built trust and positive rapport through meaningful content interactions.

David described a positive relationship with a teacher from middle school that was still influencing his decisions in high school. At that time, she was the person he went to see for help when his grades started slipping. He said, “she really cared about me, I guess, and she wanted to see me succeed and see the point of succeeding.” She made him stay in at lunch to get work done and helped him until he figured out what needed to be done. Even as he moved on to high school, she still checked in with him and tried to find ways to support him especially during his freshman year as his grades began to drop again. He described himself as a guy who never reaches out for help, so it was even more powerful to hear how she was so important to him. She offered help without making him ask for it.

Even Nick, who had a rough relationship with his teacher, lit up when he talked about a different teacher who reached out to help him. When Nick described him, he had a smile on his face, and a completely different tone compared to when he talked about the teacher of his failed course. He summed up the difference by explaining “Once I got into the class with Mr. B., the

next semester of last year, I actually still wanted to try and never stopped working with the teacher.” This relationship determined how much work and effort he was willing to contribute. For all participants, communicating with their current teachers was still a struggle. Many described avoiding talking to their teachers, despite the fact that they recognized ongoing communication was a crucial component to feeling respected and included in the classroom.

### ***Reflections on the Role of the Teacher***

Overall, it was evident that participants’ teachers played a powerful role that reinforced stereotypes or unintentionally constructed double standards of behavior in their classrooms. Only one student felt categorically targeted by his teacher because of behavior, but most of the other participants reported specific interactions with their teachers that suggested inequities between gender groups. Some of the instances that they described revolved around the inequity of treatment or behavior allowed by girls, but most of the frustration came from participants perceiving that teachers expected too much of them or expected their academic culture to be more like the girls.

This seemed particularly evident in Antonio’s meme with the phony grading scale from the United Kingdom. He commented that he needed this scale to apply to him so that he could have better grades than what the teacher was giving him. In an indirect way, I think the student was commenting that teacher’s standards and expectations were too high to ever allow him to get decent grades. These students perceived grades as tied to the power of a teacher. As a teacher, while I perceive students’ blame as a way to avoid taking responsibilities for their own actions, I can also see how their perception of teachers made them unwilling to communicate and perpetuated problems. It is impossible for a teacher to perfectly communicate with each student in their classroom and students are aware of this. However, if teachers do exhibit favoritism or

are not willing to build clear communication, participants illustrated how quickly they can shut down.

Some students spoke positively about their current relationships with teachers who encourage questioning, engagement in their classes, and employ an evenhanded approach to genders. This might reveal the ways students were attuned to evaluate the level of fairness they perceived by individual teachers. They were overt in explaining that they did not readily give respect to their teachers unless they felt that it was deserved.

### **Theme 3: Overwhelmed, Fearful, and Opting out**

The third theme deserving discussion was students' sense of being overwhelmed. The vulnerabilities of not measuring up and being lost academically, coupled with the threat of being singled out, generated a trend of opting out in the classroom for boys. Many of the comments in this theme were gathered from the individual interviews. This is important to note because it suggests that participants were still guarded with what they shared in our focus group compared to what they revealed to me and to the key informant.

#### ***Lack of Preparation***

Several times, the group indicated they did not feel prepared for high school and felt the stress of that in their failed course experience. Nick explained the feeling like this, "when you're stressed, it's kind of like a maze in your head. You get lost in your own head." Stress created a sense of powerlessness in these students and many times they decided to opt out of work rather than attempt to move forward with an assignment. James described the workload as never-ending, and "putting hard work into nothing." Their words indicated that, to some degree, being overwhelmed and opting out became commonplace. They commonly saw no value to the actual classwork itself, viewing it as simply adding more stress.

Most of the boys commented that middle school did not prepare them in any significant way. Steven said plainly, “it literally did nothing for you.” Other students’ descriptions were similar when they said “it sucked” or that there was “no preparation at all for all the work in high school.” Cody specified that “there is a lot less worry in junior high.” Antonio explained how failing middle school classes impacted how he viewed his first classes of high school. He explained, “I felt like it was Middle School where, like, it doesn’t matter. You just fail a class and it won’t, like, affect you.” These comments indicate that, for this particular group of students, the transition from middle school to high school was not a smooth one. They lacked middle school experiences that would help them anticipate the workload associated with core graduation requirements. High school stress was a different kind of stress. This theme reveals a bit further how the failure to prepare made them vulnerable to the very real possibility of failing, as indicated in Nick’s meme.

Cody indicated he knew he was struggling when he explained, “you feel powerless.” In both the focus group conversation and the individual interviews, participants mentioned things that happened to them, but they never mentioned the actions they took in those circumstances. Even in reflection, they felt powerless not only to handle what was happening, but to figure out next steps. David mentioned going to a previous teacher for help only because she offered it, but also stated he was unlikely to seek out help even when he needed it. When I asked about getting support from their families, they mentioned talking to parents at home and explaining that the struggles were, as James stated, “just something to get through.”

When speaking of his family support, Nick described his father who dropped out of high school as a sophomore in high school, “it’s like every time, every time I fail at one little thing, it all somehow is just, boom, you’re your father.” He went on to explain how much comparisons to



his father hurt and undermined his efforts to do well. Living in the shadow of his father's failure was particularly overwhelming for him:

I'm behind and then I'm trying to catch up on this one thing, then boom, here's five more assignments. It just keeps stacking and stacking and you just get more, you start procrastinating more and you start stressing more. You just get completely lost to the point where you just like, I don't know what to do so I'm just going to ignore it and try to be positive. That's just kind of what I do. I just get lost to that point and ignore things.

