A Phenomenological Study of Long-Term Success in Spite of Formal Education: What Can Be Learned From Those Who Do Not Fit the Norm

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Mary Elizabeth Butler

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Dr. Frank Guldbrandsen, Advisor

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From the time I was very small I was encouraged to ask, "*Why not?"* instead of, "*Why?"* *Why not* move to a new place? *Why not* join Teach For America? *Why not* do research in India? *Why not* attempt to uproot self and dog to live and research in Croatia? *Why not* pursue a doctoral degree while working full time? This mentality does not fit with doing what is easy. It is sometimes lonely, and it is always challenging. No less, I am determined to live a life free of regret. I will continue to push myself, and to demand that I don't waste a single minute of the life I have to live. This would not be possible without the love and support of my family and friends. I am thankful to my mother and father for believing in me regardless of the scheme I come up with, for encouraging me to ask *why not,* and for helping me to get back up after setbacks. I am thankful to my brother for helping me to be brave by allowing me to traipse after him and try new things. I am thankful to my grandmothers and great grandmothers for pursuing education long before it was the norm for women to do so. I am thankful to the other strong women in my life who have defied the odds, and for the moms and dads who helped them believe they could. I am thankful to my friends for painstakingly helping me to edit my dissertation and for understanding so many missed phone calls and delayed emails. I am thankful to my fearless advisor, Dr. Frank Guldbrandsen, whose patience, humor, and encouragement cannot be understated. I am blessed to have him as a mentor and as a friend. Finally, I am thankful to Goose, who could not be a better writing partner, source of inspiration, best friend, or standard poodle.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all those who walk to the beat of their own drum; the nonconformists, the creatives, the daredevils, the question askers, the problem solvers…May life be lived fully, and may it never be a checklist.

Abstract

A founding assumption of the formal school system is that success in the classroom correlates with success later in life, both in terms of career and participation in society. Indeed, one of the core objectives of the formal school system is to equip students with the ability to contribute meaningfully to society economically, socially, and civically. A current trend in education has been the use of academic mindsets to predict success in the formal school system. Students who apply positive academic mindsets are deemed likely to succeed and capable of long-term success. The opposite is presumed of students who fail to apply positive academic mindsets. Despite disengaging from the formal school system and failing to apply positive academic mindsets, some students do achieve long-term success. This study sought to understand what caused students capable of long-term success to disengage from the formal school system and the personal characteristics that contributed to their success. Using a qualitative, phenomenological approach, seven participants who achieved long-term success as adults but who did not graduate from high school, earned a GED, or graduated from high school but experienced significant difficulty in doing so were interviewed. Analysis resulted in identifying five specific negative school experiences which contributed to disengagement: (a) college not expected by family or educators; (b) feelings of personal isolation; (c) bureaucratic environment; (d) easy; (e) boring subject matter. Factors outside of the formal school system that contributed to long-term success included: (a) a difficult home-life resulting in a strong sense of personal responsibility and self-advocacy; (b) outgoing personality; (c) belief in ability to succeed with or without formal education; (d) high level of grit; (e)

growth mindset. Ultimately, the skills that made the participants successful as adults are the same skills that could have made them successful in the formal school system. This suggests that failure in the formal school system is not due to lacking the necessary skills to succeed, but to perceiving the objective of academic success as not personally relevant. The use of academic mindsets to predict long-term success is not a panacea for all students. Harm exists is underestimating the true ability of students who do not fit the norm by assessing their potential against an irrelevant goal.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

A founding assumption of the formal school system is that success in the classroom correlates with success later in life, both in terms of career and participation in society (Aristotle, 350; Bode, 1938; Bowles & Gintis, 2002). A current trend in the explanation of student success within the formal school system is an evaluation of noncognitive skills, with specific emphasis on the application of academic mindsets.

Academic mindsets are defined as the psychosocial attitudes, assumptions, or beliefs one has about oneself in relation to academic work (Farrington et al., 2012). Essentially, academic mindsets represent the ideas and attitudes with which a student approaches school. Students with positive academic mindsets are more likely to work harder, engage in more productive academic behaviors, and persevere to overcome obstacles to success than those with negative academic mindsets (Farrington, 2013). There are four major academic mindsets considered to contribute the most to academic success. These include: Sense of Belonging in Academic Community, Belief that Academic Ability Can Increase with Effort, Belief about Being Able to Succeed at a Given Task, and Belief that the Academic Task is of Value. Each of these academic mindsets is related to persistence at academic tasks; positive mindsets increasing persistence and negative mindsets impeding it (Farrington et al, 2012).

While there is evidence that positive academic mindsets are correlated with academic persistence and achievement, each academic mindset presupposes that formal schooling is relevant to the student in the first place. A student who does not find formal

schooling personally relevant is unlikely to exhibit a positive mindset in any of the aforementioned areas, regardless of his or her ability to achieve long-term success or potential for future societal participation. Consequently, assessing the application of academic mindsets to predict long-term success may discount the true potential of intelligent, driven youth due to their failure to resonate with the prescribed formal school system.

There are several reasons a person may not perceive the relevance of the formal school system. Of particular interest to this study were those who disengaged from school due to the perception that academic success, including college attendance, was not a prerequisite for long-term success. With public school curriculums increasingly oriented towards college preparation, disengagement is common among non-college bound students (Kemple & Snipes, 2000). As college becomes increasingly expensive, the likelihood increases that a greater number of students will no longer consider it a viable option, consequently risking increased academic disengagement. Additionally, students whose personal backgrounds do not resonate with the norms and expectations in the formal school setting may feel more strongly about preserving his or her personal identity than conforming to one imposed by the formal school system (Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Zine, 2007). Essentially, self-preservation trumps academic engagement in an environment perceived as inhospitable. Students who identify as 'other' due to the perception of having the wrong clothes, wrong language, or wrong traditions may perceive the formal school system as ostracizing and not worth the emotional pain to participate in (Schwartz, Gorman, Nakamoto, & McKay, 2006).

Recently, there has been a push in education towards emphasizing noncognitive factors and measures over intelligence tests to predict academic success. For those who do not find the formal school system personally relevant, the potential to underestimate noncognitive skills by measuring them in relation to pursuit of an irrelevant goal is a legitimate threat. This may result in discounting the true ability of students perfectly capable of long-term success by inappropriately labeling them as failures.

The intent of this research was to suggest that evaluation of noncognitive skills in the formal school system to predict long-term success is not appropriate for all students. Specifically, the application of academic mindsets is contingent on student acknowledgement that the formal school system itself is personally relevant. Consequently, evaluating student application of positive academic mindsets as a prediction for long-term success is likely to be inaccurate. Overlooking the notion that some fully capable students choose not to apply academic mindsets because they do not perceive academic success as a pre-requisite to long-term success risks legitimizing one-size fits all school system at the expense of those who fail to conform.

By studying the underlying values, assumptions, and beliefs held by those who fail to apply positive academic mindsets in the formal school setting yet achieve long-term success, this research sought to understand the root of academic disengagement among highly successful people to understand if the formal school system can be improved to better serve them. Specifically, what personally held convictions deterred participation? What about the formal school system failed to provide the academic or

social motivation to succeed within its confines? What role did the culture of schooling and/or learning experiences play in student disengagement?

Because success in the formal school system is a generally accepted indicator of long-term success, a sub motive of this study was to understand how some individuals succeed in spite of it. Specifically, what personal characteristics about those who disengaged from the formal school system enabled them to achieve long-term success? Of special inquiry was the role of the noncognitive skill, *grit*. Grit is defined as, "the tendency to sustain interest in and effort toward long term goals" (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly, 2007). The idea is that people with high levels of grit are more likely to succeed than people who do not. This research attempted to understand whether those who achieved long-term success despite disengagement from the formal school system shared similar levels of grit.

Noncognitive Factors and Academic Mindsets

Noncognitive factors in education are traits that cannot be captured by traditional measures of assessment such as intelligence tests and state examinations. Gutman & Schoon (2013) argue noncognitive traits are those that underpin success in cognitive areas (i.e. literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking). Specific noncognitive factors include: self-perceptions, motivation, perseverance, self-control, metacognition, social competencies, resilience & coping, and creativity (Gutman & Schoon, 2013). Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly (2007) identify grit as an additional noncognitive factor. Gates Foundation researchers, Dweck, Walton, & Cohen (2011)

describe the noncognitive factors that promote long-term learning and achievement as academic tenacity:

> At its most basic level, academic tenacity is about working hard (and working smart) for a long time. More specifically, academic tenacity is about the mindsets and skills that allow students: to look beyond short-term concerns to longer-term or higher-order goals, and to withstand challenges and setbacks to persevere toward these goals. (p. 5)

The concept that success is dependent on more than intellect emerged over 100 years ago with Sir Francis Galton's observation that ability alone does not bring success, but that success is most often coupled with "zeal and with capacity for hard labour *[sic]*" (Galton, 1892). Educators continue to grapple with why students of equal intelligence have different academic outcomes. The emphasis on noncognitive factors attempts to answer this question.

Current trends in education are promoting the development and measure of noncognitive factors over cognitive skills as means to predict and increase academic achievement (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005). Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly (2007) found that grit is better able to predict success than intellectual achievement in multiple arenas, including the Scripps National Spelling Bee.

Academic mindsets are one of five categories of noncognitive factors believed to contribute to academic success (Farrington et al., 2013). The other four categories include academic behaviors, academic perseverance, social skills, and learning strategies (Nagaoka et al., 2013). Arguably, mindset is the most important category, as it serves as the foundation for all other categories. (See *Figure 1*: Academic Success Noncognitive Factors.) Without positive assumptions or beliefs about oneself in relation to academic

work, students are unlikely to exhibit the requisite academic behaviors, perseverance, learning strategies, and social skills necessary to be academically successful.

Figure 1: Academic Success Noncognitive Categories. Mindset serves a foundation for other categories.

Academic mindsets attempt to explain why and under what circumstances students choose to exercise problem-solving skills, engage in academic coursework, and persevere through academic obstacles and failures (Farrington, 2013).

Through an extensive literature review in June, 2012, the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research identified four significant academic mindsets, each independently associated with increased perseverance, improved academic behaviors, and higher grades (Farrington, 2013). As mentioned above, these mindsets include: Sense of Belonging in Academic Community, Belief that Academic Ability Can Increase with Effort, Belief about Being Able to Succeed at a Given Task, and Belief that the Work is of Value.

Sense of Belonging in Academic Community

A sense of belonging in an academic setting refers to students' sense of connectedness to peers and adults in their classes and their school (Farrington, 2013). Nagaoka et al. (2013) describes this mindset as the perception that one has a rightful place in a given academic setting. Students who lack a sense of belonging in academic

settings are likely to feel isolated and alone. This contributes to the perception that achievement is for the students who belong, lacking personal conviction that it applies to them.

Belief that Academic Ability can Increase with Effort

Students who believe they can increase their academic ability through their own effort are more likely to exhibit behaviors associated with academic achievement. Dweck, Walton, & Cohen (2011) describe this as a *growth mindset*, in contrast to a *fixed mindset*, which perceives intelligence as a fixed quality. They argue students with a growth mindset are more likely to perceive academic challenges as opportunities to learn and grow and to view failure as a setback as opposed to an ending.

Belief about Being Able to Succeed at a Given Task

The belief that success at a given task is possible essentially boils down to self-efficacy. It reflects students' perception of their own capabilities and potential for success at a given task. Students who believe they are able to succeed are more likely to engage in academic tasks that are challenging and to sustain effort necessary to achieve. Alternatively, students who expect failure or don't believe they will be good at something are more likely to devalue the importance of the task and less likely to invest effort (Farrington, 2013).

The Belief that the Work is of Value

The degree to which a student finds a task interesting and worthwhile influences his or her perseverance and investment in the task (Nagaoka et al., 2013). Wigfield and Eccles (2000) defines the value of a task as derived by the importance of doing well at it,

the personal enjoyment gained by doing well at it, or serving a useful purpose to attain some end goal. Students who believe an academic task is of value are more likely to expend effort completing it (Farrington, 2013).

An important distinction within this mindset is that it has to do with specific academic tasks. A student who doesn't see the value in a particular project may not feel motivated to exercise the academic behaviors to make him or her successful in that particular project, however, this does not preclude him or her from exhibiting positive academic behaviors in another subject or on another project they perceive of value. This mindset is different from an overall belief or assumption that the academic system as a whole is not personally relevant. The latter mindset impedes performance on all academic tasks due to an overarching belief that formal schooling itself is of little personal value. It is an eschewing of the system as a whole as opposed to components within the system. Arguably, this mindset underlies all other academic mindsets, as it compels or dissuades motivation to participate within the formal school system at all.

Academic mindsets are of particular interest to educators due to recent findings that several simple, short-term interventions to change students' academic mindsets have had lasting impacts on school performance (Farrington et al, 2012). The repercussion of this is both positive and negative. Indeed, the ability to increase academic achievement through emphasis on noncognitive factors sheds new light into the role of motivation and perseverance. Conversely, overemphasis on noncognitive factors risks the assumption that students failing to succeed within the confines of the formal school system simply aren't working hard enough. This places the impetus of failure exclusively on students,

negating any type of systemic or institutionalized barriers impeding his or her ability to succeed, regardless of how hard he or she tries.

Measurement of noncognitive factors in relation to academic work also negates the fact that some driven, creative, hard-working individuals who are not motivated to exercise the skills in an academic setting lack the skills entirely. It is unfair to presuppose that the formal school system is an arena in which all students feel worthy of their time and energy. It could be that individual or specific groups of students lack conviction that the formal school system is personally relevant, favoring other forms or venues to exercise their perseverance and motivation to succeed. This research sought to identify the underlying assumptions and beliefs held by students who do *not* succeed in the formal school system yet achieve long-term success. In so doing, it attempted to illustrate that measuring noncognitive factors in relation to an irrelevant goal can yield inaccurate levels of true noncognitive ability.

Academic Relevance

There are a variety of reasons a student may not find relevance in the formal school system. By nature, its one size-fits-all approach may deter students with alternative worldviews, learning styles, or those who resist conforming to prescribed expectations. Any student who fails to connect long-term success with academic performance is at risk to find the system itself irrelevant. An expert on student engagement, Samuel Tenenbaum (1940), explains, "The children attend school with consciousness that it will help them out in later life. School is not pleasurable for itself. It is important for its future promise." Students whose parents or communities have not

experienced a personal link between achievement in the formal school system and long-term success are less likely to grow up believing that achievement in the formal school system is important (Rumberger, 1995). Other students who may not connect long-term success with achievement in the formal school setting are nonconformists, those who do not resonate with a prescribed curriculum or those who resist the overall socialization function of schools (Jackson, 1990). Nonconformists, or those who identify as 'other,' due to social, cultural, or economic reasons are less likely to perceive the value of participation in the formal school system as worth the pain, regardless of what it offers in the long run (Schwartz, Gorman, Nakamoto, & McKay, 2006). Finally, students who feel they are more likely to succeed through athletics, acting, or other non-academic pursuits also may feel that formal school is not personally relevant (Eccles, 1993).

While some research exists on why students of a specific economic class, ethnicity, or sex do not engage in the formal school system, there is little research that focuses on understanding the beliefs and assumptions of those who achieved long-term success yet failed to perceive the relevance of participating within the formal school system. This research intended to address this gap in understanding.

Long-term Success

In addition to transmitting academic skills, one of the core objectives of the formal school system is to ensure its graduates are properly instilled with the social norms, values, and beliefs intended to contribute to the well-being and maintenance of society (Durkheim, 1956; Giroux & Penna, 1979). Indeed, schools serve as a mechanism to instill societal values in students, so that regardless of their position in the hierarchy of

society, they receive sufficient education on how to participate fully as citizens and workers (Dornbusch, Glasgow, & Lin, 1996). Essentially, long-term success as defined by the formal school system equates to economic self-sufficiency, respect for social order, and civic participation.

This study identified individuals who achieved long-term success in spite of disengaging from the formal school system. These participants were able to achieve long-term success, as defined by formal school system, without the help of the formal school system. Specifically, each participant gained employment or sustained a trade or craft without periods of unemployment. Further, each participated in civic activities including paying taxes, voting, and/or serving on community committees and boards.

Problem Statement

It is generally agreed upon that performance in the formal school system is an indication of the potential for long-term success. Little is known about the underlying assumptions and beliefs held by individuals who disengage from the formal school system yet achieve long-term success as adults. Specifically, what personal characteristics about those who disengage from the formal school system enabled them to achieve long-term success?

Further, is an evaluation of the application of academic mindsets a valid indicator for long-term success? Until there is greater understanding on the characteristics of and underlying assumptions and beliefs held by those who achieve long- term success in spite of disengagement from the formal school system, a well-founded conclusion cannot be formed.

Purpose Statement

The intent of this research was to study the underlying values, assumptions, and beliefs held by those who disengage from the formal school system yet achieve long-term success as adults. In doing so, it sought to understand the root of academic disengagement among successful people as means to understand if the formal school system can be improved to better serve them. Specifically, this research questioned the validity of evaluating student potential for long-term success based on the application of academic mindsets. It further sought to understand what personal characteristics of those who disengaged from the formal school system enabled them to achieve long-term success.

Research Questions

1. What assumptions and beliefs contribute to the perception that the formal school system is not personally relevant?
2. What about the formal school system fails to provide the academic or social motivation to succeed within its confines?
3. What role does the culture of schooling and/or learning experiences play in student disengagement?
4. What factors outside of the formal school system contribute to the long-term success of students who do not succeed within the formal school system?

Significance

Some students who do not succeed within the formal school system achieve long-term success in spite of it. Through researching the lived experiences of these

individuals, this study attempted to provide insight on their underlying values, assumptions, and beliefs, and to ensure that talented students who do not find personal relevance in the formal school system are not inaccurately labeled as unlikely of future success.

As the role of academic mindsets becomes increasingly used to explain and predict success within the formal school system and success within the formal school system continues to be used as an indication of long-term success, this study attempted to diversify the discourse by highlighting individuals who do not fit the norm. It sought to expose that the four academic mindsets identified as significantly linked to academic achievement presuppose that students believe in the formal school system as a whole, and creates the hazard of drawing false conclusions on the true capability of students who are not motivated by academic achievement.

