THE PRE-KINDERGARTEN THROUGH TWELFTH GRADE EXPERIENCES OF

POSTSECONDARY STUDENTS WHO IDENTIFIED AS

ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED AT RURAL SCHOOLS

by

CHRISTOPHER MICHEAL BRUTON

(Under the Direction of Pamela O. Paisley)

ABSTRACT

Students of economic disadvantage are entering college at lower rates than their more financially affluent peers. While much of the existing literature provides information about the reasons why students of poverty forego a college education, little research exists concerning the experiences of students with financial hardships that aspire to and obtain college entrance, specifically those who reside in rural districts. The purpose of this study was to discover the experiences of postsecondary students who identified as economically disadvantaged in their pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade matriculation in rural schools. Participants who received free or reduced price lunch for a minimum of four years in a rural school were interviewed to find the essence of the factors that contributed to their successful postsecondary attainment. Six themes emerged through data analysis: resiliency in spite of negative familial circumstances; desire to improve socioeconomic status; education as a means of improvement; the presence of positive influences; feelings of marginalization; and demystification of higher education.

INDEX WORDS: Economic disadvantage, Poverty, Rural schools, College entrance, College
                 attainment

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DEDICATION

To the participants of this study who courageously shared their stories and all students of economic disadvantage.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Kuo (2013) wrote of an individual's account involving perseverance, success, and hope.
Dawn Loggins, abandoned by her parents and left homeless, worked as a janitor at the high
school that she attended (Kuo). Growing up, her house had no electricity and no running water;
she would have to obtain water from a public park, twenty minutes away, to use for hygiene
purposes. This inconvenience caused her to skip showers for multiple days at a time. Dawn's
difficult life experiences came as a consequence of her parents' poor decisions. Not wanting to
make the same mistakes as her parents, she sought education as an escape. Unfortunately,
completing course requirements came with difficulty due to her limited access to resources. For
example, Dawn had trouble doing homework because it was hard for her to read in the dark of
her trailer, and she was unable to afford candles. Through the advocacy of office staff members
and professional school counselors at the school, Dawn was able to obtain stability and necessary
resources. Through these interventions by school staff, she was able to maintain a good grade
point average throughout high school.

Initially, Dawn applied to four colleges within her state, the University of North Carolina
at Chapel Hill, North Carolina State University, Davidson College, and Warren Wilson College.
In December, she mailed one final application to her most desired choice, Harvard University.
As she received confirmations from the local schools, months went by with no word from the Ivy
League institution. Finally, the much-anticipated letter came and Dawn was certain that bad
news waited within the envelope. "Cautiously, she opened it: 'Dear Ms. Loggins, I'm delighted

to report that the admissions committee has asked me to inform you that you will be admitted to the Harvard College class of 2016 . . . We send such an early positive indication only to outstanding applicants.' She gasped when she read those words" (Kuo, 2012, "Shooting for the Stars," para. 17).

Dawn, unfortunately, is the exception to the rule. Inequity exists in education (Crethar, Torres, Rivera, & Nash, 2008; Lee, Daniel, Puig, Newgent, & Nam, 2008; Shealey, 2006; Urrieta, 2004). Most educators would like to believe that they are offering equitable experiences for all students, but data show that educators are falling short concerning populations of economic disadvantage (Lee et al.). In a nation that has developed legislation to ensure that all students receive the best education possible, schools still fail at closing college entrance gap for marginalized students (Lagana-Riorden & Aguilar, 2009). This failure to assist all students in achieving higher academic standards stems from issues related to equity, access, and harmony within the field of education (Crethar et al., 2008). To improve access and opportunity for marginalized students, professional school counselors need to heed the lessons learned through research and, based on the literature, implement effective, social justice-based efforts to advocate for the students facing institutional disadvantages.

Defining Economic Disadvantage

This study is centralized around the social justice issues of students of economic disadvantage and their unmet needs that lead to the increased high school dropout and low college attainment rates. As part of an institution's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) demographic report, the Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement (2011a) uses free or reduced price lunch data to identify students as economically disadvantaged. This standard of measurement is consistent with the United States Department of Education's (USDOE)

measurement for school Title I services, which states that children eligible for free or reduced priced lunches under the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act will be categorized as low-income *(*Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965).

Crosnoe, Mistry, and Elder (2002) stated that economic disadvantage "is most often defined in terms of family income, but other factors, such as family size, family structure, and education, also contribute to the overall level of disadvantage" (p. 691). In addition, Crosnoe et al. used the terms *economic disadvantage* and *poverty* synonymously. Therefore, poverty and, by definition, economic disadvantage, have effects that include monetary wealth but also extend to other societal elements of disadvantage (Dominguez & Arford, 2010). For the purpose of this study the terms *economic disadvantage, poverty,* and *low socioeconomic status* are used interchangeably.

The Growing Population of Students of Economic Disadvantage

The number of students of economic disadvantage enrolled in public schools has been on the increase since 2001 (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2011). The total population of the national public school system rose from 46.5 million to 48.6 million students over a ten-year period beginning in 2000 (NCES). Within this statistic, the percentage of students receiving free or reduced price lunch increased at a much sharper rate with 38.3 percent receiving these services in the 2000-2001 school year and 47.5 percent receiving the same services in 2009-2010 (NCES). Based on these figures, this significant rate of increase appears to be a recent occurrence. From the 1999-2000 school year through 2004-2005, the population of students of economic disadvantage grew from 34 percent of the total student population to 37 percent, an increase of only 3 percent (NCES). However, from 2005 through 2010, the

population of students receiving free or reduced price lunch grew from 37 to 46 percent, a rate three times that of the previous five-year span (NCES).

A review of NCES statistics specific to the state of Georgia demonstrates similar trends. Georgia, overall, holds a higher percentage of students receiving free or reduced price lunch than the national average. The number of Georgia students identified as economically disadvantaged rose from 43 percent in the 1999-2000 school year, to 56 percent in 2009-2010 (NCES). In addition, Georgia demonstrated a similar trend in increase with a 10 percent spike in students of economic disadvantage occurring between 2005 and 2010 (NCES). A review of disaggregated statistics concerning free or reduced price lunch for Georgia students shows that the number of students receiving free lunch grew from 35 to 48 percent over a ten year period, while the number of students receiving discounted lunch stayed at approximately 8 percent for the same time span (NCES). Many factors may have contributed to increased rates in free lunch and consistent rates for reduced lunch, but, regardless, the data show that almost half of the national student population is considered economically disadvantaged, and there are more students of poverty in Georgia than upper or middle-class students combined.

