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A Phenomenological Collective Case Study of Mexican American Gifted Dropouts in South Texas

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL COLLECTIVE CASE STUDY OF MEXICAN AMERICAN
GIFTED DROPOUTS IN SOUTH TEXAS

A Dissertation

by

ALBERT IRLAS

Submitted to the Graduate College of
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

August 2021

Major Subject: Educational Leadership

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL COLLECTIVE CASE STUDY OF MEXICAN AMERICAN
GIFTED DROPOUTS IN SOUTH TEXAS

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ALBERT IRLAS

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August 2021

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study was to examine the shared experiences of formally identified gifted Mexican American students that decided to drop out of high school in the south Texas region. The researcher utilized a phenomenological collective case study approach that investigated the influences that led gifted learners to drop out of high school via a series of semi-structured interviews that collected and analyzed the shared narrative data (Creswell, 2013; Degand, 2015; Seidman, 2014). Prevailing studies have found that Mexican American gifted learners are more likely to live in economically depressed communities, more likely to suffer from linguistic and cultural barriers, and less likely to graduate from high school as compared to all other ethnicities (Card & Giuliano, 2016; Ortiz, Valerio, & Lopez, 2016; Román, 2015). According to Van Tassel-Baska (2018), gifted Mexican American students are more likely to withdraw from high school and drop out due to socioeconomic, relationship, and negative self-perception factors than their peer groups. School leaders that cultivate intervention and support programs purposely designed for gifted Mexican American students are more likely to have these students graduate high school (Vega & Moore, 2018).

The study explored the needs for school district to cultivate advanced, individualized, and transdisciplinary curriculum models and include culturally relevant practices that serve to engage

with gifted Mexican American students at risk of dropping out of high school. Further, the research advocated for schools to implement dropout prevention programs that are specifically targeted to the unique plights of gifted Mexican American learners.

DEDICATION

This accomplishment is dedicated to my Lord and savior Jesus Christ and to my parents, Chuy and Hortencia Irlas. Thank you, mom and dad, for your support, guidance, and for a million other things that I may never know. This would not be possible without all the sacrifices you made for our family.

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Thank you, committee members for your guidance and continued support as I have learned not just about research about how to be an effective leader by impacting my community through authentic change. Thank you, Dr. Marie Simonsson, Dr. Karen Watt, Dr. Miguel De Los Santos, and Dr. Hilda Silva. I will be forever grateful for all the lessons that you all have bestowed upon me. Thank you to my mentor Mrs. Sonia Casas; your mentorship has had an immeasurable impact on my life. Thank you to my amazing friend Liz Silva. Your grace, humility and intelligence inspires me every day. I could not have done this without you.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Intellectual and academic giftedness is a phenomenon that has been studied in the United States and Europe since the late 1800s and has experienced an emphasis in scope, study, and government funding in America during the height of the Cold War era in the 1950s (Kulik, 1992; Van Tassel-Baska, Feng, & Evans, 2007; Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2015). During this time of technological advancement, Russia and the United States began to shift resources and training into specialized areas of study particularly in the areas of education, technology, and military advancements. The United States government ushered in several initiatives, programs, and reforms that were the conduit to landmark policies such as the National Defense Education Act of 1958 that intended to improve and enhance the education system in the country (Jolly, 2009). According to educational historians and researchers (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2015; Jolly, 2009; Van Tassel-Baska, Feng, & Evans, 2007), this time period served as the genesis of compulsory and semi-standardized gifted education in America that sought to not only identify students that demonstrated exceptionally high levels of cognition but also cultivated pathways to nurture these students' intellectual abilities.

The objective for gifted and talented programs was to erect infrastructure that creates a series of local, state, and federal guidelines via funding, staffing, resource management, and curricular differentiation that serves the needs of advanced learners in an equitable learning environment as compared to their respective peers (Robins & Jolly, 2013). However, despite

attempting to differentiate pedagogy and implement instructional mechanisms for gifted pupils in American schools, tens of thousands of American gifted students fail to complete high school and dropout every year (Blaas, 2014; Landis & Reschly, 2013; Zabloski & Milacc, 2012). Empirical data has shown that gifted and talented educational programs help promote a significant progression of mastery of learning, particularly during late elementary and early middle school years, when compared to students that are not identified as gifted yet gifted high school learners leave school behind due to non-academic issues (Card, & Giuliano, 2014; Smith, Kupczynski, Mundy, & Desiderio, 2017).

The United States Census Bureau (2017) reported that American schools have a total enrollment of over 77 million students; 36.6 million children in grades Kindergarten through 8th and 40.4 million in grades 9th through 12th. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2013) reports that the national dropout rate, although it has been declining for over a decade, currently stands at an average of 7% for all enrolled students in the country. The National Association for Gifted Children (2013) states that the gifted population of enrolled American students is between 5% and 10% of the total enrollment which estimates to encompass between 3.24 million and 5.4 million children in the nation. Although these national dropout figures are readily available, researchers have been unable to agree upon specific statistics regarding the dropout rates of gifted and talented students.

In a comprehensive study that included student sub-groups in relation to variables such as ethnicity, economic status, and parents' level of education Matthews (2009) reported that gifted students comprise 1% to 5% of the total number of high school dropouts nationally however other researchers state that identified gifted student dropouts rates are over 10% given all socioeconomic and racial backgrounds (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). These

figures can be extrapolated to equate to an estimated population of nearly half a million identified gifted and talented high school students that elected to cease their education in school and fail to earn their diploma or equivalency credential.

Gifted and talented student dropout rates have long been considered a paradoxical problem for school districts and state government agencies, however few measures in the country have been enacted to target this understudied demographic (Council of State Directors of Programs for the Gifted Child, 2007; Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Borland, 2009). According to Laird, Cataldi, Kewal-Ramani, and Chapman (2007), the identification and labeling of these students as gifted learners may affect lack of intervention and dropout retention programs when compared to other student groups since advanced learners are viewed as more than academic capable and prepared than their peers.

In order for schools to establish a platform of equal opportunity and serve the needs of students on an individual basis, schools and learning institutions have utilized a system of identification categories in learning labeling that intend to offer educational support and assistance based upon the needs of the individual learner (Stevenson, 2011). However, according to Stevenson (2011), this approach is fraught with unintended consequences for some student subgroups, particularly that of gifted children. In the realm of education, categorical labels often connote academic paradigm parameters that seek to place limitations on student expectations and provide educators with a semblance, be it accurate or otherwise, of ability and classroom performance (Carl, 2009). Moreover, learning style and ability labels may act as obstacles to students that need guidance beyond the academic parameters (Carl, 2009). These labels of both expectations and limitations have the ability to impact student academic growth, peer relationships, and family dynamics (Connor, 2012).

Albeit identification and tracking provide schools with the ability to gather and generate local, state, and national accountability and testing data, the identification process and its ubiquitous utilization in contemporary schools can be viewed as detrimental to student self-perceptions and academic worth (Geake & Gross, 2012). Despite critics and detractors of student tracking and their detrimental effects on student academic motivation and comprehension, confidence, and teacher-student relationships, the label of gifted and talented or advanced learner seems to evade such condemnation (Eccles, Wigfield, Midgley, Reuman, Iver & Feldlaufer, 1993; McClain & Pfeiffer, 2012).

Giftedness is one of the few academic labels that is coveted by many yet only bestowed upon a few identified individuals that have been identified as having a nearly ineffable intellectual or cognitive set of abilities as determined by a student's educational setting (McClain & Pfeiffer, 2012). A student that has been labeled as "gifted" is not seen as a child that has been shackled to conventional academic expectations rather, these children are viewed as possessing high levels of academic potential that are not common within their peer groups (Colangelo, Assouline, Marron, Castellano, Clinkenbeard, Rogers & Smith, 2010). According to the National Center for Gifted Children (2013), gifted students are identified differently in America throughout each state, educational region area, and school district however these children demonstrate an extraordinary caliber of reasoning, learning, competency, and ability in various domains typically in the top 5% to 10% of their school peers. These students' above average aptitude for academics and potential classroom success places them at a distinct advantage in the learning process over their classmates (Geake & Gross, 2012). However, potential and reality are not always aligned. Gifted students face the same family, social, and academic pressures as their peers and thus, similar to their peers, some gifted children - for all their talents, abilities,

and potential - dropout and do not graduate high school (Landis & Reschly, 2013). Their propensity to learn and comprehend academic content did not come to fruition as their talents did not prevent them from leaving behind a facet of their lives that they may have excelled upon (Capern & Hammond, 2014). These promising students transitioned from the gifted child to the gifted dropout.

According to Henfield, Woo and Bang, (2017), an estimated 3.3 million students were identified nationally as gifted learners in 2016. Of the 3.3 million students, over 72% were White or Asian students leaving only an approximate 28% of gifted students that were Black or Mexican American representing the largest ethnic minorities in the United States (Henfield, Woo, & Bang, 2017). Further, gifted minority students are more likely to live in economically depressed communities that have an array of obstacles to serving the needs of these learners and may not have the resources and school programs needed to identify these advanced learners (Card & Giuliano, 2016). Van Tassel-Baska (2018), cites that districts have historically struggled to identify and provide support to gifted minority students particularly in Title I schools that are reliant upon federal funding. Black and Mexican American students are more than twice as likely to reside in economically depressed areas and attend Title I schools at higher rates than White and Asian students. Vega and Moore (2018) found that only 61% of Title I schools in the country screen and assess for giftedness while only less than 8% of Black and Mexican American students attending these schools are identified as gifted. Yaluma and Tyner (2018) assert that the gifted gap is already profound for Black and Mexican American students however the gap is nearly pervasive for minority students of families of low socioeconomic communities that are also content with related factors that influence school performance and high school graduation rates.

Moreover, Mexican American and economically disadvantaged students are less likely to be have parents and teachers advocate for the gifted testing process, are significantly less likely to be identified as gifted and talented learners, and are more likely to drop out of high school than their White, gifted peers (Siegle, Gubbins, O'Rourke, Langley, Mun, Luria, & Pucker, 2016). Ramos (2010) posits that despite a movement for non-verbal gifted testing, project-based portfolios, observations, student interviewing, and other progressive instruments to gauge academic propensity, Mexican Americans in gifted and talented programs persist to be underrepresented. The underrepresentation is compounded for students that are both Mexican American and economically disadvantaged. Esquierdo and Arreguín-Anderson (2012) reported that nebulous assessment practices that vary from district to district and state to state often leave Mexican American and economically underprivileged children vulnerable to testing scoring gaps and language proficiency obstacles faced by students that are not native English speakers. Furthermore, limited English learners and non-English speaking children are 15.5 times less likely than White children to be identified as gifted learners and thus be provided with gifted and talented education (Esquierdo & Arreguín-Anderson, 2012).

Texas represents a microcosm of the trend of the gifted dropout (Texas Education Agency, 2018). According to the Texas Education Agency (2018), the state of Texas currently has both the second largest enrollment population and enrolled identified gifted learners in the country with over 5.2 million Kinder through 12th grade registered students while sustaining a statewide dropout rate of 6.3% since 2018. Texas also educates the second highest number of Mexican American students in America and the second highest English language learners for non-native speakers in the country (Texas Education Agency, 2018). Furthermore, the state of Texas estimates that 7.6% of these learners were identified as gifted and talented children during

their educational enrollment term (Texas Education Agency, 2018). This equates to a total number of over 387,000 students that are serviced as gifted learners across all Texas schools.

The Texas Education Agency also claims that over 1.8% of the total number of dropouts were formally identified gifted students (2018). The Texas Education Agency divides Texas into 20 regions that surround various sections of the state. Region One, the southernmost region of the state that is primarily of Mexican American communities and children, has a total enrollment of over 412,000 students with an 8% total dropout rate. Although 7% of these students are classified as advanced, gifted learners, gifted students only comprised 1.3% of the aggregate number of high school dropouts within Region One. For instance, three of the largest districts in Region One, M School District, E School District and B School District, have a combined enrollment of nearly 124,000 students and 13,750, 11%, of these children have been identified as gifted throughout the district (Region One Demographics, 2018). Interestingly, the average dropout rate for schools in this region of south Texas stands at over 8% yet the portion of these students labeled as gifted is just above 1% (McAllen Independent School, 2014). Gifted students that dropout of Region One high schools represent a small yet overwhelmingly significant portion of academic capital that is lost for each child that opts to drop out of school rather than utilize their innate cognitive gifts.

Statement of the Problem

A stark lacuna of research exists regarding high school dropouts that were labeled as academically gifted when compared to other student subgroups and non-identified gifted learners (Landis & Reschly, 2012; Wellisch and Brown, 2012; Gentry & Fugate, 2012; Card & Giuliano, 2016). In contrast, dropout rates for Mexican Americans, gifted or otherwise, are readily available. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2018) the overall

Mexican American dropout rate of 20% continues to be disproportionately high when compared to that of White students at 11% and Asian students at 9% respectively. The dropout rates for students are compounded with the struggles of living in a low income home and language barriers. According to Huang, Haas, Zhu, and Tran (2016), only 63% of students that are economically disadvantaged and are non-native English speakers graduate high school in America. Identified by the Texas Education Agency (2018), Region One comprises the southernmost school districts and counties in Texas which has one of the highest numbers of economically disadvantaged students at 85% as well as the highest percentage of non-native English speakers at 72% in the country (Region One Demographics, 2018). Thus, dropout rates for students that are identified as gifted learners remain high since the demographic variables of socioeconomic and language are prevalent throughout this part of America (Region One Demographics, 2018; Texas Education Agency, 2018).

Researchers and practitioners have reported that the phenomena of gifted Mexican American and economically disadvantaged students continues to be amplified due to factors such as bias assessment practices and an underrepresentation of Mexican American children in gifted and advanced curricular programs in schools (Chandler & Adams, 2013; Erwin & Worrell, 2012; National Center for Education Statistics, 2017; VanTassel-Baska, 2018). Current research findings and figures fail to accurately depict the narratives and perspectives of highly intelligent and talented students that elected to leave traditional schooling behind (Young & Balli, 2014). Moreover, researchers have not attained a consensus on the exact number nor the estimated number of identified gifted dropouts (Matthews, 2009). Callahan (2009) argues that the scope of this understudied epidemic is exacerbated when recognizing that few states and school districts have implemented policies that are exclusively devised to address gifted dropouts given their

specific socioemotional needs and perceptions of self-efficacy as well as relationships with their families, peers, and school staff. Ford (2010) theorizes that not only do schools lack the proper grasp of the problem, but rather the overarching concern is that schools are ill equipped to proffer intervention programs for student support that are geared toward the needs of the advanced pupil. Cengel and Alkan (2018) found that teachers, administrators, and school counselors are not provided with professional development in the areas of guiding children through control and friendship issues, perfectionism and unrealistic goal setting, and low self-esteem. Gifted students are more susceptible to recurring bouts of depression that are rooted in social inadequacies within their respective peer groups and family members (Cengel & Alkan, 2018).

Burns and Martin (2019), postulate that schools have only recently discovered the profound effects that student control, attrition, and self-worth projection have on the social and academic growth of gifted learners. Further, Matthews, Lin, Zeidner and Roberts (2018), theorize that gifted children that are already struggling with issues of self-esteem and fitting into social groups often lack the emotional intelligence needed to make deep and personal connections with other children. The needs of these students are often non-academic and extend beyond classroom demands but rather are entrenched predominantly in social, engagement, and motivational facets (Jolly, 2018).

The United States Census Bureau (2017) reported that an estimated half a million gifted learners in grades 9th through 12th failed to complete their secondary education and this figure is projected to increase over the next five years. Educational leaders, policy makers, and community stakeholders have the ability to establish and adopt policy, systems, and programs that specifically target provisions that guide and support students that possess a valuable human

resource yet change for improvement with this demographic has been currently gradual or nonexistent (McClain & Pfeiffer, 2012).

Although the phenomenon of high school dropouts in the United States has reached its lowest levels in most states (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016), high school dropout rates continue to be not only a family crisis but a national and community epidemic for current and future generations of people (Stillwell, 2010). High school dropouts are less likely to be employed, accrue less income, more likely to be dependent on social services and public assistance, suffer from poor health, and experience increased rates of obesity and criminal activity when compared to individuals that completed a high school degree or a higher level of education (Moretti, 2007; Waldfogel, Garfinkel, & Kelly, 2007). Furthermore, Orfield (2006) analysis yielded that gifted children of parents that did not earn their secondary degree were more prone to display poor academic performance and preparation and tended to drop out of their respective secondary educational institute. Minority students and children of economically disadvantaged backgrounds compound the dropout rates since these students are more likely to leave high school without a diploma as compared to White students of economically median or affluent families (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014).

No race-ethnic group has contributed more to the high school dropout phenomenon in America since dropout rates have been recorded than that of the Mexican American community (Espinoza-Herold & González-Carriedo, 2017; Kim, Chang, Singh, & Allen, 2015). According to the Pew Center for Research (2017), while the Mexican American dropout rate decreased by a historic low 11% in 2016, Black students (6%), White students (4%) and Asian students (3%) continued to graduate at significantly higher rates than their Mexican American peers in nearly every state in the country. Although Mexican American K-12th grade student enrollment in

public and private schools has increased substantially over the past twenty years to 17.9 million students to constitute the largest minority group currently in American classes, nearly 2 million of these students are projected to not complete high school (United States Census Bureau, 2017). There are several key elements that contribute to the disproportionately high Mexican American dropout rate but according to experts and practitioners, socioeconomics and plights endemic to the Mexican American experience are the most prevalent that attribute to students leaving school without a diploma (Burns & Martin, 2019; Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2013; Kim, Chang, Singh, & Allen, 2015; Perreira & Spees, 2015; Román, 2015).

Millions of Mexican American students enter U.S. schools on disadvantaged paths that can adversely affect their propensity to graduate high school. While the poverty rates for Mexican American students have reached a record low of 18.3% in 2017, the Mexican American community continues to be overrepresented as being identified at or below the poverty line (United States Census Bureau, 2020). Additionally, Mexican American students enter schools with a disproportionate number of children that do not speak the English language when compared to their peers (Andreadis & Quinn, 2017). The Pew Center for Research (2017) found that 77% of the over 5 million English language learners come from Mexican American households accounting for nearly a tenth of all school enrollees in 2015. Many of these students have to not only contend with learning a different learning and teaching model from home or their country of origin but must also adapt to a new country as well as a new language. Deschenes, Cuban, and Tyack (2013) argue that economically disadvantaged students that do not speak English natively are more likely to exhibit difficulty learning, serviced through intervention programs and special education, identified as dyslexic, and lose sense of cultural identity contribute to school disengagement and dropping out. Moreover, Mexican American

students tend to disproportionately come from single parent homes (41%), have parents that did not graduate from high school (51%), come from first generation families that immigrated to the U.S. (35%), and have the highest teen pregnancy rates at nearly 5% when compared to all other ethnic groups in the country (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016). Studies have found merely one of these factors can contribute to an increased likelihood of dropping out of school however for many Mexican American students, these factors are not only compounded and ubiquitous but rather represent everyday life in the American classroom (Fry, & Taylor, 2013; Kim, Chang, Singh, & Allen, 2015; Ortiz, Valerio, & Lopez, 2016; Perreira & Spees, 2015; Román, 2015; Rothe, 2013).

Mexican American students that are identified as gifted face the same plights of poverty and income inequality, language barriers, single parent homes, and navigating through immigration family and community dynamics as their peers, however these academically advanced students are also subject to their own perils. According to the National Association for Gifted Children (2014), White students enrolled in affluent schools are more than twice as likely to participate in advanced curriculum programs while Mexican American students, regardless of the school-community poverty level, are not only less likely to participate in advanced curriculum but are also less likely to attend a school that offer a gifted learning curriculum. Moreover, gifted Mexican American students in high poverty schools comprise less than 5% of the average school population while the national average is approximately more than double this figure at over 10% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016; National Association for Gifted Children, 2014). The aphorisms that hard work, talent, and dedication triumphs all obstacles may be an illusion to the disenfranchised communities of Mexican American families. Educational opportunity, despite giftedness or talent, remains an elusive opportunity for some.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the shared experiences of formally identified, Mexican American, economically disadvantaged gifted learners that decided to drop out of south Texas high school despite their academic abilities. The researcher investigated and analyzed the narrative data to find common themes of the shared experiences between each participants' journey. The study explored themes of family, school staff, and peer relationship social dynamics, socioeconomics, perceptions of giftedness and expectations, motivation and neglect, autonomy and identify, and other factors that were critical in understanding the phenomena of academically gifted students that dropout of high school (Gentry, 2006; Gallagher, 2002; Landis & Reschly, 2012; Zabloski & Milacci, 2012).

The researcher examined the shared experiences of formally identified gifted students that opted to drop out of high school with a focus on Mexican American and economically disadvantaged individuals. Additionally, the research also centered on the relationships between gifted student dropouts and their respective peers, school staff, and family members. The study delved into the unique academic plights and circumstances encountered by gifted learners that have contributed to the decision to leave traditional schooling behind and withdraw from their secondary institutions prematurely without graduating. Moreover, the research underpinned the significance, value, and perceptions of relationships in and out of the school environment for the gifted student toward others while exploring the ramifications of dropping out of high school. Lastly, the study proffered the critical need of school leaders and stakeholders to enact dropout prevention practices and intervention supports centered on the unique needs of gifted, Mexican American students that live in low income communities. Schools that intentionally cultivate programs designed to meet both the academic and non-academic needs of gifted children

learners are more likely to increase gifted graduation rates (National Association for Gifted Children, 2013; Navarro-Leal & Colmenares-González, 2019).

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to guide the researcher in this study:

- (1) How do selected gifted Mexican American gifted students describe their life experiences prior to dropping out of school?
- (2) What do the selected Mexican American gifted student dropouts in south Texas schools report to be the reasons for dropping out of school?
- (3) What do the selected Mexican American gifted dropouts describe to be the social, economic, and educational outcomes of dropping out of school?

Methodology Overview

This research employed a qualitative, phenomenological collective case study (Creswell, 2013). The phenomenological collective case study approach gave the narrative of the participants' voices profound and rich depth within their stories (Milacci, 2003) as well as provided a platform to gain extensive insights into their respective rationale of dropping out of school. This study approach promoted the collection of data through a series of in-depth interviews and field notes in the naturalistic setting of the participants (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), conducting the research interviews in a neutral setting, the natural environment of the participant, or in a location of their selection promotes an authentic attempt to interpret and make sense of the studied phenomena and brings meaning to the shared experiences of the individuals.

The study delved into the perspectives of five high school Mexican American, economically disadvantaged dropouts that were identified as gifted and talented in elementary,

middle, or high school or were placed in a gifted program during their K-12 experience (Creswell, 2013). All the participants were high school dropouts from secondary schools in south Texas and were comprised of various ages of at least 18, male and female genders, and various levels of education and occupations after dropping out of high school. Due to the nature of the study, the researcher utilized purposeful criterion and snowball sampling to establish and adhere to the parameters of the individuals that were studied and interviewed which examined the identified Mexican American gifted high school dropouts' formal educational journeys (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

The data collected and analyzed was obtained through a three-interview series of five individuals that were formerly identified as gifted during their schooling however chose to drop out of school between 1999 and 2019 (Seidman, 2014). The phenomenological collective case study methodology provided in-depth analysis into the lived experiences, insights, and narratives of the participants (Creswell, 2013). The researcher conducted the study and interviews in the respective environments of the participants via field notes, interview questions, and some observations and gestures noted during the virtual sessions to engage in interviews that promote authentic discourse in non-bias settings (Creswell, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The researcher manually transcribed all of the interviews via recording hardware and online application platforms. The data was thoroughly reviewed to establish common themes and individual reasons that lead each participant to drop out of school. The analysis of the collective narrative data was conducted using the NVivo computer software program that organized and coded multiple data sources, assisted with constructing a visual of the narratives, and assigned attributes to the data onto one project file (Maher, Hadfield, Hutchings & de Eyto, 2018). The

analysis of the data produced emergent themes and allowed for naturalistic generalizations of the interviewed groups (Creswell, 2013).

Definition of Terms

The following terms were defined and used throughout this study:

Dropout

For the purposes of this study, a school dropout was defined based upon the definition of the Texas Education Agency Secondary School Completion and Dropouts in Texas Public Schools (2018):

A dropout is a student who attends Grade 7-12 in a public school in a particular school year, does not return the following fall, is not expelled, and does not: graduate, receive a General Educational Development certificate (GED) during their time in school, continue school outside the public school system, begin college, or die (p. 10).

Economically Disadvantaged

The United States Census Bureau (2018) utilizes a metric referred to as the “Ratio of Income to Poverty” in which factors such as numbers of individuals in a household, age of the individuals, and total income earnings is weighted towards an adjustable poverty threshold calculated by the average mean of a comparable family size. The total household income divided by the mean threshold produced a quotient. The difference between a household’s income and the poverty threshold ratio either provided a range of income deficiency for households categorized as “economically disadvantaged” or a range of income surplus for households above the “economically disadvantaged” line.

The Pew Research Center (2017) reported that the average household in America for 2018 was nearly 3 individuals per home. Accordingly, the United States Census Bureau (2018)

found that the weighted average poverty threshold for a household of 3 people earned an annual income of \$20,231 in 2018. Thus, a family at or below this annual income figure would be considered economically disadvantaged for the purposes of this study.

Gifted Student

A gifted student was defined by the National Association for Gifted Children (2013) parameters in which a learner that was identified as gifted and talented in their K-12 educational experience or was placed or group in advanced coursework by their respective school or district. These students have been identified as being in the top 10% of a facet or domain that is delineated by the district due to innate ability or refined skills obtained through other methods (National Association for Gifted Children, 2013). The label of a gifted student was defined as a student that was assessed for giftedness in any domain of multiple intelligence or was placed in a classroom, classes, or programs in which all other students or a majority of the students were also labeled and identified as gifted students (National Association for Gifted Children, 2013). This study also utilized the current federal definition of gifted students that was initially constructed by the 1972 Marland Report to congress as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that was then revised by the “Every Student Success Act” of 2015 (National Association of Gifted Children, 2013):

Students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities (p. 128).

Gifted and talented education, commonly referred to as GATE, was defined using the National Association for Gifted Children (2013) parameters of programs and curriculum that are

specifically designed to meet the rigorous academic needs of gifted students and challenge their cognitive abilities through various means.

Gifted and Talented Education (GATE)

Gifted and talented education (GATE) programs and studies are only provided to either identified gifted students or children that are placed with gifted students due to their high achieving academic abilities. These programs offered identified gifted learners with rigorous, differentiated instruction that challenges gifted students intellectually, academically, and creatively with specialized content, approaches to learning, and instructors that are provided with professional development and trainings geared toward educating these student subgroups with an advanced or more rigorous curriculum (National Association for Gifted Children, 2013).

Mexican American

As per the United States Census Bureau (2020), a Mexican American is any individual that is of Mexican descent, culture, or origin regardless of race that has citizenship, residency, or residential affiliation in the United States.

South Texas

For the purposes of this study, the region of South Texas refers to the southernmost section of the state of Texas often referred to as the Rio Grande Valley that borders Mexico at the basin of the Rio Grande River. According to the United States Census Bureau (2010), the Rio Grande Valley region of South Texas is comprised of four counties in that of Starr, Hidalgo, Willacy, and Cameron County with a population of over 1.3 million people that are predominantly of Mexican and Latin ancestry.

Texas Education Agency (TEA)

Directed by the state Commissioner of Education appointed by the Governor, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) is the organization that oversees the primary and secondary education law and policy in the state of Texas (Texas Education Agency, 2018). Established in 1949, TEA guides, supports and leads all aspects of educational efforts to over 5.3 million students across the state which is only second behind California for total enrollment in the United States (Texas Education Agency, 2018).

Significance of the Study

This study is critical for all educators and the stakeholders in that of Mexican American families and communities. The researcher conducted a thorough analysis and delved into the most salient factors that influence the decisions of gifted Mexican American students to drop out of school to cease their formal education without a diploma. The study described the roles peer groups, school relationships, self-perceptions and socioeconomics affected the educational progress of this student demographic. Moreover, the student outlines the vital need for schools and stakeholders to work collaboratively to implement effective and accessible intervention programs that are designed to meet the specific needs of Mexican American gifted learners that are more likely to content with pernicious school dynamics and lack of advanced cognitive-based curriculum, language barriers, and low income communities (Cavilla, 2015; Kettler, Oveross, & Bishop, 2017).