(Nick, individual interview, 12/9/2019)

Nick's feelings were representative of the other participants. They all spoke of the workload being too much for them to manage, but only one, James, mentioned that he stayed after class to ask a teacher for help. The sparse communication between their homes and teachers did not address the mounting stress from being behind in work; students found it easiest to just ignore things rather than deal with the problems they were facing in the classroom. They also seemed to perceive that their struggle was commonplace and something for which they had to take responsibility, even though they did not know how to do so.

### ***Unwanted Attention and Opting Out***

James stated that "being called out is like the worst." His statement represents the disquietude that fear created for these students. They were afraid of any attention directed their way, especially when they felt unsure about classwork. Most wanted to hide any vulnerabilities with behavior or distraction rather than expose their fear of being seen as dumb, nerdy, or deficient. Nick mentioned a specific scenario when he did not want to get singled out by anyone:

It's like when someone notices I'm mad. I feel like I just gave them something that is just for me. It's like, I didn't want you to know that. I wanted to keep it to myself. Now

everyone knows...sometimes you want the attention and sometimes you don't (Nick, FG, 12/4/2019).

He expressed the fear of being too vulnerable and too seen by his peers that was echoed in so many other comments made by participants. They were all fearful of being exposed at times when they felt things were out of control, and that seemed to be often in the classroom.

One clear way that participants chose to avoid being singled out was to opt out of participating entirely. In the focus group, students recalled different assignments that they remembered from the previous year. David and Nick responded with, "I just didn't do it," which was often followed by shared laughter. They explained the work was boring, or not interesting, they were not prepared, or they just did not care as their reasons for not participating. Opting out also indicated frustration: "I got behind and even more lost to the point where I was just like, yeah, I'm actually just going to stop because I feel unwanted." With these words, Nick expressed how he interpreted his overwhelm as a personal rejection by a teacher and classmates who continued to move forward without him.

Sometimes more personal things were going on that led students to eschew attention or support, as in Cody's case. He and his family dealt with a close family member's death during his freshmen year. This major life event was completely derailing for him. His family focus was on dealing with loss and concerns of how Cody was progressing through class were not a priority. He was on his own to navigate school while his family dealt with upheaval.

David also went through a very difficult family time, an ongoing situation that began in elementary school, when his father left the family for over a year. He explained the beginnings of his inclinations to do less and less in the classroom this way:

When I was younger, I didn't want to fail. I wanted to make people proud, I guess make my parents proud. But as I got older, mainly to middle school, I just stopped caring. I didn't care if I failed. And same thing with last year. I still have it today. I don't care if it doesn't matter to me (David, individual interview, 12/9/2019).

David linked his choice to not care in school anymore to the moment his father left.

David was the only student where both the key informant and I could sense anger in his disposition. When he discussed his father leaving just before David's middle school years, he did so with resentment and anger about that upheaval. He felt abandoned at a crucial time of becoming a man, and a responsibility to be there for his younger brother. He commented that he just had to grow up really quick and saw that life was not always fair. These feelings plagued him, undoubtedly contributing to his failure experience.

### ***Reflections on Opting Out***

It was common to hear participants talk about not doing things, or not giving as much attention to their classwork as other students. Some were clear that their feelings of overwhelm came from their own choices of not doing the work or getting behind and just giving up. It is possible that their middle school years did not adequately prepare them for the rigor of high school, or even acclimate them to dealing with the stress of taking rigorous, credit-bearing courses. They perceived little value in their coursework and subsequently had little to no motivation to participate.

While the situations were different, participants shared a fear of being exposed in one way or another. For one student, it was the fear that he would end up being just like his dad, who failed out of high school as a sophomore. For another, it was a sense of loss and grief that derailed his efforts. Overall, participants' greatest fear was that they would be called out or

exposed by their peers or teachers. They imagined it in different forms: teachers drawing attention to them when they were unprepared or having their personal emotions and struggles on display for others. These boys constantly grappled with how they viewed themselves and tried to not draw attention for the wrong reasons. Controlling how they were perceived by their peers and others was incredibly important to them.

#### **Theme 4: Growth from Failure**

When asked to describe the experience of failing a class, most students replied with short phrases: a struggle, overwhelming, terrible, and horrible. Antonio commented, “it made me feel dumb.” Across the board, most students said that their families expected they would struggle academically, even to the point of course failure. Steven explained, “freshmen year, you normally fail a couple classes, and then they [parents] kind of accepted it, and I kind of accepted it as well.” Not a single participant seemed surprised by their failure. They all discussed struggling academically in middle school, which seemed to confirm the idea that failure was a strong possibility in their first year of high school. Only two of the six participants, Antonio and Steven, mentioned concern about how their failed class could affect credits and their ability to graduate, which may indicate that some of them do not expect to graduate high school.

However, rather than defining themselves by that experience, many demonstrated resilience and a growth mindset. Nick compared his views on course failure to skateboarding, one of his biggest passions.

Look [at failure] as a lesson to learn from and try to do better at the next lesson, right?

Like my favorite quote of mine is don't ever plan failure. No matter how hard you are failing, don't even plan to fail. A lot of my favorite quotes connect with both school and

skating. You have to learn, so there's going to be failure. You have to try something for the first time. (Nick, individual interview, 12/9/2019)

Rather than let his course failure define who he was as a student, Nick recognized that learning something new carries the risk of failure; one only learns by trying again. He recognized failure as just a part of the learning process. His mindset is even more profound when considering his fears about ending up like his father. James indicated that course failure “just means that I need to try harder.” When Steven reflects on whether he might change anything if he could go back, he responded that he would not. He went on to say everything that was going right this year for him was because he failed the class last year and he had made some significant changes as a student since then. All of these comments indicate that failure was not derailing for these students, but rather a course correction.