The Academic Effects of Disadvantage

Students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are not entering college at the same rates as their middle- and upper-class counterparts (Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008). Research shows that socioeconomic status does indeed have an effect on college attainment, and the factors present in situations of poverty are linked to high school dropout and low college entrance rates (Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna). Blank (2011) found that institutions in most states have been closing the achievement gap on standardized tests. However, trends in the literature show that obstacles to college attainment still exist for students of economic

disadvantage (Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna). Institutional bias, a lack of social capital, low

levels of parent efficacy, and other factors may contribute to the academic tendencies of

economically disadvantaged populations (Blair & Scott, 2002; Brookins-Bozeman, 2007; Farkas,

2003; Klopfenstein, 2004; Louie, 2007; Ndura, Robinson, & Ochs, 2003; Raffo, Dyson, Gunter,

Hall, Jones, & Kalambouka, 2009; Shealey, 2006, Urrieta, 2004). The present issue involving

low levels of college entrance for students of economic disadvantage does not involve the

intelligence or efficacy of these individuals, but, rather, the external factors and systems of

influence that contribute to the current rates of postsecondary attainment.

Previous Studies

How do we increase the college entrance rates of students of economic disadvantage, and

how can pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade institutions prepare students for this transition?

Deil-Amen and Tevis (2010) conducted a qualitative study on the effect on college entrance

exams concerning perceived confidence, efficacy, and agency of college attainment. The authors

concluded that improved college counseling at the high school level could promote better

information about college entrance exams and more adequately prepare high school juniors and

seniors for transition to post-secondary institutions (Deil-Amen & Tevis). Perna, Rowan-

Kenyon, Thomas, Bell, Anderson, and Li (2008) conducted a study to review the successfulness

of college counseling programs in high schools throughout three states. Perna et al. found that

the services among these schools were inconsistent and not adequate for the needs of

marginalized students.

Crosnoe, Mistry, and Elder (2002) conducted a quantitative study to explore the

mechanisms of disadvantage and educational resources. Within the authors' review of literature,

many studies correlated low socioeconomic status with low college entrance rates. The authors

believed that early disadvantage led to obstacles concerning high-school graduation, college enrollment, and years of completed schooling. In reaction to the literature, Crosnoe et al. constructed a family process model that would capture how well the correlation between low socioeconomic status and college entrance could be rooted in psychological processes. They found that parents with a low socioeconomic status tend to possess more pessimistic opinions about their child's opportunities for post-secondary education, and they are less likely to advocate for their students in this realm of development. The authors maintained that family dynamics represent only one of many elements that can affect the lower rates of students of economic disadvantage entering college, and they recommended that other systems of influence should be explored.

Lee, Daniels, Puig, Newgent, and Nam (2008) used The National Educational Longitudinal Study database to "examine the educational development of students of low socioeconomic status" (p. 306). Due to the low percentage of students of economic disadvantage entering and continuing in postsecondary institutions, Lee et al. conducted research to discover the elements of this issue and found that math scores, internal locus of control, self-concept, educational aspirations, academic expectations, and psychological factors are good predictors of college attainment.

Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, and Perna (2008) explored the factors that shape a student's desire to attend a postsecondary institution and the probability of that student enrolling in college. In their qualitative study, the researchers raised questions concerning three different hypotheses that may have an effect on student involvement within the college aspiration process: "[1] parents shape college opportunity for their children, but involvement varies based on socioeconomic status; [2] parental involvement is shaped by, and also shapes, the school context for college

opportunity; and [3] parental involvement is also shaped by the higher education context and the social, economic, and policy context" (p. 565). Interviewed students, teachers, counselors, postsecondary institution personnel, and parents speak of their experiences within one of the three elements assessed by the study. The authors implied that parents do shape the college opportunities for their children and that this influence varies based on socioeconomic status. The experiences of first-generation college students and those students whose parents attended college also indicated varying effects on the college decision process regardless of financial affluence.

Deming and Dynarski (2009) conducted research to review the monetary issues concerning college attainment. The researchers expanded on policies that could make the financial hardships of college tuition more reasonable for students of economic disadvantage. Deming and Dynarski found that students of poverty are more likely to attend and stay in college if the economics of the college-going process are alleviated. While no concepts of social disadvantage are dissected within the Deming and Dynarski study, the financial aspect of college entrance remains adversarial in the pursuit of postsecondary attainment equity.

Reddick, Welton, Alsandor, Denyszyn, and Platt (2011) conducted a study on a problem that most closely resembles the one in this research. The authors sought to develop themes from the qualitative responses of Black and Hispanic high school graduates concerning their journey to success in college attainment. They were interested in the common experiences that positively affected the participants and gave them the motivation to apply and enter a postsecondary institution. Reddick et al. found that the "participants were successful in accessing college through relationships with family members, peers, counselors, and teachers, all of whom set high expectations" (p. 612). The authors also noted the negative attributes of the college attainment

process that each participant encountered. Bloom (2009) conducted a similar study which assessed the success of Beyond Welfare, an organization that "helps [mothers in poverty] soften the hardships of juggling family, college, and work" while attending postsecondary institutions (p. 485). The author found that community and system support is vital to the academic success of women of economic disadvantage yet calls for more research concerning education and families of economic disadvantage.

Gaps in the Literature

Most of the current literature reviews the state of the relationship between poverty and college attainment (Crosnoe, Mistry, & Elder, Jr., 2002; Deil-Amen &Tevis, 2010; Lee Daniels, Puig, Newgent, & Nam, 2008; Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, and Perna, 2008). However, few studies focus on how to increase the low college entrance rates among students of economic disadvantage, specifically with emphasis on rural districts. Concerning these issues, Deil-Amen and Tevis stated, "Future research should further examine [the] dynamic interplay between students' internal motivations and their high school context" (p. 30). The authors elaborated about a lack of understanding concerning psychosocial college attainment factors. Nora (2002) defined these concepts as "self-efficacy, anticipatory attitudes, intimacy motivation, introversion, extroversion, leadership, involvement, friendship support, parental support, and explanatory styles" (p. 70). Many educators could benefit from discovering the elements of education that are working for students of economic disadvantage and their postsecondary attainment and success.

The study conducted by Reddick, Welton, Alsandor, Denyszyn, and Platt (2011) attempted to find the positives of the pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade educational process for students of economic disadvantage. However, the Reddick et al. study contained students

from urban schools and does not account for the unique characteristics of rural districts, and includes only Hispanic and Black participants. A review of literature did not produce any studies concerning the pre-kindergarten though twelfth grade experiences and perspectives of students of economic disadvantage from rural districts that contribute to successful college attainment.

<div align="center">**Research Paradigm and Theoretical Orientation**</div>

To understand the experiences of students of economic disadvantage from rural districts with respect to their postsecondary attainment, a phenomenological study is most appropriate. In a phenomenological study, "the investigator abstains from making suppositions, focuses on a specific topic freshly and naively, constructs a question or problem to guide the study, and derives findings that will provide the basis for further research and reflection" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 47). The researcher framed the methods of the study around Moustakas's definition of phenomenological study. Through the horizontalization of participants' transcribed interviews, themes were identified concerning the attributes of the pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade educational experience with respect to the college attainment process. Based on the findings of the phenomenological study and the understanding gained from the experiences of the participants, the themes and essence that are found in the qualitative responses will add to the literature concerning this marginalized group and further inform the educational community to the experiences of these students of economic disadvantage.