Definitions

The following are operational definitions of terms used in this study. Additional detailed discussion of these terms appears in Chapter 2.

Academic Success- Conforming to the norms of the formal school system, conveyed by academic engagement, high grades, and demonstration of active learning behaviors (Senechal, 2011)

Academic Mindset- The psycho-social attitudes, assumptions, or beliefs one has about oneself in relation to academic work (Farrington et al., 2012)

Academic Engagement- Students' psychological investment in and effort toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skill, or craft that academic work is

intended to promote; the extent to which students identify with and value intended school outcomes (Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992; Willms 2003)

Academic Disengagement- Lack of psychological investment in and effort toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skill, or craft that academic work is intended to promote (Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992)

Formal School System- A systematic, organized education model, structured and administered according to a given set of laws and norms, presenting a rather rigid curriculum as regards objectives, content and methodology (Dib, 1998); For the sake od this research, the Formal School System largely refers to grades K-12

Grit- The ability to overcome challenges, to maintain effort, and persist in pursuit of long-term goals despite adversity, setback, and failure (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly, 2007)

Hidden Curriculum- The unstated curriculum within schools used to systematically instill social norms, values, and beliefs intended to contribute to the well-being and maintenance of society (Durkheim, 1956; Giroux & Penna, 1979)

Noncognitive Factors- Skills, attitudes, beliefs, and strategies that play a role in school performance but which are not directly measured by most cognitive academic tests (Farrington, 2013)

Long-term Success-The ability to contribute meaningfully to society economically, socially, and civically; the attainment of which is a core objective of the formal school system (Durkheim, 1956; Dornbusch, Glasgow, & Lin, 1996; Giroux & Penna, 1979;)

Assumptions

The researcher assumed the following during the undertaking of this study:

1. Each participant was honest in his or her self-report of experience within the formal school system.
2. Common themes emerged which allowed the researcher to draw broad conclusions.
3. The researcher was able to bracket her own presuppositions and completely and accurately identify common themes and units of meaning with as little bias as possible.

Delimitations

This study was delimited to participants outside of the formal school system, reflecting on their experience within it. Participants were further delimited to those who achieved long-term success despite a negative experience in the formal school system. This included dropping out of high school prior to graduation, passing a General Educational Development Test (GED) instead of earning a traditional diploma, or graduating from high school but experiencing significant difficulties in doing so. Using a qualitative research design, the researcher conducted a phenomenological study consisting of one thirty to ninety minute face-to-face interview, and a follow-up discussion up via email or ten to twenty minute phone call, depending on participant preference. The face-to-face interview was used to identify common themes among the lived experiences of individuals who achieved long-term success in spite of disengaging from the formal school system. While identifying common themes, the researcher drew

upon responses from a 12-Item Grit Survey administered during the first interview. The follow-up interview was used to add, delete, and/or to clarify meaning generated from the face-to-face interview.

Limitations

The researcher understood that limitations existed within this study. Nonetheless, every effort was made to minimize their influence on the outcome of the research. There were, however, some constraints beyond the control of the study. The limitations of the study were as follows:

1. This study included individuals perceived to have achieved long-term success as defined by this study. Others may have alternative definitions of long-term success.
2. This study only examined the self-report of individuals who were not successful within the formal school system. It did not examine alternative accounts from outside observers.
3. The findings of the study may have been subject to some degree of the researcher's subjectivity when isolating common themes.

Nature of the Study

With approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), this investigation used a qualitative, phenomenological approach to gathering data. This consisted of personal interviews conducted during the spring of 2015. The researcher used a phenomenological approach to identify common themes among participants who achieved long-term success yet who were not successful in the formal school system. By identifying common themes,

the researcher was able to identify shared experiences, assumptions, and beliefs among people who failed within the formal school system yet achieved long-term success as adults.

An additional component consisted of administering a 12- item Grit-Scale to each person interviewed (see Appendix F). Analysis of the grit scores was used in part to answer the third research question: *What factors outside of the formal school system contributed to the long-term success of students who did not succeed within the formal school system?* The Grit Scores were used as one way to describe the observed phenomenon. Administration of this survey did not constitute quantitative analysis, as the population size was limited to seven research participants and used exclusively as a descriptive form of data.

Organization of the Remainder of the Study

The intent of this study was to investigate the root of academic disengagement among highly successful people as means to understand if the formal school system can be improved to better serve them. Specifically, this research questioned the validity of evaluating student potential for long-term success based on the application of academic mindsets. A sub motive of this study was to identify whether there are shared characteristics among those who achieve long-term success in spite of disengagement from the formal school system. The objective of Chapter 1 was to provide an overview of the issue, and to present the research questions, definitions, assumptions, delimitations, and limitations of the study. Chapter 2 will review pertinent literature related to the research questions. Chapter 3 serves to describe the research methods employed during

the investigation and Chapter 4 provides the results of the study. Finally, Chapter 5 presents discussion of the study's results, provides practical recommendations given the study's outcomes, and offers suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The objective of the formal school system in the United States is two-fold; to cultivate student minds and to assimilate young people to cultural values and norms. Success in the formal school system is typically viewed by society as an indication of long-term success. With few exceptions, individuals who do not succeed within the formal school system have traditionally been viewed as those who will be the least likely to contribute meaningfully to society (Rumberger, 1987). Nonetheless, several historical figures including Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Edison left the formal school system prior to high school graduation. It can be argued then, knowledge is not the same thing as intelligence, and those capable of long-term success are not limited to those who succeed within the formal school system as it currently exists. An ideal formal school system would create personal relevance within all individuals through facilitating personalized learning experiences free of bias and geared toward individual goals. This research attempted to understand the absence of personal relevance, its impact on academic behaviors, and questioned where the formal school system can be improved to accommodate students capable of long-term success who do not meet traditional academic standards. It further sought to understand the characteristics that contributed to the long-term success of individuals who did not succeed within the confines of the formal school system.

Until an ideal formal school system exists, it is important to examine the processes within the system that currently exist, to ensure that at best it does no harm. At

question is the assumption that the use of academic mindsets to explain and predict student success in the formal school system is a valid indication of the potential for long-term success. The potential for harm exists through presupposing that all students find the formal school system personally relevant. Those who do not perceive the formal school system as personally relevant are unlikely to exhibit positive academic mindsets, regardless of his or her potential for long-term success. (See *Figure 2*: Harm of Inaccurate Measurement). By evaluating students against an irrelevant goal, it risks inaccurate measurement and harmful labeling. Intelligent, driven youth may be discounted as incapable of success due to his or her failure to resonate with the prescribed formal school system.

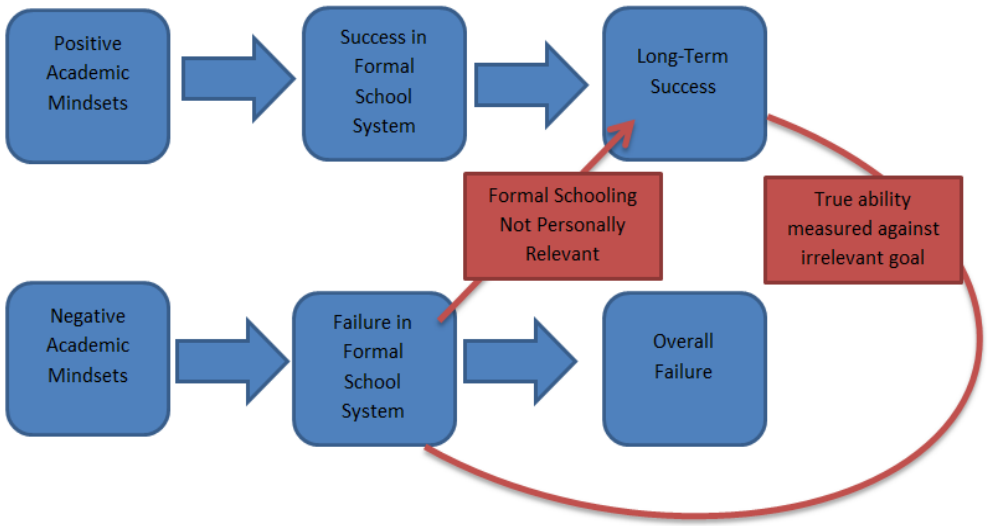

Figure 2. Harm of Inaccurate measurement. Some students with negative academic mindsets do achieve long-term success.

To understand the application of academic mindsets and why some students may not find the formal school system personally relevant, it is imperative to recognize first

how the formal school system does or does not invite students to participate within it. Understanding the development of a personal relevance to succeed in the formal school system requires an in depth look at the hidden curriculum typically applied in most formal school settings. After exploring the hidden curriculum and its link to academic engagement, specific theories of academic disengagement will be broken down by category. The theories explored are linked in that each results in students failing to perceive success in the formal school system as a prerequisite to long-term success. This is different than students who disengage from the formal school system as the result of an isolated instance such as pregnancy or incarceration.

The first theories of disengagement explored are those that focus on social background including socioeconomic status, family influence, and community impact. These are followed by an overview of studies which link disengagement to school related factors. The cited literature is limited to an emphasis on curriculum, conformity, and socialization. After reviewing the theories of academic disengagement, individuals who achieve long-term success in spite of academic disengagement is discussed with a call for additional understanding.

This is followed by an exploration of noncognitive skills commonly associated with successful adults. This is important to understanding whether there are shared characteristics among individuals who achieved long-term success in spite of failing to succeed within the formal school system. Of further interest is how the noncognitive skills linked to long-term success are linked to those that promote academic success.

To examine the use of academic mindsets as an explanation for and prediction of academic success, each of the four academic mindsets most strongly linked to academic motivation and achievement is subsequently discussed in detail. These mindsets include: Sense of Belonging in Academic Community, Belief that Academic Ability Can Increase with Effort, Belief about Being Able to Succeed at a Given Task, and Belief that the Academic Task is of Value. This is followed by an explanation for the necessity of the current research.

Hidden Curriculum in the Formal School System

The formal school system functions not only to transmit academic skills and knowledge to society's youth but also to systematically instill social norms, values, and beliefs intended to contribute to the well-being and maintenance of society (Durkheim, 1956; Giroux & Penna, 1979). This is referred to as the *hidden curriculum*, because it is a process typically unacknowledged by teachers, students, and/or society at large (Jackson, 1990). Success in the formal school system demands not only academic ability but also a willingness to submit to the hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1990).

The hidden curriculum is linked to the structure of schooling, including the rituals and procedures used throughout the school day (Giroux & Penna, 1979). These include systematically rewarding students for behavior or academics, walking in lines, using a bell to prompt movement, and organizing curriculum by age and grade level (Hinde, 2004). Jackson (1990) describes the hidden curriculum in the United States as strict adherence to rules and policies, respect for authority, and following procedures without

asking questions. Essentially, the hidden curriculum is linked to the specific values held by society, namely, economic gain and acceptance of the prescribed social order.

Often, the hidden curriculum is based on middle class values and presupposes a certain amount of social capital. Lee and Burkam (2003) define this social capital as, "the norms, traditions and behavior patterns that shape both the goals that people pursue and their opportunities for doing so" (p. 363). Schools are generally set up in a way which privileges students who come to school with sufficient social capital to adhere to the unspoken code, while holding students without such capital accountable for something they have not been taught or been exposed to (Wexler, 1982). If the norms, values, and behavioral expectations conflict strongly with students' home experiences, a conflict arises in which students feel torn between what they have lived, and what they are being told in school (Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Zine, 2007). Failure to critically assess the hidden curriculum in the formal school system risks a hegemonic transmission of societal norms and values, limiting acceptance of any worldview, ethnicity, socio-economic status, practice, or belief contrary to those held by the majority (Apple, 1971; Jackson, 1990). Some smart, able students resist conforming to the hidden curriculum due to self-preservation, believing it better to be true to oneself and one's personal values in lieu of those prescribed by an institution. This can result in disengagement from formal schooling as a whole (Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Zine, 2007).

Theories of Academic Disengagement

Academic engagement is a prerequisite to academic success (Steinberg, 1996). Consequently, any discussion of student achievement must begin with a discussion of

student engagement. It is generally agreed upon that academic engagement refers to the extent students identify with and value intended school outcomes (Willms, 2003). These include the outcomes of both the official and hidden curriculums (Jackson, 1990). There is a continuum of academic engagement; the most engaged students are those motivated to perform, because they resonate with the prescribed school culture and accept academic success as a prerequisite to success later in life (Steinberg, 1996). This is in contrast to the least engaged students who typically drop out of the formal school system prior to graduating high school (Steinberg, 1996).

Most theories of academic engagement, or disengagement for that matter, can be broken down into three categories. Phelan (1992) categorizes them as family background, personal problems, and school related factors, while Lee & Burkam (2003) classify the theories as social background, academic background, and academically related behaviors. Wang & Eccles (2013) opt for broader categories of emotion, cognition, and behavior. Regardless of what the categories are called, each grouping touches on both internal and external origins of why students are or are not engaged in the formal school setting. The intent of this research was to identify the underlying assumptions and beliefs that result in disengagement due to the failure to perceive success in the formal school system as prerequisite for long-term success. Consequently, the most pertinent theories of disengagement are those that focus on social background and school related factors. The rationale for this is that these theories touch upon disengagement over time, as opposed to an isolated event. The decision not to touch upon student behaviors is based on the concept that how a student behaves is related to his or her personal background and

school related factors. In this way, the behaviors are a result of the categories that will be reviewed, making further discussion on them individually unwarranted. Additionally, although personal problems such as pregnancy, illness, or incarceration are strongly linked to academic disengagement, they are beyond the scope of this research because they represent disengagement as the result of an isolated event (Bridgeland, Dilulio Jr., & Morrison, 2006).

Social Background

A student's social background helps tell the story of whom they are and what they believe by understanding where they came from. Students' individual experiences and external influencers strongly shape whether or not they perceive formal education as personally valuable (Steinberg, 1996). Social background can be broadly defined as race, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, family structure, and community (Lee & Burkham, 2003). Other definitions expand it to include worldview, sexuality, and religion (Frable, 1997). To manage the breadth of available literature, this research limited the definition to socioeconomic status, family, and community influences.

Socioeconomic influence. As children grow and interact with society, their perception of it is largely shaped by their experiences at home and in their immediate surroundings (Hybels & Weaver, 2004). In other words, what students experience at home becomes the lens through which they address and make sense of the rest of society. Steinberg (1996) contends that formal schooling is important for its future promise; students who lack the perception that achievement in the formal school system is connected with long-term success will have little incentive to achieve. There is a strong

link between children who grow up in intergenerational poverty and those who disengage from or drop out of school prematurely (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Beegle, 2002; Chapman, Laird, Ifill, & KewalRamani, 2011).

A student whose parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents did not persist in or perceive benefit from participating in the formal school system is unlikely to perceive the formal school system as relevant to himself or herself either. Dr. Donna M. Beegle, a woman who grew up in generational poverty explains:

> Early on, I learned that education meant stress: the stress of trying to arrive on time; having the right clothing, shoes, and lunch; and completing homework projects. Like others born into generational poverty, I find that thinking of my early educational experiences evokes memories of violence, humiliation, and fear; school became peripheral to my family life and earning a living (Beegle, 2002).

After dropping out of school at the age of 15, Beegle went on to pass a General Education Development test in a nontraditional program and subsequently earned a Doctorate of Education. Generations of poverty and poor experience with the formal school system led her to associate it with stress and failure. As a child, it was not perceived as connected to long-term success and consequently was not viewed as a personally relevant institution. As an adult, she recognized the connection and ultimately earned a Doctorate of Education.

Students' families who are new to poverty are also at risk of academic disengagement and drop out. In 2009, students in the bottom 20% of household incomes were five times more likely to drop out than students in the top 20% of household incomes (Chapman, Laird, Ifill, & KewalRamani, 2011). This is largely due to the quantity of adverse conditions poor children must overcome including high rates of

mobility and homelessness, food insecurity, and general instability (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Gassama, 2012; Jacob & Ludwig, 2009; Jensen, 2009; Leroy & Symes, 2001). Although poor students may recognize that formal schooling is connected with success, their struggle to meet basic needs and cope with chronic stress can create the perception that it is an opportunity for *others*, but not for them (Jensen, 2009).

There is limited research available on middle and upper class students who disengage from and/or drop out of high school. What does exist indicates a disconnection between identification of the financial value of getting an education (Somers, Owen, & Piliawsky, 2010) or the perception that they could be better off economically doing something else (Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Zine, 2007; Eccles, 1993). Alternative activities could include acting, participating in athletics, exercising musical talent, working, or joining the armed forces. Indeed, a variety of successful celebrities left high school prematurely to engage in more lucrative activities. This includes actress, Catherine Zeta Jones and actor, Robert DeNiro, musician, Billy Joel, and entrepreneur, David Branson of the Virgin Group (Lee & Coster, 2010). The creator of Shutterfly, David Karp also dropped out of high school at the age of 15 (Giang, 2013).

Family influence. As mentioned previously, students' experiences in the home greatly shape their perception of reality; what they observe, what is expected of them, and how things are explained to them becomes a foundation for how they interact with greater society (Hybels & Weaver, 2004). Dr. Jacquelynne S. Eccles proposes an expectancy-value theory for achievement that emphasizes parents as role models and providers of information, resources, and opportunities for children (Eccles, 1993). The theory posits

student expectancies and values directly impact achievement choices, essentially whether or not they perceive school as personally relevant depends on how they value it and what they expect to gain through engagement (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Families play a pivotal role in the development of these expectations and values (Eccles, 1993).

Expectation. Professor of Education and author of several research articles addressing student disengagement and premature withdrawal from school, Dr. Russell W. Rumberger, proclaims that family background is the single most important contributor to student success in school (Rumberger, 1995). Several others agree that the educational aspirations of parents are strongly linked with the aspirations held by their children (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Goodman & Greg, 2010; Jacobs & Harvey, 2005; Mistry et al, 2009; Senlar & Sungar, 2009). Each of these studies shows that students whose parents expect them to engage and succeed in school are more likely do so than students without the same expectations.