Failure was a complicated experience for these students; for most, it confirmed their lacking academic abilities. Many explained that they knew exactly how their choices led to failure by either opting out, not finishing the work, or letting things go for too long before trying to make up assignments in the end. They were accountable to some of the choices they made that contributed to failing, and optimistic about their academic future.

Despite evidence of growth mindsets, I noticed that there was very little elaboration of *how* they would grow from this experience of failure. Most responses were platitudes such as “I will learn from my mistakes” or “I will stay positive.” To other questions, the boys often elaborated on a topic with specific examples and anecdotes, but these comments were short and devoid of any real meaning. I do think they were sincere in seeing failure as an opportunity to learn, but it might be that they have not fully grappled with what they have learned from the

experience. Their statements about positivity and moving forward might be absolutely true of them, or it might be their attempts at moving into a mindset.

### **MSLQ Correlations**

The themes elucidated above were further explored by eliciting students' responses to the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ). This exploratory data analysis was derived from the motivation section of the questionnaire which assesses students' goals and value beliefs about a course. In this study, I used it to better understand participants' experience in their failed World History class.

The motivational scales encompass six values: extrinsic goal orientation, intrinsic goal orientation, task value, control of learning beliefs, self-efficacy for learning and performance, and test anxiety. I administered the MSLQ at the end of each individual interview. Each student listened to the statements from the questionnaire and verbally answered with a number from 1 (not at all true of me) to 7 (very true of me). I chose to read the statements aloud to students to make it part of the interview process and keep it casual by offering additional explanation when needed. Some of the statements were longer than others and the student requested it be repeated. Asking students to listen to, rather than read the responses may have taxed their ability to comprehend the whole statement and respond with confidence, but the results nevertheless offer useful exploratory data. Overall, there were four strong correlations in participants' responses.

The strongest correlation, with a Pearson correlation value of .923, was between the values of self-efficacy for learning and intrinsic goal orientation ( $r = .923$ ). This number signifies that if participants knew what was expected of them in terms of performance in the classroom, they believed they had the ability to complete the task well. Given participants' statements of feeling overwhelmed, academically subpar to girls, and having poor communication with their

teachers, these factors could represent significant barriers to their understanding of what was expected from them.

Another strong correlation was evident between task value and intrinsic goal orientation ( $r = .915$ ). This signifies a strong, positive correlation of a participant's understanding of the general goals of a class and why they are participating in the class. Qualitatively, many participants described feeling lost in class, which would significantly disrupt a student's ability to find value in a learning task, especially if they saw no intrinsic value in the overall learning goals.

Self-efficacy and extrinsic goal orientation were strongly correlated ( $r = .852$ ). This indicates a connection between the participant's self-appraisal of their abilities to do a task and their perception of the end goal of that task. In their focus group discussion and individual interviews, it was common to hear the students appraise themselves as "less" than their female counterparts in academic capabilities and behavior. I believe this poor self-concept translated to an expectation that they would not do well.

One of the most interesting correlations was between control of beliefs and test anxiety ( $r = .574$ ). This value signified that there was a strong negative correlation between participants' belief that their efforts will result in a positive outcome and the negative feelings generated by test anxiety. In other words, this correlation indicated that test anxiety had the ability to compromise a student's belief that their efforts will result in a positive outcome. While testing was not directly discussed in our focus group or subsequent interviews, participants did discuss how they perceived their work and efforts being evaluated by teachers and other students. They often concluded that their work was inferior to that of others. They also mentioned stress associated with evaluations. I saw this within administering the MSLQ questions at the end of

the individual interview. This was the most test-like element in the study and there was a noticeable difference to participants' behavior. Since testing is the most commonly used means of collecting data in the classroom at any grade, this suggests that test anxiety might also have disrupted students' ability to realize a positive outcome in their class assessments.

### ***Reflections on MSLQ Results***

The aim of this study was to explore the lived experience of six young men through their experiences. These correlations offer several additional insights through the students' responses to statements that particularly address motivation, self-concept and attainment. Following Eccles (2000) Self- Attainment framework, these students' perceptions of beliefs, expectations and stereotypes directly impacted their individual goals and self-concept. Their expectations for success were built off of their self-concept, which was directly connected to their assessment of self and others. Overall, the correlations echoed what they boys described in their own experiences and self-perceptions. Some students felt their lack of abilities keenly, and in turn did not find success. Others felt continually chose to opt out of participating as a way to limit unwanted attention from others. These numbers suggest that what a student believes about themselves is powerful and self-fulfilling.

### **Conclusions**

The findings in this chapter are profound to me as a teacher. The young men in this study had many potential derailing expectations, perceptions, and even stereotypes to negotiate as they navigated their first year of high school. Most of them expected to struggle or fail courses. These expectations led them to opt out, avoid communication with teachers, and distract themselves with friends or technology. Their experiences help educators understand how these experiences



can perpetuate the stereotypes of misbehaving boys who chronically underperform in the classroom.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

This study highlighted student voice by exploring the lived experience of male students who failed courses their freshmen year. While each of the six participants represented different ethnicities, ages, socio-economic situations, and different levels of academic testing, they shared many common experiences and perceptions. From a thorough analysis of their experiences, four themes emerged from the data: (a) a lacking academic culture, (b) the importance of the role of the teacher, (c) a general lack of preparation, and (d) a strong growth mindset resolve to learn from the failure they experienced.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

To unpack the meaning of the findings, it is necessary to return to the overarching questions that drove this study. These questions sought insight into participants' expectations, stereotypes, and perceptions of course failure from their freshmen year. Students organically touched on all of these elements as they remembered specific moments or particular aspects of failure. Most of their comments alluded to their self-perceptions, and the ways they believed their peers and teachers perceived them. Families' perceptions were the least-mentioned element of the participants' experiences.