For this qualitative study, the researcher worked within the philosophical assumptions of Creswell's (2009) social constructivist and advocacy and participatory worldviews. Creswell stated that the social constructivist framework is most often applied in qualitative study, thus making the framework an adequate choice for this particular research approach. Due to the research inquiry with students of economic disadvantage from rural school districts, the

constructivist worldview is congruent with the collaborative process that the study holds as well as the methods of inquiry that can be applied. "Social constructivists hold assumptions that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live…[and they] develop subjective meanings of their experiences--meanings directed towards certain objects or things" (Creswell, p. 8). These meanings are formed through interaction with other individuals and through the historical and cultural norms of their experiences (Creswell). Discovering the meaning behind the experiences of students of economic disadvantage who chose to enroll in college maintains the concept of the social constructivist worldview, and is, therefore, an adequate framework from which to conduct this study.

However, Creswell (2009) believed that the constructivist paradigm does not place enough emphasis on the advocacy and social justice that is necessary for change in the college preparation practices of current educational institutions. For this reason, the advocacy and participatory worldview is also applicable. The hope of this research is that professional school counselors can take advocacy action in response to the findings of this study; this concept is consistent with the advocacy/participatory paradigm (Creswell). Creswell stated, "Advocacy research provides a voice for these participants, raising their consciousness or advancing an agenda for change to improve their lives" (p. 9). The qualitative form of the study will give the participants a voice in what they feel is important in their own experiences of this phenomenon. For this reason, the themes that are found in the qualitative responses will add to the literature of this marginalized group and further inform the educational community to the experiences of these students of economic disadvantage.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to discover the experiences of postsecondary students who identified as economically disadvantaged in their pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade matriculation in rural schools, concerning the factors that contributed to their successful postsecondary attainment. The desire was to gain a perspective of the phenomenon of students from backgrounds of poverty successfully attending college. Gaining an understanding of these experiences through the data analysis offered meaning as to the essence of what these students of economic disadvantage encountered in their pursuit of college entrance in rural districts. Due to the large numbers of individuals of economic disadvantage who are forgoing postsecondary education, research inquiry concerning the success stories of members of this marginalized group is needed.

Delimitations

Concerning this study, as with all phenomenological research, a few delimitations should be discussed. The participants of the study come from a single institution of the University System of Georgia, located in a rural environment in the northeastern portion of the state. For this reason, some of the participants attended the same pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade schools, although none of the participants had congruent matriculations with respect to individual institutions. Furthermore, no students who attended a postsecondary research institution are included in the participant population. These factors limit the study by the exclusion of current students at all other postsecondary institutions in the state of Georgia, as well as nationally.

The study requires that participants received free or reduced price lunch for at least four years of their pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade experience. The requirement of free or

reduced price lunch data is congruent with the definition of students as economically

disadvantaged through the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (Elementary and

Secondary Education Act of 1965). This four-year threshold is required to ensure that the

participant's experience in economic disadvantage is holistic as possible and not limited to a

short period of their life. Students who were only identified as economically disadvantaged for

one, two, or three years may lack a full understanding of the experiences of an individual of

poverty. However, this requirement excludes the possibility of valuable data collected from

participants who received free or reduced price lunch for three years or less. Additionally, the

voices are silenced of those students who qualified for free or reduced price lunch but chose to

forego the benefits thereof, yet still experienced all of the effects of economic disadvantage.

Definition of Core Terms

For clarity, it is important to provide definitions of terms that will be used in the study:

Economic disadvantage: The socioeconomic status that derives from low income

identified through free or reduced price lunch data. Economic disadvantage involves Crosnoe,

Mistry, and Elder's (2002) concepts of "family income . . . family size, family structure, and

education" (p. 691). The term *economic disadvantage* is used synonymously with *poverty* and

low socioeconomic status throughout the study, all of which assume a lack of monetary wealth

and social capital.

Rural: In terms of geography, Provasnik et al. (2007) classified a rural district on the

fringe of an urban cluster as a "census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to five

miles from an urbanized area, as well as a rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles

from an urban cluster" (p. 122).

Postsecondary school: Any institution of higher education that requires a high school diploma or General Education Development (GED).

College attainment: A person's realization of physically enrolling into and attending a postsecondary school. This term is synonymous with *college or postsecondary entrance.*

CHAPTER 2

SELECTED REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to answer the question: What are the lived experiences of the pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade experiences of students who identified as economically disadvantaged in rural schools with regards to their successful postsecondary institution enrollment? To develop an adequate method of inquiry and analysis, a comprehensive literature review of related concepts was necessary. The literature review included topics relating to the current state of education and legislation that governs the closing of the achievement gap between students of economic disadvantage and their more affluent peers, the issues surrounding these students with respect to their academic achievement and postsecondary institution entrance efficacy, social capital, the concept of a sense of belonging in schools, parent advocacy, and the argument of a culture of poverty.

Johnson and Strange (2007) believed that the population of students who receive free or reduced price lunch and the demographics of rural districts are correlated. The authors claimed that almost half of students in rural districts identify as economically disadvantaged. For this reason, a review of current issues among students from rural areas with respect to academics and college going is also necessary. In response to the issues of economic disadvantage and rural education, the social justice means with which to promote change in the education field needs to be reviewed to allow for the development of new services for rural students of economic disadvantage.

The Legislative Foundation of Modern Education and College Attainment

Founded in 1979, the United States Department of Education (USDOE) declared an objective to ensure equal access for all students to promote achievement and the inclusion in a global economy (USDOE, 2009). In other words, modern educational institutions serve the purpose of educating students to become productive global citizens. Since the USDOE's inauguration, declarations for "ensuring access to equal educational opportunity for every individual" and "encouraging the increased involvement of the public, parents, and students in Federal education programs" have been pillars of the federal educational movement (p. 1). The legislation enacting the USDOE serves the purpose of promoting fair and equitable services for all students; yet, additional legislation was later drafted to ensure further access to educational resources for all marginalized groups.

No Child Left Behind

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (2001) calls for all federally funded educational institutions to close the achievement gap between marginalized students and their more privileged peers by the year 2014. Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is the NCLB accountability measure that assesses the effectiveness of the institution with respect to student achievement. AYP requires disaggregation of achievement data for White, Black, and Hispanic ethnic subgroups, English Language Learners, students with disabilities, and students who are economically disadvantaged (NCLB, 2001). Attendance rates among holistic and disaggregated groups, along with Criterion Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) are used as accountability measures for elementary and middle schools in the state of Georgia (Georgia Department of Education [GADOE], 2011a). In high school, students' graduation test scores and end-of-course test (EOCT) scores, attendance, and graduation rates are reviewed for each institution.