One way parents convey their expectation for success is through involvement in student activities (Rumberger, 2005). This may include attending school events, reading at home, or participating in school government. A large body of research suggests that the greater parental involvement in student activities, the greater likelihood students will engage in school and achieve academic success (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Rumberger, 1995; Stevenson & Baker, 1987). Englund, Egeland, & Collins (2008) also observe that patterns of parental involvement are significantly different between expected dropouts and unexpected graduates. Essentially, parental involvement can mitigate the risk that likely dropouts will actually leave school prematurely. Similarly, students who

aren't at risk are more apt to drop out of school if their parents are not involved in school activities.

As a whole, available research indicates that students are more likely to engage in school if their parents expect them to. When the expectation is reinforced through regular involvement in student related activities, the likelihood of school engagement and academic success increases.

Parental expectation is often linked with his or her own personal academic experiences (Kaplan, Liu, & Kaplan, 2004). A negative academic history may inhibit a parent's ability to effectively advocate on his or her child's behalf or to convey a positive attitude towards the formal school system. This in turn leads to disengagement and poor academic performance by their child (Gorman, 1998). Parents with higher levels of education are more likely to expect their children to achieve similarly high levels of education (Davis- Keane, 2005; Stevenson & Baker, 1987). Parents with low levels of education may not expect their children to succeed in school, reasoning that what was good enough for them is good enough for their children (Kaplan, Liu, & Kaplan, 2004). Alternatively, parents without high levels of education may hold high expectations for their children to succeed academically due to their own missed opportunity or belief in social mobility through education (Sheridan, 2001).

Gorman (1998) links parental expectation to class, asserting that working-class parents are more likely to resist the meritocratic ideology of social mobility through education based on their pride in the working class culture (pp. 19-20). Gorman adds that this culture is solidified through enduring hidden injuries of class, including feelings of

frustration, anger, and bitterness when interacting with members of the middle class. In a sense, a rejection of higher education is a response to personal injury inflicted by the middle class (Gorman, 1998). Middle-class parents though, are more likely to have had positive academic experiences, and to translate them to their children (Gorman, 1998).

Structure and Stability. In addition to parental expectation and involvement in school activities, the actual structure of families is linked to student engagement and completion of high school (Amato, 2005; Magnusen & Berger, 2009; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Students living with both parents are more likely to engage in and complete high school than students in other family arrangements (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). One reason for this may be that the combined incomes of both parents reduce the likelihood of poverty, thus precluding the aforementioned barriers to school engagement a lack of resources creates for poor students (Magnusen & Berger, 2009). Hofferth & Anderson (2003), though, attribute increased engagement and academic success to the increased quality and quantity of time two parents are able to provide to students. This correlates with the role that involvement in student activities plays in student engagement.

Further, students who experience a structural change such as death, divorce, or adults coming and going are more likely to disengage from school than students who remain in a consistent environment (Amato, 2005; Magnusen & Berger, 2009; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Amato (2005) focuses on the impact of family structural change on the overall wellbeing of children with compromised educational engagement and completion a potential outcome of the transition. Magnusen & Berger (2009) find that students who transition from two to one parent families have increases in behavior

problems and decreases in academic achievement. Rumberger & Lim (2008) further add that there is a link between family structural changes and relocation; particularly in high school, students forced to change schools may weigh the pros and cons of beginning in a new place, and decide that reestablishing themselves socially simply isn't worth it.

Community Influence. The communities students come from are also linked to academic disengagement, particularly those with concentrated disadvantage (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, & Aber, 1997; Harding, 2012; Massey & Denton, 1993; Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002; Wodtke, Harding, & Elwert, 2011). Students who do not feel that local conditions make employment likely, regardless of education level, are more likely to disengage from formal academia than students who perceive a relevant connection between academic success and future employment (Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Zine, 2007). Steinberg (1996) reiterates the necessity that students must perceive school to have an appreciable benefit:

> Students will not remain engaged in school unless they believe that academic success will have a future payoff, either in terms of success in subsequent schooling settings, achievement in the workplace, increased earnings, or some combination of all three.

If a future payoff is not observed, students will be less likely to direct their energies towards academics and more likely to value other activities more highly (Eccles, 1993). They are most likely to perceive this appreciable benefit in their immediate surroundings; if those around them attended school but continue to live in poverty, there is little evidence that engaging in school is connected to long-term success.

School Related Factors

There is an extensive list of school related factors that have been linked to academic disengagement. This includes: the size of classes, whether the school is public or private, the length of classes, amount of time spent in school, prescribed curriculum, socialization, and conformity. This research did address factors related to school structure. More relevant to this study are the underlying factors that occur regardless of how the school is structured. For this reason, only literature on the impact of curriculum, socialization, and conformity will be reviewed.

Curriculum. The curriculum used in schools essentially dictates how students are required to spend their time. Further, the choice of curriculum subtly implies what is worth knowing, by choosing what to include and what to leave out. Hegemonic curriculums which edit the narrative of minorities are strongly correlated with disengagement of the non-majority (Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Zine, 2007). In order to be engaged in school, students must have some sense that what they are doing on a daily basis holds value and is personally meaningful (Steinberg, 1996). Students whose personal histories are absent from the curriculum feel a strong sense of exclusion, and that school itself lacks personal relevance (Dei, Mazzuca, McIssac & Zine, 2007).

Baines & Stanley (2004) report that curriculum perceived as boring, or disconnected from real life contributes to feelings of loathing and disengagement from school. Boring is a relative term, however the recent emphasis on high-stakes testing in core content areas comes at the expense of elective courses that catered to a broader array of student preference (Amrein & Berliner, 2002). Restrictive curricula stifles the creative

expression of artistic and musically motivated students (Graham et al., 2002) and cuts opportunities for students not motivated by traditional academic coursework to find personal relevance and succeed in the formal school setting (Stiegelbauer, 2008).

In addition to missing the mark with creatively motivated students, school curricula geared exclusively towards college preparation deters the engagement of students who do not intend to go to college (Kemple & Snipes, 2000). This risks alienating the working-class that take pride in working-class culture and resist higher education as a result of class injury inflicted by the college-educated (Gordon, 1998). One way to mitigate this risk is to include a broader array of course offerings which prepare all students for success, regardless of whether or not they are college-bound. Curricula which incorporates Career Academics, a combination of academic and career related coursework, have been found to keep students who don't intend to go to college engaged in school and prepared for careers (Kemply & Snipes, 2000). Unfortunately, high stakes testing precludes most schools' ability to implement Career Academics.

Conformity/Socialization. Schools are not just a tool to educate the mind; they are a mechanism to instill social norms and societal values in students, so that regardless of their position in the hierarchy of society, they receive sufficient education on how to participate fully as citizens and workers (Dornbusch, Glasgow, & Lin, 1996).

The late educational anthropologist, John Ogbu, posits an explanation for academic disengagement pertinent to this discussion. In sum, Ogbu suggests that minorities who hold negative feelings about the dominant society are resistant to adopting dominant attitudes or behaviors, because they believe doing so supports their oppression

(Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu & Simons, 1999). This explanation has subsequently been called Cultural Opposition Theory, and is used to explain why some minority students fail to achieve in school (Chizhik & Chizhik, 2009). Although Ogbu focused exclusively on the academic disengagement of minority students, the underlying principles of his theory may be applied more liberally (Finn, 1999). Using Ogbu's premise that the dissonance between dominant culture and minority beliefs and values stimulates resistance, Professor of Education, Patrick J. Finn, applies the same premise to the working class. He argues that resistance to and disengagement from school is a result of the discord between the beliefs and values of the working class and the middle class beliefs and values prescribed in schools (Finn, 1999). Finn links the relationship between students and teachers to that of unions and management. Like union members who collaborate with management, students who conform to the goals and expectations promoted by schools are viewed as selling out, or giving in. Thus, some students actively resist succeeding in school because of peer pressure. It is perceived as more favorable to disengage from school, than to conform to its socialization (Finn, 1999).

Room for Understanding

The theories of academic disengagement discussed above present various explanations for why students disengage from school. They are subsequently used to explain poor academic success and to forecast the unlikelihood of long-term success. Some students who disengage from and do not succeed academically within the formal school system do achieve long-term success though. Little is known about the specific underlying values, assumptions, and beliefs held by this population of students that contribute to academic disengagement. Through researching the lived experiences of

these individuals, the intent is to evaluate their underlying values, assumptions, and beliefs to help ensure that students who do not find personal relevance in the formal school system are not inaccurately labeled as failures. Ideally, a more thorough understanding will support the creation of learning experiences to benefit future students who would not succeed within the confines of the formal school system as it currently exists.

Noncognitive Skills of Successful Adults

Of further inquiry is whether there are any shared characteristics among those who achieve long-term success despite academic disengagement. As a basis for this inquiry, it is helpful to explore the noncognitive skills commonly associated with successful adults. Bowles & Gintis (2002) find that the noncognitive skills valued in the formal school system are the same as those valued in the labor market. This implies that those who achieved long-term success in spite of failing to achieve in the formal school system possessed the skills to be successful as students, but chose not to apply them. The noncognitive skills addressed below include extraversion, openness to experience, grit, and personal confidence.

Extraversion. People who are extraverts tend to be socially oriented; they are outgoing and assertive (Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, & Barrick, 1999). Watson and Clark (1997) further find that extraversion is linked to positive moods, greater social activity, and rewarding interpersonal experiences. People who are extraverted are typically not shy, and enjoy being around other people. This is especially beneficial in fields that require frequent interaction with others. Whereas extraversion is linked to managerial

advancement, shyness is negatively linked to occupational status attainment (Seibert & Kraimer, 2001). Indeed, Seibert & Kraimer (2001) found that an increase of one standard deviation on the extraversion scale was associated with a $5,706 increase in yearly salary. This does not mean all shy people are unsuccessful or only extroverts receive promotions. It simply points out that if there are two equally qualified individuals, the one who is better able to assert dominance and self-advocate is more likely to be recognized.

Openness to Experience. Openness to experience relates to an individual's tendency to seek out and appreciate new experiences. Those who have a high level of openness to experience tend to be curious, creative, and have a breath of diverse interests. (Seibert & Kraimer, 2001). It has been suggested that those who exhibit personality traits of openness to experience are also more intelligent, arguing that openness is a reflection of a complex individual searching for intellectual immersion in activity (Aitken Harris, 2004). Judge et al. (1999) cite the flexibility, creativity, and intellectual orientation of individuals open to experience as instrumental to their success in many occupations. This being said, those strongly open to experience tend to gravitate towards nonconventional occupations including artistry and entrepreneurship which allow greater autonomy and less conformity (Judge et al., 1999).

Grit. Grit is the ability to overcome challenges, to maintain effort, and persist in pursuit of long-term goals despite adversity, setback, and failure. In a study released in 2007, high levels of grit successfully predicted, greater than any other indicator including self-control and intelligence, cadets who would complete the rigorous summer training program at West Point Military Academy, high grade point averages in an Ivy League

university, and finalists in the Scripps National Spelling Bee (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly, 2007).

Duckworth (2013) describes having grit as living life like a marathon as opposed to a sprint. Although linked with resilience, grit is more than an optimistic response to set-back or failure. Gritty individuals are those who inspire through their refusal to give up. It does not mean they persist stubbornly down the same path, but alter course when they recognize a better, more efficient route to the same goal. Whereas failure is the end of the journey for some, gritty individuals use it as a chance to get up and re-route.

The link between hard work and success is not new. In 1932, Thomas Edison asserted, "Genius is one percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration" (Rosanoff, 1932). In 1892, the prominent British psychologist, Sir Francis Galton, concluded that success was not contingent on ability alone but on persistence and the capacity for hard labor (Galton, 1892). The current emphasis on grit is largely due to its ability to be quantified; the idea that *perspiration* can be measured presents the possibility of increasing grit to increase success. Recent studies suggest that grit can be taught, precipitating an urgency to improve academic achievement through developing grit in school-aged children (Shechtman, DeBarger, Dornsife, Rosier and Yarnhall, 2013).

Arguably, individuals who achieve long-term success may be those who set their mind on something and don't give up. Failure in the formal school system may not be a lack of grit, but its measure towards an irrelevant goal. Thus, measuring grit among school-aged children who do not find school personally relevant may yield inaccurately low levels of grit.

Personal Confidence. Personal confidence can also be described as self-esteem. Kammeyer-Mueller, Judge, & Piccolo (2008) suggest that people with high self-esteem or personal confidence are prone to seek out roles consistent with their positive self-appraisals. This often results in pursuing roles that are perceived as being challenging and rewarding. Contrarily, those with low self-esteem or personal confidence lack the belief that he or she is capable of anything beyond low-status positions. Essentially, those who believe in themselves are less likely to limit their career choices, regardless of suggested level of education or years of experience (Kay & Shipman, 2014).

Alternatively, Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs (2003) find that high self-esteem is not correlated with long term success, but that it does facilitate persistence after failure. It could be that high self-esteem or a strong degree of personal confidence contributes to the belief that if one works hard enough, one will find a way to be successful. Regardless of whether strong personal confidence or high self-esteem embolden individuals to pursue challenging roles or facilitate recovery after failure, they are characteristics of successful individuals.

Academic Mindset

In order to want to learn and/or to apply the noncognitive skills that will make them successful, "students need to think of themselves and school in certain ways…and to regulate themselves in ways that promote learning" (Dweck, Walton, & Cohen, 2011). An academic mindset is a collection of psycho-social attitudes, assumptions or beliefs one has about oneself in relation to academic work (Farrington et al., 2012). Essentially, academic mindsets capture the motivational components that influence students'

engagement in learning, attempting to explain why and under what circumstances students choose to exercise energy towards mastering academic content (Farrington, 2013).

Farrington et al. (2012) find that students with positive academic mindsets work harder, engage in more productive behaviors, and persevere to overcome obstacles to academic success. On the other hand, students with negative academic mindsets about themselves as learners or about school are likely to disengage from behaviors that promote academic success and to give up easily when they encounter failure (Farrington et al., 2012).

The bulk of literature on academic mindsets argues that to improve academic perseverance and achievement, positive academic mindsets should be proactively developed. In this way, academic mindsets become a tool to alter student beliefs in a way that makes them successful within the existing school system. Whether this is right or wrong is debatable, however, it sheds light on the power that understanding academic mindsets holds.

Although there are slight variations in how they are labeled, it is generally agreed upon that there are four major academic mindsets, independently associated with perseverance, behaviors, and grades (Dweck, Walton, & Cohen, 2011; Farrington, 2013; Farrington et al., 2012). These mindsets include: Sense of Belonging in Academic Community, Belief that Academic Ability Can Increase with Effort, Belief about Being Able to Succeed at a Given Task, and Belief that the Academic Task is of Value.

Although briefly described in Chapter One, each academic mindset will be reviewed again, drawing upon a greater body of literature.

Sense of Belonging in an Academic Community

The need to belong is a fundamental human motivation (Maslow, 1943). Current research suggests that the sense of belonging is an important factor in understanding student behavior and performance (Osterman, 2000). Belonging has two main features; namely, frequent, personal contacts or interactions with another person and the perception that there is an interpersonal bond or relationship marked by stability and continuation into the foreseeable future (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In terms of school, this means that in order to engage in academics, student must perceive they have a relationship with the school community; that they, as individuals, belong to the community (Nagaoka et al., 2013). They must perceive that the community is important to them and that they are important to the community (Osterman, 2000).

The more students feel connected to their teacher and peers in their classes and school, the greater the likelihood they will feel a part of the academic community (Farrington et al, 2012). Feeling accepted, welcomed, or included is linked to positive emotions, including happiness, contentment and calm, whereas feeling excluded or ignored leads to negative emotions including loneliness, isolation, and inadequacy (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Learning often occurs through collaboration, thus a sense of belonging is an important motivator for academic success (Osterman, 2000). Students who do not feel a sense of belonging in school tend to withdraw from interaction with their peers,

prohibiting their ability to work collaboratively (Farrington, 2013). Further, students who associate academic work with their alienation from the school community are unlikely to put forth the effort necessary to learn (Osterman, 2000).

Belief that Academic Ability Can Increase with Effort

Strongly linked with perseverance, the belief that academic ability can increase with effort is often referred to as the *growth mindset* (Shechtman et al., 2013). The growth mindset is attributed to Dr. Carol S. Dweck, a leading researcher in the field of motivation. Dweck (2006) contrasts a growth mindset with a fixed mindset. The growth mindset, she states, "is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts" (p. 7). A fixed mindset, though, is based on the belief that our qualities are unchangeable (Dweck, 2006). In terms of academic perseverance, students with a fixed mindset view intelligence as a set quantity they either possess, or do not; those with a growth mindset, though, perceive intelligence as something that can increase with effort and learning (Dweck, Walton, & Cohen, 2011).

Dweck contends that students who possess a growth mindset are better able to withstand challenges and overcome setbacks and failures than students with a fixed mindset (Dweck, Walton, & Cohen, 2011). She supports this with the concept that students with a fixed mindset attribute failure to 'being dumb,' that their fixed amount of intelligence was not enough to succeed at a task. This is in contrast to students with a growth mindset who perceive failure as an opportunity to learn and to grow (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Consequently, students with a growth mindset are better able to transcend momentary set-backs to focus on long-term goals (Dweck, Walton, & Cohen, 2011).

The growth mindset is also thought to be linked to grit (Duckworth & Eskreis-Winkler, 2013). Grit is defined as the tendency to sustain interest in and effort toward very long-term goals (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly, 2007). It refers to the determination and drive necessary to stay focused and persist in the face of adversity in order to achieve goals (Snipes, Fancsalil, & Stoker, 2012). Preliminary studies suggest that the growth mindset contributes positively to the development of grit by facilitating the determination necessary to persist through challenges in pursuit of long-term goals (Duckworth & Eskreis-Winkler, 2012; Dweck, Walton, & Cohen, 2011). This is important in terms of academic achievement, as grit has predicted success more accurately than any other indicator, including self-control and intelligence (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly, 2007).

Belief in Being Able to Succeed at a Given Task

Students' beliefs about their academic capabilities play an important role in their motivation to achieve (Zimmerman, 2000). In other words, students' motivation to achieve is strongly linked to self-efficacy. Bandura (1993) asserts, "efficacy beliefs influence how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave" (p. 118). Indeed, self-efficacy has been shown to be more predictive of academic success that one's actual measured ability (Farrington, 2013). Multon, Brown, & Lent (1991) find that this is especially true for low-achieving students, indicating increases in self-efficacy lead to greater academic achievement.