The impetus and rationale for this research was to gain a deeper conceptualization of the phenomena of the most advanced and highly capable learners to actively stop attending courses and completely withdraw from school (Lovelace, Reschly, & Appleton, 2017). The researcher attempted to unearth and place a narrative scope on the logic and rationale behind the decisions these individuals made to drop out of school despite their above average intellect and innate

academic dexterity. Students in general education dropout of high school for various academic and non-academic reasons however gifted and talented children do not drop out due to scholastic needs or deficiencies rather these learners continued to be in the periphery of analysis (McCoach & Siegle 2003). The stories and perspectives of this group of students are imperative for school leaders and community stakeholders to comprehend since these students represent the most advanced minds in the proverbial classroom settings. Edwards (2009) posits that approaches such as curriculum changes that deepen engagement and comprehension levels and pedagogical initiatives that intend to support gifted students' unique needs could be implemented to directly decrease the dropout rates amongst gifted students. In other words, teaching approaches and assessment techniques have the ability to appropriately challenged and sufficiently support advanced students through high school curriculum educational experiences via academic engagement. However, researchers and practitioners argue that these pathways are not currently pervasive in schools but rather are unlikely to exist for advanced learners in schools that primarily serve minority and low-income families (Dole, Bloom, & Kowalske, 2016; Henfield, Woo, & Bang, 2017; Smith, 2018). Callahan and Hamilton (2016) argue that despite school leaders that are aware of the factors and patterns that can influence the decision of gifted students to drop out of school, most school administrators are only able to act in a prevention manner rather than a reactionary approach to ensure that intervention support for the unique needs of the student is implemented.

While Mexican American dropout rates have remained at over 8.6% for the past ten years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016), Mexican American students are statistically more likely to dropout and not obtain their high school diploma or GED when compared to all other ethnic and racial student groups in America (McFarland, Cui, Stark, 2018; National Center

for Education Statistics, 2018). An extensive 2014 study commissioned by the United States Department of Education revealed that Mexican American students have a higher propensity to be identified with labels that compound dropout rates among this student group particularly in the areas of limited English proficiency and economically disadvantaged households (McFarland, Cui, Stark, 2018; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018; United States Department of Education, 2017). This dropout trend continued and paralleled Mexican American gifted learners. According to the National Association for Gifted Children (2014), gifted Mexican American students are over 2.5 times more likely as gifted Asian and White students to dropout of school and not attain their high school diploma. Moreover, researchers have found gifted Mexican American learners dropout of high school due to non-academic nor assessment reasons (Card & Giuliano, 2016; Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2017; Navarro-Leal & Colmenares-González, 2019).

The stories and perspectives of Mexican American gifted dropouts is imperative for school leaders and stakeholders to be aware so that authentic action and systems of effective intervention can be cultivated for the unique needs of this population of advanced students (Erwin & Worrell, 2012). Leaders that are aware of the prevailing factors and patterns that may impact gifted learners can become proactive actors in facilitating academic, social, and emotional support programs that designed for the needs of gifted learners that transcend the classroom parameters. According to Yaluma and Tyner (2018), school leaders that are trained to assess and identify patters of academic withdrawal, loss of motivation, and changes in social and attendance behaviors in gifted learners are more apt to respond with effective measures to reengage with these advanced pupils to provided them with the needed socioemotional support. While gifted dropout interventions that are cultivated to meet the unique needs of disengaged and at-risk

gifted dropouts have been shown to curb the trend of dropping out of high school, studies have shown that approaches that lack to address the gifted component often have little to no effect in ceasing the gifted dropout phenomena (Ortiz, Valerio, & Lopez, 2016; Prewett & Huang, 2018; Sewell, 2020). In other words, high dropout intervention programs that are not refined for the bespoke needs of gifted learners are not likely to impact their decision to dropout of high school.

Additionally, gifted learners most also contend with influences that are directly tied to their academic prowess. Factors such as self-worth, a lack of meaningful and lasting peer relationships, and bullying have contributed to gifted learners to withdraw from GATE or cease to attend classes or school entirely (Ma, Phelps, Lerner, & Lerner, 2009). Although Ma, Phelps, Lerner, and Lerner (2009) claim that identified gifted learners often find a sense of safety and security provided by their gifted peers and collaborative coursework, this population of students do not feel as welcomed in other learning environments. According to Pelchar and Bain (2014), bullying has become pervasive occurrences for students enrolled in gifted and talented programs from elementary through the high school years. Kitsantas, Bland, and Chirinos (2017) conducted a study of gifted student self-efficacy and perceptions and found that 67% of identified gifted learners had experienced some form of bullying, from verbal to physical exchanges, during their Kinder through 8th grade years. Further, males (73%) reported a higher prevalence of bullying than their female gifted peers (63%) while over a tenth (11%) of identified gifted children in the study claimed to have been victims of recurring bullying tactics against them by their peer group (Kitsantas, Bland, & Chirinos, 2017). Consequently, the social dynamics of bullying and peer relationships can create fragmentation between gifted and non-gifted children. Adams-Byers, Whitsell, and Moon (2004) postulated that gifted elementary children experienced losing

friendships that lead them to be emotionally disadvantaged at higher rates than non-identified gifted elementary students.

Not only do gifted and talented students have to face the same pressures and constraints of social norms, family expectations, and academic responsibilities that accompany adolescents during the formative high school years, these students are more likely to feel isolated and perceive themselves as different than their peers which may lead to a decrease in academic motivation (Berlin, 2009). Lo and Porath (2017) found that the socioemotional and peer relationships facets are variables that are often overlooked in favor viewing the phenomenon of high school dropout as a predominantly academic, economic, or motivational issue divorced the unique plight of gifted learners which can span across traditional factors and include lack of authentic relationships, emotional distress, and lack of identify.

The gifted and talented label has traditionally proffered unique academic opportunities and experiences for these students that include specialized and smaller class sizes, exposure to advanced coursework and post-secondary resources, and project and inquiry-based learning that fosters independence and agency (Kettler, Overross, & Bishop, 2017). However, these educational advantages are not a panacea to keep students engaged in their studies through graduation. Despite the inherent opportunities for academic and social advancement erected by schools through gifted and talented programs, gifted learners, particularly minority gifted students, lack the determination to graduate high school (Cavilla, 2015). According to Peterson (2015), gifted minority students tend to overwhelmingly disengage with school and school-related relationships for non-academic reasons. Ford (2014) argues that Mexican American gifted learners are one of the most susceptible groups that are underrepresented and underserved

in gifted education due to socioeconomic and language factors that may impact their collective graduation rate.

Although current studies focus on the academic success of these students an insufficient amount of time or attention is given to this population of children that, for all their innate cognitive gifts, are as fallible as any other student in the classroom (Cramond, Kuss, & Nordin, 2007; Hansen & Toso, 2007). Since there is a lack of research in this field, researchers have been unable to agree on the fundamental aspects of the problem, much less measures to remedy the situation (Landis & Reschly, 2013). For instance, not only do researchers lack a consensus of the accurate number of gifted and talented students that dropout of high school (Matthews, 2006; Renzulli & Park, 2007) scholars and researchers are uncertain how schools, predominantly those with high numbers of identified minority gifted students, can take steps toward mitigating dropout rates for advanced learners (Levin & Belfield, 2007). Gifted students are no more immune to family and economic hardships, societal pressures, and external hindrances that led to escapism as are general education students (Brown, Renzulli, Gubbins, Zhang, & Chen, 2005).

A qualitative analysis of the stories and perspectives of Mexican American gifted dropouts that derives meaning through a rich and deep interpretation of the shared phenomena is critical for community leaders and stakeholders to comprehend and serve to intervene. The experiences and narratives shared will provide schools and stakeholders to cultivate dropout prevention programs that are specifically designed for gifted students at risk of prematurely leaving schooling behind. It is imperative for stakeholders in and outside of the school system to view work collaboratively to identify patterns of academic and school disengagement in an effort to dramatically decrease dropout rates for the most gifted and advanced learners. Moreover, action to prevention gifted learner dropout is at a critical juncture as an increase of minority and

lower income gifted students are more likely to dropout than their peers (Yaluma & Tyner, 2018).

Limitations of the Study

This study faced certain limitations that impeded the depth of the data analysis. The initial limitation is that as this is a qualitative study, the research questions and interpretations are derived from the researcher's categories own of meaning. In other words, the narrative meaning and analysis was prone to be influenced by the personal experiences of the researcher. Furthermore, the collected narrative data that was analyzed and constructed by the researcher was not gathered via a traditional interview form as the research was conducted in the midst of a global health crisis.

As this study was conducted completely remotely due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, a few key limitations were evident specific to the health and safety protocols of social distancing to prevent the spread of the virus. The first safety limitation was the nature of the online interview format. While conducting the interviews online provided each participant to stay in their respective homes while they answered the questions during the semi-structured interviews, the researcher was unable to view some non-verbal gestures and cues. In contrast, in-person interviews would have allowed the researcher to view all non-verbal gestures that may not have been viewed witnessed by the virtual interview format as the camera captured gestures only from the shoulder and upper chest area to the face of the participants. Although each participant had their camera and microphones on and the interviews were conducted in the participant's naturalistic environment, factors such as some hand gestures and certain tonal shifts were often challenging to notice. Additionally, building rapport and a layer of transparency with each

participant was initially difficult as meeting with an individual in a face-to-face setting would have facilitated more humanistic connections and thus may have yielded more data.

Lastly, the ability to provide generalization would be impacted if additional Mexican American students from other parts of south Texas outside of the Rio Grande Valley participated in the study. The global pandemic created barriers that made the inclusion of more participants a unique challenge however the data collected to study this phenomenon proffered rich narratives from the five participants.

Summary

This phenomenological collective case study examined the perspectives and stories of five Mexican American, economically disadvantaged high school dropouts that were identified as gifted students during their K-12 education. The research focused upon five participants of the south Texas high school that were identified as gifted learners and decided to withdraw from traditional high school programs for various individual reasons. The researcher collected narrative data in naturalistic settings in the forms of observations, interviews, and field notes and attempted to find the common themes and unique perceptions of these gifted high school dropouts (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). The research intended to provide valuable insights for the rationale of the most cognitively gifted students opting to leave formal schooling behind and select a new path in life, education, and personal growth.

The second chapter of this dissertation contains a review of the literature conducted for this study on gifted learners. The researcher explored a historical perspective of gifted high school dropouts, the definitions and characteristics of gifted learners, academic issues of gifted learners, and the peer and family relationships of these academically talented students.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter begins by providing a theoretical framework as well as historical and contemporary definitions and characteristic traits of gifted and talented learners in public K-12 learning institutions. Further, the literature review provides a historical perspective that detailed GATE programs in the United States and the challenges faced by identified gifted learners. The literature studied also delved into the academic and social issues specific to children that have been identified as gifted learners that have contributed to the dropout rates of this subpopulation of students. The research was explored by examining contemporary literature and studies of the phenomena of high school dropouts. The literature review provides a social and school environment context that captures the narratives and perspectives of gifted dropouts to understand the paradox of academically gifted students that opt to cease their formal education in the secondary setting.

The framework was divided into several sections following themes related to gifted dropouts. The initial topic provided an overview of gifted education in American schools in response to the Cold War while the second section focused on the historical perspective on school mandatory attendance and dropouts. The proceeding portion of the research proffered the definitions and characteristics of giftedness in schools while the following section delved into the academic issues affecting gifted students. The final topic explored the peer, family and school relationships with gifted learners. The conceptual theories provided the reader with insights and

connections through the perceptions of Mexican American gifted learners that dropout of high school.

Theoretical Framework

Renowned American psychologist and constructivist theorist Jerome Bruner's work during the 1960s and 1970s contributed to the canon of cognitive learning theory in educational psychology. Bruner (1960) researched the cognitive development of children from a few months old through early adolescence and found that children learn through varying stages of mastery, applied and connected knowledge in vastly distinctive pathways, and process information differently dependent upon their cognition and background knowledge. Bruner (1960) sought to identify pedagogical practices that compliment a child's cognitive abilities as he contended that the active process of learning can be taught to any child via various degrees of rigor, depth and complexity. Bruner viewed learning as an upward trajectory spiral that propels learners through a theoretical framework centered on theories of cognition and epistemology, pedagogy, educational theory, axiology and self-discovery.

Bruner's (1971) seminal cognition and epistemology theory proposed that the diverse ability levels conceptualize academic material uniquely in synthesis, comprehension, application, and in the creation of additional learning. Further, according to Bruner's (1971) cognition theory, learning is an active, competency-based continuum that demands practitioners to adapt a multitude of distinctive, foundational teaching and assessment styles that parallel the needs of the learner. Bruner (1960) contended that the theory of discovery and subsequent learning was both intellectually and sociologically motivated to allow for authentic discovery from the student and not merely transferred by a teacher. The most profound method to stimulate learning is to engage and peak an individual's interest. Bruner (1960) argued that grades, competition, or mere

task completion does not develop the confidence and motivation to learn thus educators must challenge students to think critically, evaluate and deconstruct information, and empower them to attain autonomy in their learning.

The most effective and appropriate pedagogical practices delivered by educators must adapt to a multitude of distinctive learning styles for all children particularly in those of young learners that demonstrate great and advanced abilities when compared to their peers (Baudson, & Preckel, 2013; Blaas, 2014; Bruner, 1971). Gifted students have a propensity to thrive on independent study, self-pacing curricula of relevance, and opportunities to explore the world around them through in-depth means however these are factors that often do not conform to traditional schooling, lesson pacing, and teacher-centered instruction and assessment practices that tend to represent the majority of the contemporary classrooms for most students (Dole, Bloom, & Kowalske, 2016; Ford, 2010; Welsh, 2011). Thus, gifted students may be more susceptible to have their skills and abilities stifled rather than flourish in an arena that by its very nature is often rooted in learning as a product rather than a process (Blaas, 2014; Bruner, 1966).

Bruner's theories on learning parallel educational theory and gifted education principles that posit that gifted children are prone to optimize their learning experiences when the learner has autonomy in their education and is provided with guidance reflective of their holistic individual needs (Bruner, 1960; Mooij, 2008; Erwin & Worrell, 2012; Cavilla, 2015; Patton, 2015; Cengel & Alkan, 2018). In other words, gifted students are more likely to thrive in an environment that challenges them, espouses self-interest and exploration, and address their respective socioemotional needs with individualized approaches and systems of support. Teachers must establish authentic and trusting relationships with their gifted learners to promote ample opportunities for academic exploration within a guided environment that challenges

thinking. Dilekli (2017) found that teachers that cultivated learning spaces that advocated for learning via student-centered self-interests and pacing for gifted learners performed higher on critical thinking tasks. These findings underpin Bruner's (1960) educational theory as gifted children that are given autonomy are more apt to maximize their learning experiences.

Renzulli (2012) argues that contemporary school systems should reexamine basic teaching and learning exchanges for advanced learners that proffer student exploration of ideas rather than sequential curricula as well as assessment as learning tools rather than a gauge for understanding. In the traditional and established teacher-centered approaches pervasive in contemporary classrooms, students are typically taught with whole-group instruction with the same pacing using the same resources and the same pedagogical techniques and assessments despite their background knowledge, culture, or academic need, or cognitive abilities (Carl, 2009; Schmitt & Goebel, 2015). Utilizing rote teaching practices in standard means for nearly every learner runs counter to the philosophy of gifted and differentiated teaching and learning. Bruner (1960) suggests that gifted learners must be given individual opportunities to traverse their own inquiry, self-discovery, and autonomy while their sense of self is valued and nurtured by way of authentic relationships with the instruction and their teacher. Gifted students that are encouraged to narrow their focus of learning from large conceptual thinking to more specific yet intrinsic, transdisciplinary modalities retained more knowledge and applied it to new contexts for more effective problem solving and deeper learning thus finding meaning and merit in their learning (Stevenson, 2011; Van Tassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2008).

Bruner's (1960) axiology theory maintains that challenging students to reach their full potential through authentic instruction and cognitive mastery is at the crux of teaching and learning. This sentiment parallels gifted student studies that advocate for conceptual knowledge

acquisition rather than attaining a grade or receiving a passing mark on a standardized exam (De Wet, & Gubbins, 2011; Preckel, Götz, T., & Frenzel, 2010; Owen & Porath, 2017; Sternberg, 2010). Bruner continually argued for preserving the journey and self-discovery of learning to truly acquire knowledge and for individuals to become critical thinkers as opposed to merely restarting facts and figures with seemingly no connection or application to the real-world. He stated that educators must, "...teach a subject to produce little living libraries on that subject, but rather to get a student to think mathematically for himself. Knowing is a process, not a product" (Bruner, 1966, p. 72). Bruner contextualized learning as mastery of knowledge based upon competence and connection not task and mere academic performance. Learning is stimulated via interest and exploration rather than assessment mastery so that educators can enhance the skills of their students to think to their limits (Bruner, 1971). Moreover, Bruner sought to have practitioners to internalize education through a higher prism of moral objectivity and righteousness - the teaching and learning process is inherently not a morally neutral process (Bruner, 1971).

Historical Perspective

Educational attendance attrition has existed as long as education itself and thus, the United States government and school districts have enacted measures to retain students in the classroom (Provasnik, 2006). Centuries before dropout prevention programs and initiatives that intended to reduce or eliminate students leaving a secondary education institution without successful completion, local and federal programs proposed to keep children in school through the implementation of compulsory attendance laws (Porowski, O'Connor, & Luo, 2014). According to Provasnik (2006) compulsory attendance policies mandated by federal or state laws that students within a certain age range must be enrolled in school and must be present in the

classroom. Katz (1976) argues that these compulsory attendance laws were implemented to educationally indoctrinate children to the values and beliefs of the American and Puritan way of life. Albeit the very first compulsory attendance mandates were initially enforced in 1642 in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the country did not officially place these policies into a law at the federal level until 1918 for all states in the union (Katz, 1976). Provasnik (2009) states that parents and guardians that did not adhere to these laws were subject to penalties in the forms of fines, court ordered appearances, and incarceration. Child labor laws in the early 1900s, the institution of juvenile courts, the 1918 Education Act, and the start of World War I only strengthen the necessity of requiring students to attend school for a minimum age range (Sheldon, 2007). Truancy, or school attendance officers were tasked to locate the families of children that were in violation of the law and according to Sheldon (2007), these officers positively impacted attendance rates by the turn of the 20th century. This ushered in the era of state and federal government mandating parents to send their children to school in America.

For years during its widespread onset, education was viewed as a privilege offered to the select few while others experienced limited and sheltered instructional opportunities (Ong-Dean, Daly & Park, 2011). Regardless of the schooling, family and working environment, students have withdrawn from the confines of the classroom since the advent of schools as an institution of learning (Gonzalez, Kennedy, & Julien, 2009). In the United States, the term “dropout” was implemented in the early 1960s to identify an increasing pattern of students that selected to leave high school before completing graduation (Dorn, 1996; Dorn & Johanningmeier, 1999). The term was initially utilized to identify students that did not obtain a 4-year diploma and yet was void of any significant, dismissive societal context of that of a failure or an unskilled individual since many of these former students began working in various occupations (Dorn, 1996).

However, as the 1960s progressed, the establishment of a high school diploma as a necessity for educational and career opportunities became more prevalent. According to Gonzalez, Kennedy, and Julien (2009), the paradigm of high school graduation as a valued societal achievement was influenced by two factors in that of a surge of enrollment of students during the 1950s and the swift involvement of the work field during the same time period. Hence, the high school diploma was gradually conceptualized as a requirement rather than an auxiliary accomplishment in the workforce during the late 1960s (Gonzalez, Kennedy & Julien, 2009).

As the labor market became increasingly skilled and specialized after World War II, individuals that lacked a formal education were less prepared for the workforce and thus the high school dropout transitioned from a common occurrence to a problematic and critical phenomenon (Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2009). What was considered part of the norm for students in their mid to late teenage years was now perceived as a severe limitation for future financial stability and economic opportunity in their adulthood. Students that dropped out of school were viewed as unprepared in possessing the necessary skills for employment when compared to high school and college graduates (Ong-Dean, Daly & Park, 2011). American society began to view dropouts as harmful to individual communities as well as society itself (Stark & Noel, 2015). Governmental and state agencies sought to curtail the growing epidemic with varied levels of success. For instance, the National Education Association initiated the comprehensive “Project On School Dropouts” in 1961 that intended to unearth authentic solutions to the crisis of over one million students dropping out every year from American schools (Schreiber, 1964). The National Education Association reported mixed results however it provided the nation's first large scale attempt to reduce the rates of high school dropouts (Schreiber, 1967). Additionally, many of the compulsory attendance regulations could not

reduce the dropout rates since they only affected specific student ages and grade levels thus students in their mid to late teenage years departed school permanently with little to no resistance from the school environment or local school districts (Sheldon, 2007).

Gonzalez, Kennedy, and Julien (2009) found that the overwhelming majority of student dropouts of school during their high school years took place predominantly between the 9th and 11th grade. High school aged students that dropout tend to be affected by factors such as mobility rates, poor academic performance, low engagement, economic needs, and inconsistent attendance rates (Gonzalez, Kennedy, & Julien, 2009). These student dropouts represent nearly 25% of all entering Freshman classes which translates to over 1.2 million students that fail to complete their high school degree every year in America (United States Census Bureau, 2016).

Although dropout rates have decreased steadily since the 1970s across the nation and an increase of students are graduating from high school, a few student subpopulations, such as gifted and talented learners, economically disadvantaged, and minority students, have experienced stagnated dropout rates and have remained relatively unchanged for over a decade (Laird, Cataldi, Kewal-Ramani, Chapman, & National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). Moreover, recent research suggests that a majority of all other student subgroups and demographics have either stagnated or improved their high school completion rates since 1975 (Stark & Noel, 2015). According to Stark and Noel (2015) the national trend has continued to improve in many areas however variables such as socioeconomic status persists as a pivotal aspect to the successful attainment of a high school diploma including for academically advanced students. Further, economically disadvantaged gifted learners are more likely to drop out of school than non-economically disadvantaged students (Schmitt & Goebel, 2015). Coleman and Cross (2014) reported that minority gifted learners are also more likely to not

complete high school compared to their Anglo or Asian cohorts. Thus, economically disadvantaged, minority gifted learners are less likely to graduate high school when compared to their gifted peers.

The National Center for Educational Statistics (2016) stated that low income Mexican American students, gifted or otherwise, are more likely to drop out of high school when compared to the other largest ethnic populations in that of White students (5.2%), Black students (6.2%), and Asian students (3.1%). Economically disadvantaged Mexican American students drop out rates have displayed an average of over 9% from 2000 to 2016 due to several factors such as a need to enter the workforce to contribute the family, limited English proficiency, and a dissonance for the culture and language of the student that often runs counter to school culture (Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2013; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016). Consequently, Mexican American communities are negatively affected by these high dropout rates thus exacerbating the phenomenon particularly in homes of low socioeconomic status, Mexican American families (Orfield, 2006).

Gifted Dropouts

Gifted student dropout rates in America range between 3% and 5% of all high school students annually since 2000, however studies have shown that this number is predicted to increase slightly within the next ten years (National Association for Gifted Children, 2014; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018; Zabloski, & Milacci, 2012; United States Census Bureau, 2020). With a total enrollment of over 17 million high school students as of 2016 with a state average of 10% gifted identification rate, researchers estimate that the range between 51,000 and 85,000 identified gifted and talented learners in the United States may not obtain their high school diploma (United States Census Bureau, 2014; National Center for Educational

Statistics, 2018). This could translate to some of the most advanced students lacking a formal education or access to post-secondary opportunities for most of these advanced learners that have already demonstrated academic promise. Researchers and practitioners have advocated that gifted learners need far more than mere differentiation and advance curriculum but rather yearn for social and scholastic engagement, relationships, and value of the individual through learning and authentic interactions (Blass, 2014; Ritchotte, Rubenstein, & Murry, 2015; Smith, 2018). In other words, solely providing gifted students with academic guidance without social support may cause lasting ramifications.

When gifted learners are not challenged and nurtured through the learning process and taught in methods that refute the aforementioned theories, students can suffer from disengagement, feelings of social distance and isolation, fail to see the value of their learning, and may influence their decision to disconnect from the continuity of learning (Bruner, 1974; Landis & Reschly, 2013; Owen & Porath, 2017). Gifted students are more susceptible than any other student demographic group to be affected by social factors, and not academic variables, in that of school disengagement, dissociation from relationships, self-worth and the value of learning, as well as a lack of motivation that all act as a catalyst to dropping out (Landis & Reschly, 2013; Zabloski, & Milacci, 2012). Gifted students are not deficient of the adequate academic skills necessary to show mastery but rather are most influenced by social interactions, sense of value, and relationships.

If these areas of social interactions and communication exchanges are not met, gifted students may suffer social withdrawal and lose interest in school entirely. Studies have shown that when schools and teachers fail to adhere to these social constructs unique to gifted learners these students exhibited a direct lack of a sense of fulfillment and may conceive school and

learning as without merit or value (Blass, 2014; Owen & Porath, 2017; Vialle & Rogers, 2012). The lack of ambition may move some gifted students to dropout due to a lack of self-realization, underachievement, and significance. Bruner (1971) emphasized that self-discovery is essential for learners to advance their learning and need for cognitive simulation and this is most pronounced for gifted students that thrive on self-realization through independent study not a dictated pacing of curriculum. Discovery is found by the student rather than be imparted by an educator. Bruner would contend that student learning and mastery of skills rests upon their autonomy not within the bounds of an educator, administrator, nor system. Gifted students' underachievement and lack of motivation is rarely ever an academic concern but resides in connecting to others through relationships and finding meaningful connections between themselves and their learning (Smith, 2018). When gifted learners are not given agency in their learning, they are prone to disengage from school but not from learning (Lovelace, Reschly, & Appleton, 2017).

Origins of Gifted and Talented Education in American Classrooms

The advent of gifted and talented education in United States classrooms was not a civil act of pedagogical progress to serve the needs of diverse learners brought forth by concerned schools and parent groups nor by a progressive thinking state government but rather gifted and talented education was an outcome of the Cold War (Van Tassel-Baska, 2010). Albeit rudimentary GATE programs for advanced performing children can be traced back to 1910s in American schools, these curriculum and resource approaches were not formally a viable learning construct until after the Soviet Union's launch of the Sputnik satellite in 1957 (Pfeiffer, 2009). According to historians and researchers, the launch of Sputnik during the era's Space Race unofficially signaled the evolution and looming dominance of the Soviet Union as both a military

and economic leader on the global stage and also the pioneer in math and science throughout the world (Robinson & Clinkenbeard, 2008; McClain & Pfeiffer, 2012).

In efforts to prepare future generations of students to combat Russian advances in applied technologies, the federal government allocated funds to directly identify students that demonstrated high and uncommon cognitive abilities in the fields of mathematics and science so that educators could provide advanced counsel and guidance to these exceptional pupils (McClain and Pfeiffer, 2012). Anderson (2007) found that while financial resources were provided to educating gifted learners during most of the 1950s, school leaders and policy makers did not establish parameters or unified characteristics in the identification process of recognizing advanced students nor were there policies on curriculum, teacher professional development, or standardized funding for this student population. However, during the late 1950s the US government began to implement specific guidelines and initiatives to strengthen and proliferate advanced curriculum and resources into American schools primarily through one wide-sweeping federal act.