It is important to note how these participants differed from common stereotypes about young men who underperform academically. These students showed up to school on a regular basis; at a rate of 90% or better, attendance was not their issue. They had routine access to classwork and teachers. Also, while some had referrals for behavioral issues, some did not. They represented a wide spectrum of socio-economic status, extra-curricular involvement, and family involvement.

*What do these young men say about the meaning of these failure experiences as they intersect with perceived stereotypes and personal expectations?* Each student indicated they *expected* to fail during their freshmen year. Students spoke of powerful stereotypes at work in their thinking, especially when they compared themselves to their female peers and found themselves lacking. When their like-minded peers had similar expectations or teachers persecuted them, they created self-fulfilling prophecies of failure. In essence, the stereotyped behaviors of young men were clearly present for this group of students. Two hallmarks of these beliefs were behaviors that directly oppose academic success: opting out of required work and opting out of participation in an academic community. Even though they stayed present in the community and continued attending class, they did not believe school was for them.

These students perceived a distinctly different academic culture between boys and girls, as evidenced by aptitude, behavior, and work ethic. This is similar to the findings of Houtte (2004) and Jackson (1998) who found that boys' poor study culture disrupted their academic pursuits. Research such as this indicates how boys' resistance to academic culture can become a way of rejecting imposed expectations or academic behavior that could be construed as feminine or soft. It makes sense that as a group, they would be less motivated to comply with behavior expectations if they repeatedly experienced choosing between academic behavior and masculinity.

A similar study in the UK identified a "laddishness" at work in boys' academic culture (Jackson, 2003), where boys were not only acting out in fear of failure, but also fearful of being singled out in front of their peers. This was analogous with the sentiments shared by the students in this study. One aspect of image management were students' efforts to not appear less masculine by virtue of their academic efforts. This rejecting academic behavior strongly

resonates with literature that discusses how masculinities are challenged in classrooms today (Cobbett & Younger, 2012; Grønberg, 2013; Houtte, 2004). As a group, these boys countered academic culture by avoiding situations that caused fear or unwanted attention. One striking difference that I never heard from this group of students was rejecting academic culture because they wanted to be seen as “cool” (Houtte, 2004; Walker, 2013). Opting out was more about self-protection or deflecting attention rather than an effort to be perceived as “too cool” to participate.

*What do they perceive about this experience in relation to the expectations of others (parents/teachers/peers) in their lives?* The threat of stereotypes was an undercurrent for participants, indicating how stereotype threats are powerful realities in the classroom (Harlley & Sutton, 2013; Pansu et al, 2016; Wei, 2012). Some students labored under familial expectations that they would fail since it had happened with other family members. Others felt these stereotypes were reinforced by teachers who were lenient on girls, but not boys. But the most overt stereotypes came from the students themselves as they talked about their choices and behaviors. These perceptions played a role in overall motivation and self-attainment (Dweck, 2003), because they perceived they had fewer abilities than the young women in their class. Their subsequent actions to avoid being seen as academic or singled out for their work drove them to behaviors and choices that undermined their success.

Teachers played a huge part in contributing to whether or not a student wanted to engage or opt out entirely. Students who felt targeted opted out; the most common complaint from the young men in this study was that they felt that most classrooms were tailored for studious girls and not for them, which echoes findings in other studies (Lietaert et al, 2015; Wang & Eccles, 2012). A lack of communication between student and teacher was also a commonly raised issue; if teachers are difficult to approach or impatient with behavior, these students will not pursue

better relationships. One well-liked teacher in this study seemed to be an exemplar for how to educate these students: he was open to questions, firm and fair in his discipline with all students, and used humor to engage students. In fact, the importance of humor as a bridge between student and teacher emerged as an essential communication tool for this particular group of students. The teacher who was well-liked used humor to hook them into subject matter content and maintain behavioral expectations. Humor became a key tool for me in conducting this study, helping me initiate and maintain robust conversations with students about these ideas. Humor helped us talk about issues that participants might have been hesitant to discuss before and brought levity to the heavy weight of self-perceptions, stereotypes, and failure.

*What do their expectations of future academic pathways reveal about their resilience, growth mindset, and anticipated academic trajectories?* To me, the most encouraging finding in this study was that each student saw this failure experience as a moment in their life, but not something that defined them. While it was hard to hear how much they anticipated that they would fail, it felt hopeful that each student saw their course failure as an opportunity to learn. They all showed evidence of a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) at work as they described wanting to do better in the next academic year and not letting their failure as freshmen dictate the rest of their school experience.

The two areas suggesting a “fixed” mindset for this group were in the perceived stereotyped differences between themselves and female students, and their general perceptions of masculinity. In our conversations, most descriptions of academic culture and behaviors were laced with fixed opinions of the two gender groups operate and how young women were more well-suited to the classroom compared to young men. These findings seemed to challenge their

ideas that they could learn from their mistakes in the classroom and continue to improve in academic work.

### **Recommendations for School Leadership**

To the extent that boys not only underachieve but are also labeled as such by larger systems, this study indicates significant responsibility for school leaders. These complex issues require system-wide analysis and attention. While this study highlighted high school freshmen, their educational pathways were nine years in the making.

### ***Considerations from Eccles' Expectancy-Value Framework***

School systems can play a key role in the development of students' stereotypes and self-concepts. This study supports the conclusions of Eccles' Expectancy-Value Theory (2000), that students' self-perceptions drive not only their goals and definitions of success, but also help them identify their ideal selves. In this study, students spoke of the ideal academic male student, Zander. He was someone who was always on task and constantly pursuing his own learning. Yet he was also outside the ideal they could imagine for themselves. It may be that pursuing the academic ideal was too risky for these young men.