Students with high self-efficacy are more likely to set higher goals and remain more committed to them than students with low perceptions of self-efficacy (Bandura,

1991). Farrington (2013) reiterates that students who don't believe in their ability to succeed are less likely to engage in challenging academic work, believing it is better to not to try than to try and fail. Bandura (1993) explains the difference in thought processes:

> Those who have a high sense of efficacy visualize success scenarios that provide positive guides and support for performance. Those who doubt their efficacy visualize failure scenarios and dwell on the many things that can go wrong. (p. 118).

Students who visualize failure are less likely to engage in challenging tasks due to the basic human need to maintain a high evaluation of one-self to preserve self-esteem and the esteem of others (Maslow, 1943).

Belief that the Academic Task is of Value

The value of a task is determined both by the characteristics of the task, and the needs, goals, and values of the person performing the task (Spence & Helmreich, 1983). In order for students to engage in an academic task, they must believe that the task has some relevant connection to their lives; that it relates to their future educational goals, career, or current interests (Farrington, 2013). The value assigned to a specific academic task can be attributed to previous experience with a similar task, perceptions of the cost of success, or feedback from parents, teachers, or peers on the importance of succeeding at the task (Spence & Helmreich, 1983).

Gray (2014) finds that student motivation to engage in tasks varies from task to task. The degree to which a student finds the task interesting or worthwhile influences his or her perseverance and investment in the task (Nagaoka et al., 2013). Consequently, overall academic achievement can vary depending on how often a student finds

individual tasks interesting or worthwhile. In a sense, then, this academic mindset is limiting because it is task-specific. A student who assigns value to one academic task may or may not assign the same value to another academic task. A disengaged student may find value in a single task, yet shed little insight into his or her overall investment in school as an institution. Consequently, a more overarching understanding of the perceived relevance of the formal school system as a whole is necessary to fully understand student motivation.

Understanding why students do or do not place value in individual academic tasks, no matter how frequently, is qualitatively different than understanding the underlying beliefs and assumptions which result in placing value in the formal school system as a whole. Eschewing or endorsing the formal school system as a whole is largely different than validating or opposing individual components within the system.

Necessity of Current Research

As the role of academic mindsets becomes increasingly used to explain success within the formal school system and success within the formal school system continues to be used as an indication of long-term success, this study attempted to diversify the discourse by highlighting individuals who do not fit the norm. It sought to expose that the four academic mindsets identified as significantly linked to academic achievement presuppose that students believe in the relevance of the formal school system as a whole, and creates the hazard of drawing false conclusions on the true capability of students who are not successful in the formal school setting.

Summary

This chapter reviewed literature relevant to the current study. After discussing how the formal school system typically includes a hidden curriculum to instill the norms and values of society, it posited several reasons for academic disengagement. These included theories on both social background and school related factors. It then discussed the lack of research on adults who achieve long-term success, yet disengaged from the formal school system as students. Next, it examined noncognitive skills commonly shared by successful adults; notably the same skills thought to contribute to academic success. The chapter then reviewed the literature on academic mindsets, both what they are and how they are used to explain academic success. Finally, the necessity of the current research was revisited. Essentially, the use of academic mindsets to explain academic success and generate student labels for the likelihood of long-term success creates the hazard of drawing false conclusions on the true capability of students who are not successful in the formal school setting.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Success in the formal school system is typically viewed by society as an indicator of long-term success. Individuals who do not succeed within the formal school system are commonly perceived as those least likely to contribute meaningfully to society in terms of economic and civic engagement (Rumberger, 1987). A recent trend in education has been the evaluation of noncognitive skills to explain academic success. Students who demonstrate positive academic mindsets are linked to high achievement while those who do not are perceived as disengaged or not trying hard enough. Consequently, students who do not demonstrate positive academic mindsets are at greatest risk of being labeled as the least likely to contribute to society. This is unfair. Indeed, there are several reasons students disengage from the formal school system, not because they lack the capacity to achieve, but because success in the formal school system is not viewed as a prerequisite for long-term success.

Statement of the Problem

The use of academic mindsets to predict long-term success presupposes that all students perceive academic success as a relevant goal. For students who do not perceive academic success as a prerequisite for long-term success, the evaluation of academic mindsets creates the hazard of underestimating the true capability of students who do not fit the norm.

To more accurately evaluate students' long-term potential for success, it is necessary to understand the underlying assumptions, beliefs, and characteristics of those

who do not demonstrate positive academic mindsets yet achieve long-term success anyway.

Research Questions

1. What assumptions and beliefs contribute to the perception that the formal school system is not personally relevant?
2. What about the formal school system fails to provide the academic or social motivation to succeed within its confines?
3. What role does the culture of schooling and/or learning experiences play in student disengagement?
4. What factors outside of the formal school system contribute to the long-term success of students who do not succeed within the formal school system?

Research Methodology

A qualitative approach was appropriate for this study as the researcher was more interested in detailed personal experiences than with quantifiable statistics. In this case, decoding generalizable units of meaning was favored over collecting numbers to perform a statistical analysis. Its primary objective was to gain insight into the lived experiences of individuals who disengaged from the formal school system yet achieved long-term success as adults. The researcher was interested in the relationship between the individual and the formal school system, formative experiences that shaped educational perspective, and the personal nuances that contributed to success outside of academia. The aim was to create complete, detailed descriptions of participants' lived experiences. Consequently, words were the most important source of data. To identify common

themes in participants' stories, the researcher relied heavily on personal interviews. The 12-Item Grit Scale was administered to participants, but was used as a descriptive tool as opposed to quantitative data for statistical analysis (see Appendix F). Specifically, the researcher used the scale when identifying common themes among the lived experiences to help explain the observed phenomenon.

Analytical Framework

This study used a phenomenological qualitative approach to analyze data. The phenomenological approach lends itself best to capturing reality as it appears to individuals (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). The use of a phenomenological framework worked to reduce individual experiences into themes that could be applied to a larger context. In this way, the study was not indicative of just the individuals studied, but facilitated identification of broad themes that are generalizable to others who achieve long-term success in spite of disengagement from the formal school system (Cresswell, 2007). It was the researcher's intent to remain as objective as possible. The use of bracketing personal insights and observations in the phenomenological approach allowed for greater objectivity when assigning units of meaning.

Research Design

The intent of this study was to gain personal insight into the lived experiences of individuals who achieved long-term success in spite of disengaging from the formal school system. The researcher depended heavily on semi-structured personal interviews, both in person and over the phone. To protect the well-being and human dignity of research participants, the researcher adhered strictly to the guidelines set forth by the University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board. Further, the researcher provided full

disclosure to research participants on the purpose, process, and findings of the study, and allowed for data correction and/or deletions and additions prior to completion of the study.

Participant Criteria and Recruitment

While quantitative studies rely heavily on large sample sizes, qualitative research is not bound by the same requirement. The imperative is to attain data saturation, the point at which there is no new relevant insight or information to be gained thru additional interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). While the point of saturation varies from study to study, it is generally agreed upon the point of saturation in a phenomenological study is between five and twenty five interviews (Baker & Edwards, 2012; Creswell, 2007; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). The more intensive nature and longer length of phenomenological interviews creates the potential to yield a great wealth of information with a small number of research participants. Too many participants creates the hazard of yielding an overwhelming amount of data, while too few may fail to reach saturation. This research consisted of seven research participants who participated in in-depth personal interviews. The depth of questions and detailed responses allowed the researcher to achieve saturation with seven participants, four males and three females.

Participant Criteria. The target population for this study was working adults, from the age cohort commonly defined as *Generation X*, aged 35-54 (Patterson, 2005). This age cohort was targeted specifically, because it was the first cohort to facilitate gender parity. Largely a result of the 1972 inclusion of Title IX to the Education Amendments of the Civil Rights Act, gender roles changed through additional educational opportunities and a gradual change of public perception (Valentin, 1997).

This study was further delimited to those who did not finish high school, finished high school with significant struggle, graduated from high school after dropping out for at least one year, or pursued and passed a General Educational Development Test (GED). Three of the participants had some college education, though each attended as a non-traditional student several years after high school. Further, the participants self-identified as successful adults, specifically that they had a sustainable career or craft, were proud of what they have achieved in life, and practiced some form of civic engagement (voting, board membership, philanthropy). The researcher strived to achieve parity in gender. Gender parity was pivotal to identifying broad units of meaning, as opposed to units of meaning isolated to one sex or another.

Participant Recruitment. The nature of phenomenological study lends itself to the observed phenomena dictating the method of study, including the selection of participants (Hycner, 1985). Consequently, participants were initially solicited through purposive sampling based on the researcher's knowledge of individuals whose personal experiences aligned with the purpose of this study (Groenewald, 2004). After extending invitations to participate in the study through purposive sampling, the researcher used snowball sampling in which identified participants recommended others to participate. This included participants' friends or colleagues who shared a similar background. Potential participants identified through snowball sampling were invited to participate in the study via email (see Appendix B). Finally, additional recruitment occurred through advertisements on Craigslist in three Midwestern states (see Appendix C), and

solicitation for participants through *ResearchChicago*, a research recruitment service which publicizes academic, corporate, and medical research studies in the Chicago area. Hycner (1985) cautions that the control of a phenomenological study depends on the quality of participants and their ability to articulate their experiences, thus the researcher will have a brief conversation with each self-identified participant prior to participation in the study. Specifically, the researcher will ask each potential participant to verify his or her educational attainment, sustainable career or craft, and civic engagement.

Initial Interview

Each research participant engaged in a semi-structured, in-person, audio recorded interview that was transcribed verbatim. This interview served as the primary unit of analysis. The duration of each initial interview was between thirty and ninety minutes. The interviews were scheduled at the participants' convenience and conducted in a place of each participants' choosing (i.e. home, coffees shop, place of business).

To ensure ethical research, the interview began by gaining informed consent of each participant. The consent included the purpose of the research, the specific research questions, the risk and benefits of participation, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to discontinue participation at any time, and the procedures used to protect anonymity (see Appendix A).

After gaining informed consent, the researcher provided each participant with a copy of the planned interview questions (see Appendix D). The semi-structured interview provided space for the researcher to ask follow-up questions when necessary. The researcher encouraged each participant to 'tell his or her story,' and remained actively

engaged in listening to the story with as little input as possible. At the conclusion of the interview, the researcher explained the concept of grit, and asked each participant to fill out the 12-Item Grit Scale (see Appendix F). The researcher then explained that the participant would receive a written summary of the interview with initial analysis of key units of meaning. This was sent via email within two weeks of the initial interview. Each participant was encouraged to read the summary and to make any necessary additions, deletions, or clarifications. A follow-up interview via phone call or email discussion was also scheduled at this time.

12-Item Grit Scale

The 12-Item Grit Scale, was developed in 2007 by Angela Duckworth, Christopher Peterson, Michael Matthews, and Dennis Kelly. Using a five point Likert scale, survey participants were asked to self-identify to what extent they identified with twelve statements related to grit: *Very much like me* to *Not like me at all*. One half of the statements conveyed strong indications of grit; the other half of the statements reflected low levels of grit. Points were assigned to each response, per the scoring developed by the creators of the scale. To achieve a final grit score, the points from each item were added together and divided by twelve, resulting in a value between one and five. The maximum possible score on the scale was five, an indication of being *extremely gritty*. The lowest possible score was one, *not at all gritty.*

In combination with information gathered through the personal interviews, the grit scores were used as means to answer the fourth question posed by this study: *What factors outside of the formal school system contribute to the long-term success of students*

who do not succeed within the formal school system? In this way, the grit scores were used as an additional form of descriptive data as opposed to units of numerical analysis.

Transcription: Procedure and Analysis

The process of conducting and analyzing the interview transcription was largely based on Hycner's (1985) *Guidelines for Phenomenological Analysis of Interview Data*. Its recommended approach is to remain 'true to the phenomenon' observed, while practicing concrete research methods. It is recognized that Hycner's approach is one of many a researcher may take when analyzing phenomenological data, as arbitrarily imposing a uniform analysis risks compromising the integrity of the phenomenon of interest (Hycner, 1985). Hycner's approach was appropriate, as it places special focus on maintaining true to the phenomenon through practices such as bracketing, and inclusion of participants in verifying accuracy of analysis.

Transcription. To ensure accurate transcription, the researcher recorded each interview using to two different audio recording devices. To protect the anonymity of each research participant, the researcher implemented the use of pseudonyms in each transcription. The researcher transcribed each interview verbatim, using written observations as a tool to help identify units of meaning.

Analysis. The objective of phenomenological analysis is to suspend the researcher's own meanings and interpretations and to fully enter the world of the person interviewed (Hycner, 1985). Consequently, the researcher listed all of her presuppositions on achievement in the formal school system, academic disengagement, and the use of academic mindsets to label success prior to conducting interviews (see

Appendix E). This list was revisited throughout the process of analysis to ensure appropriate bracketing to ensure as much objectivity as possible (Hycner, 1985).

Prior to identifying units of meaning, the researcher listened to each interview in its entirety at least two times and thoroughly read through each transcription no less than two times to gain a thorough sense of the whole. Close attention was paid to non-verbal cues including pauses, emphases, and intonations. Listening and reading for a sense of the whole provided a context for the emergence of specific units of meaning and themes later on (Hycner, 1985).

Next, the researcher delineated units of general meaning. With as much openness as possible, the researcher went through each word, sentence, and paragraph to generate discrete units of meaning. Initially, every discreet unit of meaning was included, regardless of whether or not it related to the research questions.

After identifying units of general meaning, the researcher assessed the extent to which each unit addressed and/or illuminated the research questions. Units of general meaning that were unrelated to the research questions were not recorded (Hycner, 1985). The researcher erred on the side of inclusion as opposed to exclusion when deciding whether the unit was related to the research questions. The researcher then eliminated redundancies in relevant units of meaning, noting how many times each unit occurred as support for the strength of each unit. The researcher then clustered the units of meaning and determined a theme for each one. Finally, the researcher wrote a summary of each interview, incorporating the themes generated form the data (Hycner, 1985).

Participant Feedback. The researcher sent the summary to each participant via email within two weeks of the initial interview. Each participant was encouraged to review whether the summary fully and accurately captured the interview (Hycner, 1985). He or she was encouraged to clarify meaning and suggest additions or deletions. Each participant was given the opportunity to send the feedback via email, mail, or to discuss during the scheduled follow-up interview. Three of the participants responded with specific feedback. This feedback was incorporated into the final summary.

Follow-Up Interview. Each follow-up interview consisted of a ten to twenty minute phone call and/or dialogue via email approximately one week after sending the summary of the initial interview. The researcher reviewed the interview summary (revised if feedback provided in advance) to ensure it fully and accurately reflected the participants' personal experience. This review was an essential check of validity for the study itself. Each summary was revised until the participant was confident it validly conveyed his or her personal experience.

Confidentiality

In order to identify and follow up with research participants, the researcher collected first and last names, email, and telephone numbers from each participant. The researcher was the only one with access to this information. Further, to facilitate transcription, use of audio recording was employed. To ensure confidentiality, the researcher followed practices of data encryption, coding, pseudonyms, secure storage of materials, and timely destruction of personal identifiers.

Encryption. The names, email addresses, telephone numbers, and email correspondences was stored electronically in an encrypted, password-protected file on the researcher's computer.

Coding. Each research participant was assigned a number linked with his or her personal identifying information. All notes and audio recordings were labeled with the number as opposed to any form of personal information. The researcher was the only one with access to which participant the code corresponded with.

Pseudonyms. During the process of transcription, the researcher employed the use of a pseudonym anytime a person or specific location was referenced.

Storage. All physical material including audio recordings and written notes were stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home. The researcher was the only one with a key to access the file cabinet.

Destruction of Materials. The researcher destroyed all identifying information as soon as a full analysis of data was completed. All electronic data, including audio recordings, was destroyed. Paper documents were shredded and recycled.

Role of the Researcher

It was the researchers' responsibility to respond to both verbal and non-verbal cues, always mindful of the fact that she had more to learn from each participant, than he or she did from her. The researcher listed all of her presuppositions on achievement in the formal school system, academic disengagement, and the use of academic mindsets to label success prior to conducting interviews (see Appendix E).

Summary

In order to understand the underlying values and assumptions of those who achieved long-term success in spite of disengagement from the formal school system, the researcher conducted a phenomenological study. Seven participants were interviewed. Precautions were taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Units of meaning isolated from each interview were used to identify themes with broad applicability to address each research question. To reduce bias, the researcher listed all of her presuppositions relating to the research questions prior to conducting interviews.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS OF DATA

Introduction

The intent of this research was to study the underlying values, assumptions, beliefs held by and characteristics of those who disengaged from the formal school system, yet achieved long-term success as adults. Individuals who do not succeed within the formal school system are commonly perceived as those least likely to contribute meaningfully to society in terms of economic and civic engagement (Rumberger, 1987). By studying the lived experiences of individuals who contradict this perception, the intent was to learn what caused them to disengage from the formal school system and to identify what characteristics contributed to their long-term success. At issue is whether the formal school system can be improved to better serve this population. Specifically, this research questioned the validity of evaluating academic mindsets as an indicator for long-term success.

This section will begin with a profile of each research participant. The intent of the participant profile is to better understand the *parts of the whole*, and to convey as accurately as possible the human experience at the core of this study. The individuals interviewed were candid and forthcoming. They shared their triumphs as well as their struggles; it is only just to present them as clearly as possible when using their lived experiences to identify broad themes. The participant profiles are followed by a presentation of the themes and subthemes that emerged through analysis of the interviews. The themes and subthemes are supported with quotes taken directly from

participant interviews. Although each participant provided quotable ideas for nearly every theme and subtheme, those selected for inclusion here best illustrate the participants' shared reality. Finally, after revisiting the research questions posed by this study, a summary of how each theme and subtheme relates to the research question is provided.