The National Defense Education Act of 1958 was formulated to increase fidelity and imbed structure into gifted and talented education programs as well as to provide financial assistance via government subsidized loans to college entering undergraduates. Jolly (2018) found that this legislative law increased funding for mathematics, science, and advanced programs of study in elementary and secondary schools and was instrumental in the growth of enrollment in colleges throughout the country. This act helped to not only increase academic rigor, depth, and complexity for all students with the use of highly trained teachers and professors but also reinforced the need for an advanced curriculum for advanced students and aided colleges and universities to increase their enrollment numbers for all students (Hemelt &

Marcotte, 2011). More recent legislation, such as the Jacob Javits Gifted and Talented Education Act of 1988, allows the American government to fund research distinctly for the advancement of gifted learners by coordinating large scale gifted and talented initiatives and programs.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016) the annual \$12 million budget of the Jarvis Act, along with a network of less substantial funding legislation, also aims to provide support to traditionally underrepresented gifted learners, particularly in that of minorities and socioeconomically disadvantaged youth, however these resources do provide assistance to post-secondary gifted students at the university or collegiate level.

The National Center for Educational Statistics (2016) reported that postsecondary variables that would often limit access to entering university undergraduates, preliminary in the form of tuition, were directly impacted by the federal government's influence to increase funding that from the 1960s to the 2000s, postsecondary learning institutions experienced an enrollment increase of over 200%. Minorities, first generation college students, and individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds were shown to have experienced the most growth in college enrollment during these past three decades when compared to White students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016).

According to McClain and Pfeiffer (2012), the Marland Report was instrumental in reshaping how the government and school entities conceptualized GATE and students with innate high cognitive functionality by aligning IQ, conceptual sophistication, and necessary academic differentiation for students that were in the top 3% to 5% of a school's population. The Marland Report (1972) was the first U.S. national report on GATE and proclaimed that the most inherently talented children were deprived of their educational rights and are at risk of suffering permanent physiological damage and lasting impairment to their cognitive abilities

when school systems do not institute provisions that lack the required differentiation of teaching, learning, inquire, and assessment practices. The Marland Report (1972) influenced educational reform in the realm of gifted children and mandated states and federal agencies to appropriate pervasive enhancement measures that contributed to increased funding for student resources and teacher professional development, assessment and observational instruments to identify gifted students, and inquiry-based learning practices.

Thomlison (2009) suggested that school leaders and policy makers cultivate more systematic means to the identification process during the onset of the 2000s. Rather than relying solely on IQ scores, school district and state and guidelines must mandate that research-based, multiple criteria be utilized for the classification of gifted status as well as the subsequent differentiation programs and services (Horowitz, Subotnik, & Matthews, 2009). Despite proponents of GATE that argue that cerebral divisions such as logical-mathematical intelligence, spatial ability, musical acumen, and interpersonal intelligence must be components of the gifted identification process, policy makers continue to focus on doggedly on IQ metrics (Edwards, 2009; Ford, 2010; Worrell, 2009). Local school districts, states, and the federal government have currently not reached a fully unified criteria for measuring high intellectual or related abilities while others argue that perceptions of giftedness must remain as a multidimensional conceptual construct (Callahan, 2009; McClain & Pfeiffer, 2012; Reis & Renzulli, 2009).

Definition and Characteristics of Gifted Learners

According to the National Association for Gifted Children (2014) educational pedagogies, resources, and curriculum designated for cognitively advanced children was primarily cultivated during the 1920s and was propelled into mainstream American education during the 1950s as a response to the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik. Seminal government

reports and findings such as *A Nation At Risk* (1983) and *National Excellence: A Case for Developing America's Talent* (1993) facilitated legislation that provided federal and state funding for the education of identified gifted and talented students. Although funding has become more readily available to serve the unique needs of gifted learners, a nationally accepted framework for the identification process of gifted students has not reached a point of confluence (McClain and Pfeiffer, 2012). Further, McClain and Pfeiffer (2012) report that despite funding from local and federal outlets, no state advocates using a single score as a criterion for a decision making model for the placement of children in a gifted classroom or school.

Giftedness was once determined exclusively on IQ measures that were in the top 3% to 5% of the population (Borland, 2009) while others viewed as possessing high abilities in various realms of multiple intelligences (Van Tassel-Baska, Feng, & Evans, 2007; Ford, 2010). However, the seminal Marland Report (1972) was instrumental in encouraging states to identify the academically top performing 3% to 5% of a school's population to be provided advanced, differentiated instruction. At the national level, school districts in America often tend to serve between 6% and 10% of identified gifted children based on the state and district's criteria for gifted and talented classroom placement (Council of State Directors of Programs for the Gifted & National Association for Gifted Children, 2007). According to the National Association for Gifted Learners (2013), an estimated 10% of the total enrolled students in the United States are classified as children with gifted abilities which comprises between 3.24 and 5.4 million students.

However, the national criteria of gifted children do vary between the most prominent organization in the National Association for Gifted Children and the federal government. The National Association for Gifted Children (2010) defines giftedness as "...gifted individuals are

those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude - defined as an exceptional ability to reason and learn - or competence - documented performance or achievement in top 10% or rarer - in one or more domains. Domains include any structured area of activity with its own symbol system such as mathematics, music, language and/or set of sensorimotor skills including but not limited to painting, dance, sports (National Association for Gifted Children, 2010). As per the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), the United States Government interprets advanced learners as “...children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities.” In addition, a formative government reported that was commissioned to explicitly establish to broaden the definition of GATE served as the cornerstone for contemporary research claims that students that have mastered between 35% to 40% of the curriculum in at least five core subjects before the beginning of the new year must be considered to be gifted learners (Walley, 1994). Moreover, while educators and policymakers utilize IQ scores as a metric and predictor for academic giftedness (Borland, 2009; Cramond, 2008) recent research suggest that IQ alone must not be the determining factor while multiple intelligence theory, leadership, and problem-solving capabilities are more reliable indicators of a child’s gift and talented cognitive prowess (Callahan, 2009; Reis & Renzulli, 2009). According to McClain and Pfeiffer (2012), a majority of researchers and practitioners agree that students that possess IQ scores that are in the top 10% and have advanced skills in one or more of the multiple intelligences may be identified as gifted learners at any school age or grade level.

The state of Texas, as outlined by the Texas Education Agency (2018) defines a gifted learner as a “...student that exhibits high performance capability in an intellectual, creative, or

artistic area, possesses a strong capacity for leadership, and excels in one or more academic fields as per the state's education code.” At the state level, 7.6% of all Texas students are identified as academically advanced, gifted and talented learners (Texas Education Agency, 2018). As of 2018, the state of Texas displayed a total student enrollment of over 5.3 million students equating to nearly 402,800 gifted and talented students that not only comprise some of most academically skilled children but also represents an ambiguously defined student population that continues to be serve as an example of the disconnect between policy and practicum (Jolly & Kettler, 2008; Texas Education Agency, 2018). Though the definitions seem to parallel one another, the federal government, state government entities, and one of America's largest GATE advocacy groups, the National Association for Gifted Children, interpretation of giftedness remains a point of contention as a standard set of universal parameters has not been established.

Students that are recognized as being gifted and talented learners often to share similar characteristics, some of which are aligned to the constructs and demands of school expectations while others juxtapose a traditional schooling environment (Tomlinson, 2009). Plucker, Burroughs, and Songs (2010) argue that gifted learners have the potential to demonstrate superior academic and cerebral skills that exceed their same-aged peers. Among the most prominent traits for classroom academic success, gifted and talented learners are more apt to make transdisciplinary connections from the content to the authentic world, have a strong sense of right and wrong, demonstrate rapid recall and automaticity with newly introduced concepts, exhibit extraordinary memorization and logic skills, and possess exceptional visual-spatial reasoning (National Association for Gifted Children, 2014). All of these common characteristics have the potential to support or enhance the learning experience for highly intelligent students

given the demands of the classroom and assessed content. Thus, these learners have certain social and academic needs that their peers do not necessitate to be challenged or attain their respective goals. Gifted learners are more likely to be academically successful if provided instruction from educators that have been specially trained to teach gifted children and deliver instruction based on the strengths of the child rather than the needs of their non-gifted peers (Van Tassel-Baska, & Stambaugh, 2008). These students must be provided opportunities to problem solve and be challenged and various stages in their learning reflective of their individual abilities (Ford, 2010).

Academic Issues for Gifted Dropouts

According to recent findings, gifted students comprised between 3% and 5% of all high school dropouts in America (National Association for Gifted Children, 2010; Zabloski, & Milacci, 2012). The United States public school system currently educates a total of 17 million high school aged students with an estimated 10% gifted pool or 1.7 million gifted learners (National Center for Education Statics, 2016). Reports have estimated that gifted and talented dropouts would annually constitute between 51,000 and 85,000 total students (Pew Research Center, 2017; United States Census Bureau, 2014). While the majority of high school dropouts are not identified gifted learners, gifted and talented student dropouts represent the most intellectually talented student subgroup when compared to their peers. Similar to general education students, gifted learners fail to attain their respective high school, 4-year diploma or equivalency credential for a plethora of reasons related to school and social issues, family dynamics, and financial responsibilities. However, Schmitt and Goebel (2015) posit that gifted students opt to drop out of high school due to factors indirectly related to their cognitive talents and abilities. Identified gifted students often experienced years of one-size fits all instruction

delivery methods that are too slow-paced and academically inadequate to meet the unique needs of these high ability learners (Schmitt & Goebel, 2015). Students that are not challenged nor engaged in their instruction may not see the value in their current educational setting and thus may not be academically invested to put in the effort needed to attain the passing standards or adhere to the demands of the school's curriculum. Kurt and Chenault (2017) confirmed that gifted students not only lack engagement when adhering to a non-challenging curriculum but these learners also yield significantly lowered valued-added growth scores when compared to their peers.

These exceedingly capable students have the capability to be academically successful yet may lose interest. Gifted teenagers whose individual needs have not been addressed will become apathetic, bored, and disappointed in school because of lack of sustained engagement and worth to the student which, to some high achieving learners, leads to the start of the abandonment of formal schooling (Brulles, Saunders, & Cohen, 2010). In comparison to other student subgroups, gifted learners are more likely to succeed in a learning environment that is cultivated and geared to meet their needs. Current studies on gifted children have indicated that academically and cognitively advanced students necessitate differentiated instructional approaches to maximize their innate mental gifts (Jones & Hébert, 2012; Landis & Reschly, 2013; Preckel, Vogl & Preckel, 2014). As a result, gifted students that are not nurtured or challenged for their talents may fall victim to curriculum and instructional neglect (Van Tassel-Baska, & Stambaugh, 2008).

Further, according to Kanevsky and Keighley (2003) gifted learners are more likely to drop out of high school due to class work that is not challenging and lacks the authentic application to real world relevance. It is critical for gifted and talented children to see the value in their learning as real use to them to not only comprehend the content but to attain a sense of

autonomy as well. Gifted learners value time spent on rigorous and relevant instruction that has real significance in their lives (Schmitt & Goebel, 2015). Consequently, a lack of clear and applicable instructional activities that fails provide gifted learners with the relevance needed to maintain a committed level of attention and time are not valued by these advanced learners (Wellisch & Brown, 2012). Gifted children see time as a valuable resource that must have meaning in order for them to be active members of their learning experiences (Cavilla, 2015).

Another overarching theme for gifted dropouts and academics is strongly correlated to scholastic disengagement. Davis and Rimm (2004) found that the average gifted elementary student, starting as early as 1st grade, knew between 35% and 50% of the core curriculum content presented to them and this disparity of mastered content continues to grow in the secondary setting. While most students need to scaffold background knowledge and require guidance to make connections to authentic learning applications, gifted students necessitate opportunities to increase their knowledge base through learning outcomes that are relevant and meaningful to their respective experiences (Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009). When this occurs, gifted students are more likely to suffer academic apathy leading to a loss of interest in class assignments, activities, and lessons since they are very familiar with the taught objectives (Blaas, 2014). In other words, gifted learners are more susceptible to withdraw from academic activities due to boredom regarding objectives that they either have already mastered, have extensive background knowledge, or find no relevance to their own lived experiences. When factoring at-risk indicators such as low socioeconomic status and non-native English speakers, Landis and Reschly (2013) found that students between the scored between the 95th and 97th percentile on standardized achievement measurements were more likely to drop out of school due to academic disengagement and sheer boredom. Landis and Reschly (2013) also claim that scholastic

detachment due to apathy towards already mastered student objectives was a more prevalent factor that led to gifted children dropping out of school than intervention factors such as amount of academic work, parental involvement, and even attendance. Appleton, Christenson, and Furlong (2008) posit that student engagement can be conceptualized into four subgroups in that of academic, behavioral, cognitive, and affective facets however these subgroups are not equal in significance. The cognitive subgroup, which consists of students' thoughts, perceptions and attitudes, have been shown to profoundly affect engagement levels and encompasses a learners' sense of belonging and self-worth as well as the self-perceived values of peer and school staff relationships (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008). It is evident that a lack of student engagement for gifted learners can result in not only a loss of academic interest but also influences a student's behaviors and attitudes towards schools and scholarly activities.

Albeit student engagement is primarily influenced by three contextual factors of the home, the school, and peer groups, student disengagement is overwhelmingly tied to the school environment that may not be prepared to address the needs of gifted learners (Christenson, Reschly, Appleton, Berman, Spanjers & Varro, 2008). Critics argue that, in similar fashion to serving the needs of children with severe intellectual disabilities, the modern general education classroom is not equipped to address the extreme needs of very advanced learners (Siemer, 2009). For instance, Sutherland (2012) found that the modern education system is currently not constructed to teach all spectrums of student needs in the forms of regular education, students with developmental delays, and gifted children learning at exceptional rates. Schools and educators are ill-prepared to teach students that have extraordinarily high abilities and thus are not paving individualized pathways of learning (Sutherland, 2012). Cavilla (2015) hypothesizes that without teacher professional development and a paradigm shift in schools' philosophy

toward addressing the unique social and academic needs of advanced children, American schools may witness a large increase in dropouts for identified gifted learners.

The paradox of the underachieving gifted learner is exacerbated when teachers and educators that work directly with gifted learners lack the formal, specialized professional development for highly differentiated instructional practices. Educators that are not specifically trained to provide stimulating, high caliber instruction to gifted are underprepared to meet the unique needs of this student subgroup. As proposed by Wellisch and Brown (2012), teachers that are unprepared to provide differentiated classroom instruction often encounter the aforementioned problematic issues that lead to a disconnect between students and their attention to the content and classroom. Underprepared teachers and administrative leaders may not be able to provide the instructional support and academic challenges for the gifted child. Moreover, these teachers often tend to implement traditional pedagogical practices that are void of rigor and differentiation thus the cycle of boredom and apathy for the advanced learner continues (Horowitz, Subotnik, & Matthews, 2009). Cavilla (2015) states that a lack of clear learning objectives and ambiguous expectations established by the classroom teacher can lead to low academic self-perception and poor intrinsic motivation from the gifted student.

Several studies have discerned that the gifted dropout phenomenon is exacerbated by the aforementioned factors when coupled with minorities families and communities that are more likely to live in households in poverty or in lower socioeconomically areas than their peers (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010; Marchbanks, Blake, Booth, Carmichael, Seibert, & Fabelo, 2015; Renzulli & Park, 2007; Vega & Moore, 2018). Andreadis and Quinn (2017) found that most Mexican American communities are more likely than other ethnic groups to live and remain in poverty while future generations of their children are not prone to display significant

social mobility due to a lack of educational access and career opportunities. According to Vega and Moore (2018), giftedness does not shield Mexican American students from English language deficiencies, home and social disengagement, family pressure to contribute financially, and low socioeconomics. Gifted Mexican American children are not infallible to the perils of dropping out of school.

Mexican American high school dropouts are affected by variables that seldom act as obstacles to high school completion when compared to other ethnicities. In general, Mexican American high school students drop out due to factors such as English language deficiencies, low student engagement levels, immigration concerns, and greater financial need to enter the workforce for production and transportation related seasonal occupations (Duncan, Hotz, & Trejo, 2006; Gonzales, Wong, Toomey, Millsap, Dumka, & Mauricio, 2014). However, these systemic barriers are magnified for gifted Mexican American students that prevent them from graduating high school. According to Yaluma and Tyner (2018), Mexican American gifted students are statistically enrolled in schools in low income areas, less likely to enroll in classes that differentiate for their learning, less likely to be taught by teachers trained in advanced curriculum and giftedness, more likely to come from single parent households, lack access to quality educational programs, and have limited financial means for advanced teaching tools and resources when compared to their when compared to their peers. Furthermore, families of Mexican American gifted students are more likely to come from homes in which Spanish is the primary language which can lead to less home-to-school parental engagement and overall parental support with school work or campus participation (Yaluma & Tyner, 2018). Studies have shown that a strong correlation exists between parental involvement and academic achievement for students especially in minority and low socioeconomic communities (Benner,

Boyle, & Sadler, 2016; Castro, Expósito-Casas, López-Martín, Lizasoain, Navarro-Asencio, E., & Gaviria, 2015).

Despite their inherit academic abilities, gifted Mexican American students entering their freshman year of high school were three times more likely to fail at least one class, less likely to apply for college, and dropped out of school at 5% higher rates than their peers (McCormick & Plucker, 2013; Landis & Reschly, 2013; Renzulli & Park, 2007). Researchers have also noted that Mexican American children that reside in a household at or near the poverty line and have parents that did not graduate high school are less likely to have passing grades, adequate attendance rates, are will be less like to graduate from high school (Landis & Reschly, 2013; Renzulli & Park, 2007). Gifted Mexican American students are not immune to the emergent patterns of high school dropouts when faced with a multitude of economic, engagement, linguistic, and systemic issues distinctive to their experience.

Teacher, Peer, and Family Relationships with Gifted Dropouts

Pfeiffer (2009) suggests that teacher and student relationships are a critical component of the learning experience for the gifted child. Teacher-student relationships may affect a student's academic performance, attendance, motivation, and overall attitude towards school and the classroom environment (Cornelius-White, 2007). The cultivation of an academic relationship extends to the academic and social outcomes for gifted learners more than their non-identified counterparts (Wilkins, 2006). In the larger scope, the daily interactions that occur between educators and their gifted pupils affects students' social, emotional, and academic well-being that may impact academic performance and motivation (Hattie, 2009; Klem & Connell, 2004). Teachers that work with gifted children have the clout to influence the perceptions students have to school and their overall learning (Pfeiffer, 2009). According to Cross (2011), gifted and

talented individuals may battle with bouts of depression and isolation which can lead to students rejecting the concept of the school dynamic if the learning relationships are not nonexistent or beneficial toward the learner. However, high ability students often tend to share a heightened awareness of their sense of belonging and a school and classroom has the power to counter the effects of depression in gifted and talented adolescents (Mueller, 2009). Conversely, negative school relationships can not only hinder academic growth but may prolong the effects of isolation and thus cause students to deviate further from completing high school. Educators that teach gifted children must be cognizant that although the teacher must respect their personal boundaries and space, one must also challenge them with support and motivation (Pfeiffer, 2009).

Blaas (2014) argues that gifted learners are vulnerable to fall into a destructive need to attain perfectionism with their academics and peer relationships which may result in anxiety, stress, and depression when these lofty expectations are not met. Despite their innate abilities, gifted students are more susceptible to academic underachievement than any other student subgroup and thus require proper mentorship, teacher and family guidance, and rely on support from their peers than other students (Reis & McCoach, 2002). Neihardt, Reis, Robinson, and Moon (2012) assert that a cyclic phenomenon exists in which educators and family members overlook the needs of gifted children and create a false perception that these children are able to guide themselves leaving these learners without support thus the gifted child ceases to ask for help and continues to withdraw from their academics. Poor social development and high expectations is a pervasive obstacle that is difficult to overcome for many students, but gifted learners are more likely to be affected by this plight. A positive correlation exists between academic achievement and motivation to poor social-emotional growth within the gifted student

community (Blaas, 2014). Educational leaders and the structure of schools to provide emotional support and stewardship currently fail to adequately address the social-emotional needs of gifted children.

Gifted students also have unique bonds with their peers that parallels the juxtaposition with their teachers (Borland, 2009). While gifted learners seek to conform within a social group, they also yearn to be accepted as individuals while blending into the group. According to Preckel, Gotz, and Frenzel (2010), gifted students often struggle to attain a balance between acceptance, anonymity, individualism that a majority of teenagers and adolescents do not focus upon as intently. Gifted learners covet group acceptance and yet aspire to attain a strong sense of self-identity (Preckel, Gotz, & Frenzel, 2010). Thus, establishing meaningful connections to peer groups is of great significance to the development of connections to the learning environment. Gifted students that establish authentic and mutually beneficial relationships with their peers are more likely to view school as a welcoming and positive learning atmosphere (French & Shore, 2008). Furthermore, peer groups can foster healthy competition and facilitate academic stability to one another. However, social dynamics and relationships can also bring about negative aspects that impede the motivation and self-worth of students brought about by their peers (Bernal, 2003).

The relationships between school friends is more vital in the gifted and talented realm than non-identified gifted children (Bernal, 2003; Schapiro, Schneider, Shore, Margison, & Udvari, 2009) therefore peers have the ability to influence the perceptions of gifted learners. Gifted learners can view their talents as stark differences when compared to their counterparts and friends that do not promote healthy relationships. According to Coleman and Cross (2014), this self-perception can be experienced as a social handicap paradigm as some gifted students

minimize or restrain their academic talents to essentially hide their abilities from their friends and social circles. The suppression of a gifted student's talents can lead to critical, reflective questions regarding the abilities of the students, the value of perceptions of others and self, and may affect academic performance (Coleman & Cross, 2014).

Family relationships also play a pivotal role in the learning experiences of a gifted and talented child. Family involvement, particularly that of parental involvement, can affect the outlook and attitudes a gifted learner has toward school (Borland, 2009). Although parental involvement in the gifted classroom and general participation has increased in the past decade, it still remains low in secondary education when compared to elementary education (National Association for Gifted Children, 2014). This difference in direct support from younger children to teenage students has remained relatively unchanged and yet adolescent students claim to need continued family support as they navigate the perils and uncertainties of the high school setting (Schmitt & Goebel, 2015). Parents that are actively involved in the education of a gifted learner can positively affect the perceptions the child has toward school, teachers, and learning itself. Neihart (2006) theorizes that parents and family members have the ability to strengthen an underachieving gifted child's rapport with the school environment with the confidence they need to embrace the achievement through discussions, shared experiences, and emotional support. By extension, other family members, such as siblings, can also influence one another by way of competition, support, and peer guidance. These strong relationships and family figures can guide students to stay on track to complete their high school education. (French & Shore, 2008).

However, parental involvement that may be considered as intrusive by the high ability child may harm the relationship the child has to the school. According to Peters (2012) parents and family members that are profoundly involved at the micro and macro levels may negatively

affect student perceptions to school and formal learning nearly as much as a lack of parental involvement. These parents tend to desire full control over the child's decision making and planning thus reducing or eliminating an intellectually advanced child's sense of autonomy. Gifted and talented learners seek to be individuals in the family unit and display a strong sense of independence from their parents at an earlier age when compared to their non-identified counterparts (Baudson & Preckel, 2013). Thus, reducing a gifted child's autonomy may negatively influence their potential for academic, individual success.

Summary

Although identified advanced and talented student dropouts represent between 3% and 5% of the total number of high school dropouts in America (National Association for Gifted Children, 2010; Zabloski, & Milacci, 2012), these students represent the most capable and academically gifted minds in the classroom. This chapter captures the historical aspect and identification of the gifted child as well as delve into the academic and social issues faced by these students that may prevent them from completing their high school education. Gifted and talented learners face unique challenges from academic pressures, apathy, identity, individualism, and acceptance that non-identified gifted learners do not readily face continually (Cornelius-White, 2007; Zabloski, & Milacci, 2012; Preckel, Gotz & Frenzel, 2010). Similar to all other student subgroups, gifted learners have individual needs that must be addressed in order to ensure academic success and high school completion. Gifted and talented learners must not be academically neglected due to their potential but must be nurtured, guided, and provided support despite their advanced abilities (Van Tassel-Baska, & Stambaugh, 2008). Giftedness is not a panacea that remedies that need for continual and individualized student support.

The subsequent chapter of the study focused upon the methodology and approach to the research and outlines the research questions and design of the study. The next chapter explored the site and participant selection process, as well as the instrumentation and data collection and analysis procedures in detail.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This study constructed meaning and identified commonalities within the experiences of five gifted dropouts to gain an understanding of the issues and problems faced by these individuals during their time in the school environment. This chapter begins by establishing the research design facets of the phenomenological collective case study approach as well as proffering the overarching research questions. The chapter then proceeded to the site and participation selection process, gaining access to the information, instrumentation, and concluded with the data collection and analysis process.

Research Design

This phenomenological collective case study (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2017) centered on the phenomenon of Mexican American and economically disadvantaged gifted high school student dropouts in south Texas schools. Additionally, the qualitative collective case study also conceptualized the relationships between gifted student dropouts and their respective peers, school staff, and family members, captured and explored their shared experiences, and examined the influences that led these identified gifted and talented students to drop out of school despite their academic abilities (Gentry, 2006; Gallagher, 2002; Landis & Reschly, 2012; Zabloski & Milacci, 2012). The researcher's qualitative approach in leveraging a system of multiple, in-depth interviews in a naturalistic setting strengthened the validity of the collection, findings, and analysis of the data (Alase, 2017; Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012).

This research design was a qualitative phenomenological collective case study that provided the participants with the ability to narrate their individual decision to drop out of high school despite their status as identified, academically gifted students (Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The qualitative component provided an overarching structure for narrative data collection (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Pan, & Lopez, 2008) and the phenomenological collective case study paradigm established an inquiry account framework for the appropriate and effective aggregation of the stories of the participants to transform from narrative to meaning (Groenewald, 2004). The qualitative phenomenological collective case study approach allowed the researcher to listen, collect, and obtain insights to the stories of the participants as they unfold naturally in an environment conducive to exploring the mindset of the participants during their past decision to leave school as well as their current, reflective state of mind (Groenewald, 2004; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Furthermore, the researcher provided an extensive and in-depth scope for the researcher to chronicle the influences that promoted the individuals to leave traditional schooling behind (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012).

The researcher utilized the three-interview series to frame narratives and perceptions of five participants that were formerly identified as gifted learners during their K-12 educational experience (Seidman, 2014). According to Seidman (2014), stories are a way of knowing and harnessing the agency of an individual's story is essentially the process of making authentic meaning. Multiple perspectives of a phenomenon that are collected by means of a qualitative, phenomenological process were utilized to give voice, empowerment, and narrative autonomy to the researcher and the participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The lived experience was crafted through the narrative to reflect the accuracy of the perspectives of the participants as well as to

obtain the profound ramifications, commonalities, and the unique rationale of each participant interviewed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

The phenomenological collective case study approach provided the researcher with the ability to explore the perspectives and experiences of the participants and to capture rich and detailed meanings (Alase, 2017; Creswell, 2013; Hyett, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2014). The intent of the research is to not only collect and interpret accuracy in the narratives and accounts of the gifted dropout but to also make connections and develop connective themes throughout the capture experiences of the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The phenomenological collective study encouraged the participants studied to delve into their personal experiences that led them to leave behind the traditional secondary school structure and subsequently, allowed the researcher to capture the shared experiences of formally identified gifted students, most of which are Mexican American and formerly economically disadvantaged learners, that opted to drop out of high school (Lauckner, Paterson, & Krupa, 2012; Yin, 2017).

Phenomenological collective case studies promote a researcher to fastidiously study a bounded case of individuals that experienced a phenomenon via structured or semi-structured interviews thereby acquiring rich details, perspectives, and reflections on the lived experience (Degand, 2015). The phenomenological collective case study approach sought to gain deeper significance of everyday experiences from a selected group of people by providing the possibility of conceptual understanding with which one can transfer to help explain or control society or our surroundings (Atkins & Wallace, 2012). Van Manen (2016) argues that phenomenological collective case study promotes formulating plausible understandings about that bring others in more direct connection with the world. Lincoln and Guba (1985) proffer that the qualitative research paradigm, inherit in phenomenological collective case studies,

establishes a naturalistic setting, consistency, and neutrality to provide validity in the data. Further, VanWynsberghe and Khan (2007) propose that the application of the phenomenological collective case study design allows for the researcher to approach the narrative with a descriptive, exploratory, and evaluative lens to collect multiple sources of data and enables the heuristic analysis of the collected data. Phenomenological collective case studies traverse beyond the scope of studying variables in isolation but rather intends to accumulate multiple data sources to construct transformational meaning and insightful appreciation of the world (Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Hillburn, 2014). Yin (2017), states that phenomenological collective case studies in research serve as an empirical inquiry about a prevailing phenomenon contained within its real-world context and application to aid to identify and comprehend the condition of the lived experience.