Under NCLB, schools that did not meet the federal accountability benchmarks set for a given year could lose faculty or funding (Lagana-Riorden & Aguilar, 2009; NCLB, 2001). In response to NCLB, and to serve all students more appropriately, schools should be on the cutting edge of education by implementing curriculum, interventions, and programs that would lead to the achievement of every student, regardless of race, disability, or socioeconomic status. For this reason, the academic achievement and college entrance rates of marginalized students have never been so documented, valued, and discussed. The legislation served the purpose of ensuring equity for all students, including those of economic disadvantage. NCLB placed emphasis on the economically disadvantaged subgroup of students, shedding light on their achievement, and in some cases, the lack thereof. A discussion concerning the achievement of students of economic disadvantage is incomplete without the inclusion of this relative legislation.

Georgia's BRIDGE Act

The Building Resourceful Individuals to Develop Georgia's Economy Act (BRIDGE) was passed through the collaborative effort of legislators beginning in the middle school grades to assist in academic and career development, high-school graduation, and college-readiness (BRIDGE, 2009). In addition the bill seeks "to create an atmosphere motivating middle- and high-school students to learn because they see the relevance of education to their dreams and future plans" (GADOE, 2011a, p. 1). The legislation defines college and career readiness as the level of achievement required for students to enroll in postsecondary institutions or successful entry into the workforce (BRIDGE, 2009). In only its second year of implementation, no data exist yet for students who began the BRIDGE process in middle school and received all elements through twelfth grade.

The BRIDGE legislation includes annual requirements for educators with respect to the academic, career, and college readiness development of all Georgia students starting in the sixth grade (2009). Georgia legislators agreed that academic development needs a college transition focus starting as early as the middle school level (BRIDGE, 2009). The BRIDGE Act requires that professional school counselor's work with interactive college/work-ready databases to help students through academic and career development. One manner by which schools can achieve this end is through GACollege411.org (Georgia Student Finance Commission, 2010). For those using GACollege411.org, the BRIDGE Bill states that by 2012, 90% of sixth grades students must create an account on www.gacollege411.org and take at least one career cluster inventory. In addition, BRIDGE requires that 90% of seventh graders take an interest profile, and 90% of eighth graders complete a work values sorter. Once these elements have been identified, eighth grades students can investigate three or more careers and the necessary post-secondary education associated with those occupations (BRIDGE).

The BRIDGE Act also requires a transitional conference at the end of eighth grade or the beginning of ninth grade to prepare the student and parents for the continuation of career development in high school. Although not required, it would be helpful for a middle school and high school professional counselor to be present at this meeting along with the parent/guardian to enhance the fluidity of transition to high school. This process involves the development of an Individual Graduation Plan (IGP) that "helps 'map out' the rigorous academic core subjects and focused work in mathematics, science, or humanities, fine arts, world languages or sequenced career pathway coursework" (GADOE, 2011b, p. 1). The IGP is based on the student's developed academic and career goals (GADOE). "Additional parts of the IGP may include

career-oriented and work-based learning experiences, and postsecondary studies through Georgia's multiple College Credit Now programs" (p. 1).

Building upon the career and academic development momentum created by the middle school through the BRIDGE Bill and the development of an IGP, professional school counselors could conduct entrance meetings with students and parents to engage the student in high school academics. The BRIDGE Bill lists requirements for high school students as well. Ninety percent of ninth grade students must investigate three additional careers by the end of their freshman year (BRIDGE, 2009). For tenth grade, school personnel are required to inform students about Move On When Ready and College Credit Now programs (i.e., dual enrollment partnerships) and the enrollment requirements of each (BRIDGE). Hoffman, Vargas, and Santos (2009) affirmed the state of Georgia's belief in dual enrollment. The authors stated that these dual enrollment options "increase the likelihood that students currently underrepresented in higher education will enroll in postsecondary education" (p. 44). Hoffman et al. found that dual enrollment programs are an adequate method of involving individuals in college enrollment, even those students who did not think that they were college ready. These partnerships allow college student affairs professionals the ability to come to the high school campus where they can meet and interact with students. Inversely, the process would also allow high school students to visit college campuses.

As students matriculate through Georgia high schools, further measures exist. After the sophomore level, the BRIDGE Bill requires that eleventh grade students explore at least three post-secondary institutions that offer programs of study that align with their academic plan and career goals. Additionally, 90% of twelfth grade students must submit at least one application to a post-secondary school of their choice (BRIDGE, 2009). The purpose of these requirements lies

with the General Assembly's desire to see higher college entrance rates and career readiness for all Georgia students.

Georgia's College and Career Ready Performance Index

In September of 2011, President Barack Obama allowed for State Departments of Education to apply for waivers for the NCLB requirements (Badertscher, 2012). President Obama called the NCLB legislation an admirable but flawed attempt at reforming the educational system. With many states so far from meeting the NCLB requirements by the 2014 deadline, the President allowed for states to apply for NCLB waivers by submitting their own drafted accountability measures. Georgia submitted and was granted a waiver via their College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI), the new accountability standard for the state.

To be implemented at the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year, CCRPI possesses many of the aspects of NCLB, with other major differences (GADOE, 2012). With the program being developed over the 2011-2012 school year and continuing into 2012-2013 with further refinements, the baselines and intricate details of the measure were not entirely published for inclusion in this review of literature. However, CCRPI contains similar accountability measures with NCLB concerning achievement, progress, achievement gap closure, and exceeding the bar set by the measure (GADOE). The accountability details to which a school will meet these standards varies within the details of the number of students necessary to classify a subgroup, formerly forty students, but soon to be between ten and thirty; how these groups of students will be included in the accountability assessment; how students will accounted with respect to standardized test achievement; what subjects are included in assessment; the number of years for which students must be accounted; and how attendance is determined (GADOE). End of Course Tests in high schools and Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests in grades 3-8 will continue to

be the standardized tests of measure. Additionally, in an attempt to create college and career ready students, developers included many of the BRIDGE standards in CCRPI, an element of accountability not implemented in NCLB. These differences, plus others, were still being defined and refined at the time of this study. How these measures affect the population of students of economic disadvantage remains unseen. Yet, the differences seen in the Georgia's CCRPI demonstrate a greater significance placed on college entrance (GADOE).

Issues within the Legislation

Involving Students of Economic Disadvantage

After all of the federal mandates of the USDOE and NCLB, the goal of equity in student achievement across all populations is still not realized in schools (Shealey, 2006). Studies conducted as recently as 2011 show that institutions keep upper/middle class students performing at higher academic levels than individuals of economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Hernandez, 2011). Additionally, students of economic disadvantage are not entering college at the same rates as their more financially-affluent peers (Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008). Many factors contribute to the lack of secondary and postsecondary success of students who identify as economically disadvantaged, but no remedies to raise the rate of college attainment among members of this marginalized group have alleviated the issue altogether. Federal mandates claim that equal access is essential to the education process, yet research shows inequity within academic institutions concerning these issues (Klopfenstein, 2004; Raffo, Dyson, Gunter, Hall, Jones, & Kalambouka, 2009).