Participant Profiles

To protect confidentiality, each participant is identified by a pseudonym. Further, where identities may be discerned, schools, specific geographic locations, and places of employment have been modified. A total of seven participants between the age of 35 and 54 were interviewed. Three of the participants were female, and four were male. Four were Caucasian, two were African American, and one was Mediterranean.

Two of the participants offered to provide supplemental data; one a letter she wrote to her high school describing how she felt failed by the institution, and one a profile he received after completing a behavioral assessment. These supplements were coded in the same way that the interviews were.

Overall, each profile is unique, though there are some striking similarities. Every single participant used the word *outgoing* or a synonym of outgoing to describe him or herself. Further, the profiles are linked in that each one had a difficult childhood that resulted in a strong sense of personal responsibility. Each had a high level a grit, shared a growth mindset, and had a level of personal confidence. Finally, there is a general consensus that in retrospect, a college degree would have made their lives easier despite the success they were able to achieve. This was never expressed as a tangible regret, but

as an acknowledgement that an alternative path may have been easier. To the extent possible, the researcher has tried to remain true to the voice and tone of each participant in each description.

Anna

Anna is a 53 year-old female who struggled throughout high school, largely as a result of cutting class. She did graduate from high school, but it was a close call. She spent most of her adult life owning and operating a business specializing in installing and repairing electromagnetic radiation equipment.

Anna is outgoing. She is also determined. These traits helped her to succeed in business. She never felt comfortable in school, often in conflict with her teachers, and was picked on by other students. She did not feel challenged by the coursework, and was able to earn high marks with little effort and frequent absences from school:

> I skipped most my senior year, but I, I was still making A's, even though I was skipping a lot of school. It used to drive my sister nuts. She was a straight A student- had to work for it, whereas I goofed off all the time, barely brought home books and still made A's.

Throughout her school experience, she felt confident of her ability to do well; attending school just didn't always feel worth her time, and she was often in conflict with teachers. It was boring, and college was not something she was pushed to do by her family or teachers. After skipping most of her senior year, she was just barely able to graduate. She married right out of high school, and supported her husband while he went to college.

Anna got her start in business through on the job training from her now ex-husband. She learned to assemble and repair x-ray equipment, and helped her husband

run a successful business. When her marriage deteriorated and her health declined, she wished that she had a college education to rely on. She enrolled in college at the age of 40 while living in a battered women's shelter.

The idea of reinventing herself was scary, but she was determined to move forward. When she sets her mind to something, she is unstoppable. She is an overachiever in the sense that she sets big goals and holds herself accountable. She is a strong self-advocate and believes that hard work can increase both intelligence and ability. Though currently disabled, she intends to write a book with information on how to go to college and get a better deal for your money. She feels that if she had had someone guide her while in high school, she would have made different choices. She hopes that by sharing what she has learned, she may help others like herself who don't have anyone in their lives able to offer advice. In addition to writing the book, she plans to mentor women living in battered women shelters so they too may get a fresh start.

When she was young, she didn't understand the importance of college, so she didn't invest herself in high school. She was not interested in entering another bureaucratic system that seemed irrelevant to help her succeed. She knew that she would succeed in whatever she set her mind to, so she was confident she could get a job and support herself.

In retrospect, she feels that she made the right decision at the time, but that going to college sooner may have made things easier for her, particularly when her health deteriorated. Throughout her life, there was no one to pick her up when things were

difficult; she had to pick herself up. As she copes with her disability, she relies on her own strength and perseverance to make it through each day.

Jonathon

Jonathon is a 36 year-old male. He dropped out of high school after his freshman year to help support his family financially after his father fell ill. After working in an auto-repair garage for nine years, he opened his own shop that he has run successfully for twelve years.

Jonathon is outgoing and very sociable. He is also very ambitious, illustrated through running a successful auto repair shop despite dropping out of high school at the age of 15. Throughout his experience in middle and high school, he felt dejected and misunderstood. When he was young, he wanted to be an Art Director at a museum, but after his dad fell ill from cancer, he had to get a part-time job to help support his parents and four younger siblings.

While working several hours a week and coping with his father's illness, he was often exhausted and his grades declined. No one at school asked or seemed to care why his grades were slipping or why he was withdrawn, so school became an isolating place. He began cutting class, going to the washroom and not returning. He would be sent to detention, which was even more off-putting. No one asked him why he was behaving this way. It seemed like a bureaucratic system he was forced to participate in despite feeling he was not being offered any practical tools to help him personally.

He grew up very fast, quickly becoming more occupied with paying bills than socializing with friends. His desire to become an Art Director was trumped by the

necessity of life. He began falling asleep in school, and his mind was on other things. He felt much older than a 15 year old. Further, he became less and less confident in his ability to succeed academically:

> In school, I didn't feel confident. I was falling behind and was at the bottom of the class. When everyone else was doing well, thriving, I was getting bad marks. I developed an inferiority complex. At the same time, I was thinking about paying the electricity and the gas. The water bill, and the rent…

Initially, he worked 20 hours a week, but as money began to come in, he increased his hours to 40, and sometimes with overtime, he worked 50 to 60 hours a week. Jonathon soon felt that his time was better spent working than going to school, so he dropped out after the ninth grade. He felt he would be more successful pursuing what he knew he was good at, rather than staying in school where he felt inferior to his peers.

He worked for the same shop until he was 24, and then opened up his own. He has been very successful, and is confident in his ability to identify and fix anything that is wrong with a car. In the spring of 2015, he was approved for a loan to expand his business. Ultimately, he would like to open several different locations. He is currently dependent on a bookkeeper, but would like to be able to double-check the records in order to ensure accuracy. Consequently, he is strongly considering pursuing a GED so that he may enroll in college accounting classes.

Looking back, he would not change his decision to leave high school. He has been successful, and was able to help his family at a time they really needed it. He is invested in mentoring other young people, teaching them skills, and helping them to succeed as he has. He believes that with hard work and determination, both intelligence and ability in a given area can increase over time.

Tom

Tom is a 51 year-old male. He struggled in high school, particularly his junior and senior year. After skipping most of his final year, he just barely graduated. In his twenties, he started a sales business that he continues to run. He is also in the process of establishing a non-profit organization to mentor young men in his neighborhood and to encourage them to stay in school and off the street. Tom is very outgoing. He is also ambitious.

Tom had a positive academic experience until his second year of high school. His parents divorced, and he transferred from an all boy high school to a public school in his neighborhood. The new school refused to accept several of his credits from his previous school, so he was forced to take classes he had already taken. This included having to take freshman history when he was senior. This was really frustrating to Tom, and felt more like an arbitrary procedure than doing what was in his best interest as a student. He didn't feel challenged, and was often bored. Ultimately, he felt devalued and frustrated, so he began to cut class.

In general, he felt that the school didn't have the best interests of students in mind, particularly when it came to scheduling. He would get to school at 7am and be there until 4:30pm each day with a lunch period at 10 in the morning. It felt like the school just didn't care about him as a person, which made it easier for him to cut class. He didn't spend much time in school his last two years. Although he graduated, it was a struggle. He ended up attending college several years after high school, but did not

graduate. After being offered a good paying job that matched his interests, he felt confident in his ability to succeed without further education.

When he was in middle school, he did very well. He knew it was important to his father to get good grades, and he had very supportive friends. After his parents divorced, this changed. He lived with his mother and siblings, and money was tight.

Tom is a very hard worker, and has always believed in his personal ability to succeed. He believes that with hard work, both ability and intelligence can increase over time. He attributes his hard work and belief in himself to his success in the business world. He states, "If you're not comfortable doing something, maybe feeling overwhelmed and that if you put yourself out there you might fail, but you should try it…things can change depending on how much work you put into it."

In retrospect, he understands the importance of staying in school, and not cutting class. He laments that if he had taken high school seriously, his path to success may have been easier, or at least more direct. He encourages young people to enjoy the experience, that it's really not that bad, and that it's a great avenue to explore the world. He urges that there is nothing wrong with a good education; it can only help you, and can be really fun at times.

Sophie

Sophie is a 43 year-old female. After cutting several high school classes, she was not able to graduate until she completed correspondence classes during the summer after her senior year. After working in sales for several years, she transitioned to a career in human resources in which she currently works.

Sophie is a self-described 'loud mouth.' She is also very independent. She has never had anyone in her life to pick her up when she falls down; she picks herself up. At times, this has been very lonely, making her feel isolated from her peers, but it has also contributed to her success as an adult. She does not let small defeats hold her back; she knows that she is competent, intelligent, and that she will achieve what she sets her mind to.

Although she had a positive elementary and middle school experience, things began to go downhill when she entered high school. This was partially due to her parents' divorce. An only child, she felt isolated and alone without anyone to share her feelings with. Complicating the issue, her mom remarried, causing her to move from her working class neighborhood and high school to an upper middle class suburb where it felt that each kid in her class had their own personal money broker, and that she didn't fit:

> My friends threatened to kick my ass if I came back a snob. What kind of place was I going? It was hard for me to make friends when I got to [the new high school] as everyone judged you for what your father did for a living and what kind of car you drove. My dad worked in a factory and I had my own older model car that I paid for myself. You can see why I didn't fit in.

At the high school in her old neighborhood, they offered courses in home-economics. When she told her the administrators at her new school that she wanted to learn how to sew and cook, they informed her that the classes were not offered at the school. They told her that if she really wanted to, she could take a bus to another school that did offer them, but that it would be a great pain both for them and for her. Sophie felt discouraged, and decided not to push the issue. She began to rebel; she got in with a bad crowd and began cutting class and doing drugs.

Ultimately, she was put in a behavioral disorder program that isolated her from the mainstream classroom, and combined classes with the school's learning disorder program. Having excelled in advanced courses prior to high school, Sophie found this both frustrating and boring. She felt that she was treated as inferior to the 'normal' kids, and that the curriculum was outdated and irrelevant. She particularly remembers being taught how to save money by using two envelopes; one for daily expenses, and one for special purchases. It was clear to her that she was not being educated to go to college; that college was not for 'someone like her.' Though she was confident she would excel in normal, or even advanced coursework, she wasn't given the chance. Consequently, she reflects on her time in high school as extremely biased. No one believed in her; not the school, not her parents, not her friends.

In order to graduate, Sophie spent the summer after her senior year completing correspondence classes to make up for the credits from the classes she had skipped. She finished in September of the same year, but did not receive a diploma until January of the following year. Consequently, her diploma implies that it took her five years to finish high school. After working so hard to finish the same year as her class, it was a huge blow to be given a diploma with the wrong year on it. It further confirmed her view that the school didn't care about her as a person, or about the long-term effect of their actions. Regardless, she has it hanging in her living room.

Sophie never had any encouragement to succeed in school. At one point growing up, she wanted to be a teacher, but she knew she needed college for that. Even if she had wanted to go, she wouldn't have had any idea of how to get there or how to pay for it. It

never felt like an option. It wasn't important to either of her parents that she go to college or do well in school. Her mom told her to marry a rich man, while her dad told her to get a job. When she finished high school, her mom gave her a magnet with a picture of a file cabinet that said 'Thank God it's Friday.' She never felt supported. No one ever said to her, "I believe in you. You can go to college. You can achieve whatever you set your mind to."

After graduating, Sophie got a job working in sales. Frustrated with sales, she began a career in human resources. She gradually worked her way up in the company, relying on her good communication skills and ability to learn things quickly. At one point, she decided that she should pursue a certificate in human resources from a local community college. When she was successful, she decided to get an Associate's Degree. At this point, a colleague in her department told her about a bachelor's program for adults over 24 at a major University near her home. She thought about it, and decided that she would give it a try. When her colleague told her she could do it, she believed him, all she ever needed was one person to say, "You can do this. I believe in you."

The program was a struggle, and it took seven years to finish, but at the age of 41, Sophie earned her Bachelor's Degree. To date, it is her proudest accomplishment. She did it; she worked hard, and she did it while working full time. Although her mom was proud of her, her dad showed little interest. He didn't send a card, or provide any encouragement when she graduated. He was more interested when she took on a second job to earn more money.

Sophie doesn't feel that she has anyone on her side. She is her only cheerleader, and that gets exhausting:

> It sucks. I have nobody on my side. I'm an only child. I have no family [no husband or kids]. And I have no cheerleaders. It sucks. I've never had a cheerleader. So it sucks. So that's where the 'independent' word comes from [word used to describe herself earlier in interview].

Regardless, she proved to herself that she can achieve academically, and decided to enroll in a Master's Program for Health Promotion. She is aware that her company is likely to be sold, and would like to set herself up for success in a new career, if necessary. She has learned that with hard work, intelligence and ability can increase over time, and that the only one who can stop you from achieving your dreams is yourself.

She wishes that the formal education system was more invested in actually helping kids to succeed, and getting to know each one as a person. She believes that some schools are better than others, and that the second high school she attended was a particularly bad fit that did nothing to help her succeed in the future. She wrote them a letter explaining how they had failed her, and made suggestions on how to improve, but understands that they are unlikely to listen to her. They did write back to her, but it was extremely brief and void of any meaningful content.

Sophie's success in her career, and her success in college was not a result of her experience in high school. If anything, her time in high school held her back. It didn't draw out her skills, or empower her in any way. Once she received the label that she was a behavioral problem, they gave up on her:

> No one ever believed in me. Not once. Not once had anyone ever thought that I could make it in college. I got a magnet from my mom for high school graduation that when you pressed the button it screamed out, "thank God it's Friday!!!" So

> even she thought the best plan of action was to go right to work. My dad barely made it out of high school and my mom took a few classes at community college. Neither side of my family valued higher education so I don't think the disinterest in college was my entire fault. Aren't parents supposed to want more for their kids? And I think educators are supposed to encourage college no matter the background.

The reason she has been successful is because she didn't believe their label; she knew she was just as capable of success as the high academic achievers, and she was strong enough to prove it. In her own words:

> It took me seven years to graduate from X-University. I had some rough patches and took time away a few semesters here and there but I made it! I made it all the way to the end. I learned that I can't expect anyone to believe in me except me. I don't have the support system and a family foundation that many others have and that's OK. I'm just that much stronger for it.

Kat

Kat is a 49 year-old female who earned her General Education Development (GED) Certificate after dropping out of high school her senior year. At 21 years old, she was hired by a large University, and has worked there ever since.

Kat is very articulate. She is also candid. One of her greatest skills is her ability to communicate, which proved successful as she worked her way up progressively with more responsibility at a large training hospital in the Midwest.

Kat dropped out of high school at the beginning of her senior year, opting to earn a GED instead. Growing up, she knew she had to attend school, but doing well wasn't a great priority. Her mother graduated from high school, but her father, growing up African American in the south, dropped out of school after the second grade to pick cotton. Her dad owned a successful hardware store, so she never guessed he had such

little formal schooling. She learned of this only recently when helping him to apply for social security.

Her decision to drop out of high school was partially due to her parents' divorce. There was no longer the stability in her home with her father gone, and her mother working long hours to help make ends meet. This was complicated by the fact that she was heavily bullied. She had a kidney disease that she had to take steroids for. The steroids made her face puff up, and the other kids were mean. She was thin, tall, and moon-faced, and the kids were brutal. The teachers and administration at her high school did little to help her. They were burdened with day-to-day processes, and seemed unable or unwilling to address her individual needs.

Without her parents to make her stay in school, she decided that the cruelty she experienced just wasn't worth it. The size of the school made it easy for her to disappear. The classes were big, and if she didn't show up for class, no one really noticed. It wasn't structured to care about individual students. Further, several of the things she learned in school didn't feel like they had practical application to the real world. Specifically, she felt advanced math courses were unlikely to benefit her. She had no intent to pursue a career in mathematics, so she didn't understand why advanced math was a requirement. She wished that the curriculum was more tailored towards practical skills and things that she was actually interested in.

Earning her GED wasn't easy, but she did it. After getting pregnant at 19, she had to get a job. She received two offers, one at the post office, and the other at the hospital she currently works at. She knew that she'd initially make more money working

for the post office, but she felt that even though she'd start off with a smaller title at the hospital, she could work her way up and groom the position to be something else. This is exactly what happened; twenty years later and she is still there.

Kat's success has come partially from her sense of personal responsibility. She has never relied on others to help her. When things need to get done, like when she had her first daughter and needed to support herself, she figured out what needed to be done, and she did it. Further, she didn't always look for the easiest way to do things; she looked for the smartest way. This is why she decided to pursue a career with the ability to grow and advance as opposed to going with a more stable position up front but little room to grow.

When she was in her early twenties, Kat decided to enroll in school. Raising her children and working full time, though, it was just too much. In retrospect, she wishes that she could go back and stick with it:

> It's so difficult to work for eight hours, go to school for four hours, come home, help them [her children] with their homework, cook dinner, start all over again. I've gotten to a certain level without college…but…I think that if I'd had it, things would be different. I wish I would have fought it out, because I ultimately, I now see the bigger picture.

She thinks that her life would have been easier with a college education- easier to advance more quickly. She also feels she was greatly blessed to get in at the hospital she works at when she did, if she hadn't been so fortunate, things could have turned out differently for her.

Consequently, she encouraged all of her children to do well in school, and pushed them to go to college. Her eldest daughter has been very successful, and is currently

pursuing a master's degree. Her youngest daughter, though, has struggled. She graduated from high school, but currently lives at home. Kat thinks that the biggest difference between herself and her youngest daughter is that when Kat was her age, she didn't have anyone to help her out. She didn't have a 'Kat.' Even in high school, she had a lot more responsibility than her daughter; she had a job to earn money, and if she wanted something like a new pair of shoes or school clothes at the beginning of the year, she had to buy them herself. Her daughter has always been blessed with Kat's ability to buy these things for her.

Kat does believe that both intelligence and ability can increase over time. She has proven this as she has advanced through her career. She has never felt challenged by her work, so has always wanted to push to the next level. She has also looked for other opportunities to grow as a person and to give back to her community. One way she has done this is through mentoring undergraduate students at a college near her place of work.

Christopher

Christoper is a 40 year-old male. He is also an Eagle Scout. After barely graduating from high school he joined the Navy where he excelled in all areas. He currently works in radio sales and owns his own business. He is the father of a nine year-old son.