Research Questions

This study centered on the following three research questions:

- (1) How do selected gifted Mexican American gifted students describe their life experiences prior to dropping out of school?
- (2) What do the selected Mexican American gifted student dropouts in south Texas schools report to be the reasons for dropping out of school?
- (3) What do the selected Mexican American gifted dropouts describe to be the social, economic, and educational outcomes of dropping out of school?

Site and Participant Selection

Gifted students possess innate cognitive abilities that provide them with the opportunity to excel in areas that other learners may fail or find difficult (Matthews, 2006) yet the participants selected for this study, for all of their academic potential, opted to cease their

schooling and not graduate with their peers. According to Cramond, Kuss, and Nordin (2007), this subpopulation of students has not been thoroughly interviewed or studied to provide detailed context, rationale, or history for their departure from school when compared to other dropout demographic populations. Thus, the narrative of these particular participants was collected and given significance as a vital subcomponent of the larger dropout phenomena.

The participants for the study were selected using purposeful criterion and snowball sampling which enabled the researcher the ability to provide ample opportunities to collect the narrative data from multiple individuals to form a phenomenological collective case study of the gifted dropout phenomena (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The five individual gifted high school dropouts participants enabled the researcher to form insights and interpretations of the shared experiences of the academically talented students that did neither graduate from a secondary education school nor completed an equivalency credential program (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, & Hoagwood, 2015). The participants in the study were from a group of Mexican American individuals from schools in south Texas that were identified as gifted learners during their K-12th grade education that dropped out of high school. The study attempted to draw naturalistic generalizations about the population studied of formerly identified gifted student dropouts enrolled in south Texas schools within a ten-year timeframe (Suri, 2011; Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan & Hoagwood, 2015).

The researcher reviewed the public education information database of multiple school districts in south Texas campuses to gather the population figures of the number of identified gifted students at any point of their elementary, middle school, or high school experience for over the past decade from the 2007-2008 to the 2017-2018 academic school year. This proceeded to a thorough review of the school district's Public Education Information

Management System (PEIMS) database to procure the numbers of high school dropouts that were in their respective program during the past ten years and then move to gather sufficient numbers of participants for the study. The researcher then proceeded to verify the data with administrative leaders in the selected school districts' gifted and talented education department to confirm the gifted identification label for each individual participant via an open records request. Each participant was contacted individually by the researcher to verify their respective past dropout status, confirm their individual gifted and talented program status, and attain their approval for participation in the study and succeeding interviews. After obtaining voluntary consent from the participants as shown in Appendix A, the researcher confirmed placement of each participant's gifted status during their time as a student in the district with both the gifted and talented department as well as their respective student support offices of the high school and district via an open records request. The open records request allowed the researcher the authorization needed to obtain district enrollment and program identification information from each former student including those individuals participating in the study.

The five south Texas school districts in the study was selected due to the high number of Mexican American, low socioeconomic gifted students that failed to attain a high school diploma in four years or less (Region One Academics, 2014). This was conducted through the process of a data mining process from the public district records through the offices of Advanced Academics and an open records request from the Department of Student Support Services. The researcher then collected the names of the formerly identified gifted students that dropped out of high school within the district and proceed to contact these individuals. Participants in the study were confined to be only students in the district that were identified as gifted or talented learners that did not graduate high school and were identified as “dropouts” from the 1999 to the 2019

school year via the previously enrolled, respective district's public information database. The researcher verified with each individual participant if they indeed were identified as a gifted child during their K-12 years and verify if all the participants are adults of at least 18 years of age. Moreover, the researcher confirmed each participant's gifted identification from an open records request submitted to the Department of Student Services. Although these participants were comprised of different genders, age, backgrounds, and current levels of education, all of the individuals studied were of Mexican American heritage given the demographic population of this region of the nation, state, and school district.

A total of five individuals were selected to participate in the study. Albeit qualitative researchers suggest between five to ten participants to interview to attain a level of saturation (Boyd, 2001; Creswell, 2013; Nelson, 2017), for the purposes of this study, five individuals were selected to conduct the semi-structured, three interviews series which provided profound and individual insights and shared themes for dropping out of school (Creswell, 2013; Seidman, 2014). Researching five participants ensured a rich quality of dialogue and maintained sample specificity (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016). Nelson (2017), outlines that maintaining five to ten participants in a case study provides conceptual depth in narrative that was projected to supply a robustness in developing theory and uphold external validity. Further Mason (2010), asserts that a range of five to ten participants can obtain similar data that would be grounded within a group of over twenty-five individuals in an interview setting approach. This participant group and selection process ensured that all individuals studied adhered to the stated criteria but also shed light and reveal truths and insights into the lived experiences of the gifted high school dropout.

Gaining Access

The researcher has completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative certification process for the responsible conduct of research curriculum. Prior to conducting the study, the researcher obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board to collect narrative data from the individuals that were studied (Creswell, 2013). Furthermore, the researcher has also disclosed the purpose of the study to the participants and obtain information for the individuals studied as well as the University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley. The forms completed indicated that the individuals are participated voluntarily, and the participants were not placed in any form of bodily risk or harm (Creswell, 2013). The researcher adhered to the strict ethical guidelines and policies of the university and the Institutional Review Board and thus the participants are not deceived about any facet of the nature of the research, the data collection process, or the interview themselves (Creswell, 2013). As an employee of one of the school districts in the study, the researcher leveraged the resources at the Offices of the Gifted and Talented Development Department to view the years of data regarding the identification of gifted learners in the district via an Open Records request filed with the department. After the names of the participants were then verified individually to confirm their status as previously identified gifted learners during their K-12 educational time in the district, the researcher proceeded to cross-reference each participants status as a “dropout” via the district’s Public Education Information System; PEIMS grants access to any individual that requests access by the via an open records request for all Texas school districts. Moreover, the researcher worked fastidiously to cultivate a rapport of trust between himself and the participants by building on mutual respect, obtaining permission to access documents and narrative information, continually informing the participants about the purpose of the study and how it was reported, stored, and validated their

perspectives of the shared phenomena of dropping out of high school as a gifted learners (Hyett, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2014; Zabloski & Milacci, 2012). Additionally, with the permission and consent of the participants, the interviews were conducted in the homes of the participants via online platforms of Google Meet due to maintaining health and safety standards during the Covid-19 Pandemic. Further, as the researcher approached the portion of gaining access with the school district and the participants, the researcher viewed this aspect as a gatekeeper to not only seek answers but to help ask questions of reflection, culture, and relationships (Alase, 2017; Creswell, 2013).

Data Collection Procedures

Once the aforementioned consent and approval measures were obtained (see Appendix A), the researcher collected qualitative data through a ‘three-interview series’ in which individual interviews with each of the participants in the study were conducted for a duration of between forty-five to sixty minutes each (Seidman, 2014). Each series of the semi-structured interview centered on questions and discussions prompted by the researcher to each individual participant via the online format (see Appendix B). These circuits of opened-ended dialogue were constructed to explore a deep level of understanding for the lived experience while the interviewer finds meaning, relevance, and connecting themes when possible (Creswell, 2013; Seidman, 2014). In other words, all components of the three interviews, particularly in that of the semi-structured approach questions, had the lived experience at the core of the conversations that allowed the interviewer to derive authentic interpretations of meaning and connections between the participants in the narrative data collected.

The initial series of interviews provided each individual with a narrative platform that promoted each individual to articulate their respective life history within the context of dropping

out of high school despite their innate cognitive abilities. According to Seidman (2014) this facet of the interview process involves meaningful and understandable context communication exchanges between the interviewer and the interviewee regarding the conditions of the phenomena of dropping out of school. Charmaz and Belgrave (2012) suggest that the researcher must elicit and explore the participants' specific family experience in a holistic manner to understand the participant. The participants were asked to speak about their early childhood memories, family dynamics, school relationships and environment, and other factors meaningful to their truncated educational journey. The researcher's primary role during this and all subsequent interviews was to play the role of an active listener and copious note taker. Furthermore, the researcher also delved into artifacts from the participants, data and records from the school districts, qualitative information shared by individuals related to the participants, and reviewed relevant documents provided by the participants. During these first interview sessions, the researcher explored how each participant decided to leave the confines of traditional schooling behind as opposed to focusing on their respective rationale to drop out. The preliminary interviews underpinned the "how" of the narrative to understand the perspective of the participant while abstaining from the "why" which shifts focus to merely decision-making void of larger themes to travers (Kitsantas, Bland & Chirinos, 2017).

The second section of the interview series centered on the concrete aspects and perspectives of the participants current lives regarding their decision to drop out of high school. The researcher prompted each participant to reconstruct the details and outcomes that led them to their present day lived experiences. According to Seidman (2014) this second component of the interview series promotes obtaining quality, narrative data in the form of critical details and elements that are not based in opinions but rather in true perspectives about relationships

dynamics, family backgrounds, and school-social interactions. This allowed depth and meaning to the details to comprehend the experiences and place the behaviors and decisions of the participant in a focused context. In this section of the interview process, it was imperative for the researcher to not only give meaning and relevance to the information gathered but to also internalize the facet of reflexivity and how it impacts the narrative. Gilgun (2005), posits that qualitative writings are interactive, co-constructions between the observed and the observer and thus researchers must be consciously aware of inherent bias, core principles and lived experiences. Consequently, the second, detailed-rich element of the interview series was integral to simultaneously establish transparency between the participant and the researcher and gather fundamental facts about the current lived experiences of each observed individual.

The final and third phase of the interview series centered on asking the participants to reflect on the significance of their respective journeys in relation to their current lives. Seidman (2014) postulates that encouraging the participant to contemplate on the watershed moments and decisions promotes the individual to contextualize their path through multiple lenses such as ethical implications and value systems. The researcher's goal is to promote the participants to construct meaning between the intellectual and emotional connections experienced as well as establishing patterns of behaviors that may extrapolate future actions (Kitsantas, Bland & Chirinos, 2017). Moreover, reflection allowed for behavior to have authentic meaning within the context thus revealing motivations (Pelchar & Bain, 2014). In other words, the researcher created opportunities for reflection that required participants to internalize and contemplate their own backgrounds, decisions, and relationships that has led them to their current lived experience within the context of dropping out of high school. In doing so, the researcher proffers pathways of authentic reflection that allowed the participant to examine and evaluate factors in their lives

that influenced their decision making and subsequent actions in leaving school behind for other life choices. Seidman (2006) maintains that the “...combination of exploring the past to clarify the events that led participants to where they are now, and describing the concrete details of their present experience, establishes conditions for reflecting upon what they are now doing in their lives” (p. 20).

The researcher set up the audio equipment to record the interview session prior to the commencement of the discussion as well as have a general list of questions and related sub questions prepared (Gibson, Mistry, Smith, Yoshida, Abbott, Lindsay, & Hamdani 2013; Kelly, Bourgeault & Dingwall 2010). Three audio devices were utilized to record the audio and dialogue; one device faced the researcher, the second was an application which recorded the audio and video interviews via voice dictation, and the third device recorded both the researcher and the participant on-screen (Weller, 2017). Due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, all of the interviews were held virtually via Google Meet so that all individuals involved remained in their respective homes. This approach had the benefit of allowing for the participants to be interviewed in their respective home environment which allowed the researcher to capture the narrative data in a naturalistic setting (Creswell, 2013; Robinson, 2014). The interviews were conducted on an individual basis with only the researcher and the participant present in the online session that allowed for the researcher to investigate relationships and study cause and effect phenomena (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012; Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2009). Each interview was conducted between one and two weeks of one another to allow the researcher ample time to properly transcribe and code the stories of the individuals to unearth themes and find relevant meanings (Seidman, 2014). Observational data, including anecdotal statements before, during and after the interview sessions, was kept with the researcher in his

field notes while the interview data were collected via electronic means by using three audio devices (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2013; Weller, 2017).

The researcher structured cases centered around the three sets of interviews to portray a rich and detailed description about each of the cases studied. Although the interviewer's intent is to attain a profound understanding of the collected narrative data, it is vital for the interviewer to gain subjective understanding while recognizing the limits of the experiences shared and gathered data. Schutz (1967) postulates that it is never possible to perfectly comprehend the totality of another individual's lived experience nor to enter their stream of consciousness however a researcher must place their words, behaviors, and actions into context to make meaning and relevance. Darawsheh and Stanley (2014), add that interpreting relevance to the collected data may shape the meaning however the researcher must continually strive to understand the context of the shared experiences. Moreover, Roulston and Shelton (2015) contend that a researcher must be cognizant of the ethical implications inherent to transferring the lived experiences of others to the canon of study.

Instrumentation

As a qualitative study, the researcher was the instrument for all facets of the data collection and analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Based upon the interview questions found in Appendix B, the researcher utilized Seidman's (2014) three-interview series approach with each respective participant that allowed for a narrative, open discussion structure to the conferences (Creswell, 2013). The three-series interview process facilitated the researcher to value context and meaning to the experience of the participants by providing authenticity to their lives and the lives around them (Patton, 2015). This approach attempted to proffer and obtain rich meaning and narratives from the perspectives of the lived experience that transcended a solitary interview

process that may merely provide superficial context. Locke, Silverman, and Spirduso (2010) espouse that by utilizing a three-series interview system, one may promote a relationship from the researcher to the participant and the study to plan, communicate and establish a mutual contract that offered a pathway for the exploration of insights and complexities during the sets of interviews. This approach cultivated narrative data that not only created a profile of each participant but also acted to scaffold on their shared experiences to reconstruct meaning and offer reflection.

The three-interview series was formatted to follow Seidman's (2014) approach to gaining rich qualitative data to facilitate depth and meaning for the participant and researcher and was 90 minutes in duration for each interview session. The interviews conducted by cultivating a dialogue that explores the lived experience prior dropping out of high school, detailing the intricacies of the experience of leaving traditional school behind, and concluded by adding value and reflection to the meaning of becoming a gifted dropout thus providing a narrative platform for each participant (Seidman, 2014). The focal point of the initial interview of the series centered on each participants' life history related to their academic journey in school and the focus that accounted to their decision to leave secondary education and dropout. The second interview was rooted in the narrative details of each participant's experience dropping out of high school and the ramifications of their decision. In order to ensure reliability, the researcher did not inquire about opinions but rather concentrated on authentic facets and variables of the shared experiences through exploring the social settings regarding relationships with family members, peers, and school staff (Schuman, 1982). The final portion of the interview series centered on making meaning through reflection. According to Seidman (2014), the goal during the last interviews is not to gain satisfaction of the narrative dialogue but rather establishing a

connection between the socioemotional and intellectual aspects of the participants' journey to derive interpretation and significance. In other words, the research and data collection process during the interviews promoted the participants to reflect on their experiences dropping out of school to construct self-actualization and understanding. The final interview is only as impactful in acquiring rich data if the foundation of the first two interviews has been established to be productive (Seidman, 2013).

Further, this interview methodology allowed the researcher to not only draw meaning from the collective experiences but also evoked overarching themes and commonalities to attain resonant qualitative data through authentic narrative data and detailed field notes (Creswell, 2013). The questions, field notes, and interview sessions all served as a platform for the data collection process to explore, analyze, and make meaning of the participants' lived experience (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). The crux of all three interviews is to enable the participants to make context and meaning of their individuals journeys as well as to find commonalities and shared truths throughout all of the narratives. Transforming narratives into language is a meaning defining experience that allows one to frame and recontextualize the process meaning (Vygotsky, 1987).

Data Analysis Procedures

The researcher, acting as the researcher instrument, collected narrative data in the form of audio recordings, the transcription of these recordings, field notes taken during and after the participant meeting, as well as any observational findings during the duration of the study. At the conclusion of each completed interview series, the researcher proceeded to relisten to the recorded interview sessions for audio fidelity then commence to play the interview for himself to physically type the entirety of the conversation pausing every 30 seconds to capture all of the

spoken words and exchange. Additionally, the researcher also incorporated the use of Google Voice Transcription Speech-to-Text computer transcription application that transcribed each individual interview. The Google Voice Speech-to-Text transcription application was utilized in this study due to its high accuracy rate to in efficiently detecting sentences and words within conversations or interviews (Karakas, 2017). Further, Google Voice Speech-to-Text was developed by artificial intelligence and speech algorithms that becomes more accurate as it understands an individual's speaking patterns (Shadiev, Wu, & Huang, 2017). The researcher checked and verified the precision of each manual and computer transcription by comparing both sets of transcriptions for accuracy. This required meticulously listening to the interviews multiple times before beginning to type the transcription and comparing it to the version transcribed by the computer application in that of Google Voice.

The researcher then analyzed the narrative data captured through the audio devices and the observational and field notes information and began to compile both data sets and determine commonalities between the shared experiences as well as unique perspectives provided by the participants. The coding of the transcribed interviews was completed using the NVivo computer software to aid the researcher in coding and identifying common themes throughout the personal stories of the gifted dropouts (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The utilization of the NVivo software allowed the researcher to condense the data into codes that enabled the researcher to efficiently create any models, tables, or general themes for the data (Creswell, 2013). According to Miles, Huberman, & Saldana (2014), as well as Denzin and Lincoln (2018), although debate remains over the usage and effectiveness of software programs such as NVivo, these programs allow the researcher to assign codes to the collected data, assist in configuring meaning, and can assembly various images to make connections for deeper meanings.

Once all of the participant interviews were all completed and the narrative data are transcribed via the aforementioned manual typed versions compared to and verified by accuracy with the Google Voice transcription process, the researcher commenced the process by thoroughly gathering and organizing the data for software analysis. This aspect consists of organizing all text data, transcriptions, graphic data and all other sources for careful and extensive analysis as well as to obtain a direct familiarity with all forms of information obtained from the participants (Creswell, 2013). Once completed, the researcher then began reducing, or chunking, the data into themes through a specific condensing process of sub-coding and coding the raw data via the NVivo program (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). This process is invaluable to the qualitative process and guides researchers to evaluating significant patterns in the data by identifying the important information that continually emerges, either consciously or subconsciously, from the participants in the study (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Dependent on the narrative collected, the researcher then represented the data in figures, tables, or discussions of the findings in detail. This final step allowed for the researcher to obtain rich and detailed data from multiple participants as well as to establish structure given the nature of the semi-structured interview format (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). According to Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), the implementation of software to analyze qualitative data is essential when disaggregating voluminous amounts of data in complex, large scale studies. This software coding provided a comprehensive and thorough scope of the study that may not be achieved without its use.

Trustworthiness

The researcher established validity in the study by leveraging member checking and peer review to strengthen the approaches utilized in the semi-structured interview process, data

collection methods, and overall trustworthiness of the data and its subsequent findings (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012). An overarching, fundamental goal of the researcher was to establish and maintain trust with the participants and validity in the data throughout the duration of all aspects of the study. Denzin and Lincoln (2012) argue that pursuing trustworthiness in naturalistic investigations that attempts to capture elements of the lived experience must be supported through systems that promote reliability in the data.

The researcher employed member checking with the participants after the interview and providing a thick, rich description of the phenomena in establishing trustworthiness and reliability of the collective narrative (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Moreover, Lincoln and Guba (1985) posit that member checking is the most critical and direct method in establishing credibility in the study. Member checking allows the researcher to inquiry and engage directly with the participant or participants of the study they were involved by providing the participants with the data, interpretations, and conclusions so that they may provide critical reflections to the study (Creswell, 2013). The researcher continually reviewed the transcriptions with the participants to ensure that their narrative is accurate and captures their perspective and lived experience pertinent to the phenomenon. After each interview concludes, the researcher member checked before the start of the next interview session. This approach not only provides a sense of mutual trust with the data but also establishes a platform for the participant to interact with their narrative. Additionally, the peer review process was vital as the researcher established a rapport of honesty and trustworthiness regarding all aspects of the methods, meaning, data analysis, and collection process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher consistently met with a peer reviewer through several peer sessions during the study to critically evaluate the themes and validity of the research to maintain an objective perspective and challenge the researcher to be

cognizant of their potential bias during the analysis and interpretation of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Krueger & Casey, 2009). The researcher and the peer reviewer discussed the data collection methods, findings, and outcomes to obtain a critical point of view thus ensuring added reliability to the research and the results (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012).

Summary

The research design methodology was a qualitative, phenomenological case study paradigm in which the researcher collected the narrative data of gifted students that dropped out of high school. The foundation of the study was rooted upon the questions regarding the response and relationships that gifted students experienced while in school and their individual reasons for leaving school. The criteria for the participants in the study was limited to Mexican American students in one south Texas school district that were identified as gifted learners during their K-12 educational journey that decided to drop out of high school. The researcher was able to gain all appropriate consent, approval, and permission from the proper channels and individuals that were enrolled in the south Texas schools, the Institutional Review Board, the University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley, and the participants themselves. The researcher acted as the exclusive data collection instrument as the stories of these participants are gathered with individual, semi-structured interviews. The data was then coded for themes and shared context with the use of the NVivo computer software program which enabled the researcher to establish underlying authentic meanings and rich connections within the narrative data.

The ensuing chapter sought to investigate the lives and events of academically gifted individuals that elected to drop out of high school without obtaining their diploma. The scope of the semi-structured interviews encompassed these individuals' lived experience, family and home backgrounds, and relationships as Mexican American high school dropouts. The

researcher captured the narratives and attempt to find recurring themes and commonalities through the shared experiences of the participants.

CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH RESULTS

The research investigated the collective experiences of five economically disadvantaged, Mexican American adults who were identified as gifted students while being schooled during their K-12 education in the Rio Grande Valley of south Texas, and who decided to drop out of high school. The researcher investigated the influences that led identified gifted and talented students to drop out of high school due to factors such as family structures, social dynamics, expectations, neglect, and interpersonal relationships with school faculty (Gentry, 2006; Gallagher, 2002; Landis & Reschly, 2012; Zabloski & Milacci, 2012). This chapter was divided into three sections in that of the participants' perspective, connective themes, and the summary of findings. This study centered on three overarching questions that were at the core of the research:

Research Questions

- (1) How do selected gifted Mexican American gifted students describe their life experiences prior to dropping out of school?
- (2) What do the selected Mexican American gifted student dropouts in south Texas schools report to be the reasons for dropping out of school?
- (3) What do the selected Mexican American gifted dropouts describe to be the social, economic, and educational outcomes of dropping out of school?

The three-guiding questions that underpinned the study, which focused on the lived circumstances of each individual, the rationale for dropping out, and the subsequent outcomes of their decision, examine how each participant views their story and that of those around them. Bruner (2004) posits that we presume people inherently self-reports their life story precisely and accurately and that they leave out no vital details. However, Bruner (2004) then argues, “But what is coverage? Are not omissions also important?” (p. 693). In other words, the narrative provided may be found in themes and connections that were not explicitly stated by the participants. The findings in this chapter attempt to unearth both what the participants explicitly recollected and shared but also what they did not profess. Bengtsson (2016), argues that authentic content analysis may shift to an interpretive approach to derive deeper, richer meaning rather than exploring the content from an external perspective. The narrative structure allows qualitative examination to be divorced from its own context thereby giving the text full autonomy and relevance (Graneheim, Lindgren, & Lundman, 2017).

Due to the nature of the study, all of the participants were selected utilizing purposeful criterion and snowball sampling (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The participants’ names have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities and privacy however all demographic and other information is accurate. Table 1 provides an overview of the demographics of the participants as well as displays pertinent information related to the study and the exploration of connective themes. Albeit the five participants experienced the same phenomena of dropping out of high school despite being identified as a gifted learner, each participant’s respective insights and interpretation of this phenomena was notably varied. Despite their unique challenges and journeys, the collection of experiences did provide ample avenues of overarching themes and

narrative data that allow the researcher to make meaning and establish explicit connections to the shared experience of the group (Zabloski & Milacci, 2012).

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name	Current Age	Drop Out Age	SES Status	Race	Family Status	Occupation
Jane	25	16	Low SES/Poor	Mexican American	Married with no children	Food Service (Part-Time)
Deshawn	27	15	Low SES/Poor	Mexican American	Divorced with one child	Construction (Part-Time)
Maria	30	18	Low SES/Poor	Mexican American	Twice divorced with 2 children	Medical Assistant
Robert	31	17	Low SES/Poor	Mexican American	Single with five children	Unemployed
Alecio	33	15	Low SES/Extreme Poverty	Mexican American	Single with no children	Unemployed

Table 1 displays the assigned pseudonyms for each participant as well as their current age as of the conclusion of the interview process. The table also includes each individual’s age in which he or she dropped out of school. By juxtaposing the current age of the participants with their respective dropout age, the researcher provides ample time for each participant to reflect on their past decision to leave formal schooling behind. Providing time and separation for participants to internalize major life events helps to promote deeper introspection and adds meaning that may have been overlooked in the past (Nobbe & Davis, 2019). At 18 years, Alecio, the eldest of the group, has the largest number of years between dropping out of school and his current age while

Jane, 9 years, exhibits the smallest length of time between dropping out and her current age as of the interviews. The median difference in time between dropping out of high school and their current age is at 13 years for all participants.

Table 1 indicates the socioeconomic status of each individual as indexed by their enrollment of Title 1 schools and verified with the Public Education Information Management System of the respective school districts as attended by each participant (Diemer, Wadsworth, López, & Reimers, 2013). The socioeconomic status was included to provide a broader context of the financial plight of the participants as they transitioned from enrolled, gifted high school students to high school gifted dropouts. A plethora of research studies have found that one of the strongest dropout rate predictors is that of students that reside in low socioeconomic communities (Blaas, 2014; Card & Giuliano, 2016; Ford, 2014; Kearney & Levine, 2014; Schmitt & Goebel, 2015; Wood, Kiperman, Esch, Leroux, & Truscott, 2017). Moreover, Burns and Martin (2019) and Degand (2015) concur that students that receive special services and interventions, including children that are serviced through the gifted and talented model, are not immune to the pernicious effects an impoverished socioeconomic community has on high school graduation rates. Socioeconomics does not discriminate in its effects and impact to decrease the likelihood of any high school student to graduate no matter their academic abilities or giftedness (Ecker-Lyster, M., & Niileksela, 2017) Moreover, students of Mexican American ethnicity that live in areas near the Mexican border are more than twice as likely to be live in low socioeconomic homes when compared to their White peers in the same area and over three times more likely to reside in low socioeconomic households than their White peers that do not reside in border communities (Navarro-Leal & Colmenares-González, 2019). All five of the participants attended school in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas near the United States-

Mexican border and attended school districts that were identified by the state of Texas to serve a majority of low income families (Texas Education Agency, 2018). Further, four of the participants described living in households that earned less than \$40,000 per home while one of the participants lived in a home that received less than an estimated \$200 per month. According to the United States Census Bureau (2020), these families would live in households that range between poverty and extreme poverty when adjusted to current 2021 income earning standards. Additionally, the Texas Education Agency (2018) reports that while the state of Texas enrolls an average of 55% of incoming 9th graders that are identified as low socioeconomic, Rio Grande Valley school districts' low socioeconomic enrollment rate stands at over 84% for all incoming 9th graders. This discrepancy exhibits nearly a 30% difference between average students in the state of Texas to the average student in the Rio Grande Valley. Greenbaum (2015) reports that while poverty may be insurmountable for many families to overcome and display long term social mobility, children of extreme poverty are even less likely to escape life-long financial hardships.