To me, this study points to the need for educators to cultivate academic environments that assist students in building positive stereotypes that embrace the academic abilities of all students. One way that educators can do this is by purposefully pairing up students. Underperforming students could be matched up with high-performing students to foster academic work and understanding for both students. Teachers can support true collaborative work by pointing out the strengths of both partners, so that both students can take the lead in different areas of their partnership. It is in this way that students might be able to shift their own stereotypes and self-perceptions as they interact with students who are different from them, in good ways.

### ***Focus on Confronting Stereotyped Behaviors***

I view this recommendation as one of the most important ones for educators and school systems. While school leaders cannot change stereotypes generated from peers and parents, they can make a dramatic change in how stereotypes are perpetuated through school building policies. If it is true that young men experience different treatment than young women, along with expectations that they should behave like young women in the classroom, there is a problem. Educators and school systems need to look critically at referral reports and behavior expectations and take steps to ameliorate injustices there.

Another way to confront stereotypes is to rebuild the image of an academic student. Educators must critically confront their own stereotypes, even as they help students reshape an academic culture that includes all students. Even as society grapples with defining masculinity, schools can help by sending the message that a young man is never defined as at-risk because he is male. We must disrupt practices and messages that perpetuate this concept.

### ***Focus on a Clear Academic Transition Plan***

Given that all these young men felt unprepared for the academic rigor of high school, this study indicates the potential for bridge teams to support students in the middle- to high-school transition. This team could unite eighth-grade teachers with ninth-grade teachers, along with other specialists, to share information and coordinate needs for these students before their freshmen year even begins. It is imperative that teachers have as much information about students as possible to create a positive transition experience; it is inappropriate to ask students to communicate it for themselves. The young men in this study demonstrate it is too heavy of a burden to expect them to share their own vulnerabilities as a student and seek help. Freshmen teacher teams have become a new practice to specifically develop curriculum and support

students across content areas (Neild, 2009), but rarely are middle level school staff working as a team with high school staff to bridge the transition for struggling students.

School districts might also consider the unintended consequences of how failure is currently handled at the junior high/middle school level. During those years, if a student fails a course, they do not get held back. I wonder if this practice perpetuates the likelihood of failure for vulnerable students. Since they progressed through classes without actually acquiring the skills needed to advance to the next level and were simultaneously shielded from the natural consequences of failure, they become even more vulnerable to the extra-high stakes of high school failure. In short, it is reckless to continue the practice of advancing students who are not prepared into the next grade level and expect them to be successful.

### ***Focus on Helping Students Navigate through Difficulty to Growth***

School is designed to be challenging, to teach students new material, and then assess how well they have learned that concept. Yet its methods for doing so are not always well-matched to student need. All the open, relaxed communication characterizing this study's data collection process abruptly changed when I administered the MSLQ questionnaire to students. This was a striking moment in each interview, and to me it reflected participants' avoidance of being evaluated or tested. Testing and evaluations are an integral part of any classroom, and could perpetuate key anxiety-inducing moments. School leadership should consider active ways to coach struggling students through these common and stress-inducing experiences. This might be a useful area of professional development to adequately prepare teachers and staff to not only support students in managing these evaluations but to consider alternative methods of evaluation, as well.



## **Recommendations for Classroom Educators**

The following recommendations are oriented toward classroom teachers. As a current classroom teacher, I understand the multitude of demands placed on educators every day, and am reticent to add to the list of obligations. But this study leads me to say with conviction that building relationships with students is the most powerful tool that educators have to impact them. Authentic, genuine relationships cannot be condensed to a few recommendations, yet these areas of focus could make a difference for students like the ones in this study.

### ***Focus on Teacher-initiated Communication***

Teachers can cultivate relationship by diversifying the means and frequency of communication they use to connect with students. This could include email, online classroom platforms, and social media. One valuable way that teachers could improve communication is to coach incoming freshmen in low-stakes weekly “check-in” dates. Because self-concept and achievement are connected, it would be ideal for these check-in practices to be done face-to-face in classrooms, but any mode of communication would be preferable to none. This check-in could help students develop communication skills, learn to advocate for themselves, and receive coaching on how to self-assess their academic progress.

### ***Focus on Building Academic Behaviors for All Students***

Not only do students need to be coached in how to communicate when they are stuck, they also need to be coached in how to build positive academic habits. This study indicates that students were often left to figure out many particulars of assignments or study on their own. Rather than assuming students develop study skills alongside assignment work, educators might need to directly coach these skills in their freshmen coursework. There are numerous methods of teaching students how to study, but very few educators teach those skills to high school

freshmen. If the World History class had study culture methods built into the curriculum, it could help shift the perceived stereotypes that young women are the only participants in an academic study culture. Rather than hoping that students will adopt this culture on their own, educators and schools should overtly focus on building academic culture along with content in their classrooms. This could greatly benefit young men without singling them out.

### ***Focus on Humor and Questions to Engage Students***

Teachers can foster strong relationships with students through humor and meaningful praise. This study indicates how humor can serve as a non-threatening way for teachers connect with students. Humor helped students feel comfortable to talk about sensitive topics with less fear and trepidation, and was a powerful tool in positively shaping a student's self-confidence. Another subtle, yet powerful, implication lies in students' descriptions of when they their questions were welcomed. A teacher who was open to questions was someone who wanted them there. If a teacher was impatient or unwilling to be interrupted, they inadvertently shut down students' willingness to participate.