After all of the legislation, equity in student achievement is still not pervasive in schools. Many members of the educational community claim that the legislation is to blame for many issues of current inequity (Shealey, 2006; Urrieta, 2004). Klopfenstein (2004) stated that

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schools' biases in practices and processes keep upper/middle class students achieving higher academically than individuals of economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Shealey believed that NCLB ignores these inequities that are present in education. In the educational community, an error exists in communication with parents and guardians and ignorance through privilege prevails which leads to inequity in expectation and service implementation at an institutional and societal level.

Involving Rural Schools

NCLB maintains bias exists against students from rural districts as well (Hodge & Krumm, 2009; Jimerson 2005; Prater, 2005; Tonn, 2007). Jimerson (2005) named this bias "placism" and stated that it "discriminates against people based on where they live" (p. 211). Hodge and Krumm found that NCLB does not take into account the difficulty with which rural schools acquire highly-qualified teachers for disaggregated student groups. Prater (2005) further stated that the rigorous requirements for teachers to be highly-qualified as set by NCLB applies a strain on rural districts' hiring processes, creates a void of highly-qualified teachers, and violates the students' right to an adequate education as outlined by legislation. Jimerson agreed that the presence of highly-qualified teachers is a struggle for rural schools, the issue will lead to low student achievement, and these institutions will be incorrectly labeled as failing with respect to AYP measures.

Tonn (2007) wrote of the concerns of the National Rural Education Advocacy Coalition (NREAC) which desires to "focus on program improvement for schools and districts that need assistance rather than on one-size-fits-all sanctions that do not meet the unique needs and challenges of rural schools" (p. 19). The NREAC believes that the unique circumstances of rural districts should be accounted for within NCLB and Title I legislation (Tonn). Tonn maintained

that NCLB and AYP sanctions hold bias and do not account for possible validity issues within assessment data for rural schools. To hold an institution accountable for a disaggregated group, the school must meet a minimum population requirement (NCLB, 2001). Although measured differently, CCRPI has lowered this requirement for forty students to a threshold of somewhere between ten and thirty (GADOE, 2012). NREAC stated that many rural schools lack the population size to meet the NCLB accountability requirements and, thus, their test accountability assessment scores are skewed based on a low number of participants in some subgroups (Tonn).

In addition to these issues, "rural educators also say that the isolation of most rural schools can make it difficult, if not impossible, to comply with the law's consequences for failing schools, which can include the offer of public school choice and tutoring" (Tonn, 2007, p. 20). Furthermore, legislative measures force rural schools to function within inequitable circumstances with respect to the typical low funding in these districts due to low tax revenue ("Rural Schoolchildren," 2008). These discriminatory practices, in addition to ambiguity within federal funding for rural schools, create obstacles for these institutions when striving to meet accountability measures.

The purpose of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) was "to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments" (p. 1). Members of the coalition believe that Title I itself is discriminatory toward rural districts (Tonn). Tonn provided the following statement from a member of the NREAC:

> The formula to allocate Title I money tends to target concentrations of low-income
> families, rather than percentages of poverty in districts. As a result, they say, larger,

urbanized districts receive more money per pupil than do the smallest rural districts even

though studies have shown that 35 percent of rural students live in poverty. (p. 21)

Title I issues contribute to the biased NCLB sanctions and force inequitable accountability

practices upon rural schools.

The Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) provision of NCLB was

implemented to help rural districts meet the AYP accountability measures (Christensen,

Amerikaner, Klasik, & Cohodes, 2007). The authors claimed that "REAP Flex is part of a series

of NCLB flexibility initiatives aimed at rural schools . . . that allows rural districts additional

control over how to spend portions of their federal funding" (Christensen et al. 2007, p. 1). This

legislation came in response to the issues of NCLB concerning rural districts. However,

Christensen et al. found that only 51% of their sample used REAP Flex and that those who did

not cited lack of information or restrictions in funding as the source for their decision. Although

REAP Flex sought to help rural schools, the legislation has not alleviated the issues of NCLB

altogether.

As states begin to receive waivers from NCLB and implement new accountability

measures, individualized from state to state, a lack of information exists as to how the new

legislation will affect students of economic disadvantage students and students in rural districts.

Although Georgia's CCRPI was created as an improvement on NCLB, it has not been fully

implemented at the time of this study, and, therefore, cannot be assessed for its accessibility

accountability for students of economic disadvantage.

Students of Economic Disadvantage and Postsecondary Attainment

When looking at the educational landscape, many issues for students of economic

disadvantage are evident. Students of economic disadvantage are not achieving academically

and not entering college at the same rates as their middle- and upper-class peers (Hernandez, 2011; Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008). To construct a working definition, Crosnoe, Mistry, and Elder (2002) stated that economic disadvantage "is most often defined in terms of family income, but other factors, such as family size, family structure, and education, also contribute to the overall level of disadvantage" (p. 691). In addition, Crosnoe et al. used the terms *economic disadvantage* and *poverty* synonymously. Thus, poverty and, by definition, economic disadvantage, have affects that include monetary wealth but also extend to other societal elements of disadvantage (Dominguez & Arford, 2010). Concerning monetary capital alone, Bozick and DeLuca (2011) cited economic deficiencies as one reason for lack of college transition in students of economic disadvantage. The authors concluded that many students simply do not believe that they can afford college; therefore, they do not attempt to apply or enroll (Bozick & DeLuca, 2011). However, other aspects of economic disadvantage affect college going as well.

Research shows that economic disadvantage has an effect on college attainment and that the factors present in situations of poverty are linked to high school dropout and low college entrance rates (Lee et al., 2008). In short, the student's environment has potential to influence his or her academic performance and goals. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) suggested that family aspects of socioeconomic status and contributions of society influence a child's development. With respect to the public arena, these individuals of economic disadvantage face barriers of access when trying to succeed academically (Payne, 2005). Considering this, an individual may conclude that obstacles in postsecondary school access have academic consequences for students of economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Lack of Social Capital

Lack of social capital is a disadvantage of poverty that exists beyond monetary resources. Dominguez and Arford (2010) believed that social capital consists of relationship, material, and political elements, in addition to monetary wealth. The authors cited the definition of social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (p. 248). The lack of social capital can lead to inequity in access at educational institutions and may reflect lack of wealth but also potentially a lack of relational, material, or political resources. Crethar, Torres Rivera, and Nash (2008) stated:

> Access is a principle of social justice that includes notions of fairness for the common good that are based on the ability of people to access the knowledge, power, resources, and services . . . When people from marginalized and devalued groups experience environmental barriers that systematically undermine their ability to access the knowledge, power, resources, and services that would allow them to gain control over their lives, they cannot be expected to function as effectively as those with more privileges that enable them greater access to these forms of social capital. (p. 271)