All of the participants in this study are Mexican Americans that were identified as gifted learners during their elementary school years while residing in rural, economically depressed communities and attended low income, Title I public schools in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. Table 1 includes a section for each individual's race to provide a framework of the demographics in the Rio Grande Valley. The United States Census Bureau (2012) estimated that over 95% of the residents in all counties of the Rio Grande Valley identified as Hispanic of Mexican American. The Texas Education Agency (2018) reported that over 92% of all children enrolled in this region of south Texas schools were Mexican American students while White and Black student enrollment combined for less than 7% of the total study body. As detailed in the

first chapter, Mexican American students are twice as likely to live in economically depressed communities, more likely to display instructional and literacy gaps, and less likely to graduate from high school when compared to their White peers (Vega & Moore; 2018; Yaluma & Tyner, 2018). Ramos (2010) found that Mexican American students are severely underidentified and underrepresented across all gifted programs and classrooms in U.S. schools. Furthermore, Esquierdo and Arreguín-Anderson (2012) documented that Mexican American students, due to primarily to linguistic and socioeconomic factors, displayed the lowest gifted identification rates for all learners Kinder through secondary grade levels and the highest gifted student high school dropout rates in the U.S. school system.

Furthermore, each participant's current family status is signified to support the exploration of themes and connective throughlines that are explored and detailed in this chapter. Their detailed account of home, social, and school life served as a critical conduit that facilitated the introspection of their current home and family life to that of their childhood and adolescent backgrounds. According to Parr and Bonitz (2015), reflecting upon an individual's social constructs in that of self-efficacy and identity are an essential lens to provide rich and detailed views into their past behaviors and current ideals regarding family, work, and relationships.

Participants' Perspective

Jane

At 25, Jane started her first job and is planning to secure her first apartment with her husband. All of her interviews were conducted at the conclusion of her shift as a part-time cook at a pizza restaurant that employs both Jane and her husband. Jane currently lives with her parents but is planning to stay near her childhood home due to a lack of food security and access to appliances. Although her financial situation has proven to be difficult for her, Jane is looking

forward to becoming a full-time employee within a year to increase her income. Jane grew up in a household that struggled to pay bills and basic necessities but laments that she did not work sooner as her current economic situation is nearly as arduous as the conditions during her upbringing. Jane is adamant that she is not returning to a school system as she feels that following a set schedule and having more responsibilities would trigger her anxiety and low self-esteem issues that have largely been under control for nearly 5 years.

At the age of 16, Jane decided that high school or formal schooling of any kind was not a fit for her any longer. Although Jane was identified as a gifted learner at the age of 10 while in the 4th grade, she often struggled in school, both academically and socially. While Jane was identified as a gifted learner at an early age she was also identified with a behavioral disorder that predates her gifted learner status. At 8 years of age, Jane was identified as having Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) while near the end of her 3rd grade year.

I've always had a ton of anger issues since I could remember. I was angry at my family all the time and was even more enraged at my teachers. I mean, I understood that my parents had to put boundaries on me since I'm a kid at all but my teachers were so strict in making me do things that I didn't even want to do. I'm like 'I barely wanted to clean my room and then year after year a new teacher would try to force me to show my work for simple things I could do in my head' No, that wasn't going to happen."

Her voice was even raised when she was reminiscing about her childhood. On several occasions during our interviews, Jane apologized for raising her tone but stated that these memories do not seem as if they happened decades ago but rather mere weeks ago in her mind. "Sorry, I think my ODD sometimes gets really active after a long day at work but it's getting better now that I'm a little older. I think with more time and therapy, I'll be able to control my

emotions to match the situation without having to go overboard all the time” Jane would reiterate occasionally. When asked about her childhood experience living with ODD while being placed in a new school that was enrolled in to leverage her academic giftedness, Jane described the experience as mixed with learning opportunity and strife however the family’s financial plight loomed over her schooling years. Jane also detailed her struggles with poverty during school.

I was really lucky to attend the school that was geared specifically to help gifted kids like me. But to be honest with you, everything was really hard even before arriving at school; it was really tough just getting to the school in the first place. My parents had difficulty driving me to the new school since the school didn’t provide transportation for most kids. In fact, my family had so little money that even having gas in the car to take me to school wasn’t always a guarantee. What made things even worse is that I had to pay for my own lunch, supplies, field trips, and any other activities that I wanted to do. It’s not like in my old school in which just about everything was free or paid for by the campus. At my new gifted school, I had to contend with controlling my emotions, which was always difficult for me back then, and make my parents pay for things that I knew or out of their reach. They did their best with what they had but I missed out on a lot of opportunities that would have been memorable. Back then, when I couldn’t have something that the other kids were getting because it was too expensive, I would kind of blackout and start to bite myself and punch and kick the walls. It’s like I just couldn’t control my hands or something when I was told I couldn’t do something or go somewhere. When I got to school on the days I missed out on something, I yelled at my teachers and even tried to kick them a few times. Yeah, that wasn’t helping things much either when I was suspended on those days. On days when things were good and I didn’t miss out on anything, I didn’t like school

anyway. The teachers, for the most part, were nice and all, but I don't think they cared much for me, you know. The things we learned were easy for me but at an early age, I knew that my family was poor so I never felt that I fit in that school.

At the end of her 9th grade year, Jane convinced her parents to move her back to her local high school as she planned to finish her school years with her childhood neighbors and friends. In retrospect, she expressed that this was an egregious mistake. It was at this point of her life that Jane met and started to date a Mexican national that enrolled at her high school. Jane recalls that both her and her then boyfriend were infatuated with one another to an unhealthy degree to that point that she ran away with him to Mexico in an attempt to get married and start a family with him. At the age of 15, Jane and her partner, who was 19 at the time, lived in Mexico for a month without her parents' consent. During this time, Jane found out she was pregnant and did not want to return to her home with her parents in the Rio Grande Valley. Jane felt that had her life planned; she would work at an area car repair warehouse while her boyfriend would continue with his job as a mechanic. Mere days before her parents were able to locate and bring her back home from a trailer in a small Mexican town on the outskirts of Reynosa, Jane remembers that her ODD would trigger rage-filled arguments with her partner. This is when the bouts of abuse and depression began.

It was like I couldn't control my anger and when I tried, things only seemed to get worse by the day. At first, we would only argue about everything couples argue about - money, communication issues, work. But it escalated to us shouting with each other for what felt like hours over the simplest things and then just like that, he started to physically abuse me to keep me quiet. He didn't slap me; he straight up punched me and knocked me unconscious more than a few times. I couldn't control my emotional outburst but I'm

damn sure he could control his physical aggression but he didn't. I think it was the second time that he beat me when I lost the baby. Yeah I felt devastated and got into a deep depression but the only thing that help me cope at the time was knowing that I wasn't going to bring a baby into this anymore. I think that I never fully recovered and have crazy bad trust issues with people till this day and I don't see that changing soon. When my parents found me in Mexico, the weird thing is that at first, I didn't want to leave. My boyfriend had a strange physiological hold on me and for the life of me, I wasn't overcoming it at first. I was scared to leave him because I thought he would find me back home and try to kill me. That's what I told myself but really, I loved him and didn't want to leave him and the future that I thought I wanted. I was a teenager, I didn't know.

Jane acknowledged that the emotional toll it took on her followed her back to school and that she experienced issues acclimating back to a more normal life. Jane stated that she felt ostracized in her school within her peer group and from her teachers. Jane recalled, "School was the only thing that I knew in a time where I didn't know myself and when my school environment started to feel foreign to me, the little desire that I had to stay kind of vanished really quickly." According to Jane, this magnified her battles with depression and anxiety that she had been quietly suffering for years. She did not reach out to her parents for help as they did not see her mental health issues as anything more than her natural temperament. Moreover, Jane felt that her teachers and counselors, despite their good-natured efforts, were not equipped to provide guidance that strays beyond encouraging students to graduate and go to college. "The school staff would always circle everything back to me having the abilities to go to college without noticing that I wasn't even able to pull myself together to come to school" Jane

remembers. Jane states that she had no one to turn to for guidance and felt that everyone put pressure on her for several sides primarily due to her intelligence. “I didn’t even know myself anymore; everyone was telling me who I was suppose to be or what I was suppose to do since I was really smart. My family, friends, teachers, and counselors had no clue that I felt the complete opposite.” It was at this time in her high school journey that Jane decided to stop moving on a path set by others and define herself as a free-spirit not an engineer or software developer as others predetermined her to be. “I know it’s weird but dropping out back then made me feel free and not carry the weight of other people’s expectations of what I was going to be. That choice may have saved my life since I was in a really dark place back then.”

Deshawn

“Other than some years in elementary, I hated school from the very beginning of what I can remember...” Deshawn repeated several times during the discussion sessions. Deshawn claims that the only reason he went to school was to bond with his friends and play on this school’s football team. Deshawn states that he has an aversion to the structure of schooling as a concept and prefers to learn on his own schedule free from timelines and academic responsibilities. At 27, Deshawn has already amassed a total of over 11 years working at his father’s modest construction company on part-time employment but one day intends to steward the business operations. Deshawn currently lives at his girlfriend’s home with his son from a previous marriage but would like to get a full-time position in his father’s company if given the chance. Deshawn expressed no desire to obtain a GED or equivalent degree as his time is devoted to his son after the untimely death of his first wife when she was 23 years old. Deshawn tends to shift his focus from working in his father’s business to beginning a career in producing music if he does not receive an opportunity to get a full-time promotion in the construction field.

“I know that I can unleash my creativity with music like I can’t anywhere else and speak my mind while making really good money.” Deshawn aims to give his son the life he always wanted while coming of age in a humble trailer park that often did not have reliable running water a few days on most weeks.

Deshawn was identified as a gifted learner and chess child prodigy at the age of 7 while in the 1st grade. Deshawn looks back at his time in elementary fondly and reminisces about how he can provide a similar experience for his son that will be enrolled in Pre-Kindergarten. Moreover, Deshawn is planning to enroll his son in the same school he attended despite living a considerable distance from this campus. Deshawn describes his first few years in elementary school as enjoyable but not formative. While he did not express a love of learning at school, he had a mostly positive experience during his childhood of learning outside of school. “I grew up surrounded by my brothers and neighborhood kids that were all older than I was. I remember learning so much from them like how to build things, how to write music and beats, and probably learned a few things that I shouldn’t have at that or any age really” Deshawn stated. When asked to clarify and unpack these memories, Deshawn was initially reluctant but eventually expanded at length about how he first began to experiment with alcohol abuse and frequent drug use. Deshawn relished spending time with older peers and even taught some of them how to play chess, however most of their time was spent selling illegal drugs to other students as well as adults in and around their trailer park area.

I think that it was in the 4th grade when I tried my first beer and by the end of my 5th grade year, I was already smoking a little bit of weed from time to time. I remember that while I digged playing chess and even won a few state competitions in around Dallas, my interests were always in just hanging out with my friends, getting high, playing football,

and selling (drugs) to make some extra cash. My parents were working all the time just to pay the rent and give us some food for us after school so they didn't even notice that I was hustling (selling drugs) before I even went to middle school. I wasn't selling anything too intense; it was mostly just weed and a few pills but like nothing crazy then. But by the time I got to 8th grade, I was selling and doing some harder, more addictive stuff. I can't get into it but it was some stuff that was pretty serious. I didn't use those too much, but I did drink just about every day once I was in high school. That's when things went from bad to worse and I didn't even try to control it anymore.

During his middle school years, Deshawn claims he was not addicted to smoking marijuana or pills however he states that he was developing an alcohol addiction. Deshawn would describe attending school for two reasons at this point - his friends and his football teammates. Deshawn adds, "I would love to play football with my guys and if I stick this out, maybe I can play in a big-time college program out of the area. Believe it or not, I was pretty talented at football. But as soon as our practice sessions or games were over, I'd just mess around with my friends and not even care about school." When asked about his support structures in that of his family and school staff, Deshawn echoed a sentiment that was common throughout the perspectives of the other participants. Deshawn reiterated on several occasions that his family nor school personnel intervened since he excelled academically, displayed no external signs for help, and generally followed the tenets of model student behavior. Deshawn continued and stated that he had overall good attendance and the only negative attention he received in middle school was that he was too quiet and did not speak his mind. "I would barely talk in class, like ever and would just do my work while getting good grades with no problems" Deshawn clarified. Deshawn believed that his academic success and good nature propelled him

to maintain a distance from those that may have helped him to leave behind negative influences at this critical time in his social development and growth. Deshawn felt that if he would have ceased to spend time with the individuals that encouraged him to do and sell drugs, he may have had a more positive high school experience and have graduated and even enrolled at a university. Deshawn posited that along with the substance abuse, particularly with alcohol, he started to face issues of relationship trauma from his parents and family.

It was during my second arrest that my family turned their back on me. I got locked up for dealing (drugs) at my school during my 9th grade year and was sent to a juvenile program. What not one tells you about these kinds of things is that getting a lawyer, court fees, and the programs aren't cheap. My family was already broke and my parents couldn't afford to pay for all my mistakes again. I had to serve all my time and it was really rough. There were a lot of guys that were in there for aggravated robbery, assault and gang violence and I was always a chill, relaxed person. When someone found out I was dealing in places I shouldn't have been dealing, I got into a ton of fights and was scared for my life. I called my parents to get me out somehow, but they refused and kind of forgot about me. They won't visit or even call me at all. I know I messed up but the people that were suppose to take care of me didn't even want to see me or have any connection with me. It was hard. To make things worse, my parents kicked me out of the house by 15 because they thought I was a bad influence to my little brother and sister. I ended up living with one of my friends and all I did at his house was drink and smoke every day. The funny thing is that I started to deal all because I wanted to help my family with some money, but it just made things go south. Things have gotten much better

between my dad and me, but my mom abandoned me and when she passed away, I never got closure with her.

Deshawn also recalls that at this point of his life, school was that much less a significant aspect of his life. He attempted to return to his advanced class and regain focus on his studies however he described falling into the same destructive habits. “Not long after I was doing well in school, I was hanging out with the same crew again and started doing pretty much the same things. I wanted to do better but also liked the other lifestyle. After my mom died, I found that I couldn’t find myself and so let others find me and define me I guess.” Deshawn recounts several instances where he was embroiled in further legal difficulties. Albeit the legal issues caused more problematic issues with his family and created more of a divide between his desire to graduate high school, Deshawn fixated on trying to find himself while attempting to establish sources of income to pay his legal fees as he insisted he did not want to encumber his family with more financial woes again. These burdens coupled with behaviors that were detrimental to his formal learning served as the impetus for Deshawn’s decision to drop out of high school. Deshawn reported that he, “...no longer wanted to put pressure on everyone else” for the decisions that he made. Deshawn added that dropping out of high school was a liberating and cathartic experience since he was living for himself rather than by the expectations of others. “The academic or convict life was never going to be for me. I just want to take care of myself, my family and make some music for others. I won’t ever be the engineer that everyone wanted me to be and honestly, I wouldn’t want it any other way.”

Maria

Maria was identified as a gifted learner later than most children in her peer group and school primarily due to her being first identified as having dyslexia in the 1st grade. “I’ve

always had difficulty reading because of my dyslexia but once I understood how to read differently, I loved to learn about biology and astronomy” recalls Maria. Maria, 30, was first identified as a gifted learner in the 8th grade at the age of 14. Being both dyslexic and gifted presented Maria with unique challenges that helped her in some areas but acted as barriers in other facets of her school and social circles. Maria recollects that at times, she would be embarrassed to have to learn to read simple words and phrases in a small group setting with her dyslexia teachers while also enrolling in online college level mathematics courses. “I was able to memorize all these equations and see how numbers worked within systems, but I could barely read the short stories in a kids’ book for years. I still have difficulty reading but I’ve figured out ways to compensate and get around to the point” stated Maria.

Maria grew up in what she described as a humble but loving home with a supportive family. For most of her upbringing, her parents were able to provide food and shelter for her brother and four sisters in the two-bedroom home. Maria was keenly aware that her family did not have the financial stability that others enjoyed however, obtaining the essentials was rarely an issue. Nonetheless, her family circumstances changed once her father suffered a severe injury at his job and was unable to work. Maria’s mother, a homemaker, did not speak English and was an undocumented citizen of the United States. While her father collected a small amount of money from disability checks, her mother was unable to find work given her immigration status. Maria’s mother was first deported back to Mexico when Maria was 8 years old and going through the emotional ordeal again was not an option for the family. Maria described the experience as harrowing and emotionally draining.

I got home from school and remember that my dad was yelling over the phone and at our neighbor to help him do something to get my mom back home once she was detained by

some I.C.E. (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) agents while shopping for food at the store. It still feels really intense just thinking about how his voice sounded and then it got worse when he started to cry. I'm sure that he didn't want us to see or hear him but we witnessed everything. My mom was always one to not go out of the house much at all other than to get some food and find side jobs in the neighborhood where she would get paid straight cash. My mom was even afraid to take us to school or the doctor's office, but she would when we had to go. My mom finally called us back the next day but it felt way longer than just one day. My dad arranged for one of his friends to bring my mom back home but it was totally illegal to sneak her back in but they did. From getting caught by those agents to being back home, it all happened within less than week or so but it was like an eternity to have my mom not home and my dad a nervous wreck the whole time. I never really think my family recovered from that. Not only did it my sisters and I question who we are as actual U.S. citizens and all that side of things but that hung over our heads. It was like at any minute that my mom, or any of us really, were outside of the house we could just be taken in by I.C.E. and sent to Mexico. Having that evil feeling hang on you does something to your mind. I've made a ton of mistakes in my life, but I'll always be thankful that my parents did so much to keep us together and keep my sisters and I safe.

While Maria expressed that she was thriving academically in middle school being twice expecting for dyslexia and giftedness, the start of high school years was vastly different. Maria did not have any external pressure to perform well at school however she explained that her family financial woes increased when her older sister, who was then the only family member that was working, lost her job and the burden to contribute fell on Maria being the next eldest

daughter. “Since my dad couldn’t work and my mom was unable to find a decent paying job because of her immigration status, my sister and I were the only ones that could work. But when my sister’s position was cut, she had to get another job and I had to rush to work somewhere” stated Maria.

At the conclusion of her freshman year in high school, Maria’s family resorted to selling several of their clothes and shoes, bartering for food with neighbors, and opened a small crafts booth at the local flea market in hopes of making some extra money. However, the family was not bringing in enough money to purchase basic necessities and pay their utilities and her parents were starting to persuade Maria to look for employment. Maria describes this conversation as both humbling and transformative. “My parents sat me down at the table and told me that I had to work for a few months to help them stay above water. It was so strange to hear the desperation in their voices but I had no choice” recalls Maria. Shortly thereafter, Maria started her full-time employment at an area restaurant as a server and dishwasher. With the use of her older sister’s driver’s license and social security number, Maria detailed working long shifts at the restaurant with the other workers that were twice or three times her age. During one of her first shifts, Maria described the beginnings of a romantic relationship with one of her then co-workers who was over ten years her senior. Soon after, Maria shared that she felt that she was the statistic her parents and teachers warned her about repeatedly. At the age of 15, Maria found out that she was pregnant. Maria describes being in a relationship with her co-worker as brief so she was surprised to know that she was already a few months into her pregnancy. As soon as she informed him of her pregnancy, the father of her child stopped coming to work and was not returning Maria’s calls or messages. Maria came to find out that the father of her unborn son had moved out of the area and did not inform anyone of his whereabouts. Maria stated, “I was

devastated to learn that I was pregnant and alone; I've always loved kids and wanted a family of my own at a young age but not like this and not so quickly.”

Maria and her family were intent on providing her son with a happy and positive life despite her young age and the absence of the baby's father. Maria reminisced about how her parents were very saddened to have their teenage daughter become a mother but surrounded Maria and her baby with care and patience. Maria's father was particularly involved and did his best to spend ample time with her son while Maria returned to school a few months after his birth. Although the family was united in raising the child, the economic hardships persisted and forced Maria back to another full-time job in the service industry to benefit her family. Maria continued to work long hours for months after school and all of her wages went to her parents or basic childcare items for her young son. It was at this point that Maria started to question the need for school as she began to identify herself as mother and provider. Maria acknowledged that while she saw the long-term value of an education and a subsequent career, she preferred to be a full-time mom to her son, caregiver to her aging parents, and support system for her autistic younger sister.

Family has always been the most important thing to me. I've always thought that if I can take care of my parents and family, I would be able to figure out everything else. Maybe it's naive to say but I thought that I was smart enough to make good money without having to work all the time so that I can be home with my loved ones. The way I figured, I would be spending two-thirds of my life by sleeping, getting ready for work, working and driving back from work. The return of investment in time was something that I didn't see that outweighed the benefits of using spending my time with my family and I just want to live a simple life. Driving a nice car and buying a large house doesn't seem

appealing to me and this doesn't devalue me as a person or a mom. I kind of always felt that I was learning for myself but working in school for someone else. I didn't see the career path in law, medicine, business or whatever for me as much as other people saw it in me. I felt that I was living for them and not for me. I was doing the academics for my friends, teachers, and people that didn't really know me as more of a status thing but I knew that it wasn't really. Looking back at things now, I felt that being 'gifted' just gave me a spotlight that I never asked for. I never felt like myself around other gifted kids in class or in the programs. What made things worse was that I didn't even feel like myself in front of my friends. I know this sounds arrogant or whatever but it was like I was too smart for my friends and too different from the other gifted kids from elementary through high school. The only place on the planet that I felt like myself was with my family.

When asked to clarify why she did not feel like herself amongst her gifted peer group, Maria had visible difficulty expressing her answer however she did state feeling a foreboding sense of being "lost without a clear direction of where to create a path." Maria felt that her teachers, and even most of her friends, were pulling her in a direction that she had little to no desire to follow. As her time in high school progressed, this sensation of wandering about grew only stronger. Maria's sense of alienation was short lived during her high school years as she stopped attending classes and nearly dropped out of classes on three separate occasions before officially dropping out during the first month of her senior year of high school due to a expecting another child. During one of Maria's prolonged absences from school before completely dropping out, Maria met her future husband and father of her second son. Once she found out that she was pregnant at the age of 17 with her second child, Maria felt that this was an opportunity to have the family and stability that she sought. It was this point that Maria decided

to leave schooling behind and focus on making a stable income and start living for herself rather than under the weight of the lives of others.

Although Maria did not attain the traditional family that she wanted, she proudly claims that her sons bring her an authentic feeling of success and completion. Maria and her husband divorced after two years of marriage after what Maria describes as an emotionally and verbally abusive relationship. “My ex-husband drank and became another person when he did; he wasn’t the caring, fun type of drinker” recalls Maria. Albeit Maria did not go into additional details of her marriage, she stated that one of her goals is to raise two boys that will grow to respect and treat their family with honor and respect for women. Maria has been divorced now for over 10 years and dropped out of high school nearly 13 years ago. While she has some regrets, she claims that she is at peace with her decision and is now employed as a medical assistant and will be enrolling in a nursing program in hopes of obtaining her GED and a Bachelor of Science in Registered Nursing (BSRN). When asked about the ramifications of her decision to dropout of high school in terms of her economic, social, and learning opportunities, Maria focused on her future possibilities.

I understand that by dropping out, I was going to lose friends, social standings, and a ton of long-term money. I know I could have been years into my career in maybe law or by being a physician by now. I was taking medical classes concurrently in high school and even took a few college level exams and passed them all. The honest truth is that I know that I had the capability of obtaining my degrees; no problem at all. Right now, I’m living behind my parent’s house in a single room shack and I’m still working a low paying job. I work all the time and have no real friends and no importance. I get that. But I have my parents, my family, and my boys. If I did what I was told that I was suppose to do, I don’t

think I'd have what makes me who I am. I would have been miserable and would have been just like everyone else and working to buy things that eventually own me. I never wanted that. I know what I wanted and since I have my family my schooling will come next. I'm enrolling in a nursing program while getting my GED. Trust me, I know what those GED tests are like and I'm not going to have any problem passing it. After I get my GED, I'm looking to get my BSRN and maybe even go for a Master's too. I'm at a point of my life that I'm only looking forward. I have everything that I wanted in life and now - a supportive family and my two boys. Now, I feel that I can actually be myself and live my life for my kids. No more stressing over money or who I'm suppose to be anymore. I can go to back to school now since it's on my time for something that I now know I want to do.

Robert

Robert, 31, was identified as a gifted learner much later than the other participants in the study. As opposed to the other participants in the study, Robert was identified as a gifted learner in the summer after his 8th grade school year at the age of 14. Robert remembers being asked to take a gifted and talented exam by a school counselor that saw great academic potential in him. This was a complete shock to Robert as he described himself as a procrastinator and lacked the motivation to sustain academic engagement in his classes. While his grades were preliminary just over the passing mark starting in elementary school, Robert states that he has had a photographic memory and a predilection for software coding and programming since he was about 7 years old. "I remember designing a simple alien video game on my computer when I was in 3rd grade and played tournaments with my friends during class" recalls Robert. Robert claims to have completed two video games before he reached the 5th grade. Despite having self-

developed technical skills, learning in a classroom structured environment was challenging for Robert as one of the few students in his classes that had to receive intervention and additional tutoring services to improve his grades. When asked why he had to attend these academic intervention sessions during most of his elementary years, Robert summed his perspective by stating he was not engaged with traditional learning.

I always felt that I learned how to do things, math, reading, coding, anything really, by myself without having someone look over my shoulder the whole time. My teachers were trying to be supportive and all but I don't think that they knew how to deal with gifted kids. If a student is failing, they shouldn't automatically think it's because he doesn't understand the concept; maybe it's just because the concept doesn't appeal to them. This was the deal with me. I never had troubling learning what my teachers were trying to teach me it was just that I had no interest in what I already knew or that I could learn it quickly by myself. I would never do my homework, never showed my work on my tests, and would just not do the work. The only times that I would actually do my work was when my parents were on me when my teachers would call home to complain about how lazy I was being. If only my teachers approached things differently and let me learn at my own pace or just gave me grades based on what I know and not what I showed them on a paper, maybe I would have graduated high school or college years ago. If ever there was a way to get me to do my work was to call my parents. They just seemed to yell and degrade me at every chance they got and I always felt that they just saw me as a lazy know-it-all that can't do anything right. I was just a big disappointment as a student and an even bigger disappointment as a son I guess.

Robert's describes his stepfather as combative and argumentative with him for as long as he could remember. Robert states that while his mother was working multiple jobs in convenience and department stores, his stepfather would stay home caring for Robert and his older sister. Robert recollects that he and his stepfather did not get along well and their disagreements would largely stem from Robert's troubles in schools. Roberts recalls his teachers calling his home and complaining about him to his stepfather since Robert continually failed to turn in his assignments and was not an active participant in his learning. It was only after these calls to his stepfather that Robert would submit the bare minimum to his teachers so that he would not have to endure the harsh criticisms of his stepfather. Robert recalls his father calling names such as "lazy idiot" and "good-for-nothing" on a near daily basis and the name calling would only intensify when his stepfather would be called about Robert's lack of school progress. "I didn't like going to school but I really hated my stepfather" stated Robert. Moreover, Robert claims that his family's lack of financial stability would only magnify the home toxic relationship.

While his mother was working most of the day and parts of the evening, Robert would retreat to his small room that he would share with his sister and aunt that lived with the family for a few years. Robert states that his trailer home was very humble but he usually spent his time after school outside learning how to code on a borrowed school computer while logging onto the internet connection of a nearby laundromat. Robert posits that learning to code and being able to explore a budding fascination with computer science was his only salvation from poverty and the emotional burden placed upon him by his stepfather. Robert felt isolated at school and at home since he did not receive the guidance and support he needed to grow as a gifted learner.

Things were really difficult for me from the start. My mom was working the whole time just to pay the bills with dead-end jobs since she's undocumented. My stepdad is such a jerk that he didn't want work and just stayed home to put me down. We had no money or fun and I felt better when I was alone. When I was by myself, I would just come up with coding schemes that I learned online and focus all my time there. It was like an escape for me to bury myself in computers and I didn't want to be anywhere else other than online. School sucked, my home life sucked even more and I had really nothing. I had some bouts of depression even by middle school and it continued in high school to that point that I had suicidal thoughts every now and then. I saw some of my friends having girlfriends, already selecting out of state colleges, and even planning on where to live once they finished school and here I was not even believing that I was worth anything.