### ***Focus on Debunking Stereotypes***

Teachers can build stronger relationships with students when they engage in self-reflection about how stereotypes are perpetuated in their own classrooms. Audits of language, messaging, and even instructional approaches should be vetted for their overall effect on students of both genders. Teachers must also be willing to reflectively take stock of their approaches in the classroom that could contribute to a more equitable academic culture in favor of boys. Hands-on experiences, gamification, and student choice could all be helpful ways to connect young men to content and learning. Nevertheless, I believe this study indicates the most powerful tool in the classroom is a positive relationship between a teacher and a student. If a teacher takes

the time to build a solid relationship with a struggling student, they can learn how to engage him and help debunk stereotypes that might hold them back. Teachers should also be aware that their words are powerful. The students in this study seemed to be inundated with critiques from others and their own negative self-perceptions; they rarely received positive feedback. I sense this could be one of the most powerful, underutilized tools for reaching students who are beginning to opt out of class.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Given this study's small and local reach, similarly-oriented studies at different school locations could indicate whether similar issues exist for other groups of students. Comparing the different lived experiences of young men in other locations could help expand the discussion of what students encounter as they navigate their freshman year. The differences in the findings could help to isolate the elements that pertain to just a particular group of students, while the similarities could hone in on larger, systems-wide issues that are negatively impacting freshmen.

A continuation of this study would also be very valuable, to check in with these young men as they progress through their academic pathways. It could be worthwhile to document how they demonstrate a growth mindset or continue to contend with stereotype threat and negative self-perceptions. It may also be interesting to do a similar study with young women who have experienced course failure as a freshman, to see whether these same issues might become known for them. Their observations could help balance the realities of the student experience at the freshmen level, and provide a counter-balance to the viewpoints shared here. It would also be revealing to study the teachers' perspectives of these struggling students.

### **Lessons Learned: A Personal Reflection**

This initial experience as a teacher-researcher has been enlightening and challenging. Like any first attempt, there are aspects to this study that I would go back and alter, had I the power to do so. I am curious whether it could have been helpful to begin with individual interviews prior to the focus group, to individually establish rapport with students. I sense that embedding Eccles' Expectancy-Value framework more explicitly in my questions could have helped me have more specific insight related to that theory. At the same time, I am grateful for the unfiltered, natural conversations generated from our focus group and interviews.

This study reminded me of how powerful an in-depth conversation can be for a vulnerable student. Every single moment of data collection (besides the MSLQ element) was a natural and respectful conversation; I daresay this study was probably the first time these students had been asked about their thoughts and feelings regarding this experience. I also sense it served the boys in an unexpected way. Many of them now drop by my classroom to say "hey" and share a bit of their life. For most of them, I sense the key informant and I are now two more advocates that they did not have before the study.

As this dissertation goes under committee review, my key informant just offered me anecdotal evidence of the relationships we built with students during this study. She analyzed participants grades during and after the study's data collection phase. David, who had failed every course during the first semester of his freshmen year, passed six out of seven classes during the course of this study and even achieved a Student of the Month award. He beamed when I saw him in the hallway and gave him a high five. Cody and Steven passed all core classes with a C average except in math. Antonio passed all his classes with above a C-average and raised his GPA to a 3.0. This was outstanding news and I celebrated with him when he came by

my classroom to say hello. James made a slight improvement in his grades, but had failed two core classes, math and history. The most difficult news to hear was where Nick finished at the end of the semester. Not only had he failed all of his core classes during first semester of sophomore year, he had also been transferred over to the alternative high school.

As an educator, I am hopeful for these young men and their academic future. I have been inspired by these students to be a better teacher and I am optimistic that I can help bring positive change into the classroom because of their lived experiences.

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**APPENDIX A****Meme Protocol**

## Meme Protocol

*Informed by Copes et al. (2018), Epstein, Stevens, Mckeever & Baruchel (2006), and Phelan & Kinsella (2013).*

**When:** At the focus group, as an “icebreaker” for the group discussion

**Process:** After the group has had a general introduction about the study and participants, they will be given 5 minutes to find a meme that captures one aspect of their feelings/experience of failing a class. They will be doing this independently to give opportunity to represent the unique perspective each has from this experience, with either phones or Chromebooks available for searching memes. Once they have found a meme they identify with, the group follows the following questions:

1. How does this meme highlight some aspect of failing your class last year?

(Each participant shares their response)

2. What similarities do you see of your experience in the other memes?

(Open exchange from participants)

3. What is one thing about failure that your meme doesn't represent?

(Each participant shares their response)

4. From the memes that others chose, which would you add to yours to explain the full experience of failing a class? Why?

(open exchange from participants)

**APPENDIX B**

**Focus Group Questions**

### Focus Group Questions

(Meme protocol, pizza, selected questions)

What do you remember about your World History class?

What topics or activities did you enjoy? Why?

What topics or activities did you struggle with? Why?

What expectations did you feel were expected of you as a male student?

What were your own expectations of yourself as a student?

How did you go about communicating your slipping grades with parents and teachers?

What was it like when you realized you were not going to pass your class?

How did last years' F in World History affect this years' classes or decisions you had to make about this year?

How is this year going in your history class? What expectations do you feel you have on you now?

**APPENDIX C**

**Individual Interview Questions**



### Individual Interview Questions

Describe what freshmen year was like in your World History class.

What did you feel were the expectations for you in class?

What are the expectations you feel teachers have for boys? Are there any different expectations for you versus girls?

What has the experience of failure been like to you?

Explain how people view failure in your life? How do you view failure?

Can you give me an example of a way that you dealt with your grades slipping?

Who was the first person you told that you failed your class? Why?

What is one thought you had when you found out you failed your class?

Describe your communication with your teacher as your grade was more and more in danger of failing.

Tell me how this experience helped you make decisions this year.

What have you learned about yourself after failing the class?

What would you have liked to tell yourself when you struggled last year?

What similar things have you experienced already this year? What have you done about it?