Christopher is very determined, and takes great pride in what he does. Since he was a child, he struggled with poor vision. At one point, he was blind. At the age of 30, he had two major operations that saved his sight. Throughout his life, his vision limited

what he was able to do. No less, he did not let it stop him from setting big goals and working hard to meet them. Although he qualifies for disability payments, he is determined not to rely on government aid. He would be too ashamed.

Christopher is the youngest of four children. His sibling closest in age is a brother that is six and a half years older. All of his siblings excelled academically. His two brothers are engineers, and his sister holds a Master's Degree in Education. Christopher found school, particularly high school, to be excruciatingly miserable. In his words, "As I look back, it just seemed like a waste of time. There's really nothing I took away from those high school classes. I learned through reading. I was a big reader."

After high school, Christopher joined the Navy. In every class he took in the Navy, he was number one in his class. He did so well that it took him only six weeks to become plane captain, a process that typically takes three to six months. He attributes his success in the Navy to its structure, and feeling that it had a purpose. He knew exactly what he needed to do to succeed, and flourished in the clearly defined environment. He felt it was similar to his Eagle Scout experience in which guidelines were set out, he knew what he was working towards, and that the process was worthwhile. The Officers he worked with wanted him to go to the Naval Academy, but he was unable due to his vision.

After exiting the Navy, Christopher began a successful career in sales. He finds it ironic that he generally finds himself in positions that typically require a college degree. He attributes his ability to be hired for these positions to strong communication skills, "I think I can sit down with someone and have a conversation with them. You know, make

them believe what they want to believe, so to speak. Not to manipulate them, but I can sell myself." He is able to be successful in the positions by working hard, and quickly learning the nuances of the role. In his current role, a radio sales position, there is a high degree of turnover. Most people hired do not last a year. He has been very successful though, despite feeling like he works at only about a 10% level. To cope with being underwhelmed, Christopher began his own business that fabricates golf carts for handicapped people.

Christopher feels strongly that both intelligence and ability can improve over time; that it really comes down to hard work and believing that you can succeed. He also understands that improvement is contingent on what else may be going on in people's lives. He states, "I'm very careful not to judge people, because everyone has their own circumstances and you don't know what they are."

Christopher greatly laments his negative experience in the formal school system. Being labeled lazy and ignorant has haunted him throughout his life; he feels a strong need to prove the labels wrong, and struggles to accept anything less than perfection. This has had negative effects interpersonally, as well as jeopardized his self-esteem.

Bill

Bill is a 35 year-old male who owns and operates a national commercial trucking business. He left high school after his sophomore year to help his mother run a business and earned his GED at the age of 16.

Bill was always significantly more mature than his peers. From the time he was very young, he had a tremendous amount of personal responsibility, stepping up to help

his mother when she purchased a fleet of twelve tractor-trailers with hopes of establishing a trucking business. He began working full time during the summer when he turned twelve years old. At the end of each summer, it was difficult for him to transition from working with adults and being treated like an adult, to interacting with children and being treated like a child. Bill spent his first few summers washing trucks, but eventually gained greater and greater responsibility. By the time he was 18, he was managing the entire business.

Formal education was not something his parents pushed him to excel in. They knew that he was intelligent and they felt confident that he would succeed whether or not he did well in school. When he was sixteen, his decision to discontinue his formal education was supported; his mother was increasingly dependent on him to help run her business and felt that his time was better spent working than at school.

Bill felt that the formal school system was very rigid; that it did not foster creativity or facilitate innovative problem solving. When he questioned the way things were done in his high school, he was seen as challenging authority. He remembers one specific instance where a teacher told him that it didn't matter what he thought because he wasn't going to amount to anything anyway. He laughed when he heard this, confident that the teacher's assessment was inaccurate.

When Bill was in first grade, his teacher told his mother that he was brilliant, but that he needed a secretary to help him keep track of things. He believed her, both that he was brilliant, and that he needed a secretary. He decided then that he would have one. Consequently, he didn't pay much attention to spelling or grammar lessons. He regrets

this, because while he does have a secretary, he sends most of his own emails and informal correspondence.

Bill respects that the formal education system is one path to success. He personally did not feel that what he learned in school was more beneficial than what he learned through experience, and/or looking things up he wanted to know more about. He wishes that there had been more practical offerings in school, including financial management and goal setting. Although he learned these skills on his own, a number of his employees struggle with the concepts and he recognizes the negative impact it has on their lives.

Emergent Themes and Subthemes

The information gathered through the interview process was organized into meaningful units of analysis. From these units, seven major themes and eight subthemes emerged that provide a better understanding of how and why individuals who did not succeed in the formal school system were able to achieve long-term success (see Figure 3: Emergent Themes and Subthemes).

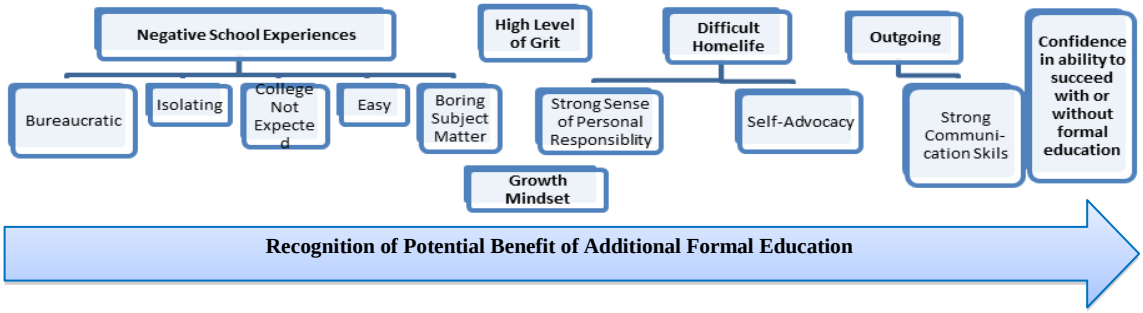

Figure 3. Emergent Themes and Subthemes. Themes revealed through interviews.

Negative School Experiences

When asked to select three words to describe the K-12 formal school system, every single word the participants offered was negative. Five of the seven participants described it as isolating, and six of the seven described it as boring. Other words included dejecting, depressing, and strict. Two participants remarked that middle school was either a neutral or positive experience, but by high school, their perception had changed. This was linked to having either a good teacher or good friend during their middle school years.

Bureaucratic. A commonly held belief was that the formal school system was extremely bureaucratic, that it was impersonal, procedures trumped promoting actual needs of students, and that attendance was necessary to 'check a box,' as opposed to learning anything meaningful. Christopher explained, "I learned nothing in high school. It almost felt as though you were being babysat, and the classes were just there to fill time."

Expressing frustration with procedures that seemed contrary to the best interest of students, Tom elaborated:

> So you're right in the middle of first or second period and then you have to stop to attend homeroom- a 'class' where you didn't learn anything at all…And then you had to start up all over again when you returned to an actual class. I also think how they scheduled the school day, like for instance, I had to show up for school at 7AM. I'd be there until 4:30PM...and I had lunch at 10am. They [school administrators] ain't thinking of us. It wasn't about the needs of the students.

Sophie expressed irritation over how she felt arbitrarily placed in classes below her ability because it was the easiest solution for her high school:

> In junior high I was doing algebra ahead of the other kids. Then I moved and I just got in with the wrong crowd. I cut classes and made some bad choices. My school just gave up on me. They were like, Ok, well you have a behavioral disorder, so we're going to throw you into these behavioral disorder classes. We had class with kids who had learning disabilities where everything was slowed down to the lowest level. I'm not an idiot. I told them I wanted to learn, but they didn't listen.

Isolating. All seven of the participants described the formal school system as isolating. This was generally expressed as feeling overlooked by teachers, peers, or both. Though three participants felt that they may have felt less isolated if they had participated in extracurricular activities, his or her ability to do so was limited by circumstances such as lack of transportation, or ability to afford incidentals related with the activity.

The overall sentiment was that participants felt overlooked and lonely throughout their formal school experience, particularly in high school. Sophie attributed the isolation to a lack of positive reinforcement, "No one ever said to me, 'You can do it…and this is why you should do it.' No one knew I was there. No one cared."

Kat further explained the feelings of isolation as a result of being bullied, "I didn't belong. Imagine being six feet tall, a hundred pounds soaking wet, and a big round face. Kids were brutal. Brutal. The [school] administration tried to be supportive, but they weren't in control of the kids."

Jonathon felt overlooked, that no one at school knew or cared whether he was there or not, "I'd cut class. I'd leave class to go the washroom and not come back. I wasn't missed…"

Bill felt significantly more socially developed than his peers, "I would spend all summer working with adults and being treated like an adult. At the end of the summer,

I'd return to school, and found my peers extremely immature. I didn't have friends in school. My friends were adults."

College Not Expected. None of seven participants felt that college was an expectation of either their parents, or their teachers. As teenagers, college felt like a continuation of high school with little added value to participation. Anna explained, "I didn't think about college. Not when I was young, and not when I was in high school. It wasn't something my parents expected, and my teachers never noticed me." Bill described how his parents placed greater emphasis on working hard than going to college, "My mom fully believed that I would be successful, but that I didn't have to go to college to get there." Likewise, Sophie expressed:

> My parents could have cared less [if I did well in school]. When I graduated from high school, my mom gave me a magnet shaped like a file cabinet that screamed, "Thank God it's Friday," when you pushed it. What kind of message does that send?

Sophie also felt that college was actually discouraged by her teachers:

> They didn't treat me like I'd ever go to college or be successful…It [high school] was all preparation and training for going to work right after high school. We learned how to, and this is so stupid...we learned how to save money in an envelope. Like, are you kidding me? Did they think we weren't smart enough to learn how to invest, or how to calculate interest...I mean, what was that message?

Easy. Six of the seven participants did not feel challenged during high school. In several cases, they were able to earn high marks with little effort. This was off-putting, and linked with a feeling that school wasn't worth the time. The lack of rigor frequently resulted in cutting class, or arguing with teachers. Anna explained, "I skipped most my senior year, but when I showed up, I got A's on what I did. Teachers hated me. I never

showed up. When I did, I knew all the answers to their questions. I read a lot." Bill explained, "I did all of my homework on the bus. It wasn't difficult."

Boring Subject Matter. Similar to the notion that classes were easy, was the idea that subject matter was either boring, or irrelevant. Christopher described, "The classes I had to take didn't have anything to do with things I actually wanted to learn. I wanted it [coursework] to be hands on. I just didn't care about music, or understand how playing the keyboard would help me."

Kat described frustration over having to learn things that didn't feel pertinent to real world application:

> My biggest challenge has always been math…science…chemistry. Anything relating to math…it just...it sucks. I didn't have plans to go to college. In my mind, I think the amount of math we need to get by is limited to the basics. We need multiplication, addition...subtraction. Who uses...you know, geometry?

Tom elaborated further, "Most of it [required coursework] seemed like a waste of time. I enjoyed reading, but had little option over the classes I took. I was 'put' in classes. I didn't pick them. I did well in what I was interested in." Bill wished that classes had greater practical application, "It bothers me how kids don't learn basic things like how to manage money and finances. I see people every day who have no idea how to manage their money. These are necessary skills!"

Difficult Home-life

All seven of the participants described experiencing a difficult home life while growing up. Five of the seven participants' parents divorced before they entered high school. Each was subsequently raised by his or her mother, and described a shift in which

she went from pushing him or her to do well in school, to being preoccupied with other responsibilities including working and paying rent. Kat described:

> What happened in my case was that my family dynamic changed. My parents divorced, and then that sort of you know, took away that stability factor, if you will. All of the things that she [her mother] had focused on slowly had to shift to becoming a single parent. So there wasn't that focus on how I did in school.

Jonathon's father became ill with cancer when he was in middle school. The oldest of five children, it became his responsibility to earn money for his family. He experienced the same shift in which his parents went from pushing him to do well in school, to being preoccupied with other things. Christopher's parents were immigrants with few connections in the United States. His three siblings were much older than he, so he often felt isolated. His father was rarely home, always at work. His mother was supportive of him, but very strict.

Experiencing a difficult home-life resulted in two common trends: a strong sense of personal responsibility, and the ability to become a strong personal advocate.

Strong Sense of Personal Responsibility. A common sentiment shared by participants was that if he or she fell, there was no one to pick them up; he or she had to pick him or herself up. All seven participants held jobs while in high school, and were often responsible for meeting their own personal needs. Kat described, "If I wanted something special, I had to get it myself. I knew better than to ask." Sophie explained:

> My parents never really coddled me, and I remember when I lost my first job at 19, I was still on my parent's car insurance. And then, instead of like...I feel so bad you lost your job...the first thing they said to me, if you can't pay your car insurance, you're in big trouble.

Jonathon described the necessity to support his family:

> I was the oldest. I had two brothers and two sisters, and my family needed money…I grew up really fast. I sometimes had to grab 40 hours/ week, and sometimes working overtime, 50, or 60 hours a week to help my mom pay the bills. That's when I quit high school, so I could work more to help my mom.

Moreover, Bill explained:

> When my mom was struggling with her new business, she became really dependent on me. I was 16 then. At first we looked into night school classes. I tried those, but I had to be there by three each day, and that cut into my working hours. It made more sense to get my GED so that I could continue to help my mom. By the time I was 18, I was running the business.

None of the participants in this study expected anyone to solve their problems for them; when life presented obstacles, they either worked harder, or changed course. Several accepted help from others when offered, but they did not seek it out. Despite qualifying for disability due to his poor vision, Christopher refuses to be supported by the government; it is important to him that he pays his own way, and the way of his child without help.

Personal Advocacy. Strongly linked to a strong sense of personal responsibility, was the ability to be a strong personal advocate. None of the participants let their lack of success in the formal school system become a deterrent to their long-term success. In all cases, this was a result of their ability to 'sell' themselves by recognizing and promoting their unique assets and skills. Kat explained:

> I'm very determined, and I'm personable. In lieu of a high school or college degree, someone can look at my resume and say, well, she's done this, she's done that, she's done this. She's been in the same field for 20 years, and progressively gotten better with more experience. I think that says a lot.

Anna described, "I'm an overachiever. I'm determined to never fail. I know this to be true, and have proved it to others. My friends would say the same thing about me."

Christopher explained, “I didn’t succeed in high school because I didn’t like it. Nothing stops me from succeeding in what I set my mind to. I prove this every day to the people I work with.”

Bill described how his success is largely due to his ability to question why things are done in a certain way, and promote new ways of thinking. He is confident in suggesting that just because something has always been done a certain way doesn’t make it the best way to do it. If a process doesn’t make sense, he points out the inefficiency, and comes up with a solution. He is a dreamer, and confident in his ability to sell his dreams.

Despite, or perhaps because of experiencing a difficult home-life growing up, each participant developed a strong sense of self, independent of external support or encouragement. The ability to convince others of their self-worth was enhanced through the ability to be outgoing and communicate well with others.

Outgoing

Every single participant used either the word, or a synonym for the word *outgoing* to describe him or herself. Five of the seven identified strongly as extroverts, while two acknowledged that the ability to be outgoing developed over time and necessity. The ability to be outgoing was enhanced through strong communication skills.

Strong Communication Skills. The ability to communicate with others was a common thread among all participants. All seven recognized that their path to success was non-traditional, and that not everyone who does not succeed in the formal school

system is likely to achieve long-term success. They strongly attributed their own success to strong communication skills. Anna described:

> I was able to build a strong business by my ability to communicate. I had to put myself out there. I had to be forward, and a little aggressive to get people in the door. After I had them in the door, I was able to convince them I was knowledgeable, and knew what I was talking about. Communication was key.

Christopher described the ability to communicate as linked to a strong capacity to relate to other people, "You have to be able to read people, and speak in a way they will hear you. You have to be able to adapt and to meet them where they are."

Confidence in Ability to Succeed without Formal Education

None of the seven participants felt that their ability to succeed was contingent on excelling in the formal school system. The ability to succeed was limited only to how hard they were willing to work. Tom explained, "I do what I have to do. I work hard, and I don't let anything stop me." Christopher expressed, "When I was in high school, it just didn't seem that it was helping me to get ahead. I wanted to run, and it was forcing me to walk." Kat described, "I wasn't an academic person. Once I learned my strengths, I learned other resources I could draw on. You just can't ever give up."

High Level of Grit

Participants' average score on the Grit Scale 3.76. This indicates an above average level of grit. The lowest score, attained by two participants, was 3.3. The highest score, attained by two participants was 4.16 on a scale of 5 points. A high level of grit was indicated in participant statements including, "I'm determined to never fail," and, "If I put my mind to it, most things I can get through.'

Growth Mindset

All seven participants believed that both intelligence and ability can increase over time; that the ability to learn and improve is boundless. This may be linked to participants' sense of confidence in his or her ability to succeed without a formal education, that skills and intelligence necessary to succeed can be attained at any point in time. Tom explained, "I believe both [ability and intelligence] can change…you know, depending on the person, how much work they put into it." Kat reflected, "Intelligence and ability can absolutely change over time because it's something that, I don't want to say rehearsed, but I think it's that the more you do something, the more you learn, and the better you become at it.

Recognition of Potential Benefit of Additional Formal Education

An unexpected theme that emerged among participants was a shared recognition that additional formal education could have made life easier. Five of the seven attended at least one year of college as non-traditional students. Two actually graduated, and one is pursuing a master's degree. All achieved success prior to attending college, but recognized that they may be *more* successful, and/or enjoy a more direct route to further success by attaining a college degree. Those who did not attend college also expressed recognition that his or her path to success may have been more direct with additional schooling. Kat explained, "If I could do it all over again, I definitely would have done things differently. I would have gone to college. I would have seen the bigger picture. It would have been easier." Anna expressed, "I messed up when I was 18. I should've done my schooling. I should've done it, so I'd have something to fall back on if needed."

All participants attributed part of their ability to achieve long-term success to who they knew, and how at times, they seemed to be in the right place at the right time. Kat explained, "By God's grace...I surrounded myself with good people...good people that saw my potential."

Research Questions

1. What assumptions and beliefs contribute to the perception that the formal school system is not personally relevant?
2. What about the formal school system fails to provide the academic or social motivation to succeed within its confines?
3. What role does the culture of schooling and/or learning experiences play in student disengagement?
4. What factors outside of the formal school system contribute to the long-term success of students who do not succeed within the formal school system?