Robert recalls that the pivotal point of walking away from school and his home life was when his mother abandoned their family. Robert's mother and stepfather's consistent arguments centered on their financial woes and his stepfather's lack of desire to work and support the family. Robert recalls one particular argument that escalated into a physical altercation between his mom and stepfather. When he was 17, Robert's parents began to throw pans, lamps, and other items at one another. Robert attempted to intervene but this only made matters worse when Robert and his stepfather started to shove each other before Robert's stepfather pulled out a kitchen knife and threatened to hurt himself. The very next day, Robert's mother left to work and never came back home. Robert described his mother's decision to leave the family as "not surprising" however still hurtful to him and his sister. After this event, Robert was told to leave his home by his stepfather and find somewhere else to live.

Robert was homeless for over a month as he slept at the homes of different friends. It was at this point that Robert decided that if he could not pay for college and was not worth investing in himself, he would drop out of high school and focus on surviving and meeting his basic needs. Robert stated that the emotional toll of believing he was worthless combined with being abandoned by both of his parental figures was insurmountable for a young teenager already coping with a lack of interest in school. Robert's perspective of academic disengagement was largely a factor of his home life and a lack of differentiation schooling structure that did not harness his gifts but rather stifled them.

Robert states that he is easily able to find employment however sustaining his employment has been the challenging aspect. Robert iterates that the job roles that he has experienced present him with the same problems that he went through during his tenure at school. Robert's employers have provided him with parameters that he does not agree with and is quick to hold his beliefs higher than his responsibilities. This has caused rifts and arguments between him and his supervisors leading to subsequent consequences and multiple terminations. When asked about the effects that dropping out school had on the various aspects of his including this academic, social, and economic impact, Robert remains optimistic.

You know, my whole life I thought I was a nobody. I mean, it was pretty much engraved in my mind that I was worthless. It was only when my first daughter was born that I can tell you that I legitimately saw value in my life. I wasn't the bum of a human that I thought I was; I had something to live and work for. The work is easy, the life part gets tough. I know that I'm not going to make the money that I feel I can make if I applied myself through the high school and college route but I'm investing in Bitcoin and a couple other cryptocurrencies that I'm sure will make me some really good money in no time. I

think that now, I'm making myself and know who I am. I don't need anyone telling me what I'm not and what I can't do; those days are over. This is how I look at my kids - like vessels that can be anything they want to be. If they don't like something, they can leave it and find something else. I mean, life's too short to waste it away on things you don't want to be doing. Being poor didn't define me. Being called a loser by my family didn't define me either. I went my gut and I know that I'll hit it big with crypto so I'll be fine when I sell some stocks and shares.

Robert argues that while part of him regrets leaving high school without his diploma, he stands by his decision and admittedly believes that he does not need school to understand the stock market. Although Robert does not speak to any of his immediate family members and has lost touch with his peers and friends over the years, he states that he is fulfilled when he sees his children during his visitation days from the two different mothers of his children. Despite currently living in destitute living conditions without employment at his current girlfriend's parent's home, Robert views the future full of endless possibilities.

Alecio

Alecio, 33, described experiencing a myriad of obstacles that pushed him to contemplate dropping out of high school even before he reached the 9th grade. Alecio states that he and his family were homeless for most of his life and lived in shelters and in various small spare rooms of relatives and neighborhood friends. Alecio was raised by supportive parents that were unable to find consistent employment due to their undocumented immigration status and their lack of English speaking proficiency skills. Alecio's parents illegally crossed into the Rio Grande Valley near the Roma, Texas border from a small town in Mexico with Alecio and his brother while Alecio was about 6 years old. Alecio vividly recalls traversing the Rio Grande Valley and

described the experience as “facing death itself”. Alecio’s parents enrolled him in the 1st grade however with no formal schooling in Mexico and only an understanding of basic interpersonal Spanish communication skills, Alecio was placed in special education classes for nearly half of a school year at his first American elementary school. Although this was in part due to Alecio’s teacher being new to the profession of education, Alecio was gradually moved to the general education setting and soon started to demonstrate a high level of proficiency for English linguistic skills. Once Alecio’s teachers noticed that he was progressing in his linguistic abilities, Alecio was tested and identified as a gifted learner all within his first school year in Texas.

I actually have a pretty good memory and let me tell you that first year after moving from Mexico to the (Rio Grande) Valley was a terrible one. It was my first time in school ever in Mexico or in the states and I was scared. I wasn’t afraid because of the language barrier or the building or teacher, but it was so scary to me to be in a class with a lot of kids without my parents most of the day. I’ve always been with my parents my entire life up to that point so it was kind of jarring to be there by myself. The teachers were trying to be nice but putting in the special education classes just because I didn’t speak English was really messed up. But I was able to pick up English really quickly once I was moved to the other (general education) classes. Once I did speak a decent amount of English, my teachers gave me a bunch of tests and I was then placed in another school entirely for other gifted kids. Luckily, the new school provided me with a bus to take me since my parents couldn’t afford to drop me off. We didn’t have a permanent home most of my life and having a car was not even a possibility so getting a bus to and from school with free meals provided was a huge advantage. After I adjusted to my new class and the new

environment, I actually started to get less scared to the point of even liking school. The biggest challenges for me academically were never the classes or coursework but it was just struggling to survive at home. My parents couldn't work because of they only spoke Spanish and because of their undocumented status so we kind of just relied on help from our neighbors and cousins that lived near us. I remember taking home a bunch of leftovers home from school and my parents usually sold it at the flea market usually the same day or that same night.

Alecio detailed his living conditions and estimated that at some points in his life, he and his family were sustaining a life with little more than approximately a dollar a day. On most days, his family would not have enough money to feed the entire home so they often find a ride to transport them to the nearest food pantry at a local church or Red Cross station. Despite the lack of food nor a stable place to call home every night, Alecio excelled academically from elementary to his middle school years. Alecio's innate abilities in math and science propelled him to the top of his class as well as provided opportunities to compete at a state level for the University Interscholastic League (U.I.L) in math. Additionally, Alecio was also recognized for his writing talents by getting some of his poems selected for publications in a local writing contest for students and was one of his school's top performers for choir and band. Alecio described starting to enjoy the attention that he was receiving for his talents from his peers and his teachers. However, it was in the middle of his 7th grade year that Alecio was in what he describes as a "fog of confusion" that began to upend his identity and his relationships with his friends, teachers, and parents. During this time, Alecio was embracing the feelings that he had long oppressed for a few years and gradually told his teachers and friends that he was gay. Alecio stated that while telling his classmates and teachers about his sexual orientation was not

difficult in most circumstances, revealing this long held secret profoundly affected his relationship with his parents that lasted for well over a decade.

I honestly don't think that most people at school or my UIL team members were shocked when I started to tell them that I was openly gay. I guess I didn't do a good job in hiding it. I always knew my mannerism or whatever were not the most masculine but I thought I was just a normal kid. It's not like I was gay out of nowhere since I always knew I was different and I had a gay cousin that I could confide in when I was in elementary. I honestly didn't think it was a big deal since I had these feelings for boys for mostly as long as I could remember but part of me knew that others would handle it differently. Most of my friends pretty much stopped talking to me. I didn't have any girlfriends but the few that I did were accepting of it but my guy friends was a different story. All but one of my guy friends just didn't hang out with me or even try to talk to me. The bad part about that is that the same friends that I hung with and played games with where now the ones pushing me and calling me gay slurs as soon as they knew. I mean, having the same people that you trusted are now the same ones that are trying to hurt you makes you have trust issues. They didn't try to beat me up, maybe one time but it was stopped by a teacher, but they would harass verbally any chance they got. And my teachers, they didn't even acknowledge that I was going through something. Not once did they so much as ask me how I was feeling or talk to me that it was ok to feel this way and that it's totally normal for some people. I mean, the counselor didn't even come talk to me to help me sort this out. Yeah, that's the Valley and Texas schools for you at their best I guess. But this was not even the worst of it. I was shaking from just thinking about how my parents would react to hearing this from me.

Although Alecio describes his relationship with his parents to be one built on love and guidance, he depicted his parents to subscribe to traditional gender roles and hold their values of faith to a destructive degree at times. Alecio recalls telling his parents about his sexual orientation and while his father was stoic and remained quiet as he processed this news, his mother left the room to cry and would not speak to Alecio for days. While Alecio had reservations about telling his parents initially as he knew they might recoil from this information, he felt that it was the morally right thing to do for his family.

I'll give my dad credit for he how acted and responded back then. All things considered, he took it alright. He was one to never really wear his heart on his sleeve so I didn't expect much but after being quiet for a moment, he was ok. He didn't hug me or give me any life lessons or anything close to that but he did the best thing I could've asked for. He just kept on treating me like he always had. It was kind of funny but not too long after I told my parents I was gay, he later on asked me to clean my room and to help him set up the table at the flea market. Nothing really changed for him and it was amazing to see. My mom though was a different story. She didn't speak to me for a long time and blamed me for being gay. In fact, she didn't believe me and told me to change my mind and heart. She treated me differently and was visibly embarrassed by me. My own mom was embarrassed for me being me. She even stopped working her side jobs to talk to people to 'make me' stop being gay. I was getting embarrassed that she was acting this way and only made things worse for me at school. My whole neighborhood, the same kids that I grew up with seemed grossed out by me. I just started to feel numb and didn't want to see anyone. I started to go get depressed and just wanted to leave everyone behind. I didn't even want to go to school anymore and was already wanting to drop out

as soon as I could. We were broke, hungry, and now I had no one. Being gay in the Valley is hard but being gay and dirt poor with virtually no family or friends makes you feel like a nobody.

Alecio stated that the immense feeling of isolation and the family's need to procure basic necessities reached a point that drove Alecio to thoughts of suicide and one failed attempt with pills all before the 9th grade. Alecio entered high school with feelings of a loss of identity, trust in others, and insurmountable home financial issues that caused him to question the purpose of attending school entirely. "Why would I want to be in place that I don't like for 4 years for a piece of paper that may not even help me long term?" Alecio reflected. At the age of 15, Alecio decided to leave school and attempt to take online classes for screenwriting and art design. Alecio expressed an interest to write movie about the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) community to promote acceptance of highlight the struggles of sexual orientation faced by youth in a largely economically depressed, Mexican American region of the U.S. Alecio stated that he intends to be a "storyteller for the LGBT community in the Valley and champion minorities in the minority community."

Alecio finds that leaving high school without graduating changed the course of his life but in many ways, for a better quality of life. Alecio states that he did not retain any relationships with any of his friends from his days at school and largely lives a life of solitude with no possessions or current employment. However, Alecio claims that not having relationships with others translates to not being at risk to get hurt by others and a lack of employment allows him the freedom to follow his passion of advocating for the LGBT community through his writing and artwork. Alecio is currently attempting to return to online schooling to obtain his GED and states that with a modicum of reviewing and studying, finishing

high school and possibly enrolling in college will not be difficult. Alecio posits, “I might be a little rusty but I’ve always felt that learning is like riding a bike and once I get back on, I’ll be able to go fast again.”

Themes

The sub-themes that emerged organically during the coding and sorting of the narrative were varied however were replete with shared circumstances that had negative effects that prompted each of the five participants to drop out of high school prematurely before graduating. Each participant member checked his or her transcript at the conclusion of each of the three interviews and a final member check was conducted at the conclusion of all the interview series. At the conclusion of confirming and member checking the data to ensure validity, the researcher was able to move to evaluating the data to connect core themes (Flick, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). With the use of NVIVO, the data collected was analyzed from narrative coding to larger, overarching themes that allowed the researcher to both examine the unique journeys of each participant while critically finding commonalities and transferability in the shared experience of the phenomenon of dropping out while being identified as a gifted learner (Maher, Hadfield, Hutchings & de Eyto, 2018). The data analysis produced emergent themes and provided the researcher with a perspective lens and naturalistic generalizations for all the conducted interviews (Creswell, 2013). Moreover, this data collection approach allowed the researcher to have a copious amount of rich data that developed a thick description of the stated phenomena by detailing the setting, interactions, relationships, and related characteristics thus promoting authentic connections within the narrative (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

According to Bueno (2012), the analyzed and collected themes unearth relationships and through lines in the perspectives provided by each participant to construct commonalities within

unique experiences for a phenomenon. While some of the shared experiences and backgrounds were positive factors in nature, the emergent themes captured acted as detrimental factors that ultimately compelled each participant to drop out of high school despite their innate cognitive abilities. According to Kim and Kim (2018), reducing the raw interview data into sub-codes producing larger themes guided the researcher to evaluate patterns and isolate the significance in the data by identifying the emerging narrative points, either consciously or subconsciously, from the participants in the study.

For instance, although influencing factors of family support were not enough to retain the participants in school during their respective high school tenure, sub-codes and themes of evolving or adverse relationships were some of more salient elements of the shared perspectives that factored in the decision to drop out of school. Further, living in a financially disadvantaged home proved to be a strong motivational factor that led all the participants to stop attending classes and ultimately suspend their enrollment in school. Moreover, all the participants articulated a loss of self-worth and a reflective identity crisis during their adolescence that was one of the most immense components that affected their decision to drop out of school. The three most prominent, shared themes found in the data were that of family and school relationship trauma, lower socioeconomic status and financial instability, and issues of identity and self-worth.

Family and School Relationship Trauma

Every individual in the study was adversely affected by relationship trauma from their peer group, teachers, and family members that caused each one to drop out of high school. According to Rivera (2013), the impact that a child's relationship from their respective teachers, peers, and parents is one of most influential elements in shaping a child's academic self-efficacy

and achievement. Cavilla (2015) posits that relationships cultivated during a child's formative and teenage years has a massive affect on developing lifelong issues of trust to help build authentic rapport with others. However, if relationships are developed to be harmful to a child, social disorganization and eloping behavior can push individuals to seek isolation and are likely to fall into states of academic disengagement and depression (Pelchar & Bain, 2014). Ecker-Lyster and Niileksela (2017), argue that if left unresolved, traumatic relationship experiences during adolescence may manifest into a loss of academic motivation, chronic absenteeism or prematurely dropping out of school entirely. Bruner (2004), found that relationships, by omission or from pernicious nature, from family, friends, and family may impact a student's desire to learn and increase the likelihood of dropping out of school to end these harmful relationships or establish positive ones.

For instance, when asked about the factors that influenced their decision to drop out of high school despite their academic giftedness, all of the participants described a traumatic or series of traumatic events that altered their trust and perception of friends, teachers and families that directly affected their decision to drop out of school. Jane detailed her experience living with an abusive partner and being fearful for her life and that of her unborn baby. Moreover, Jane simultaneously lost trust in her parents and family members for allowing the situation to occur to a 15 year old Jane. Jane elaborated on the psychological power leveraged by an older romantic partner from another country that coerced her from her home to live with him in Mexico while her parents attempted to end their relationship after he impregnated her. Jane accounts fearing for her life long before her then adult boyfriend persuaded her to live with him in a Mexican border town. Jane stated that she "felt that a captor and experienced a kind of Stockholm syndrome". Jane developed an incongruous bond of love and adoration for the same

person that was physically abusing her. While she felt that she wanted to leave the relationship, she was not emotionally ready to do so and willingly moved to Mexico to be with her partner. Jane's depressive state continued as she did not trust her parents and family enough to seek professional mental health. Jane recalls a stark feeling of a loss of faith in her family by explaining, "My parents are traditional Mexican parents and weren't going to help me with mental issues. They would just think that if I'm physically safe now and that my ex boyfriend is out of the picture, I should just toughen up and not to show others that I might be too crazy to marry someone else. I couldn't trust my parents to help me so I felt that they abandoned a part of me in a way."

Deshawn expounded his loss of confidence and trust in his parents when he was incarcerated in the juvenile system at 14 years old. Deshawn detailed that he would wish that his parents would bail him out but later he found out that they elected to keep their son locked in without visiting or calling him during his few months there. Initially, Deshawn was confident that his parents would get him out of the holding area, going so far as telling his cell mates that he was going to be released by his parents within hours however this opportunity did not come. According to Deshawn, his parents opted to use this opportunity for them to start to distance themselves from Deshawn. "I know I got in a lot of trouble back then but around middle school, I noticed that my parents were showing that they just didn't care so they disciplined me less and focused on my brothers more" recalls Deshawn. Deshawn felt that his family disowned him rather than attempt to provide the structure he claimed he needed then. Albeit Deshawn was drinking heavily before entering the 6th grade, his family was aware but did little to use guidance to help support his budding addiction. Rather, Deshawn's parents would punish him harshly at

first but then ceased any punishments at all when Deshawn's behavior seemed to be out of control.

Moreover, Deshawn also experienced trust issues with the teachers that he once admired. Deshawn had strong relationships with his teachers and considered them to be second parents and even primary parents particularly in his days of early drug use when he felt lost. According to Deshawn, his teachers knew he was abusing drugs but since the incidents did not occur at campus and he did not cause any trouble in school, his teachers did not intervene. Deshawn recounts that, "As long as I played the part of a good, high achieving student, the teachers just looked the other way. I know they are overworked and underpaid especially at a large middle school with over a thousand kids and all but not one time did any teacher try to help. I looked up to them but when I needed them the most, they just waved me through the next class and didn't have time to help. I came in drunk a few times but didn't seem to bother anybody." When asked about his friends and peers at school, Deshawn makes a clear distinction between the two factions of students that he interacted with during this time. "My real friends stopped talking to me and my bad friends were the ones getting high and drunk with me. I really had no one to turn to for actual help." While some of his friends continue to feed their addiction, Deshawn realized that harmful habits would only cause long term damage. While he did eventually turn to professional help to stop the rampant use of alcohol and other drugs, Deshawn continues to battle his addiction with drugs and depression largely alone as he does not trust others for help and guidance.

Maria states that she has long suffered from abandonment issues stemming from the emotional trauma suffered when her mother was deported to Mexico while Maria was a young child. Maria continues to carry these physiological wounds as she fears this may occur again for

most of her immediate and extended family members and possibly even Maria herself. Maria recalls that she has had several of friends and neighbors wrongfully deported to Mexico or a Central American country due to misinformation or mistaken identity. Maria argues, “During the Trump era, anyone that has undocumented family can be easily and illegally detained, maybe even deported if you’re a citizen and I’ve seen it happen a few times in the past couple of years.” Maria refuses to travel out of the Rio Grande Valley region and carries her passport as her main form of identification. In fact, Maria does not want to obtain a driver’s license as she is fearful of getting pulled over by police and believes that as a passenger in a vehicle, she is less likely to be interrogated if the vehicle she is in is stopped by the authorities. Moreover, Maria decries the current state of political environment arguing that the prevailing rhetoric is toxic for individuals of Mexican American heritage outside of her familiar Rio Grande Valley home. Maria voiced that she disdains the judicial system and has no trust in government and local police and immigration officials.

While Maria's family and parents have been supportive throughout life, she reported that both the fathers of her young sons inflicted her with emotional damage that may not ever fully heal. Maria describes being pregnant while a teenager then again expecting the arrival of her second child while the respective fathers of her sons both left her to raise the children. This dynamic enabled Maria to focus on the factors that she could control rather than risk getting hurt again.

Getting pregnant twice at those ages is tough and is made even harder when you’re essentially doing it by yourself. Both of my exes and fathers left me high and dry instead of being a man, they just abandoned me as soon as they had the chance. For years, I would ask myself ‘What’s wrong with me? Why won’t someone love me and want to

stay with me? Will I be alone forever?’ It took me a long time for me to just realize that there’s no point in worrying about the things that I can’t control. I can’t control that someone will dump me like garbage, but I can control giving my kids a good life and lots of love and support. Here I am afraid to even leave the valley or drive but I’m not going to bail on my kids. If I have my kids and family, I really don’t want to trust anyone else outside of my bubble. In here, it’s the only time in my lie that I feel safe and protected.”

The genesis of Robert’s relationship trauma began as far back as Robert could remember as he was raised by an absentee mother that was working multiple jobs and a verbally and emotionally abusive stepfather that would belittle and taunt Robert mercilessly throughout his childhood and teenage years. Robert would often describe his stepfather as a bully that would take pleasure in acting demonstrative toward Robert at home and in front of his friends. Additionally, Robert revealed that he felt that his mother was working so much as a way to escape the toxic environment that was pervasive in his home. Robert described the trauma he experienced as altering his character and impacting his decision making as he had little faith in others for support and guidance.

Years before I experienced my troubles at school and with my stepdad, I knew something was wrong with me. I would like feeling sad even hours or days after my stepdad and I would argue and get into it for nothing in particular. I was starting to feel numb and part of me liked it. Even though it wasn’t until years afterwards that I came to this realization, I always thought my mom worked to just get out of the house and not have to deal with my stepdad and I. The money she made was basically nothing after my mom left the family, my stepdad told me this about her. I think that was the only conversation that my stepdad and I had that was a real moment. Having my mom and what is suppose to be my father

figure both give up on me pretty much from the beginning changed who I was. I wasn't a kid, wasn't their child but I was just some baggage that nobody wanted.

While Robert claims that his teachers occasionally attempted to intervene, the staff at his school were just focused on Robert's academic inconsistencies rather than viewing the whole child. Robert stated that he was always hesitant to reveal all of the aspects and details of his home life so he fabricated elements of his family life to minimize his negative environment as a defense mechanism to distance himself from others that might have abandoned him as well. Robert did start to trust a few teachers at school but found it disheartening that as soon he moved up to the next class period of grade level, the attempted interventions would cease. "My teachers sort of tried to help and get to know me but it's strange because as soon as class was over or at the end of the year, as soon as I wasn't obligated to see those same teachers, they just dropped me from their mind and no help was coming" remembers Robert. While his teachers did attempt to render support and establish a rapport of trust, Robert felt betrayed as these attempts felt vapid and uninspiring.

Alecio's relationship trauma permeated from his classmates and teachers to his home and his family environment. Alecio's sexual orientation and desire to proudly represent the LGBT community was a gambit as he knew living his true life would directly counter the values held by his parents and the lens of masculinity from his male friends. Alecio demonstrated that his coming out reveal was met with abhorrent remarks, isolation, and even verbal and physical abuse by individuals that once were his friends. Despite the struggles that his family endured to traverse the Rio Grande River and retain his family's heritage and tradition in a small Texas town from the southernmost region of the Mexican state of Chiapas, the revelation about Alecio coming to terms with his sexual preference was met with internal strife and fierce derision.

I just wanted to be me and I thought that my family and close friends would accept me no matter what I felt or who I liked. I mean, we struggled just to get here and when we got to Texas, we were dirt poor but only survived through each other's help. We came from nothing and all of sudden were making a small impact to be Americans and actually have the ability to dream to live how we wanted. But this wasn't enough for my family and the few friends that I made turned their back on me. The look on their faces when I told them I was gay was like I told them I murdered someone or like I was threatening to harm them all. I was so dumb and naive to think that this was nothing and that I could just live my life being me without them judging me or anything. I was completely wrong. My parents, especially my mom, were disgusted by me and even forced me to go to a gay conversion therapy session that only made me feel like I was not born correctly. My 'friends' either stopped talking to me or started to yell insults at me or even tried to fight me a few times. Just about everyone that I knew hated me for being me. School was the last thing on my mind and I just wanted to hide and be by myself. I was depressed and even thought about taking some pills and sleeping forever. Why would I want to be locked in a place of hate and abuse for like 10 hours then go home to just about the same thing. No thanks for me; I'll pass on that.

Low Socioeconomic Status and Financial Instability

Research has shown that children of low socioeconomic status and of rural backgrounds often lack the skills needed to develop authentic rapport and trust in others due patterns of fractured relationships and cycles of disappointments that impact their interpersonal dynamics with their own families and peers (Davis & Duper, 2004; Greenbaum, 2015; Henfield, Woo & Bang, 2017; Kim, Chang, Singh & Allen, 2015; Yaluma & Tyner, 2018). Schools and campus

personnel are not equipped to detangle the roles of institutional poverty from individual gifted students and their harmful effects by curriculum and effective teaching techniques alone. (Hamilton, McCoach, Tutwiler, Siegle, Gubbins, & Callahan, 2018). In other words, a cycle of poverty within communities cannot be merely remedied from good teaching approaches for gifted learners despite their academic talents. Foundational and effective teaching practices is not a panacea to ameliorate the disadvantaged suffered by gifted children that come from lower socioeconomic homes. According to Parr and Bonitz (2015), not only are students of poverty generally less likely to be identified as gifted learners, the few children that are recognized as gifted that attend Title I, low socioeconomic schools are more than twice as likely to drop out of high school when compared to the their same gifted peers that attend more affluent school districts.

Further, Stambaugh and Ford (2015), found that teachers and school staff may purposely or inadvertently display microaggression or dismissive behaviors towards Black and Mexican American gifted children of low income households. Teachers that work in schools with gifted Mexican American children tend to under identify their students largely due to insufficient professional development and a general lack of awareness for the differentiators of giftedness within their classrooms. Van Tassel-Baska (2010), argues that teachers and staff that teach minority, low income students must be aware of their own bias and must view giftedness in the same way educators view intervention needs - there is a wide spectrum of giftedness that ranges considerably from student to student despite their home economic status.

Moreover, a lack of identification often leads to a severe lack of gifted services provided to underfunded schools. Fry and Taylor (2013) found that family financial instability is often the preeminent factor in gifted student dropout for minority families. Many of these students are

placed with a burden to work and support the family immediately rather than pursuing a postsecondary degree and accruing student loan debt over a few years is a risk that may not guarantee a financial award for these families (Degand, 2015; Fry & Taylor, 2013). According to Kearney and Levine (2014), the effects of poverty can cause student disengagement and a lack of academic motivation to graduate high school thereby placing a greater emphasis on contributing to the needs of the home through monetary means for families that experience living in poverty or extreme poverty. Essentially, these students are placed in a situation where they must find work and support the needs of their families rather than seek the long-term benefits of graduating from high school and college. Gifted students from low income families often feel pressured to use their talents in the workforce as opposed to utilizing them in higher education settings (Kurt & Chenault, 2017). This has had a negative impact on the completion of high school and overall graduation rates for Mexican American gifted students. Peterson (2015), found that a dissonance between the differentiating for the needs of gifted, low income learners and high school graduation rates has only widened with the past 15 years.

Morgan-Consoli and Llamas (2013) argue that a compelling need to financially support their families is a common attribute to the Mexican American culture ethos that emphasizes caring for the family before supporting oneself. In terms of financial support, Mexican American traditional cultural and work values are founded upon family unity, resilience, and promote collaborative economic stability for the household (Morgan-Consoli & Llamas, 2013). This approach to family unity and loyalty ties families together but also has the unintended consequence of shifting the needs from the individual to the family (Navarro-Leal & Colmenares-González, 2019).

As noted in Table 1, all five participants lived in either poverty or extreme poverty conditions which presented common difficulties from a pressure to contribute financially to a loss of academic motivation and disengagement from school. All of the participants described their living arrangements as challenging as they all shared the experience of not always having their basic needs met on a continuous basis. While Robert and Jane suffered from intermittent home loss, Alecio and his family were homeless for years while they slept in the spare rooms of various friends and extended family members. As the Rio Grande Valley has one of the highest numbers of children living below the poverty line per capita than most regions of the entire country, lower socioeconomic families are commonplace in this southernmost area of Texas (United States Census Bureau, 2010). However, the shared journeys of the participants denote the direct struggles that poverty has over even the most academically gifted minds.

Jane described her family as hard work however finding consistent employment proved difficult for her parents. When Jane was identified as a gifted learner and had to attend another school, Jane's parents did not have the means to provide daily transportation or money for meals, however her incoming school made arrangements to transport Jane and supply her with breakfast and lunch tickets. According to Jane, if the school had not made this accommodation, Jane would not have been to attend her gifted classes. Jane felt that she had a responsibility to help feed her family while in elementary school. At her elementary campus, the teachers would provide after school snacks to the children and Jane developed a habit of trading homework assignment completions and library books for the meals. "I had developed a decent system of trading their meals for me to complete their work and let them my library card so the other kids would check out books and games" reminisced Jane. Jane felt compelled to bring home food every weekday as her family would often rely on these snacks as one of their main food supplies during the

weekend. Additionally, Jane would accompany her mother daily to the nearby flea market to help sell household items for profit and would help her father on the weekends to tend to cattle, goats, and plants on a farm down her street. Jane claims that her poverty provided her with a strong sense of resilience and resourcefulness that she would appreciate much more as an adult. However, Jane's poor economic background had a devastating effect on her decision to drop out of school.