**APPENDIX D**

**Parental Letter of Permission**

## Parental Letter of Permission

Dear Families:

I am a teacher at Newberg High School and am also a doctoral student at George Fox University. I am currently doing a study to understand the experience of failing a class from the student's perspective. For this study, I will only be talking with young men who have failed their World History course as a freshman.

I am hoping that your student would be willing to participate in this study. This means that I, along with a counselor at our school, will be conducting one focus group with all participants, as well as one individual interview. In each of these meetings I will be asking them to talk about their experiences, thoughts and feelings about failing their class. This will be done during the school day and will not impact their regular class schedule in any way.

Your child's participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to not have your child participate or withdraw from the interviews at any time, or if your child decides to withdraw, there is absolutely no penalty.

This study is designed to understand what students collectively experience, and I am very aware that they are sharing personal feelings and thoughts on a difficult topic. Every effort will be given to respecting the dignity of your child throughout this study.

I will be using audio recording or video recording devices to record the conversations of the focus group and individual interview in order to capture data for further analysis. This means that I cannot guarantee confidentiality for your child, even though I will use pseudonyms for your child, the counselor, our school, and the district in order to reduce the possibility of identification. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications, but your child's name will not be used.

I have been given permission to conduct this study at NHS by Derek Brown at the district office, as well as Tami Erion, our principal.

If you have any questions concerning the research study or your child's participation, please call me at 253-964-4102 or email me at [mieleh@newberg.k12.or.us](mailto:mieleh@newberg.k12.or.us).

Sincerely,

Holly Miele, NBCT  
Doctoral Candidate, George Fox University  
Newberg High School

**APPENDIX E**

**Sample of Individual Transcript with In Vivo/Value Coding**

## Sample Individual Transcript with In Vivo/Value Coding

## Steven's Individual Interview Transcript/ In Vivo &amp; Value Coding

Transcript 5:54 to 7:17, 12/6/2019	Coding
<p>Miele: Okay, so describe in general what your freshman year was like last year in World History.</p> <p>Steven: Yeah. I had really good days to where like I actually, like, really liked what we're doing. And other days were just like completely like, I just want to leave. Like I would never not, like, I never skipped a class last year. I would just, like, not want to be there.</p> <p>Miele: So tell me what about the class. What did you not like about the class?</p> <p>Steven: Like. I want to say like the classwork she would give just got. Like how much frustration I would personally get. Like, to the point where pretty much I would get so frustrated that I would just stop. Like I'm the kind of person when I get frustrated, I just stop. Like I'm that type person. I just want to stop and just wait a couple minutes and then try again. Sometimes it wasn't really an option because then, like, you get like, not like yelled at but, like, you get told like to keep going.</p> <p>Miele: Yeah, yeah. Class time just kept moving.</p> <p>Steven: Exactly. Yeah.</p> <p>Miele: So what did you feel were those expectations of you then? By teacher, by parents, by yourself... What were the expectations of yourself?</p> <p>Steven: By my parents to like just pass a class. Right? Just get done with it pass the class. By myself, to do all the work, like, not the bare minimum but, like, at least above the bare minimum to where you still pass with the work and if not just exceed your expectations as well. And for the teachers expectations I feel like they're really high with some students on like some students because like she was also an AP teacher to some kids I know. I feel like her expectations were already high.</p>	<p>Good days = liked what we were doing (v)</p> <p>WANT TO LEAVE/ not want to be there</p> <p>never skipped a class (v)</p> <p>HOW MUCH FRUSTRATION I'm the kind of person (v) Get so frustrated</p> <p>I WOULD JUST STOP</p> <p>Frustrated (v)</p> <p>Parents= just get it done, pass (v)</p> <p>Steven=do all the work to at least ABOVE BARE MINIMUM (v) PASS</p> <p>Teacher= high expectations (v)</p>

**APPENDIX F**

**Example of Meta-Memo**

## Meta-Memo Example

### Meta-memo- David

This participant has a whole different tone than any of the other participants so far. He is fairly downcast, and had a sad, semi angry tone to his responses. He sat slouched down in a more pronounced way than any other kid. He also uses curse words freely, far more than any kid.

When asked about expectations, his response was: “I feel like they don't have them as high as expectations for they do for girls because we have to be 100% honest and most of those boys are kind of like, fucking stupid or kind of dumb. We do some stupid ass shit.”

- He sees a difference between guys and girls
- He sees guys in a negative light compared to girls
- He seems so critical of guys, which might just be his way of criticizing himself
- Earlier he talked about his parents wanting him to go to college but he cusses at the idea and says he doesn't want to go.
- He talks about guys doing stupid a\$\$ stuff.... But does not mention girls in the same language.

He specifically says that teachers expect girls to be better behaved than boys, but that boys can do just as well as girls in work, but many choose not to. He talks about boys not wanting to be seen as SOFT! He talks about bad behaviors or misbehaving as a way to not be seen as trying to hard, which he describes as soft. This goes directly to the readings of Jackson, and the other researcher who talks about “laddishness.” This is exactly the same description provided by some of those working class boys in UK schools. Stereotypes... this is exactly the same as the masculinities article.

He goes on to say “Like, with doing our work and like turning it in sometimes will be seen as a I guess the best way to put it is soft. like a pussy or some shit. And like a fucking nerd or something like that. That's that's the best way to put it because like, yeah, no one wants to do that shit.” Frustrating! Gender stereotypes that are definitive for this young man. If I guy is doing academic work then this young man calls them: soft, pussy, or a fucking nerd. This is so hard to hear, but so very revealing of his mindset toward academic efforts in the classroom. This shows me so much of what he would be fearful of if he was seen as too academic. This is so hard to hear, and also helps to understand why, even with parent support, working for college is something he does not want.