Making Sense of the Research Questions

To understand how the emergent themes and subthemes relate to the research questions posed by this study, *Figure 4. Making Sense of Research Questions* (below) visually depicts each question with explanatory themes. A more in depth analysis of how the themes and subthemes inform each research question, and how they relate to relevant literature will follow in Chapter 5. The intent here is to objectively present how the emergent themes relate to the initial research questions without imposing meaning.

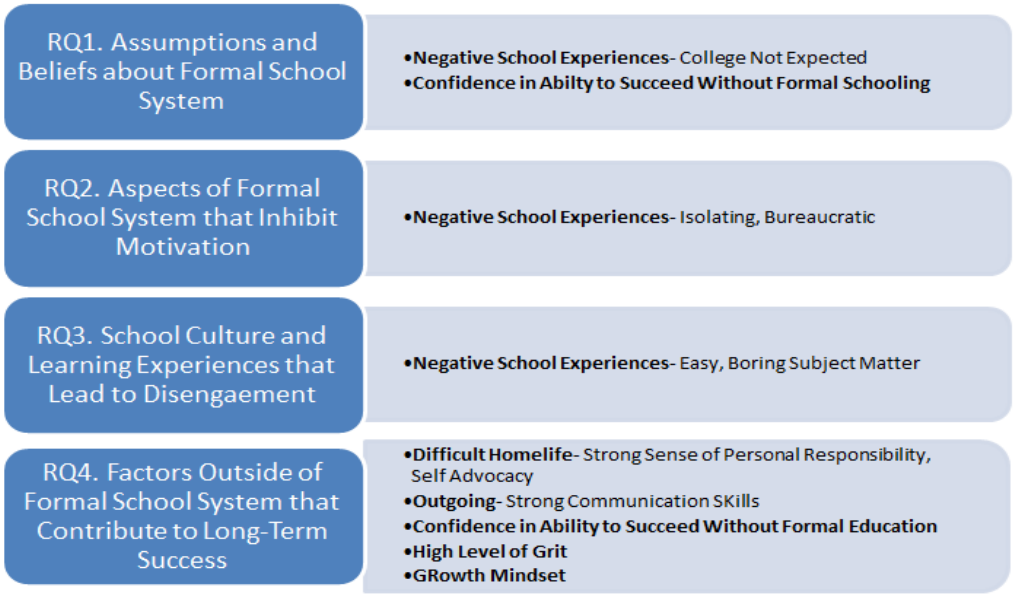

Figure 4. Making sense of the research questions. Themes and subthemes related to each research question.

Summary

After providing a profile of each research participant, this chapter presented the themes which emerged through the analysis of interviews, and supplemental materials provided by participants. Seven themes and eight subthemes emerged from the data. These include: *Negative School Experiences,* Subthemes- Bureaucratic, Isolating, Easy, Boring Subject Matter, & College not Expected; *Difficult Home-life,* Subthemes- Strong Sense of Personal Responsibility & Self-Advocacy; *Outgoing,* Subtheme- Strong Communication Skills; *Confidence in Ability to Succeed without Formal Education*; *High Level of Grit; Growth Mindset; Recognition that Additional Formal Education Could Have Made Life Easier*. Each theme and subtheme was then connected to the specific research question it informs.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The intent of this study was to identify the underlying values, assumptions, and beliefs held by and characteristics of individuals who did not succeed in the formal school system yet achieved long-term success as adults. A generally accepted objective of the formal school system is to equip future citizens with the skills necessary to be self-sufficient, civic-minded individuals who are respectful of authority (Dornbusch, Glasgow, & Lin, 1996). Students who fail to succeed within the confines of the formal school system are typically viewed as those least likely to contribute meaningfully to society economically or otherwise (Rumberger, 1987). By researching the phenomena of individuals who disengaged from the formal school system yet achieved success as adults, this study sought to understand what underlying characteristics made them successful, as well as what features within the formal school system inhibited their academic achievement. At the core of this inquiry was whether academic mindsets are an appropriate gauge of long-term success. Are there more appropriate measures to assess the true capability of individuals who do not meet the norm? What these measures may be is beyond the scope of this study; at issue is whether the current measures are effective. Through identifying the underlying values, assumptions, and beliefs of those who the current measures failed to predict accurately, this study found that there does indeed appear to be room for improvement.

Whereas the previous chapter presented the data gathered from interviews in an objective format, identifying themes, and relating the themes with each research question

in a neutral way, this chapter will weave together themes to holistically assess the phenomena of individuals who achieved long-term success in spite of failing to succeed within the formal school system. Ultimately, it will assess what the phenomena yields in terms of the use of academic mindsets as an assessment measure.

After addressing each research question and how this study's findings correlate with related literature, this chapter will discuss the broad implications of this study, and ideas for future research. After presenting the limitations of the study, it will conclude with a final reflection by the researcher.

Research Question Findings

Research Question One

The first research question asked, "What assumptions and beliefs contribute to the perception that the formal school system is not personally relevant?" This question yielded two major findings. The first finding was that attending college was not something expected by participants' parents. This is strongly supported by current literature that indicates that the educational aspirations of parents are strongly linked with the aspirations held by their children (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Goodman & Greg, 2010; Jacobs & Harvey, 2005; Mistry et al, 2009; Senlar & Sungar, 2009). Because college was not something that was expected, it is reasonable that the study participants did not perceive college attendance as a relevant goal. Further, with an exception of one participant's stepfather, none of the participants' parents had a college education. Current literature indicates that parents with higher levels of education are more likely to expect their children to achieve similarly high levels of education (Davis- Keane, 2005;

Stevenson & Baker, 1987). In sum, attending college was not something that was perceived as either relevant or necessary by those interviewed in this study. Consequently, the formal school system that has become increasingly geared towards preparing students for college through emphasis on college pre-requisites and de-emphasis on practical skills, did not feel personally relevant to the study participants.

It is increasingly believed that college is necessary for long-term success both in terms of employment and earning potential (US Department of Education, 2014). The second finding related to this research question, though, indicates that participants felt the personal confidence to succeed with or without formal education; essentially, that doing well academically or attending college was not a pre-requisite for them to achieve long-term success. Every single participant indicated that as a young person, he or she felt that as long as they worked hard enough, they would be successful at whatever they chose to pursue. For the most part, this confidence remained over time, though each now admits that additional higher level coursework may have made them successful more quickly, and/or with less anxiety. Perhaps ironically, each participant with children expressed a strong desire that he or she attain a college education, indicating that their previous assumptions and beliefs about the formal school system evolved with time and life experience.

Research Question Two

The second research question asked, "What about the formal school system fails to provide the academic or social motivation to succeed within its confines?" The two

major findings that emerged from this question were that the formal school system was isolating, and that it was bureaucratic.

There was broad consensus among participants that the formal school system was not a place they felt welcomed or valued. In one case this was due to bullying, in another, it was a result of feeling invisible. In all cases, participants expressed feeling ill at ease, and that neither teachers nor students would miss them if they were not there. Osterman (2000) affirms this through finding that in order for students to engage in the formal school system, they must perceive that the community is important to them, and that they are important to the community. Further, Nagaoka et al. (2013) uphold that in order for students to engage in academics, students must perceive that they have a relationship with the school community; that they, as individuals, belong to the community. None of the participants in this study felt they belonged to the school community.

The second finding was that participants were not motivated to succeed within the formal school system because it felt overly bureaucratic. In many cases, participants did not feel that the school day was structured in the best interest of the students. Many felt constraint in what they were able to learn by being forced to take courses they weren't interested in, did not perceive as practically applicable, or having to repeat courses they had already passed at another school. Attending school felt more like a chore than an opportunity. The majority of participants did not feel involved in the choices impacting them; they were told which courses to take, how to act, when to eat, and in one case, with whom to be friends. This was perceived as extremely off-putting by a group of

individuals who had significant autonomy in most other areas of his or her life. Essentially, the unstated imbalance of power and control was a major deterrent in the participants' motivation to succeed. Jackson (1990) who found that whether or not students prescribe to the hidden curriculum significantly impacts his or her engagement with the formal school system, and the likelihood that he or she will succeed within it. In most cases, it was the hidden curriculum that deterred the participants in this study from participation; the rigid structure and necessary conformity conflicted with the autonomy and respect they felt in other areas of their life.

Research Question Three

The third research question asked, "What role does the culture of schooling and/or do learning experiences play in student disengagement?" Overwhelmingly, participants responded that they found the academic work in formal school system easy, that it was neither inspiring nor challenging. Several participants reflected on how despite frequently cutting class, they were able to earn decent grades when they chose to attend. One participant indicated that he was able to finish all of his homework on the bus-ride home each day. The issue was not that the participants were not intelligent; it was that they were not inspired. Many indicated that they enjoyed reading, and felt that they learned more from what they read on their own time, than from what they learned in class.

In addition to the participants feeling that school was easy, they also found it boring. Baines & Stanley (2004) found that curriculum perceived as boring or disconnected from real life contributes to feelings of loathing and disengagement from

school. Steinberg (1996) also found that in order to be engaged in school, students must have some sense that what they are doing on a daily basis holds value and is personally meaningful. All seven of the participants expressed disappointment over how irrelevant their academic courses felt to their lives. Three participants specifically called out the courses they were required to take in mathematics; that in lieu of geometry or calculus, they would have liked to be taught financial management or goal setting. Whereas geometry and calculus are often perquisites for college admission, for those not intending to go college, they seemed irrelevant. This is supported by Kemple & Snipes (2000) who found that school curricula geared exclusively towards college preparation deters the engagement of students who don't intend to go to college.

Research Question Four

The fourth research question asked, "What factors outside of the formal school system contribute to the long-term success of students who do not succeed within the formal school system?" Several themes emerged through this question. Perhaps the most surprising was that every single participant overcame significant adversity growing up. Five of the participants' parents divorced, and were subsequently raised by their mothers who often struggled to make ends meet. One participant's father was extremely ill with cancer from the time he was in middle school, and another participant's parents were recent immigrants who struggled with speaking English and whose father was rarely around. Current literature suggests that students who experience a structural change such as death, divorce, or adults coming and going are more likely to disengage from school than students who remain in a consistent environment (Amato, 2005; Magnusen &

Berger, 2009; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). In addition to disengaging from school, this study found that structural change also resulted in a significant amount of personal responsibility among those interviewed. All seven participants held jobs while in high school, and indicated a strong degree of independence both personally and economically.

It is unclear whether a strong level of personal responsibility contributed to, or was aided by the ability to self-advocate. All seven of those interviewed exhibited strong traits of self-advocacy. Several participants described self-advocacy as the 'the ability to sell yourself.' Frequently, this resulted in gaining employment typically held by those with college degrees, and/or quickly gaining positions with increasing levels of responsibility. It appeared that participants' self-advocacy was strengthened through outgoing personalities. Every single participant described him or herself as outgoing, and expressed confidence in his or her ability to communicate with others. Arguably, this contributed to successful self-advocacy and promotion by consistently being able to relate to and connect with others. This is supported by Seibert and Kraimer's (2001) finding that extraversion is linked to occupational status attainment, and Watson and Clark (1997) who find that outgoing personalities are linked to positive interactions with others.

Additionally, each participant expressed strong personal confidence in his or her ability to gain employment and maintain self-sufficiency whether or not they finished high school or went to college. Although this view evolved over time, while in high school, it was a commonly held belief among those interviewed. Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs (2003) found that high self-esteem is not correlated with long term

success, but that it does facilitate persistence after failure. Kammeyer-Mueller, Judge, & Piccolo (2008) further support the role of personal confidence as important to success through their findings that it leads individuals to pursue challenging and rewarding opportunities, as opposed to low-status careers. It could be that self-confidence was linked to participants' belief that if they worked hard enough, they would find a way to be successful. This makes sense in light of the fact that each participant possessed a growth mindset in respect to both intelligence and ability. Every single participant expressed belief that neither intelligence nor ability is fixed, that the more you learn, and the more you practice, the more intelligent and able you become. Duckworth & Eskreis-Winkler (2013) found that the growth mindset is likely linked to grit. The participant responses in this study support that finding. Frequently, participants reflected on how they were able to increase their ability and intelligence on a specific topic through hard work and focus on a specific goal. Notably, the participants in this study scored highly on the grit scale with an average of 3.76 on a five-point Likert scale.

It is notable that in retrospect, each participant indicated that additional formal education might have made his or her life easier. This is not to say that they would do things differently, but that if the environment they found themselves in had been less favorable, success may have been more difficult to ensure. Each participant indicated that they felt unique; that while they were able to succeed on the path they took, they recognized that there were certain environmental factors that worked in their favor. Several of the participants attributed their personal success to having been in the right place at the right time; that circumstances beyond their control worked in their favor.

This included job opportunities, people willing to take a change on them, and being in relatively good health. While each person worked hard, and shared certain characteristics that helped them succeed on an alternative path, a favorable environment was a factor as well.

In sum, the characteristics that contributed to the long-term success of the participants in this study included a strong sense of personal responsibility, proficiency at self-advocating aided through strong communication skills, a high level of self-confidence, the belief that intelligence and ability can change over time, and a high level of setting and working determinedly towards goals. Arguably, these are the same skills that could have made the participants successful academically if he or she had chosen to apply them in an academic arena. The fact that they did not choose to apply them in an academic setting does not negate that they possess the skills; simply that their true capability should not be defined based on their achievement in an academic setting. In addition to the personal characteristics that contributed to long-term success, a favorable environment played a role as well.

Academic Mindsets as a Form of Assessment

In many ways, the measurement of noncognitive skills as indication of long-term success is a good thing; particularly for those who are academically minded but do not perform well on standardized tests. The problem arises when the noncognitive skills are measured in an arena that is not personally relevant to the person being assessed. Commonly, noncognitive skills are assessed in terms of academic mindsets. Students with positive academic mindsets are more likely to work harder, engage in more

productive academic behaviors, and persevere to overcome obstacles to success than those with negative academic mindsets (Farrington, 2013). The problem with the current academic mindsets is that they presuppose that all students believe in the merit of the formal school system as a whole.

Students who do not perceive success in the formal school system as personally relevant are unlikely to exhibit positive academic mindsets, regardless of whether or not they possess the underlying noncognitive skills linked to success. The skills will not surface when measured against an irrelevant goal. This creates the hazard of drawing false conclusions on the true capability of students who may not be successful in the formal school setting yet are capable of long-term success.

The participants in this study did not succeed within the formal school system; they did not apply positive academic mindsets. This does not mean they were not capable of applying positive academic mindsets; it means that academics were not of personal value. The participants in this study applied the same mindsets that would have made them successful academically to other areas of their life and achieved long-term success. After reviewing each academic mindset, implications of the findings will be addressed.

Sense of Belonging in Academic Community

The participants in this study did not feel a sense of belonging in their academic community. Strong feelings of isolation and the sense that they would not be missed if they did not show up for school inhibited feelings of community. One participant was severely bullied, others felt invisible or that no matter how loud they yelled, no one heard

them or cared why they were yelling. Often, this resulted in cutting class and/or conflict with teachers and administration. Nagaoka et al. (2003) found that in order to engage in academics, students must perceive that they have a relationship with the school community; that they, as individuals, belong to the community. None of the participants in this study felt that they belonged. Osterman (2000) also found that a sense of community impacts both behavior and performance. Students who feel disconnected from the school community are likely to underperform, regardless of their ability to achieve.

It is an accurate assessment that the participants in this study did not exhibit a positive academic mindset in terms of feeling a part of the community. Further, the assessment accurately predicted academic failure. This being said, just because the participants in this study did not feel a part of the academic community, measurement did not accurately assess how they would fare in an environment where he or she did feel a sense of community. In this way, it created a negative label with limited applicability. Further, it was a label that each participant carried with them, some with significant personal detriment. In an ideal formal school system, such a label would be generated in the first place.

Belief that Ability Can Increase with Effort

The belief that ability can increase with effort is linked to perseverance in pursuit of specific goals (Shechtman et al., 2013). It is important to note, though, that the decision to put forth the effort necessary to improve is linked to an assessment of the worthiness of the pursuit. People are unlikely to work hard for something they do not feel

is personally relevant. The belief that you can achieve what you set your mind to is linked to what motivates you. The participants in this study chose not to set their minds to academic success, thus measurement of this mindset in an academic setting would have provided inaccurate data.

Each of the participants in this study believed that ability could increase with effort. They shared personal stories of working hard to become experts in their field, pursuing greatness through hard work. None believe that their ability was fixed at a certain level. Every single one possessed a growth mindset, believing that with hard work, they could achieve whatever they set their minds to.

Belief about Being Able to Succeed at a Given Task

The belief about being able to succeed at a given task is essential to motivation. Academic success is also linked to whether students believe it is possible (Zimmerman, 2000). Indeed, Farrington (2013) found that self-efficacy was more predictive of academic success than one's actual measured ability. The participants in this study conveyed very strong levels of self-efficacy and personal confidence; they believed they could succeed at whatever they set their minds to. To a participant, though, none chose to succeed academically. Several shared how they found school to be easy; how they found it to be boring. Lack of success in the formal school system was not because the participants did not believe success was possible; it was because they did not feel it was a task worth succeeding at. In areas where they did feel like the task was of value, such as working hard to grow a business, or moving up the ranks of an organization, they were successful. Again, the arena in which the mindset is measured is key to its accuracy.

Belief that the Work is Of Value

Spence & Helmreich (1983) found that the value of a task is determined both by the characteristics of the task, and the needs, goals, and values of the person performing the task. While there were some tasks in the formal school setting that the participants in this study found valuable and excelled at, the major issue was that the formal school system as whole lacked personal value. The participants in this study did not feel that success in the formal schools system was a prerequisite for long-term success, thus they lacked the motivation to participate, regardless of their ability to succeed.

Implications of the Findings

It is clear that the use of academic mindsets to predict long-term success is not a panacea. While in some ways it may be an improvement over traditional forms of assessment including standardized testing and formal evaluation, it creates a specific type of hazard that underestimates true ability. For those who do not perceive the formal school system as personally relevant, students who are fully capable of long-term success may exhibit negative academic mindsets, leading educators to draw false conclusions on their true capability. The participants in this study demonstrated the same noncognitive skills in their professional lives that would have made them successful as students. This implies while they were *able* to succeed, they chose not to apply the skills that would have made them successful.