I thought that moving with my ex-boyfriend was an escape from having nothing and just wallowing in with my mental health issues, you know. I didn't have anything to call my own and even though my friends were also living in poor conditions, they never had to worry about some of the stuff that I had to worry about. I mean, living beyond your means is one thing but not having any means is another level of broke. I had to work with my mom at the flea market and I had to help my dad work at the ranch not because they wanted bonding time with me but because extra hands meant we could do extra work and get extra money. I didn't find too much value in school but making some money and helping to feed my family was way more important than any lesson I'd learn in school. Living in a poor home didn't inspire me to strive to be a better student or anything like that but it just changed my perspective to make me focus on my family and keeping what I love close to me. I know it sounds weird but not having anything made me appreciate the little control I had in my life and school was not something that I could control. I just viewed my classes as an added stress that wouldn't help me know and with no one helping me to view things different so running away from it all was the easiest thing to do to stop the stress and pain.

Deshawn accounts fully comprehending the depths of his poverty at a very young age when he noticed that he was the only child in all of his elementary classes that his teachers purchased clothing, shoes, and school supplies every year. When he informed his family about the resources he was provided, his brother told him that, “We only get all of that since we need it more than the other kids. Not everyone lives like this; some people get to eat all the time.” While Deshawn appreciated the outpour of support provided by his teachers, he was disappointed to recall that the help did not extend to the rest of his family, especially to his parents. Deshawn would advocate for a greater need for the rest of his family however the school only provided this support to the students at the school and not the adults. Since Deshawn’s grandmother moved in for elder care to the family home, Deshawn was angered that the school’s support system did not help those that were most in need such as his grandmother. “The school seemed to have plenty of money to help me buy some nice shoes and stuff but no one even thought about providing funds so that my grandma can have enough money to pay for her pills and medication” argues Deshawn. Deshawn was profoundly affected by the passing of his grandmother who died of complications from diabetes and a lack of medical care.

My grandma and I were really close and she was like a second mom to me. When she died, I was crushed. I didn’t want to eat, I couldn’t sleep. But it was about a year afterwards that I learned from my dad that she could've lived longer if we had the money to pay for some insulin and hospital bills. I know we all tried to help but my folks just didn’t have the money to pay for this stuff especially without insurance from work or anything. Knowing that we could’ve saved her with just cash changed me. I never really was into school and academics but when my grandma passed when I was in middle school, I didn’t even want to think about classes and just wanted to make quick money so

I started to hustle (sell drugs). I use to tell my friends I wanted to sell so that I can use the stash whenever and get girls but really, I just wanted to make some money so that I can do whatever I want and have everything I need. Having that money made me feel secure and I could help take care of my family.

It was during this time that Deshawn started to sell drugs to help his parents pay for basic meals for his family. Deshawn did not disclose how he obtained the Xanax and muscle relaxer pills he sold to his friends and neighbors, but he stated that he would make a considerable amount of money. On most weeks, Deshawn would go to a grocery store and purchase small amounts of groceries for his family as well as a few items for the family of one of his friends on the football team. While Deshawn did confess to buying himself some shoes or video games, a majority of the money went to food for his family. When asked if his parents questioned him, Deshawn claims that his parents were complicit to a small degree.

My parents aren't dumb; they knew something was going on. I told them that our school would give out free meals weekly to the kids on the sports team but I knew that they felt I was lying. I really didn't need to try to convince them much more than that and they seemed to be ok with it all. I would hustle (sell drugs) but most of the money just went to food and snacks for all of us so they were cool with that and didn't pressure me to tell them more. But it was a great feeling to be able to take care of my family and all. Looking back, it was probably just about \$50 dollars which isn't much but for a kid feeding his family in middle school, that's a lot of money. I'm going to be honest and admit that I used my own stuff to get high though just to get away from things but that just made me feel more distant and made school less and less of a priority. Here I was making some money, getting high, hanging out with my friends, and doing well without going to a place

(school) that I didn't really like or fit into. It just didn't feel like I needed school at all, I just wanted to relax and take of things on my own now and ten years from now.

The increased financial need was a turning point as Deshawn lost motivation and a sense of academic grit to attend classes. Gradually, his absences from school grew from a few days at a time to a few weeks until he eventually disengaged with his classes for a few months to completely dropping out in high school. Deshawn shared that during his extended absences, he would have the social and financial freedom to help out his family and spend some time with his friends that also chose to cease attending classes. Once Deshawn was able to procure more addictive and illicit drugs, he was making a substantial amount of money and was surrounding himself with friends that Deshawn describes as "organized thugs" that incentivized him to focus on making money and selling drugs rather than spending his time in school. "At that point, I was making easy money, getting paid to hang out, and was even to help pay some of my parents bills so I didn't see a value in attending classes anymore" recalls Deshawn.

Maria stated that when her father, the sole income provider, injured himself at his job her family's financial outlook transitioned from difficult to dire within mere weeks. Maria's father was the only family that could work and support her family and her mother's immigration status was undocumented and her English-speaking skills were not proficient. Although Maria attempted to teach her mother basic interpersonal communication skills in English, her mother found it too difficult and would stop the impromptu lesson. Maria described her home situation as a monetary emergency as one of her parents was suddenly unable to work and her other parent did not want to leave her home in fears of being deported again. Maria recalls that her parents had a conversation with her that was tantamount to an ultimatum; she had to choose to either continue to go to school or find work to help support her family.

My mom and dad called me to go outside with them where they sat in the evenings on most nights. That night though, they pretty much told me that since my dad couldn't work and my mom was too scared to leave the house and knew less than ten words in English, I had to make a choice between school and earning money by working at a nearby restaurant that was hiring quickly. I know that parents wouldn't ask me to do this unless things were horribly bad and that's exactly what they were at that point. To say we now had nothing, just about nothing to our name was super true. We didn't know where we're going to eat or how to pay for the light and water bill. I think that if I was in their position, I might ask that same question to my kids too, so I get it but still, it's a rough spot to put a teenager. 'Work or school?' C'mon, I had so much going on back then and this was a way to make money and not to have to go to school with my parent's permission; that's a win-win situation. So, I chose to apply and got the job the next day. The money I was making, especially in tips, was way more than I thought I'd get and since we didn't have too many bills, I was even able to keep some money for me.

Maria enjoyed working so much that when her father's injury was healed and he was able to work again, Maria opted to continue to work so that their combined incomes could provide their family with amenities for their home such as air conditioning and the ability to purchase a more reliable vehicle. The need to maintain a consistent income was exponentially more apparent when Maria found that she was expecting the birth of first son. "When the doctor told me that I was pregnant, I was ecstatic and worried since I always wanted my own family but knew that this meant school was not something in my future any time soon" explained Maria. Maria felt an added pressure to maintain the needs of her family while saving money for the expenses of the arrival of her baby, so she continued to work and now viewed her schooling as a

lost opportunity for more income. Maria stated, “I was already missing a lot of days at school and had to make up a ton of credits over the breaks and summer around the same time I was due, so I decided to work to get all the things ready for the baby.” Maria claims that this was the right decision for her and her new family. The decision to leave school behind was ultimately cemented when the father of her child vanished and left sole responsibility to a teenage Maria and her parents. “Once I was alone, I really had no choice and math, and science classes weren’t going to buy diapers and formula in a couple of months” recalls Maria.

Robert argued that his upbringing in a poverty stricken home had a large hand in his reoccurring depressive state, self-induced isolation, and academic disengagement from school. Robert described that his home life was one of lacking basic needs due to his parents living from paycheck to paycheck on a single salary income from his mom. While Robert did grow up in a humble trailer park in a rural community, the home did not have a heating or cooling source thus the peak summer and winter months proved to be especially harsh living conditions for the family. As his mother could not afford to pay for seasonal clothing, the winter months were particularly challenging as Robert had one thin jacket to wear as he had to walk to school. According to Robert, this was one of several elements that severely affected Robert’s attendance and motivation to attend school starting in his late elementary school.

I remember my mom waking me up to go to school on those cold January days and it was freezing everywhere in the house. I couldn’t barely feel my feet and since she had to go to work early in the morning, she and I would walk the mile to school. The bus didn’t pick me up since I lived so close to the school, but a mile is a long distance for a little kid. But I remember never having any school supplies and the teachers had to provide me with everything from crayons to paper and even backpacks. All of my friends had

everything they needed for school, and I didn't even have shoes that would fit me. I would even steal food from the extra lunch bin sometimes. I remember that during the weekends, I ate maybe a couple of times and even though I didn't like school, vacations and summer breaks sucked since that meant that I wasn't going to have consistent meals while I was out of school. By the time I got to about the 4th grade, I had to go with my stepdad to help him do landscaping and odd jobs for as many times as we could. But then we got into some issues since people thought it was child abuse. In fact, I think that one of my teachers called CPS (Child Protective Services) on my parents a few times when I was elementary since I didn't have proper clothes to go to school or was already hungry when I got there. CPS couldn't take me out of the house since the only way you could fix that trailer house was by buying us a new home or something. For some reason, my stepdad yelled at me as if I'm the one that called CPS on myself. He hated them and the cops stopping by the house and blamed me for it. This just distanced my mom, and she didn't want to stay at the house so she just picked up another shift or something to get out and a new cycle of being broke and not seeing my mom happened again.

According to Robert, he would use coding and technology to help him stave off depression and distract him from his family woes, manual labor, and continuous lack of basic needs. Robert would spend hours trying to program and design games and was finding this aspect of technology more appealing than having to do any of his schoolwork or the landscaping jobs with his stepdad. Robert's admitted jealousy toward the peers and friends in his class that he felt could afford basic living items and went home to a loving family so much so that he would take on more manual labor jobs with his dad in hopes of differentiating himself to become a computer program coder and game designer. His goal was to make enough money to purchase

computer parts to build his own personalized gaming system. Robert describes having an obsession to buy the computer parts as his school and social life were no longer important to him. However, the isolation and gradual abandonment he was feeling was only amplified by the time his mother left his family leaving Robert in a situation where his toxic relationship with his stepfather reached a point that forced Robert to be homeless. It was during this time that Robert's technology and coding pursuits vanished nearly overnight. Robert had to shift his focus on finding a place to live and to find any source of income to survive. Robert recalls feeling "stuck in survival mode" as his family abandoned him, Robert did the same to his academics and social circles to merely find a way to live.

Alecio endured harsh living conditions in his small village in Mexico and continued to live in extreme poverty when his family traversed the U.S.-Mexico border and relocated to south Texas. Alecio's family did not have a consistent place to call home, did not have a reliable source of clean drinking water, and struggled daily to obtain food. Alecio described his living situation as being just as dire or worse than the conditions they endured during their time in Mexico. Alecio was told directly by his parents that everyone in the family had to contribute and either bring in a source of income to the home or tend to the care of the family and home via cooking, cleaning, and other chores. When asked how this impacted Alecio's decision to drop out of school, Alecio said that being both a closeted homosexual and struggling financially to meet basic needs was an insurmountable struggle at school at home.

I really don't know how I didn't kill myself back then. I was struggling with my sexuality and who I was as a person and on top of all that, my family and I were beyond broke. We weren't living so much as surviving daily; it was a struggle. We didn't have anything to eat other than some vegetables, canned food, and leftovers from my cousin

when he'd work at a fish restaurant near us. It was hard just to go to school and not have to eat everything in sight. Maybe that's why I'm so fat now that I overeat every time these days. Anyway, I was so embarrassed that I had to wear the same things to school, and I smelled really bad since we usually only had water to boil and drink and not really to shower regularly. But my parents just one day told me when I was about 13 years old that I had to do something to help bring in some money or help keep up the house. I tried to help with chores at first but this wasn't doing anything really for us. I then started to help my dad as a repair and handyman anywhere we could find work. I would miss a ton of days at school but we did make some money by cutting lawns, basic landscaping things, fixing cars, and putting up fences in some really nice subdivisions. I was absent so much that I started to fail some of my classes and didn't want to go back and do the work since I was actually helping my dad. Maybe that's why when I told my family that I was gay, he was the only one that kind of supported me. Either way, being bullied in school and having to make up credits, no thanks. I was in a really dark place and the only thing that helped out was that I was making some cash. I didn't want to go and this only made me want to stay home and work and by the time I knew it, I didn't have any reason to go back.

Alecio stated that working with his dad provided him with a purpose as he was contributing to the needs of his family. According to Alecio, he was still struggling with bouts of depression and anxiety but working and being absent from his classes provided him with an escape from his bullies and the stigma he faced routinely at school. Alecio thrived on being independent and eventually saw no value in returning back to school to get antagonized by people he used to trust and view as friends. "When I was working, I was helping and making real

money but when I was in school, I hated it and I saw it was something that I could escape and now I had a chance to do just that.”

Issues of Identity and Self-Worth

According to Borland (2017) the construct of giftedness is not a psychological or educational dynamic but rather a spectrum of intelligence and abilities that resides within an individual not within the parameters of a label or classroom. Borland (2017) posits that giftedness is both innate and nurtured however it is imperative that it is not an actor in solely defining an individual as these labels may place undue external and internal pressures on children. In other words, despite the positive connotation provided by an identifier of giftedness, individuals, particularly children, may be subject to negative ramifications of expectations and academic presumptions. However, researchers find that schools, families, and society at large continually overvalues gifted children for their cognitive abilities and subsequently places pressures to perform academically at the detriment of the child’s self-esteem and sense of self-worth (Burns & Martin, 2019; Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2013; Owen & Porath, 2017; Smith, 2018). In brief, schools and families view a gifted student as a wealth of potential that was fortunate to have innate cognition rather than viewing the student as a child with comparable strengths, weakness, and individuality similar to his or her peers. According to Owen and Porath (2017) minority gifted children that come from economically depressed backgrounds and communities are often placed with significant stress from their peer group and teachers to perform academically while also facing challenges from their families to contribute to the household both in the present and future. These sources of tension have the ability to place pressure on gifted minority children of financial unstable homes. Some of these gifted children cite that the external pressures placed upon by family, friends, and school staff move to create a

distorted sense of self and is at the center of an identity crisis and a loss of self-worth (Sewell, 2020). Gifted minority children of at-risk backgrounds not only face the proverbial challenges of youth and adolescence of that of their peers, but they also must overcome their economic struggles, internal and external expectations, and must contend with negotiating identities in different environments (Sewell, 2020). Baudson and Ziemes (2016), contend that identity formation is especially stigmatizing to at-risk minority gifted learners leading to these children questioning and devaluing their sense of worth. Further, Burns and Martin (2019), postulate that these particular subgroups of gifted learners are more likely to experience depression, more likely to commit self-harm, and less likely to graduate high school when compared to their White, gifted peers group that do not live in lower socioeconomic homes.

Moreover, Tapper and Abbiss (2015), found that gifted minority children are more likely to develop self-esteem issues during their teenage years of development that have lasting effects on their sense of self-worth and abilities. The impact of navigating identities and a subsequent lack of self-worth may lead to issues more profound than a loss of motivation and academic avoidance. According to Watts (2020), the perceptions gifted, lower socioeconomic minority children place on themselves is significantly and negatively influenced in events viewed as failures that cannot be completed successfully. This subgroup of gifted students often lacks the development abilities and resilience or may not be prepared to adjust to failure due to their lack of authentic identity and sustained family support system (Watts, 2020). In other words, gifted minority children that live in financially unstable homes may be unlikely to overcome academic and non-academic challenges in large part due to their undeveloped sense of sense. Minority gifted learners' implicit beliefs about their intelligence and abilities are often inflated by individuals in their respective social and school however many of these children are not guided

with coping behaviors that and may ultimately view their giftedness as a obstacle and hindrance itself (Heyd-Metzuyanim & Hess-Green, 2020). The perspectives shared by the participants in this study echoed the prevailing research about the unique difficulties placed upon gifted minority children that face economic hardships.

All five of the participants each detailed events in their lives that caused them to have a strong sense of a loss of their identity that directly impacted their respective decision to leave school behind and focus on other aspects of their lives. A common theme that arose in the data was that of each participant battling to overcome separating their respective school identity with their individual identity as the two would often counter one another. The participants were often at odds with the expectations set on them when compared to their own goals and aspirations. Each participant strived to carve out their own sense of self while traversing the academic expectations placed upon them by their families, friends, and school personnel. According to the participants, their peer group and teachers tended to place added pressures of conformity and lofty scholastic presumptions that were not congruent to the goals held by the participants themselves.

Jane would often cite that she would feel overwhelmingly ostracized by her family and especially her friends and teachers when she would have emotional outbursts or came up short of attaining her goals. While Jane states that her ODD diagnosis played a role in her loss of self-regulation, she pointed out to the stress and anxiety that would escalate during moments of perceived failure at school or home. Jane's tendency to seek self-isolation and harm started when she experienced difficulty during her elementary years. Although a gifted learner, Jane stated that she struggles mightily in writing down her thoughts and often has bouts of writer's block as the myriad of ideas in her mind do not always transfer to the page. Jane articulated her

perspective by claiming that, “I just can’t write for the life of me. I have all these ideas but I get writer’s block so bad that I almost hear a ringing or buzzing sound and I can’t turn it off. I know what I want to write but I just can’t physically put it down on the page or computer.” Jane detailed that writing or exploring less structured academic activities tends to lead her to get stressed and may lead to triggering her depression and she gets physically ill from not producing her work. Moreover, Jane also struggled with similar challenges at home as her family would have a different standard of expectations regarding her behaviors and accomplishments.

I always felt that I had to be what everyone else wanted and that my mistakes were larger than if anyone else made the same mistake. It’s like a couldn’t have one mistake, one error since I was suppose to be better than that but I was just a kid like everyone else. Yeah, I was good at some things naturally but it doesn’t mean that I have to be perfect at everything. I remember that my parents, teachers, and even my friends would treat me differently as if I could do anything better than most. People don’t understand that I’m just as flawed as everyone else so matter what, I was going to screw up from time to time too. I had to be into science, math, and engineering. I had to behave a certain way or get certain grades or perform better than others. It was one pressure after another by everyone, especially at school. It was like I was always in competition and had to keep running faster than the other kids or my sisters at home. Having to be what others what you to be is hard and the weight of living another life gets heavy. Who am I? The person they want me to be or the person that I want to grow into?

Jane stated that the pressure to conform to the expectations of others was only magnified when she moved to Mexico to live with her then boyfriend then again upon her return. Jane understood that the decision to sneak to Mexico and live with an adult partner was a terrible

decision, she shared that her older sister did something similar and was not punished to the degree she was condemned. Jane described hearing hurtful rumors from her friends, being turned away from teachers for help, and being verbally abused by her parents despite her sister doing the same action years prior but faced far less repercussions. Jane felt betrayed by her ex-boyfriend, hurt by her loved ones, and lost faith in her school. Jane added that the entire reason she left behind her family, school, and friends was not only to start a family of her own but to build a new identity and have a new beginning. Jane stated, "I left to Mexico to escape the person that others wanted me to be and live a life on my own terms with my own goals. I was exhausted of having different identities and my giftedness was a curse not a gift."

Deshawn's struggles with substance abuse were directly influenced by his need to fit in with an older peer group and found that he pressured himself to take on more and more risk and dangerous behaviors. Deshawn stated that although learning and applying his knowledge through transdisciplinary ways came natural to him during his time in school, a large part of him identified more with his friends that were selling drugs. Deshawn's school identity was counter to his personality with his circle of friends that were encouraging and even threatening him to use and sell alcohol and other drugs. Albeit he claims that he was not a model student, Deshawn would complete his assignments and keep to himself while in school. However, once he shifted personas with his friends, Deshawn would display an aggressive, vulgar side to show that he could fit into his social circle. After a few years of trying to be a good student and stay out of trouble while getting intoxicated and under the influence of illicit drugs in the evenings, Deshawn did not know which persona was the authentic person.

I was getting high so much that I kind of merged my split personalities and selected the worst parts of each. I was dealing and hustling but also being lazy and inattentive while

doing it. I would just check out of conversations and couldn't think clearly anymore. I would even forget who I was suppose to be and would have to write down what I was suppose to do depending on the people that I were around me. It's a scary feeling not knowing who you are even when you grew up thinking that I was pretty smart. I mean, getting high a lot had to with it for sure, but forcing myself to be someone else for such a long time affected me so much that I lost who I was. I always felt it was like that feeling you get when you wake up quickly in the middle of the night when you're sleeping in another bed. For a quick moment, you don't know where you're at or what's going on and you're just confused. That's how I felt for a couple of years. Just paranoid and confused to that point that I would cry and don't know why. I didn't see myself as gifted. I didn't care about things and I started to feel that I had nothing to give as was just a druggie loser and nothing more.

Deshawn's inability to have an authentic identity played a pivotal role in his premature exit from high school. Deshawn felt that going to school only prolonged the internal battle he faced to become someone else as he continually was disengaged from his course work and teachers. Deshawn was fearful that the feeling of being in the fog of identity crisis was only amplified by the pressures of living up to the expectations set by others for someone of his cognitive gifts. Deshawn stated that while school was never truly a source of engagement or pleasure, his distance from school and self-isolation stemmed from having to pretend to be someone that he was not. Deshawn's identity crisis was always a part of him but only was magnified when he was identified as a gifted learner. "I hated that I was suppose to be a certain way starting the second I was labeled gifted. I was still the same person I was the second before I was labeled gifted, and I hated school then and hated it more now" Deshawn remembers.

Maria stated that her role as a gifted learner, a teenage parent, and a dyslexic student often produced feelings of depression as she felt overwhelmed as student and a mother. Maria struggled to learn foundational reading skill for years before she was identified as a gifted learner and still struggles to read fluently today. Maria expressed that she never saw herself as a gifted learner but rather a struggling learner that was placed with academic burdens before becoming a mother in her teenage years. While Maria's family was very caring and empathic to her initial difficulty in reading, her classmates and teachers were not as patient with her in school. Maria claimed that her peers and even her teachers would sometimes ridicule her for struggling to read basic text, often mimicking her cadence and reading fluency. However, the same issues persisted well after Maria was identified as a gifted child to a degree that Maria saw no academic or socioemotional value in school.

Most of my teachers were great but some of them acted like bullies to me and were frustrated that I couldn't read. They would read my writings aloud to the class knowing that I had trouble writing to use me as an example of how not to write. But when I was told I was gifted and moved to other classes, things only got worse now that the teacher, kids, and my own parents viewed me differently. Now, I was expected to magically get my act together but for me, nothing changed. I was still as confused as ever but now I had the weight of expectations. I started to drift away from school at this point and now that I was suppose to be a 'gifted student', whatever that means, I really started to push back. I was more interested in boys than in books and started to behave in a way that would be the opposite of what my parents and teachers wanted me to be. I guess this was my kind of rebellion just to be a normal kid. I actually liked it and the bad attention I was getting from school and home so I continued to be wild and not too long after that, I got pregnant.

Things went from bad to worse in terms of school. Now the rumor people were saying is true now and being called a 'slut' when you're 15 is hard. I felt that I was already too deep being someone else that I forgot about the person that I got really depressed.

Maria's depression was compounded when the few friends that she had did not want to see her and spread rumors about her sexuality. Moreover, the very few teachers that Maria developed an authentic rapport with did not attempt to support Maria during this dark time of her life. Maria stated that her self-esteem was at its lowest point and she felt that as a single, teenage mom her academic and social life was worthless as she had to adapt to this unexpected phase in her life. Maria was not ready to be a mother, but she was nearly ready to take her own life on multiple occasions. Maria explained that she "...just wanted to escape since I saw myself as nothing more than the 'slut' other people called me. I was worthless and just wanted to take some pills and sleep; I tried to do this a few times but here I am." Although Maria still struggles with suicidal thoughts and anxiety, her work and desire to continue to study in the medical field has given her a purpose and stronger sense of identity.

Robert's self-esteem and sense of self-worth have been low since his earliest memories. As far as he could recall, the absence of his mother at home due to her multiple jobs and lack of desire to be at home with the added element of his toxic relationship with his stepfather served as a continuous reminder to Robert that he was not loved or wanted. Robert detailed that he never developed a trusting, meaningful relationship with his mother and would remember that she would just be home to sleep from her shifts at work before eating and leaving again. The few times that she did interact with Robert were either momentary or superficial conversations. Robert did admit that his mother once told him that she did not want to have children during a drunken conversation with his stepfather. Despite his mother's indifference or lack of

communication with Robert, his relationship with stepfather was a callous reminder to Robert that he was not wanted and merely tolerated.

Robert's stepfather was vocal in his disdain toward his stepson and would often provoke Robert to engage in physical altercations with Robert. Although Robert would refrain from physically fighting with his stepfather, he would continually get verbally accosted and called derogatory names to belittle his manhood. According to Robert, his stepfather's animosity toward Robert was voiced daily and to the point that he believed that he was worthless and would not accomplish anything in life.

My stepdad was a sick man and a child abuser! I know that he harbored hate for me since he didn't want to have kids but apparently my mom didn't tell him about me until they were about to get married and he let me know about this all the time. I would get yelled about, called homophobic slurs, and was told that I was good-for-nothing since I got into some trouble every now and then. The worst part was when the school called to complain about me not doing my work and my stepdad would use this to remind me that I was never going to amount to anything in life so why try. I was just going to be lazy and unemployed like my uncles so why try. Remember, I was told this for almost all of my childhood. My mom wasn't there to protect me, I couldn't tell my teachers, and he just kept going. I had zero self-esteem and since I'm super lazy anyway, I started to not do my work and was missing school a bunch. I believed him so I didn't even try in school. I mean, I didn't like school anyway but it was engraved in my mind that I wasn't going to be accepted to college and if I did, there was no way to pay for it. I just wanted to be by myself and part of me liked being in that dark place. I guess I was used to it since I was there for years. Part of me still thinks that I'm worthless if I'm being honest.

Robert's neglect both as a student and a child was so profound that he continually sought refuge in isolation and activities that allowed him to be alone such as computer and program coding. Despite his academic gifts and innate talents to build and program machines, Robert did not see value in his work or himself as a learner or an individual. Robert expressed that only now, years after he was rejected by his mom and abandoned by his stepfather, did he cultivate confidence in himself and abilities. Robert stated that although he suffered psychological damage from his parents and indifference by his teachers and friends, he continues to carry the scars of deep issues of self-worth and value.

Alecio detailed that he long fought interpersonally with his identity as a member of the LGBT community in an area that, according to him, subscribes to antiquated notions of masculinity. Alecio believes that the Rio Grande Valley and south Texas tends to promote ruggedness and promiscuity for males and submissiveness and rearing children for females with nothing in the middle. Further, Alecio stated that this binary status is only exacerbated within the Mexican American culture particularly for first generation children. Although his father was gradually supportive of his decision to embrace his identity as a gay person, his mother, some of his teachers, and most of his classmates were far from supportive of his sexuality. Alecio described what was once feelings of angst and occasional name calling from his classmates quickly escalated to deep depression and constant bullying that led to lack of identity.

Other than my dad, I felt that I was hated and looked like I had some contagious disease or something. Before I told anyone I was openly gay, literally the day before, everyone was cool with me. Yeah, I think some people already knew and had an idea but when I confirmed it to them, it was like a switch was flipped that went from before I was gay to after I was gay. The transition was quick! I had my own family avoid me and my mom

cried for weeks. My teachers didn't know how to handle it so they just didn't even bring up if I needed help or someone to talk to. My counselor stayed away and didn't want to touch the subject. And my 'friends' were straight up horrible to me. They would call me a bunch of ugly names, yell at me, and even push me and threaten to punch me if I told anyone that I used to be their friend. One of my closest friends from my neighborhood even told everyone that he was going to stab me outside in the school parking lot if I came close to him and his brother. The sad thing is, no one stepped up and talked to him or others that were saying they wanted to use a knife on me. Violence is just wrong but knowing that no one tried to denounce it and try to help me made me realize that school wasn't a safe place. Yeah, my family at home didn't speak to me much but at school, I actually feared for my life. The same people that I grew up with now wanted to legit kill me. I was filled with anxiety and experienced really bad depression and withdrew from just about everyone. School was a place that I was scared to go and had no one to turn to. Imagine living a life like that. I didn't want to be me and hated myself and our stupid valley mentality.