This participant talks about not wanting to fail at first when he was younger. He wanted to make his parents proud. Then he vaguely describes a lot of things that we experienced that made him not care at all if he passed or failed. When we asked him to explain, he describes how in 7th grade, his dad left for a year to work in Nevada. This sounds like the crux of his hurt. He talks about becoming a man and his dad was not there for him. That hurt sounds so deep, that he has stopped caring about making his dad proud. This was so rough to hear. You could hear the hurt, anger and confusion in his voice. He kept describing going through things as “a lot of shit.”

The absence of his father led him to turn to friends that were already into doing bad things, and a brother who was not making good choices. His voice while discussing this is rough and

emotional. He talks about a chain reaction happening with this little brother. He mentions that he just keeps telling his little brother not to make similar mistakes and just know that they both had to grow up really quickly.

His tone totally changes when he discusses a teacher that really cared about him and as he stated “wanted to see me succeed.” She is someone he still talks to and he talked to her about his grades when he failed his classes. He also talks about two support people at school but admits that he rarely reaches out. I think this goes into his mindset of what guys can and cannot do... he needs support, has people who want to provide support, but had difficulty asking for that support.

Towards the end of our interview, he talked about how he can see that if he really applies himself and works hard on an assignment, it looks really good. He sounded like there was pride in his voice when he described finishing a project in 5 or 6 hours when it took other kids three days. One of the last comments he made was about teachers showing up not for a paycheck but because they really liked being there and teaching. He talked about humor putting him at ease and being able to joke with the teacher. This discussion seemed to unveil his trust in teachers... that it is only earned if the teachers care about him, build a relationship with him. It sounds like he is willing to do the work if the teacher shows up for him. This sounds like a reflection from the broken trust he has with his own dad.



**APPENDIX G**  
**IRB Approval Documents**

## IRB Approval Documents

GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY HSRC INITIAL REVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

2191073  
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Title: Freshmen Boys Encountering Failure: A phenomenological study

Principal Researcher(s): Holly K Miele

Date application completed: November 2, 2019

**(The researcher needs to complete the above information on this page)****COMMITTEE FINDING:**

For Committee Use

- (1) The proposed research makes adequate provision for safeguarding the health and dignity of the subjects and is therefore approved.
- (2) Due to the assessment of risk being questionable or being subject to change, the research must be periodically reviewed by the HSRC on a \_\_\_\_\_ basis throughout the course of the research or until otherwise notified. This requires resubmission of this form, with updated information, for each periodic review.
- (3) The proposed research evidences some unnecessary risk to participants and therefore must be revised to remedy the following specific area(s) on non-compliance:
- (4) The proposed research contains serious and potentially damaging risks to subjects and is therefore not approved.




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Chair or designated member

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 11/6/19

Date

**APPENDIX H**

**Sample of Study Audit List**

### Sample of Study Audit List

*Generating the list of possible participants, 11/09/2019*- I sat with Mrs. Stovers and compiled the list of potential participants from last year. It was interesting how many students are gone (moved, alt ed, etc.). Still a full list of 12 was generated. Without showing them the list, I asked my team if they would avoid any particular student from a focus group experience because of extreme behavior issues. One name was mentioned, and I did not ask that student if they would like to join the study.

*Interest meeting 11/17/2019*: I had an open invitation sent to all the potential participants and eight showed up. They came in waves, so we talked to two or three students at a time in the counseling office. Most seemed excited. I made the decision to set a time limit on the paperwork, so I would have a chance to talk with parents before the scheduled focus group. Most students were quick to get them back to me, but two waited until the last day. Two students who showed up at the interest meeting did not show up for the focus group. I felt that six students was still a great representation of the total number of boys that had failed the prior year.

*Focus Group, 12/4/2019*: I chose the counselor's meeting room for the focus group. It was small and all of us barely squeezed in around the table, but it made for a key intimacy in our conversation. The table was round and there was no place for a student to hide and the recorders were out. Naturally, the boys wanted to check them out. In a way, the recorders made the whole gathering official to the students. It was very easy to have everyone included and not be distracted by other things in the room. I was so annoyed that the two students showed up late and missed the meme protocol, but I didn't know if a teacher needed them at that moment so we just kept on going. It was more worthwhile to keep the other four moving in conversation then to make them wait or go back to their phones for distraction. I was so happy with the transition overall. The guys used their phones to find a meme, but then they set them down on the table and just talked. This was a huge sign that they wanted to talk about this topic. As a group, they were fully engaged. I had pizza delivered, and we just kept talking through lunch to make the most out of our time and that added to the relaxed atmosphere. The small space helped foster all of the positive interactions.

*How to manage individual interviews, 12/5-12/11/2019*: I shifted the interviews to Mrs. Stover's office in the counseling office to continue fostering a safe space without distractions. Time was tight, and I wanted to make sure we had each student for a full class period. They were sent a reminder in the morning and an admit slip just before their interview. One student, Nick, had to be rescheduled because he was in the vice-principal's office for a meeting. I just rescheduled him for the next day, but during a different class period so he didn't miss two classes in a row. The communication overall was subtle and followed normal procedures in our building. I was able to communicate through email with teachers when each student would be absent, keeping everyone on the same page.

*Member checks 3/2-3/11/2019*: I was able to get David, Steven, Cody, and Antonio to look over my finished draft. The only change came from the meme selection from David. Otherwise, all the students though it was cool to see their words in my dissertation. They sat down and skimmed through the writing, but did not spend lengthy time reading everything. My

key informant, Mrs. Stover, read the document in its entirety and emailed back that it captured the students' voices perfectly. I could not get James or Nick to look over the document. Nick is at a different school and James had been scheduled to see the final document, but because of our early release for Spring Break, was unable to see it. From the responses from the other participants and the key informant, I felt my work stayed very true to the students' voices.