Upper/middle class students have privilege in education and are entering college at higher rates than their economically disadvantaged counterparts (Hernandez, 2011; Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008). Most teachers, counselors, administrators, and other faculty are financially privileged and possess relationships, knowledge, and other forms of social capital that are foreign to the students and parents of economic disadvantage who they serve (Louie, 2007). Upper/middle class students may not be required to advocate on their own behalf; parents and guardians may hold leverage in terms of relationships with teachers of congruent socioeconomic

status and can possess the ability to work more seamlessly within educational institutions (Louie). Parents and guardians of students of economic disadvantage often do not possess these personal relationships with school personnel and can lack knowledge on how to advocate for their children with these unfamiliar individuals (Louie). VanSciver (2006) stated, "Parents of low-income and minority students trust school officials with the academic future of their children. This they do to a fault. Without question, they trust educators to make the appropriate decisions for their children" (p. 57). Professional school counselors need to serve as advocates for disadvantaged students' academic access and achievement and involve parents and guardians in the advocacy process.

Inequity in Access to Rigorous Academic Courses

In addition to lower rates of college attainment and higher dropout rates, populations of students who identify as economically disadvantaged possess lower grade point averages, have more frequent behavior problems, and hold lower self-perceptions than their upper/middle class counterparts (Lee, Daniels, Puig, Newgent, & Nam, 2008). Some research studies claim that the schools are to blame for these outcomes. For example, many institutions practice discrimination in the academic placement of students of economic disadvantage (Klopfenstein, 2004; Ndura, Robinson, & Ochs, 2003). These students do not receive the same level of education as their upper/middle class peers (Klopfenstein, 2004). At the elementary level, students marginalized by race and socio-economic status are not placed in gifted classes at the same rate as other students (Farkas, 2003). In high schools, Lee et al. found that high math scores are a powerful predictor of postsecondary attainment; yet, students of economic disadvantage are not able to achieve these types of scores due to lower academic placement in less rigorous math curriculums. Klopfenstein (2004) found that students of economic disadvantage are not being

placed in any rigorous courses with respect to all academic subjects. Additionally, Blair and

Scott (2002) found that students of economic disadvantage are more likely to be placed in special

education programs and are subject to lower academic expectations. The result of these practices

demonstrates a theme of multiple academic obstacles for individuals of poverty. If students of

economic disadvantage do not have access to the gifted and AP courses that will offer the rigor

necessary for high achievement in mathematics and other core academic courses, educators

cannot expect an increase in higher education attainment rates.

Absence of a Sense of Belonging

Students of economic disadvantage lack a sense of belonging in their schools (Louie,

2007). A greater sense of belonging motivates students to stay in school, become more involved

in extracurricular activities, strive for higher academic goals, and consider post-secondary

enrollment (Louie). Louie found that economic disadvantage does have an effect on a student's

sense of belonging, but the issue is based more on social capital than monetary deficiency.

Teachers, professional school counselors, office staff, and administration generally identify as

upper/middle class. The staff's familiarity with students of similar socioeconomic status allows

upper/middle class students to feel more comfortable in the school setting and the school

personnel to seem more approachable. For economically disadvantaged students, the lack of

social congruence with the middle class as well as the teachers' issues of understanding and

relating to individuals of lower socioeconomic status create barriers to the access the student of

economic disadvantage has with school resources (Louie). These students do not feel

comfortable approaching school personnel and feel isolated when they see the relationship that

teachers are able to build with students of higher socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition, Louie

found that the labeling of students as economically disadvantaged may create a further gap in

accessibility to faculty. This process further marginalizes these students and can have a negative effect on graduation rates (Louie).

Parents and Guardians of Economic Disadvantage and Student Advocacy

A lack of parent/guardian advocacy has an adverse effect on student achievement. Brookins-Bozeman (2007) stated that this lack of advocacy from parents and guardians of economic disadvantage, on behalf of their children, affects the quality and quantity of services that their children receive. According to Brookins-Bozeman, parents who advocate for better services for their children had their requests met while other students continued to be served without the additional services or accommodations. However, a disconnect exists between what is expected of school faculty and what is expected of parents. Louie (2007) stated:

> Further research needs to investigate matters such as the informational blockages among the various stakeholders in K-12 schooling, which travel in multiple directions: teachers and administrators, who often do not know much about the family and neighborhood backgrounds of their students, and thus cannot tailor instruction or when necessary, intervention; and families, who lack knowledge of what their children are doing in school, and the relevant steps to completing K-12 and getting to college, and the consequences of missing out on those steps. (p. 2228)

Unfortunately, the educational system often fails students and parents of economic disadvantage, and, where advocacy is not present, often services are found lacking (Brookins-Bozeman). The dialogue between parents of economic disadvantage and educational staff members needs to be improved to enhance the services for students. The inequity in communication among marginalized groups inhibits the services offered to students and increases the chance of student dropout.

A child's educational development is strongly correlated to the functioning of their family environments and the structure of society as a whole (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Payne (2005) observed that many economically disadvantaged parents/guardians have had negative experiences during their matriculation through school and that the resulting attitudes limit their ability and willingness to advocate for their children in educational settings. Thus, their children are dropping out of high school, only obtaining a high school diploma, or choosing not to pursue postsecondary opportunities. Epstein and Dauber (1991) and Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, and Perna (2008) similarly found that parents of economic disadvantage environments had difficulty effectively participating in their child's school due to personal and social resource issues.

The mindset of a parent can have positive or negative repercussions on advocacy and the child's academic development. For example, parents of low socioeconomic status backgrounds are more prone to pessimism with respect to their children's college attainment opportunities (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, Yeung, & Smith, 1998). As well, school institutions are creating an unfair disadvantage when placing students of poverty into academic courses (Klopfenstein, 2004). However, other environmental factors exist that help determine the probability of college attainment. Crosnoe, Mistry, and Elder, Jr. (2002) stated, "Parents who feel efficacious may be less daunted by hardship and, therefore, their parenting behavior may be less reactive to economic circumstances" (p. 691). Therefore, a parent's efficacy may have greater impact their child's academic aspirations the economic disadvantage. Crosnoe et al. and Rowan-Kenyon et al. concluded that in low socioeconomic status scenarios, a parent's perception of their child's chances of succeeding in college attainment did effect the student's post-secondary enrollment.

Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, and Perna (2008) explored the factors that shape a student's desire for post-secondary enrollment and the probability of that student going to college. The authors reviewed three elements that affected parent and student involvement: "(a) Parents shape college opportunity for their children, but involvement varies based on socioeconomic status; (b) parental involvement is shaped by, and also shapes, the school context for college opportunity; and (c) parental involvement is also shaped by the higher education context and the social, economic, and policy context" (p. 565). Parents do shape the college opportunities for their children, and this influence varies based on socioeconomic status. School personnel need to work to encourage parents and guardians of students of economic disadvantage to become more involved advocates concerning their child's education.