According to Alecio, his family and his school was not ready to divorce Alecio from his homosexuality and the only one they confronted it with indifference, violence, or silence. Alecio struggled to cope for years and although he enjoyed learning, school was a symbol of hate and oppression. Alecio explained that the callous nature of others toward him and the persecution he faced was a driving factor in his decision to drop out of school as he continued to distance himself from his family, his school, and even himself. Alecio claims that the lasting effects on his mental health still haunt him today and now uses his loss of identity as a point of pride.

“Things are a little better but now that I’m not who I once was, I can define myself to someone that I want to actually be.”

Summary of Findings

Although all five of the interviewed and studied individuals experienced a unique journey as gifted high school dropouts, all of them shared common pathways of challenges. Despite their struggles, each person allowed for exploration of their narrative to investigate the motivational factors that led them to leave school early without their diploma. While each participant explored and reflected upon a plethora of influencing factors that played a role in their decisions to drop out of high school, each individual explained that these subthemes were elements of larger, pervasive themes. The subthemes were mitigating components that stemmed from more issues of relationships, economic backgrounds and a lack of self-worth and autonomy. All of the subthemes delved into obstacles faced by each participant that were too great to overcome to successfully graduate from high school. From social rejection to a lack of trust with others, to food scarcity, each subtheme fueled their decision to leave school behind in hopes of seeking isolation or employment. As detailed in Table 2, the subthemes provided added to the larger issues of relationship trauma at home and school, difficulties living in poverty, and challenges of self-worth and issues of identity. While some subthemes were unique to the individual or exhibited some level of interconnectedness, these topics directly displayed elements of the larger aforementioned connective themes.

Table 2*Subthemes*

Name	Jane	Deshawn	Maria	Robert	Alecio
Alcohol Abuse	*	*		*	
Social Rejection			*		*
Positive Family Relationship	*		*		
Positive School Relationship	*			*	
Negative Pressure and Expectations	*	*	*		*
Loss of Academic Motivation	*	*	*	*	
Language Proficiency Barriers			*		*
Peer Support		*	*		
Food Scarcity	*	*		*	*
Need for Employment	*	*	*	*	*
Anger Issues	*			*	
Depression/Anxiety	*	*	*	*	*
Suicidal Thoughts	*	*		*	*

As noted in Table 2, the subthemes revealed that these participants contended with social, economic, emotional, and linguistic barriers along with the weight of academic expectations. Although all of participants displayed their academic talents before or shortly after being identified as a gifted learner, they all become disengaged in school and formal learning by losing interest and motivation to return to the school environment. Further, while each participant explained they had ample opportunities to speak to their teachers or counselors for guidance as most of the individuals interviewed described their school staff as somewhat helpful, the school staff did not provide authentic support. According to VanTassel-Baska (2018), gifted learners are the least likely student subgroup to seek or obtain academic support when compared to their non-gifted peers. Moreover, these individuals stated that the academic aspect of school was the least arduous section of their high school experience as they faced hardships that far exceeded the classroom components.

Finally, all of the participants showed optimism and hopefulness for their future employment opportunities and reconnections with their families despite their current challenges. For instance, Jane and Maria have begun looking into GED programs while Maria has already started to study for nursing exams. Deshawn is hopeful that his music career is picked up by an area music producer as his social media platform is gaining traction online. Robert has used his math and economic acumen in cryptocurrencies while Alecio is considering entering his artwork in galleries around Texas once the pandemic has subsided. All of the participants stated that if and when they become successful in their respective fields, they will provide financial support to members of their respective families.

Summary

The chapter examined the participants' perspectives to and factors that influenced their respective decision to drop out of high school. The chapter delved into the captured overarching themes of socioeconomic impacts, emotional distress, and self-esteem and identify issues faced by each participant that directly caused them to prematurely leave school without obtaining their diploma. Further, the chapter outlined the participants' subthemes, including drug abuse and bouts of depression, that impacted affected their decision to drop out of high school.

The ensuing chapter will open by focusing on summarizing the findings of the collected narrative data in the study. The chapter will reiterate the problem statement, research questions, and will provide a summary of the theoretical framework of the research. Moreover, the final chapter will outline the implications for future researchers and educational practitioners.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the unique academic plights and circumstances faced by gifted learners that have contributed to the decision to leave schooling behind and withdraw from their secondary institutions prematurely without graduating. The research also stressed the significance, value, and perceptions of relationships, socioeconomics, and ideals of self-worth in and out of the school parameters that influenced gifted students to drop out of high school while exploring the impact of decisions as adults.

This final chapter will review the research questions and the summary of findings. Furthermore, this chapter will present the implications to current gifted learners, implications for the families of gifted children, and measures to decrease the dropout rates for this demographic of advanced learners. Lastly, the chapter will proffer recommendations to researchers and school leaders for future interventions to support the needs of gifted learners.

Research Questions

The research examined the phenomenon of identified gifted and talented Mexican American students who dropped out of high school in south Texas school districts. The purpose of this research was to study the shared experiences of formally identified gifted learners that decided to drop out of high school despite their academic abilities. The researcher analyzed and

interpreted the narrative data to find common themes of the shared experiences of the participants.

The following questions were utilized to guide the researcher during this study of the shared phenomena of the Mexican American gifted dropout:

- (1) How do selected gifted Mexican American gifted students describe their life experiences prior to dropping out of school?
- (2) What do the selected Mexican American gifted student dropouts in south Texas schools report to be the reasons for dropping out of school?
- (3) What do the selected Mexican American gifted dropouts describe to be the social, economic, and educational outcomes of dropping out of school?

Summary of Findings

This chapter explored the common themes and shared experiences of gifted Mexican American learners that dropped out of high school in south Texas despite their academic talents to cease their formal secondary education. While the narrative data from the five participants explored the collective phenomena of being gifted dropouts, their individual paths varied greatly. However, the crux of this research found overarching through lines that connected the experiences of these individuals that were based upon the following emergent themes - family and school relationship trauma, lower socioeconomic status and financial instability, and issues of identity and self-worth. All five of the participants detailed how their respective experience with relationship trauma, financial uncertainties, and lack of a sense of self and value were the pivotal factors that pushed them to drop out of high school before attaining their diploma. Although their lives, including their current family dynamics and educational aspirations are

varied, their respective backgrounds and self-perceptions unite their stories and their individual decisions to cease their enrollment in high school.

Studies in high school completion rates have demonstrated that school and social relationships are one of the most influential factors that can determine a student's probability of graduating or dropping out of high school (Blaas, 2014; Borland, 2009; Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Landis & Reschly, 2013; Zabloski & Milacc, 2012). Students that experienced positive and supporting relationships with their families, peers, and school staff are more likely to graduate high school and attend post-secondary institutions (Landis & Reschly, 2013). Conversely, students that describe a lack of support system at home or within their social circles or encounter indifferent attitudes from their teachers are significantly more likely than their peers to suffer from chronic absenteeism, credit loss, school disengagement and retention (Gonzalez, Kennedy, & Julien, 2009). Moreover, students that experience negative home and school dynamics fare much worse in terms of graduation rates. Researchers found that students that experience relationship trauma during their school years are over twice as likely to drop out of school compared to their peer group that did not experience significant relationship trauma (Chandler & Adams, 2013; Erwin & Worrell, 2012; VanTassel-Baska, 2018). According to Kearney and Levine (2014), relationship trauma can have lasting effects in gifted learners far beyond their adolescent years.

Each participant detailed a significant episode of relationship trauma that was a key motivator to leave high school and drop out. For instance, the two women in the study, Jane and Maria, were both victims of abuse and neglect at the hands of the men that they once loved. Jane followed her then romantic partner to Mexico to start a family only to lose her baby and her sense of safety when he faced abusive tactics by her partner. Maria was pregnant with her first

son to only have the father of the child leave her; just two years later, the second father of her youngest son left her again.

Deshawn felt that he was abandoned by his parents when he was needed the most while struggled with substance abuse problems and his subsequent arrests. Deshawn shared that his parents could have easily helped and counseled him but failed to do so, leaving him to fend for himself in the streets and fight for his life when he was attacked multiple times when he was arrested. Robert's relationship with his mom and stepfather transformed their home to a toxic environment. Robert's mother would take on shifts at work to avoid staying home while his stepfather would continually berate and verbally abuse Robert every day. When Robert's mother left the family, his stepfather immediately forced Robert to move out causing him to be homeless. Alecio stated his decision to be openly gay caused nearly all of his family and to disown him. Additionally, his friends then bullied him with verbal and physical threats while he was at school.

Moreover, each individual shared that they also faced forms of harassment and abuse by their peers while the rapport they had with teachers turned to stark indifference when they were experiencing depression, anxiety, and thoughts of suicide. While their relationship dynamics were varied, all the participants went through traumatic events largely at the hands of the family members and school individuals they once trusted. The lasting impacts of the emotional abuse inflicted on the participants had profound effects on their self-worth and value and created negative perceptions of school (Burns & Martin, 2019). Each of the five participants explained that the emotional toll they experienced from these traumatic events pushed them to leave high school and continues to affect their mental health status as adults. According to Capern and Hammond (2014), students that suffer from mental health issues such as depression, feelings of

isolation and neglect, and suicide are more likely to drop out of school when compared to students that do not experience traumatic emotional experiences.

The study found that the research on the effects of socioeconomic status, school and social bonds, and identify issues were consistent with the literature review and prevailing studies on gifted dropouts (Rivera, 2013). All of the participants felt the need to leave school behind to earn income to contribute to their family's lack of financial stability. While Deshawn sold illicit drugs to help buy food as well as clothing items, Jane, Maria, and Alecio worked to help pay for medical bills, rent and mortgages, and food. Robert had to enter the workforce as he was homeless and was his only source of income. According to (Peters, 2012), gifted students living in financial unstable homes are more likely to leave school prematurely to enter the workforce and contribute to the basics needs of the household.

According to Kurt and Chenault (2017), gifted students from low income families are more likely than their peer group of average to affluent students to be forced to find employment of accrue sources of income as earning money in the short term has more value than pursuing a higher education. Although lower socioeconomic families comprehend the significance of attaining a high school diploma, those in abject poverty rely on their children and families to directly contribute to the basic needs of the home (Peterson, 2015). During the course of the interviews, all of the participants stated that they may have graduated from high school and college if they did not have to overcome the obstacles brought upon by poverty and the need to survive. While they all explained that the academic components of school were not arduous, issues such as food scarcity, a severe lack of basic resources, and the needs of the family were challenges that were out of their control (Bueno, 2012). According to Kim and Kim (2018), working and bringing income to the household allows gifted teenagers of low income families to

feel a strong sense of family and accomplishment that surpasses the accolades and recognition brought about by being identified as a advanced learner. The findings of the effects of lower socioeconomics have on dropout rates supported the research outcomes in this study (McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Connor, 2012; Fry & Taylor, 2013; Nobbe & Davis, 2019). Coleman and Cross (2014), found that the pressures to overcome financial need were pivotal forces that drives gifted, low socioeconomic individuals to gradually stop attending classes to inevitably leave high school behind.

Lastly, all of the participants discussed experiencing intense feelings of isolation and depression brought about by a loss of identity and self-worth that ultimately influenced their decision to drop out of high school (Tapper & Abbiss, 2015). Each individual chronicled the painful moments in which a part of them was lost, their faith was shattered, or their sense of value as a person, family member or friend was severed. Jane's abusive partner and the loss of her unborn child revealed to her that her goal of having her own family with a person she loved was no longer possible. Jane stated that she sacrificed her youth and her mental health status to be with her partner only to have him constantly abuse her which led to Jane's loss of freedom and self-worth. Maria was abandoned by each of the two different fathers of her children and while she was pregnant and was forced to become an adult before she was 15 years old. Maria articulated that her loss of childhood and trust in others led to bouts of depression, deep trust issues, and lost her religious faith that used to guide and define her. Deshawn claimed that his substance abuse and time in incarceration had a profound impact on his persona and character as he went through a transformation. Deshawn was not himself and continually sought self-harm as a way to cope with the person he had become. Additionally, Robert's sense of self-worth and self-esteem gradually worsened as his family and school life deteriorated. Robert viewed

himself as worthless and claimed he had no motivation to attend school and obtain his diploma opting to insulate himself from causing him harm. Moreover, Alecio's struggles with identity and worth stemmed from his regret in being openly gay in an area that Alecio claimed was fearful of the LGBT community. While Alecio battled against his family, bullies at school and an array of indifferent teachers, he often would question his faith and value as a human being.

All of the participants displayed socioemotional stress formed through traumatic events, experienced self-imposed isolation, and continue to live in economically disadvantage home several years dropping out of high school. According to Sewell (2020), mental health issues brought about by traumatic experiences are one of the prevailing factors that impact a gifted student's decision to drop out of high school as a means to avoid further trauma. However, all the individuals in the study fervently believe that their cognitive abilities and prowess will lead them to better financial and family situations. Each participant detailed their individual paths towards economic prosperity and they argue that an increase in resources will translate to improved home and family situations. Smith (2018) found that gifted high school dropouts continue to retain confidence in their cognitive abilities to improve their financial status. The participants remained optimistic for their respective futures as each individual plans to leverage their skill set to formulate plans that will provide financial and emotional stability.

Conclusion

The three overarching, most prominent themes that emerged from the research were that of family and school relationship trauma, lower socioeconomic status and financial instability, and issues of identity and self-worth. All five of the participants detailed each theme as a salient factor that influenced their individual decision to drop out of high school. As noted in the interview sessions, each participant described their respective disengagement with school as a

they each experienced a decline in academic motivation, lack of connection to the taught content, and an increase in general apathy toward their classes. The findings for these formerly identified gifted students were directly rooted within Bruner's cognition theory (1971). It is essential for teachers and school staff to work collaboratively to not merely teach concepts but provide multiple avenues to build rapport to the school, the content and with themselves via authentic engagement and relationships that are of value for the individual needs of the child. According to Bruner (1971), a teaching and learning philosophy that centers on active and differentiated cognition is a fulcrum that promotes a learning continuum and aids in cultivating valuable relationship between the child, the school, and the curriculum. Thus, it is vital for teachers and schools to nurture and develop authentic bonds within the academic realm as well as the humanistic component. Researchers have long documented that students, particularly advanced learners, are persistently more engaged with academics when they value the learning process, their peers and teachers, as well as learning as an institution itself (Cengel & Alkan, 2018; Landis & Reschly, 2012; Zabloski & Milacci, 2012).

Another conclusion that was drawn by the researcher is the effect that socioeconomic impacted the decision for all of the participants to leave formal learning behind. Each participant explain the plight and hardships endured while living in a financially unstable home while attending a Title I school that had limited resources, teacher professional development, and lacked the tools necessary to address communities in poverty. According to Parr and Bonitz, (2015), lower socioeconomic schools tend to lack the funding and family and student intervention support systems to help provide equity when compared to non-Title I campuses. Every participant in the study stated that their teachers and school leaders were not equipped to provide the support that they needed as Mexican American gifted, at-risk students.

Title I and schools serving predominantly low income communities must shift resources and staff development to close the identification gaps. Schools in lower socioeconomic communities have historically under identified gifted learners and have largely failed to provide adequate professional development to staff to properly identify, service, and challenge gifted learners through a high caliber and advanced curriculum (Esquierdo & Arreguín-Anderson, 2012; Ramos, 2010). Providing teacher trainings specific to the identification, differentiated needs, and challenges of gifted learners must be a priority for low income schools. It is vital for school leaders to erect systems of continual professional development in the areas of gifted child development and pedagogy that will assist in identifying advanced learners via assessments free of linguistic and cultural bias. School leaders should develop committees that procure quality assessment and identification programs for children in the primary grades that collaborate with teacher, parent, and district leadership to view a child's potential giftedness across a spectrum of criteria. Advanced academic budgets must be utilized to ensure that all staff is thoroughly trained to both identify gifted learners as well as to provide them with rigorous instructional practices.

Lastly, each participant also expressed the impact that issues of identity and self-worth influenced their decision to drop out of school. Each participant detailed struggles with family and school expectations as well as deep feelings of inadequacy. Owen and Porath (2017), found that minority gifted children of low income households are more likely to experience stress and anxiety from their peer group and teachers to academically perform at high levels while also contending with challenges from their families to contribute monetarily. Moreover, these Mexican American gifted students are more likely to experience depression and thoughts of suicide than their White, non-gifted peers (Espinoza-Herold & González-Carriedo, 2017). All of

the participants in the study stated that the feelings of depression and a lack of identify was one of the most influencing factors that pushed them to drop out of high school.

Moreover, districts and school must provide intervention services and programs specific to gifted learners at risk of dropping out of school. Esquierdo and Arreguín-Anderson (2012), argue that it is vital for school leaders, teachers, and parents must be properly trained to identify the characteristics of gifted students at risk of leaving school due to non-academic factors. While gifted students have the propensity to excel scholastically, many of these advanced learners contend with obstacles that are pervasive to other students as well as struggles that are inherent to gifted learners (Ortiz, Valerio, & Lopez, 2016). According to Andreadis and Quinn (2017), it is critical for schools to develop early intervention programs that stress relationship and rapport building, emotional intelligence and self-confidence, and systems to combat the negative effects of children living in poverty and low income homes. By leveraging the home environment and the school setting, minority and lower socioeconomic schools can ensure that families and school leaders work in concert to provide socioemotional support, family guidance, and school-community resources to mitigate the gifted dropout rate for all at risk advanced learners (Román, 2015).

Additionally, gifted students that actively dropout of school should be given a different approach to credit recovery models that are offered to their peers to increase the likelihood of these students attaining their high school diploma (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2017). Current intervention programs, with their single approach to attendance and credit recovery, is not a panacea for all children especially for identified gifted learners (Baudson & Ziemes, 2016). Nobbe and Davis (2019), argue that as opposed to teacher guided work or support to attain passing grades on assessments such as end of course exams, gifted children should be provided

with project-based learning that is geared to their interests based upon the curriculum content. For instance, inquiry-based projects can be assigned that allow the gifted child to work and learn at a self-pace within the given parameters of time and directions of their teacher. In doing so, schools can proffer support that is flexible enough to engage children with learning, provide them with autonomy, and help gifted learners to reconnect and establish a trusting rapport with the school and teachers (Rivera, 2013). According to Bruner's (1960) theory of discovery and learning, gifted learners can thrive in intellectually and sociologically approaches that engage and motivate them via authentic connections and relationships between themselves, the content and their school environment.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research is recommended to be conducted in the areas of academic motivation and perseverance for gifted learners. This would allow researchers to collaborate with teachers and school leaders to develop programs specifically designed to foster grit and determination for advanced students (Cengel & Alkan, 2018). Further, more studies are needed to determine the effectiveness of current high school dropout intervention programs for minority gifted learners (McClain & Pfeiffer, 2012). Additional research is also recommended to examine the relationship between socioeconomics, traumatic events, and self-worth for all gifted children. In doing so, researchers will be able to analyze qualitative and quantitative data for both minority and non-minority students (De Wet & Gubbins, 2011; Yin, 2017).

Recommendations for Educational Leaders

It is imperative for educational leaders to provide systems of professional development and progress monitoring for gifted learners beyond the areas of academic support (Bueno, 2010). School leaders and administrators must ensure that curriculum differentiation, socioemotional

and counseling guidance, as well as family engagement is a paramount facet of the educational spectrum for gifted learners. Educators must view gifted minority students as individuals divorced from their talents but rather as children with unique vulnerabilities and strengths (Rivera, 2013).

Moreover, educational leaders must cultivate dropout intervention programs designed for gifted children of various backgrounds, socioeconomics, and emotional needs. Teachers must be trained to not only identify the characteristics of gifted and advanced learners but must also be properly conditioned to recognize at-risk gifted factors that may prevent these learners from dropping out of school. It is imperative that school leaders and teachers simultaneously challenge gifted, at risk children with rigorous instructional techniques and transdisciplinary pedagogical approaches while establishing systems of rapport and trust that develop a strong sense of self and autonomy (Espinoza-Herold & González-Carriedo, 2017).

Gifted learners must be provided with individualized curriculum that is differentiated from the general education curriculum that is structured to deepen student engagement via both specialty and generalist means (Ford, 2010). In other words, gifted children must be provided with teaching, learning, and assessment models that proffer modified pathways to comprehension and application of acquired knowledge that is as malleable as it is differentiated. Advanced curriculum alignment should parallel, but not mirror, the general education framework but yet challenge these gifted children with a plethora of engagement opportunities for application that value depth, relevance, and complexity.

Additionally, the proliferation of remote teaching and learning was at its apex during the Covid-19 global pandemic. This virtual framework for teaching and learning proffered innovative approaches to grown knowledge and insights that took place virtually. Many school districts in

south Texas provided their students with computers, tablets, and WIFI access hotspots to gain internet connectivity. However, as the effects of the pandemic improved for families and communities, schools began to gradually recoup these digital learning resources (Texas Education Agency, 2018). Schools should retain this instructional technology infrastructure to facilitate continual learning for gifted learners of low income families to foster a purist of knowledge well outside the parameters of the campus walls (Smith, 2018). According to Bruner (1971) advanced learners flourish when they are provided with the support and tools needed to explore their interest and simulate their learning in a differentiated manner rather than completing wrote tasks for assessment mastery. By providing gifted learners with the resources needed to expand their learning and follow their interests, school leaders and teachers ensure to foster an individualized growth mindset for the most advanced learners (Rivera, 2013).

Finally, schools and families must work in concert to develop and foster positive and rapport with gifted students through parental educational courses, counseling outreach programs, and authentic opportunities for peer and teacher mentorship. Positive relationships with the school community can engender trust, establish authentic connections, and foster an identify of self-worth for gifted learners.

Summary

This concluding chapter of the study sought to interpret the findings of the narrative data shared by the insights and perspectives of Mexican American gifted dropout students. The researcher expanded upon the influence that socioeconomics, the persecutions of oneself and value, and family, school, and peer relationships impacted Mexican American gifted students to drop out of high school and the lasting effects of their decision to prematurely cease their formal education. This chapter explored the critical facets of the study in that of the research questions

and the discussion of the summary of findings. The researcher reviewed the implications for gifted learners, their families, and schools to proffer approaches to mitigate and decrease the dropout rates for Mexican American gifted students that are at risk to disengage from school. The chapter also offered recommendations for future researcher as well as proposals for school leaders to establish effective intervention support systems for the gifted learner.

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APPENDIX A

APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Study Title: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL COLLECTIVE CASE STUDY OF
MEXICAN AMERICAN GIFTED DROPOUTS IN SOUTH TEXAS

Consent Name: Participant 1

Principal Investigator: Albert Irlas

Telephone: (956)457-2471

Emergency Contact: Domingo Palomo

Telephone: (956)457-3188

Key points you should know

- We are inviting you to be in a research study we are conducting. Your participation is voluntary. This means it is up to you and only you to decide if you want to be in the study. Even if you decide to join the study, you are free to leave at any time if you change your mind.
- Take your time and ask to have any words or information that you do not understand explained to you.
- We are doing this study because we want to learn how to prevent gifted Mexican American students from dropping out of high school.
- Why are you being asked to be in this study?
 - You were identified as a gifted learner that drop out of school between 1999 and 2019.
- What will you do if you agree to be in the study?
 - As a participate, you will be taking part in 3 interviews answering questions related to you family, background, school experience, and reasoning to dropping out of high school as a gifted learner before obtaining your diploma.
 - Participation in this study requires audiotape of your participation in answering the interview questions proposed by the researcher, by signing this consent form you are giving us permission to make and use these recordings.
- Can you be harmed by being in this study?
 - Being in this study involves no greater risk than what you ordinarily encounter in daily life.
 - Risks to your personal privacy and confidentiality: Your participation in this research will be held strictly confidential and only a code number will be used to

identify your stored data. However, because there will be a link between the code and your identity, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed

- If we learn something new and important while doing this study that would likely affect whether you would want to be in the study, we will contact you to let you know what we have learned.
- What are the costs of being in the study?
 - None
- Will you get anything for being in this study?
 - You will not receive any payments for taking part in this study.
- What other choices do you have if you decide not to be in the study?
 - You may opt out of participating in this study at any time.
- Could you be taken out of the study?
 - You could be removed from the study at any point that would like willingly to disengage from the study.

Can the information we collect be used for other studies?

Information that could identify you will be removed and the information you gave us may be used for future research by us or other researchers; we will not contact you to sign another consent form if we decide to do this.

What happens if I say no or change my mind?

- You can say you do not want to be in the study now or if you change your mind later, you can stop participating at any time.
- No one will treat you differently. You will not be penalized.

How will my privacy be protected?

- We will share your information with the University of Texas Rio-Grande Valley only using pseudonyms to as an added layer of confidentiality.
- Your information will be stored with a code instead of identifiers for your name, date of birth, email address, and details of your life that you share.
- Even though we will make efforts to keep your information private, we cannot guarantee confidently because it is always possible that someone could figure out a way to find out what you do on a computer.
- No published scientific reports will identify you directly.
- If it is possible that your participation in this study might reveal behavior that must be reported according to state law, such as abuse, intent to harm self or others, disclosure of such information will be reported to the extent required by law.

Who to contact for research related questions

For questions about this study or to report any problems you experience as a result of being in this study contact Albert Irlas at 956.457.2471 or at albert.irlas01@utrgv.edu.

Who to contact regarding your rights as a participant

This research has been reviewed and approved by the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Protections (IRB). If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, or if you feel that your rights as a participant were not adequately met by the researcher, please contact the IRB at (956) 665-3598 or irb@utrgv.edu.

Signatures

By signing below, you indicate that you are voluntarily agreeing to participate in this study and that the procedures involved have been described to your satisfaction. The researcher

will provide you with a copy of this form for your own reference. To participate, you must be at least 18 years of age. If you are under 18, please inform the researcher.

APPENDIX B

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Research Questions

1. How do selected gifted Mexican American students describe their life experiences prior to dropping out of school?
2. What do the selected Mexican American gifted student dropouts in south Texas schools report to be the reasons for dropping out of school?
3. What do the selected Mexican American gifted dropouts describe to be the social, economic, and educational outcomes of dropping out of school?

Interview Questions

1. Can you please describe your schooling experience? Were you motivated to learn?
2. Despite your academic advancement, what challenges did you face in school? What were some of your challenges outside of the classroom setting? Did you face any economic, social or academic hardship during your school years?
3. How did you feel being identified as a gifted student? Did this labeling present unique obstacles or opportunities for you?
4. How important were your relationships with your friends, classmates, staff, and parents? Did any of these relationships impact your decision to drop out of school?
5. Before deciding to no longer attend any classes, did you feel that you were provided with support or interventions to stay in school? If any, describe the opportunities you had to communicate your feelings about no longer desiring to be in school.
6. When did you initially begin to consider dropping out of school? What could have changed your mind to cause you to have remained in school?
7. Can you please describe how you untimely decided to drop out of school? Please share this experience.
8. How did your family members, friends, and teachers react to your decision to drop out and cease to continue your education?
9. How would you describe the consequences of your decision to drop out?

10. What could have school personnel, friends, or family members have done to prevent you from dropping out?
11. Would you do anything differently if you had the opportunity?
12. Would you like to share anything else about your experience?

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Albert Irlas was born in Albert Lea, Minnesota and spent his first 5 years in Albert Lea before his family moved to Edinburg, Texas. After completing his coursework and graduation requirements at Edinburg North High School, Albert enrolled at the University of Texas-Pan American in Edinburg, Texas. Albert received a Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies in 2002. Albert began his teaching career as an elementary teacher and pursued a Master of Education degree in Educational Administration at the University of Texas-Pan American and completed this degree in 2008. Albert then earned his doctorate degree in Educational Leadership at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley in 2021. Albert continued to work in leadership roles in the Rio Grande Valley of south Texas and can be reached at albert.irlas@gmail.com or at his mailing address at 2022 N. Terry Rd. in Edinburg, Texas.