At minimum, there must be recognition that measurement of noncognitive skills in an academic setting may not accurately reflect the true capability of all students; negatively labeling students should be avoided. Ideally, educators will take a closer look

at students who fail to fit the norm, investigating where their motivation lies and creating learning experiences that capitalize on their skills.

Perhaps the use of academic mindsets as a tool to measure success is not flawed, but that simply, there is one important academic mindset that is missing; namely, a mindset of academic relevance. Farrington (2013) defines academic mindsets as the motivational components that influence student's engagement in learning, attempting to understand why and under what circumstances students choose to exercise energy towards mastering academic content. All of the current academic mindsets presuppose that the formal school system is personally relevant. Consequently they measure motivational components within the system. Prior to measuring motivation and ability within the system, it makes sense to question whether the system itself is personally relevant. This is the mindset of academic relevance. Were such a mindset to be broadly accepted, it could serve as a pre-screening mechanism to identify students unlikely to succeed within the traditional confines of the academic setting. Immediate recognition of students who do not fit the norm may enable educators to bypass misleading assessment of noncognitive skills against an irrelevant goal. By engaging with these students and understanding where their true motivation lies, educators may be able to create learning experiences that generate engagement that would otherwise not exist. This may draw forth noncognitive skills that would otherwise remain latent in an academic setting, ultimately helping students capable of success cultivate their abilities to be even more successful and not to rue the formal school system as a whole.

If there is a lesson to be learned from this study, it is that not all successful people do well academically; there are alternative paths to success. Formal education is not a condition precedent to becoming an economically independent contributing member of society. No less, if there are ways that the formal school system may be enhanced by learning from students who do not fit the norm, it behooves us as a society to do so. It is an injustice to declare individuals unlikely to succeed because they do not excel in a pre-determined arena; it is far better to learn from them how to expand the arena to create learning experiences that draw forth their true capability for success.

Considerations for Future Research

There are a variety of ways future research on this study may extend. One possibility is to conduct the same research on a variety of different age cohorts. While this study focused on Generation X, aged 34-55, other research may focus on Millennials whose work ethic research has shown to be categorically different from previous generations (McManus Warnell, 2015). How does the work ethic of Millennials impact their motivation in the formal school system? Is college more or less relevant, and how does this impact engagement in the K-12 formal school system?

Of additional interest may be further understanding the role that overcoming adversity contributes to long-term success. Frequently, adversity is cited in the role it played in negative outcomes; in this study, it proved to be a positive attribute that helped contribute to long-term success. In what other ways does adversity contribute to positive outcomes? What are the unique characteristics of individuals who are able to transform adversity into positive outcomes as opposed to being defeated by it?

This study identified that the use of academic mindsets to predict long-term success is flawed, in that it measures noncognitive ability against an irrelevant goal. What are more appropriate measures of long-term success that are not limited to whether or not students perceive the personal relevance of the formal school system? Specifically, is there a screening tool which can identify students unlikely to succeed academically, but who possess the characteristics that facilitate long-term success? And if so, is it possible for the formal education system to capitalize on these skills as means to generate engagement that would otherwise not exist? Does an Academic Relevance Mindset fit within this schema? Can it serve as an initial screening tool to identify alternatives to the traditional formal school format?

Limitations of the Study

The findings of this study were limited to the richness and robustness of the responses provided by participants to the researcher's questions. Although there were only seven participants, the nature of phenomenological study allows for a small number of participants, provided saturation occurs. Saturation is defined by reaching a point in which additional interviews yield no new concepts or ideas. In this study, saturation occurred after 5 interviews; two additional interviews were conducted to further verify the findings.

The findings of this study may have been enhanced through interacting with the family members, friends, or educators of those interviewed. All of the findings are based on self-report. For the purpose of this study, self-report was sufficient. The phenomenon of achieving long-term success in spite of having negative experiences in the formal

school system is largely personal. No less, interviewing outside respondents may have facilitated greater objectivity.

Finally, the findings of this study were subject to the researcher's personal interpretation of participant responses. The researcher took precaution to name and revisit personal presuppositions about the phenomenon throughout the research process, including the bracketing of personal biases while identifying themes and subthemes. To ensure that themes and subthemes were drawn from actual data as opposed to what the researcher expected to find, the researcher grouped all units of meaning according to topic. Topics unrelated to the research questions were discarded. The topics supported with the most units of meaning emerged as the themes and subthemes discussed as findings of the study. As each theme and subtheme emerged, the researcher revisited her personal biases once more. If there was overlap, she was able to safeguard the validity of the theme or subtheme by verifying the quantity of units of meaning supporting it.

Final Reflection

The researcher understands that for the sake of efficiency, the formal school system must employ some degree of a utilitarian approach; that not all students are going to thrive within its confines and that ultimately as long as the majority does, it is an acceptable system. This research hopes to validate the minority; those who are likely to be accepted as causalities of the utilitarian approach. By highlighting the phenomenon that some students who fail within the confines of the formal school system *do* achieve long-term success, it is the researcher's goal to provide hope to others who may not fit the norm. There are alternative paths to success; achievement in the formal school

system is not the only one, the path less traveled is not always easy. Further, this study attempts to reduce the stigma about those who pursued alternative paths to success. It seems that more and more frequently, achievement is defined by degrees and by the letters before or after one's name. This should not be the case. Some of the smartest, most creative individuals who made significant contributions to society did not go to college, and/or did not complete high school. Paradoxically, some individuals with the highest level of formal education do very little with their lives. The point is that there is not a single path for all persons to follow. One should not be judged for pursuing one contrary to the norm.

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Appendix A

CONSENT FORM

A Phenomenological Study of Long-Term Success in Spite of Formal Education: What Can Be Learned From Those Who Don Not Fit the Norm

You are invited to be in a research study of the lived experiences of those who did not succeed within the formal school system, yet achieved long-term success as adults. You were selected as a possible participant because of your experience in the formal school system and the success you have achieved as an adult. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.
This study is being conducted by: Mary E. Butler, a Doctoral Candidate at the University of Minnesota, University of Minnesota-Duluth, Department of Education.

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to understand the root of academic disengagement among successful adults as means to determine if and how the formal school system may be improved to better serve them. It further seeks to understand which personal characteristics contribute to long-term success in spite of academic disengagement. Of special interest will be the concept of grit.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in a semi-structured, sixty to ninety minute, face-to-face interview. You will be asked to describe your experiences within the formal school system, focusing on factors that did or did not make it personally relevant. At the end of the interview, you will be asked to complete a 12-item survey on grit, which will be used as an additional form of descriptive data to help understand the characteristics that have made you successful. The interview will be audio recorded. Within three days, it will be transcribed, summarized, and sent to you via email to verify its accuracy. You will be invited to make any necessary additions, deletions, or clarifications.
2. Participate in a ten to twenty minute follow-up interview via telephone. This will occur one to two weeks after the initial interview, and will serve as an opportunity to review the interview summary, and to discuss any revisions suggested via email. The objective is to ensure that the summary fully and accurately reflects your personal experience in the formal school system.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study

This study poses very little risk, however there is the possibility that recalling negative experiences within the formal school system may cause you to feel anxiety or discomfort. If it appears that the discomfort for you to recall the memories associated with a specific question is too great to continue, the researcher will redirect, and not return to the question unless you state that you wish to return to it at a later point.

The benefit of participation in this study is the potential to benefit society through helping to reduce the likelihood of drawing false conclusions on the true capability of students who may not be successful in the formal school setting.

Compensation:
You will not receive compensation for participating in this study.

Confidentiality:
The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. Study data will be encrypted according to current University policy for protection of confidentiality. The researcher is the only one who will have access to the audio recording of your interview. It will be stored on an encrypted password protected USB Flash Drive, and uploaded to an encrypted file on the researcher's personal computer. The USB Flash Drive and electronic copy will be maintained in accordance with the University's policy for protection of confidentiality until it is destroyed.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota or the researcher. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:
The researcher conducting this study is Mary E. Butler. Her faculty advisor is Dr. Frank Guldbrandsen. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact Mary at 218-349-8991 or butl0138@d.umn.edu .Dr. Guldbrandsen may be reached at UMD-Education, 121 EduE, 412 Library Drive, Duluth, MN 55812, 218-726-8172, or fguldbra@d.umn.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.
Statement of Consent:
I have read the above information. I have received answers to questions I have asked. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature:_____Date: _____

Signature of Investigator:_____Date: _____

Appendix B

Participant Recruitment Email

To: [participant email]

From: butl0138@d.umn.edu

Subject: Research Participation Invitation: The role of K-12 education in your path to success

Dear [insert participant name],

This email message is an approved request for participation in research that has been approved by the University of Minnesota Review Board (IRB).

My name is Mary Butler. I received your name from [referral source], as a person who may be willing to participate in a study I am conducting as a part of the requirements towards a Doctoral Degree in Education that I am pursuing at the University of Minnesota.

The purpose of my study is to understand the personal experience of individuals who achieved success as adults, but who did not have a positive experience in the formal education system. This includes dropping out prior to high school graduation, pursuing a GED instead of a traditional diploma, or graduating but experiencing significant difficulties in doing so.

There is no compensation to participate in this study, however your participation has the potential to benefit society through helping to reduce the likelihood of drawing false conclusions on the true capability of students who are not successful in the formal school setting.

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in a semi-structured, sixty to ninety minute, face-to-face interview. You will be asked to describe your experiences within the formal school system, focusing on factors that did or did not make it personally relevant. At the end of the interview, you will be asked to complete a 12-item survey on grit, which will be used as an additional form of descriptive data to help understand the characteristics that have made you successful. The interview will be recorded. Within three days, it will be transcribed, summarized, and sent to you via email to verify its accuracy. You will be invited to make any necessary additions, deletions, or clarifications.

2. Participate in a ten to twenty minute follow-up interview via telephone. This will occur one to two weeks after the initial interview, and will serve as an opportunity to review the interview summary, and to discuss any revisions suggested via email. The objective is to ensure that the summary fully and accurately reflects your personal experience in the formal school system.

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher and her advisor will have access to the records. Study data will be encrypted according to current University policy for protection of confidentiality.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota or the researcher. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please respond to this email. I will contact you so that we may schedule a time to meet for a face-to-face interview in a location of your choosing.

If you have any questions, I encourage you to either email me, or call me at 218-349-8991. You may also direct questions to my faculty advisor, Dr. Frank Guldbrandsen who may be reached at 218-726-8172, or fguldbra@d.umn.edu.
I look forward to hearing from you.

Best,

Mary E. Butler

Appendix C

Recruitment Advertisement

Doctoral candidate at the University of Minnesota seeks working adults aged 30 to 65 to participate in a study on the lived experience of individuals who achieved success as adults but who did not have a positive experience in the formal education system. This includes dropping out of high school prior to graduation, pursuing a GED instead of a traditional diploma, or graduating but experiencing significant difficulties in doing so. Participation includes one 60 to 90 minute face-to-face interview, and one 10 to 20 minute follow up interview via telephone. Although there is no compensation to participate in this study, your participation has the potential to benefit society through helping to reduce the likelihood of drawing false conclusions on the true capability of students who are not successful in the formal school setting. For more information please contact Mary at 218-349-8991, or butl0138.d.umn.edu

Appendix D

Interview Questions

Research Question 1: What assumptions and beliefs contribute to the perception that the formal school is not personally relevant?

Interview Questions RQ1

a. What three words would you use to describe yourself?
b. What three words would you use to describe the formal school system (K-12)
c. What are you most proud of? (Personally or professionally)
d. How important was it to your parents that you did well in school? How could you tell?
e. What is the highest level of education your parents and siblings completed?
f. When you were young, what did you want to be when you grew up? Did this change over time? Why?
g. How engaged in school were your friends, how did that compare to you?
h. What were your thoughts about going to college during middle school? How about during high school? How did your views on college evolve?

Research Question 2: What about the formal school system fails to provide the academic or social motivation to succeed within its confines?

Interview Questions RQ2

a. How much did you feel like you belonged in middle school? High school? How comfortable were you in middle school? High school? What were the reasons for such [lack of] feeling of comfort and belongingness?
b. How do you define intelligence? Ability? How much can our abilities change over time?
c. How confident are you about your current abilities to do well in your profession? How confident were you of your abilities to do well in school? What made you feel that way?
d. Which aspects of school excited and motivated you? Which aspects of school seemed boring and unexciting?
e. Which aspects of school were challenging but fun? Which aspects of school were challenging and difficult?
f. Which aspects of school seemed valuable? Which aspects of school seemed useless?

Research Question 3: What role does the culture of schooling and/or learning experiences play in student disengagement?

Interview Questions RQ3

a. Did you ever get in trouble while in school? If so, over what sorts of things?
b. Describe your experiences in middle school, both positive and negative. Describe your experiences in high school, both positive and negative.-Think about all aspects of schooling, teachers, principals, students, courses, assignments, extracurricular activities…
c. How did your school experiences (positive or negative) change across the years? What do you feel caused this change?
d. Describe when you decided discontinue your formal schooling? How and why did you decide to do that?

Research Question 4: What factors outside of the formal school system contribute to the long-term success of students who do not succeed within the formal school system?

Interview Questions RQ4

a. What qualities do you feel you possess that have made you successful?
b. If I asked your friends the same question, what do you think they would say?
c. Think about your success in your professional life. What are the factors that contributed to your success?
d. What role (positive or negative) has school played in your current situation?
e. When did you get your first job? How many hours a week did you work?
f. Did you, or do you have a mentor? If so, what role has your mentor played in your life?
g. Think about a young person who feels disengaged from school. What are some reasons for them to feel disengaged?
h. How would you advise this young person? What types of actions/strategies would you suggest?

Appendix E

Researcher's Presuppositions on Formal School System and Participants

Growing up, I never doubted that I would go to college, thus participation in the formal school was a necessity. I held myself to extremely high expectations, arguably demonstrating all of the necessary academic mindsets to make me successful. This being said, I observed several close friends, and in particular, who struggled immensely with the formal school system. It was not because she was not capable of earning good grades, indeed she is one of the smartest, wittiest individuals I have ever met. The trouble was that she didn't want to 'play the game.' She resisted conforming to the strict dress code, and resented what seemed like arbitrary enforcement of authority. Her resistance was both active and passive; on one occasion she stole the dinger from a bell used to silence students during the lunch hour. Passively, she did not study for tests, nor did she care whether or not she earned high marks. She was intelligent enough to get by with minimal effort, but found the process very off-putting. When in high school, she skated by, doing well enough to play on the soccer team her freshmen year, but eventually chose to spend her time working. She began working full time her senior year of high school, going to school when it fit with her schedule. She did graduate, but just barely. Meanwhile, she moved quickly through the ranks at a national retail chain, earning a significant income through commission. She never doubted she would be successful in life; she knew she was smart, and she did not need verification through grades or accolades in the formal school system. This friend continues to succeed in whatever she puts her mind to.

With this in mind, I believe that the formal school system is *one* path to success. Some incredibly intelligent people don't find it personally relevant. Either they don't need external validation that they are capable of success, or they find it in places other than the formal school system. Some of the most successful people I have met did not go to college. One did not graduate from high school. I think that part of what happened to my friend and what may happen to others is that when they do not conform to the rules and/or expectations of the formal school system, they receive a negative label which travels with them from grade to grade. At some point 'not a student' becomes an identity. Maybe this strengthens the resolve that the formal school system is not personally relevant.

1. Not all people believe that success in the formal school system is important
2. Some very smart people do not believe that success in the formal school system is important
3. Some incredibly successful people, particularly entrepreneurs, did not succeed in the formal school system
4. Often, those who don't believe that success in the formal school system are those that resist the socialization or the imposition of authority
5. Students who receive negative labels may develop an identity based on the label
6. Those who intend to go to college generally believe that success in the formal school system is important.

Appendix F

12-Item Grit Scale

Directions for taking the Grit Scale: Please respond to the following 12 items. Be honest- there are no right or wrong answers!

1. I have overcome setbacks to conquer an important challenge.
   - Very much like me
   - Mostly like me
   - Somewhat like me
   - Not much like me
   - Not like me at all

2. New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones.*
   - Very much like me
   - Mostly like me
   - Somewhat like me
   - Not much like me
   - Not like me at all

3. My interests change from year to year.*
   - Very much like me
   - Mostly like me
   - Somewhat like me
   - Not much like me
   - Not like me at all

4. Setbacks don't discourage me.
   - Very much like me
   - Mostly like me
   - Somewhat like me
   - Not much like me
   - Not like me at all

5. I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest.*
   - Very much like me
   - Mostly like me
   - Somewhat like me
   - Not much like me
   - Not like me at all

6. I am a hard worker.
   - Very much like me
   - Mostly like me
   - Somewhat like me
   - Not much like me
   - Not like me at all

7. I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.*
    - Very much like me
    - Mostly like me
    - Somewhat like me
    - Not much like me
    - Not like me at all

8. I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete.*
    - Very much like me
    - Mostly like me
    - Somewhat like me
    - Not much like me
    - Not like me at all

9. I finish whatever I begin.
    - Very much like me
    - Mostly like me
    - Somewhat like me
    - Not much like me
    - Not like me at all

10. I have achieved a goal that took years of work.
    - Very much like me
    - Mostly like me
    - Somewhat like me
    - Not much like me
    - Not like me at all

11. I become interested in new pursuits every few months.*
    - Very much like me
    - Mostly like me
    - Somewhat like me
    - Not much like me
    - Not like me at all

12. I am diligent.
    - Very much like me
    - Mostly like me
    - Somewhat like me
    - Not much like me
    - Not like me at all

Scoring:

1. For questions 1, 4, 6, 9, 10 and 12 assign the following points:
   5= Very much like me
   4= Mostly like me
   3= Somewhat like me
   2= Not much like me
   1= Not like me at all

2. For questions 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, and 11 assign the following points:
   1= Very much like me
   2= Mostly like me
   3= Somewhat like me
   4= Not much like me
   5= Not like me at all

Add up all the points and divide by 12. The maximum score on the scale is 5 (extremely gritty), and the lowest score on the scale is 1 (not at all gritty).

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