Recent findings in research have shown that individuals from low socioeconomic status backgrounds can view the institution of education as a threat to household operations and hold the cohesiveness of family in higher regard than success in academics, and these occurrences can have adverse effects on student achievement (Usinger, 2005). Usinger found that many parents who identify as economically disadvantaged often choose positive relationships with their children over the inevitable conflict that may arise through conversations with school staff and demands of better behavior and higher grade point averages. With parents experiencing anxiety when conversing with school staff members as well as possessing a higher regard for peaceful relationships with their children, how can true collaboration exist between school staff personnel and parent/guardians that leads to adequate advocacy on behalf of the student? Barriers created by the environment of economic disadvantage and how these elements shape parent advocacy on behalf of the student is vital to the construction of services for students of economic disadvantage and other marginalized groups (Wood & Baker, 1999; Crethar, 2010). Parent

education programs are available that assist in parents in learning how to advocate for their children. However, Wood and Baker found that, although these services are available to parents, those of low socioeconomic status were less likely to attend. Increased comfort and involvement with institutions concerning individuals of economic disadvantage can lead to better parent advocacy and student achievement. Schools can work to create an environment where parents and guardians of economic disadvantage will not feel intimidated and could work more seamlessly with educational personnel.

A Culture of Poverty?

A debate among scholars and journalists has occurred concerning the concept of a culture of poverty. According to Crosnoe, Mistry, and Elder (2002), "Poverty, or economic disadvantage, is most often defined in terms of family income, but other factors, such as family size, family structure, and education, also contribute to overall level of disadvantage" (p. 691). In other words, poverty has effects that exceed the concept of monetary wealth. Dominguez and Alford (2010) termed these effects *social* capital, with "relational, material and political components" (p. 115). Bourdieu defined social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (as cited in Dominguez & Arford, 2010, p. 248). Some authors argue that these factors lead to a culture of poverty (Niskanen, 1996; Payne, 2005). In efforts to serve students of economic disadvantage, the existence or nonexistence of a culture of poverty could influence the programs and policies that an educational institution enacts. Therefore, a review of literature concerning both perceptions of the argument is necessary.

Argument for the Affirmative

Niskanen (1996) believed that welfare leads to what he calls "social pathologies" and added that these social pathologies of welfare dependency, poverty, out-of-wedlock births, no employment, abortion, and violent crime are the attributes of a culture of poverty. Niskanen found that a positive regression exists concerning the increase in funding to families in need through the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program and the increase in percentages of those who meet his social pathologies. He felt that welfare leads to increase dependency, and this dependency promotes indicators that lead to a culture of poverty.

Bomer, Dworin, May, and Semingson (2008) conducted "an examination of the content of Ruby Payne's [2005] professional development offerings, as represented in *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. Bohn (2006) also studied the Payne framework and stated, "Given the immense popularity of the program, an assessment of its representations of poor people is warranted and significant" (p. 2497). Because of the significant use of Payne's framework in many schools and school systems, a review of the Payne (2005) study is necessary for this literature review.

Payne (2005) is one of the most significant advocates for the concept of a culture of poverty, and many educational institutions are using her work in staff professional development, training thousands at workshops each year. Payne subscribes to a cultural concept of poverty through her described difference between members of generational poverty and situational poverty. Generational poverty, by Payne's definition, is the scenario in which an individual and his or her previous ancestors have identified as low socioeconomic status. Conversely, Payne defined situational poverty as a scenario in which an individual identifies as low socioeconomic status based on a recent event or circumstance and in which previous generations of the same

family would have identified as members of a higher social class. Situational poverty is based solely on a lack of monetary wealth. In this situation, upper/middle-class experience is still present and some forms of access are still available and can be referenced when collaborating with school, community, or government institutions allowing for more positive experiences in these environments (Payne). The lack of resources and hidden rules of economic disadvantage among those individuals of generational poverty makes for a much more difficult journey to postsecondary education and an escape from their economic circumstances (Payne).

Payne (2005) argued that high unemployment rates increase the consistency of individuals in situational poverty. She believed that situational poverty can lead to generational poverty without proper services through schools and due to lower rates of college attainment among students of low socioeconomic status. As children and grandchildren continue in this manner, generational poverty can become even stronger over time. According to Bohn (2006), Payne assigned hidden rules that come with her concept of generational poverty contributing to a culture of poverty; a culture that upper and middle class individuals rarely understand.

Several other researchers also attest to a culture of poverty. Small, Harding, and Lamont (2010) cited current research that defends the concept. Carter (2005) believed that economic disadvantage plays a role in the effort that a student puts forth in educational ventures. Lareau (2003) believed that the culture in which a child is reared has an effect on the successfulness of that individual through adulthood. Akerloff and Kranton (2002) found that students of economic disadvantage regulate how hard they try in school based upon cultural perceptions. As scholars seek to revisit the concept of a culture of poverty, the implications for students vary based on educators who may or may not subscribe to this avenue of thinking.

Arguments Against a Culture of Poverty

Many critiques have been published in rebuttal to Niskanen, Payne, and other supporters of the culture of poverty concept (Ng & Rury, 2006; Osei-Kofi, 2005). Most of the individuals who do not subscribe to the notion cite classist and racist stereotypes as elements that discredit the proponents (Gorski, 2008; Ng & Rury, 2006). Gorksi (2008) found that the Payne (2005) literature and, in retrospect, many other studies by defenders of the culture of poverty set stereotypes on students of economic disadvantage through the hidden rules of class and other various forms of culture as identified by Lewis (1963/1998). Gorski, Ng and Rury, and Osei-Kofi believed that educational practice under the notion of a culture of poverty and its stereotypes leads to poor treatment and service of students of economic disadvantage. Nevertheless, Payne and her literature possess a strong influence in the educational community, evidenced by the over 200 workshops held each year, the tens of thousands of educational personnel that have been introduced to her *Framework* and other literature, and many individuals' opinion that she is the leading voice for a culture of poverty (Bohn, 2007). While many authors have recently written against Payne's literature, the conversation concerning a culture of poverty is not a recent matter.

Early in the debate, Carmon (1985) stated that the culture of poverty is nonexistent. Carmon's study was in argument to other early works like the Lewis (1963/1998) ethnographic studies concerning a culture of poverty. Lewis believed that individuals of poverty possessed many common traits due to their socioeconomic status, thus, creating a culture of poverty. While Carmon agreed that inequity is visible in the rates of college attainment among upper/middle class students and students of poverty, in addition to many other findings, the author stated that it is not the individuals of economic disadvantage who need to be corrected or a culture of poverty

that should be blamed, but, rather, it is the institutions' inequitable practices that lead to low expectations for students of poverty. Furthermore, other authors cited societal influence as the culprit of low achievement among students of economic disadvantage (Gorski, 2008; Ng & Rury, 2006). The theme blaming society and educational constructs for low achievement is a continuing argument.

As a direct counter to Payne (2005), Gorski (2008) developed multiple paradigms to frame his critique of a culture of poverty, citing classist, unethical, and unscientific evidence. The core of Gorski's review consists of the reality that "high-poverty schools are more likely than low-poverty schools to have inadequate facilities, insufficient materials, substantial numbers of teachers teaching outside their licensure areas, multiple teacher vacancies, inoperative bathrooms, and vermin infestation" (p. 133). In addition, the literature claimed that Payne ignores instances of less rigorous curricula, lower school resources, lower teacher wages, and various other aspects of schools in high-poverty communities (Gorski). These concepts correlate with many of the issues surrounding rural districts as well (Hodge and Krumm, 2009).

Payne (2005) did offer some interesting concepts based on her observed elements of generational and situational poverty; however, Gorski felt that her literature portrays classist notions. For example, Payne included questionnaires for individuals to see if they could live in poverty, which included concepts of moving to escape rent, knowing how to bail someone out of jail, and knowledge on how to obtain a firearm. Many authors felt that these concepts are stereotypic, classist, and scientifically unwarranted (Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008; Gorski, 2008; Ng & Rury, 2006). In addition, Gorski believed that Payne used sexist themes of paternalism and defined stereotypical sex roles in her work, thus, leading to continued

unscientific conclusions. All of these attributes Payne classified as elements of a culture, and she

felt that the majority of individuals of poverty are subject to these experiences.

Many advocates for students of poverty feel that culture is not to blame for low academic

achievement and individuals do not need to be remediated. They feel societal change is required

to close the achievement gap (Harris, 1976; Ortiz and Briggs, 2003). Harris, Gorski (2008),

along with Ortiz and Briggs, agreed that "this sentiment—that the goal of anti-poverty work

should be to fix the value systems and attitudes (or, in Payne's language, the 'mindsets') of

economically disadvantaged people rather than fixing the conditions that require the existence of

poverty—is the primary critique of the culture of poverty paradigm (as cited in Gorski, 2008, p.

135). Gorski offered his own anti-poverty approaches to counter arguments for a culture of

poverty. His thorough list of essentials takes into account the necessary movement that must

occur to eradicate poverty and allow true equal access to members of economically

disadvantaged backgrounds. Eliminating and demystifying current procedures and legislation,

understanding the intersections of various forms of oppression, and educating the school

personnel on classist behaviors are forms of activism that can promote change (Darling

Hammond & Post, 2000). Gorski believed that true school reform can only be sought through

these measures and not through current programs to assist students in a fictional culture of

poverty. Rather than focus on the individual as possessing the issue, Gorski looked to

inequitable practices and oppressive societal themes as the obstacles to these marginalized

students' academic achievement.

The Debate Continues

Cohen (2010) was aware of the debate concerning a culture of poverty and noted new

trends in research concerning the topic. Cohen stated that the classism and racism attributed to a

cultural definition of poverty have been pushed aside and that new scholars are redefining the definition and conducting new research to determine if a culture of poverty does indeed exist. As the argument has come full circle, the debate continues, and the implications of an educator's perception of the concept may influence the manner in which he or she serves students of economic disadvantage. For this reason, the concept involving a culture of poverty should be included within any literature review concerning this marginalized group.

Rural Education

In addition to economic disadvantage, the individuals of interest for this study attended school in rural districts. Provasnik et al. (2007) noted that the demographics of urban, suburban, and rural districts are quite different. For this reason, students of economic disadvantage may have different experiences within each of these environments and each should be studied for their unique differences. Johnson and Strange (2007) observed a correlation between rural schools and the presence of students of economic disadvantage. Due to the large percentages of these students in rural districts, this study focuses on the unique perspective of this group. In addition to elements of economic disadvantage, an exhaustive selected review of literature concerning rural education is necessary as well.

Defining Rural Education

To understand the issues surrounding the students who attend schools in rural districts, a working definition of the term *rural* is necessary. However, Budge (2006) maintained, "because rural schools and communities are quite diverse, rural education researchers acknowledge it is difficult to establish a universal set of characteristics to describe or define rural schools and communities" (p. 2). In terms of geography, Provasnik et al. (2007) classified a rural district on the fringe of an urban cluster as a "census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to five

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miles from an urbanized area, as well as a rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster" (p. 122). Distant and remote rural territories are defined as five to twenty-five and more than twenty-five miles from an urbanized area, respectively (Provasnik et al.). Budge noted common characteristics of these rural environments, including "(a) low population density and isolation, (b) school and community interdependence, (c) oppression as lived experience, (d) a history of conflict regarding purposes of schooling, (e) an 'out migration' of young talent, and (f) a salient attachment to place" (p. 2). Commonly, schools within these territories have low populations of learners, often with 200 students or less (Provasnik et al.). This picture of geography and social environment can offer insight into the landscape in which students of rural school districts interact.

Economic Disadvantage and Rural Education

The population of students who identify as economically disadvantaged and the demographics of rural districts possess many similarities. Johnson and Strange (2007) found that 45.9% of students in rural districts identified as economic disadvantage. Additionally, Provasnik et al. (2007) found that rural districts maintained high percentages of students receiving free or reduced price lunch with 32.5% in fringe territories, 41.1% in distant districts, and 49.6% in remote rural areas. The authors believed that rural education is vitally important and that the needs of students in rural districts should not be ignored. Transitively, the needs of students of poverty must be held to the same standard. With respect to rural schools, Johnson and Strange stated the following:

> Socioeconomic challenges present the most persistent threat to high levels of student
> achievement . . . the income level of families is closely related to the preparedness level
> of children entering school, while the educational attainment level of adults in the

community is closely related to both community economic well-being and community

support for education." (p. vi)

As these two populations continue to possess a correlation, the issues that arise at the intersection of living in a rural environment and identifying as economically disadvantaged must be studied.

Educational Issues in Rural Districts

According to Roscigno and Crowley (2001), "Socioeconomic status of a student's household most often operationalizes as family income or parents' education, and is consistently influential for attainment and achievement," and these factors may affect "parents' ability to invest in educational resources, hire tutors, use proper English in the household, and interact with their child's teacher" (p. 276). Provasnik et al. (2007) found that lower percentages of parents of students in rural districts attended meetings with teachers or visited a library, museum, historical center, art gallery, zoo, or aquarium. In light of this, Lichter & Johnson (2007) believed that students living in rural environments may possess the most disadvantages among marginalized groups. These environmental disadvantages caused Roscigno and Crowley to conclude that the resources of parents of economic disadvantage have an effect on the services a rural school can implement. This occurrence may contribute to the outward migration of students from rural schools that are academically successful (Smith, 2003). Herzog and Pittman (1995) also wrote of the number of educated individuals who move away from rural districts, thus, contributing to the pandemic of uneducated households in these environments.

Drop-out Rates

As Hernandez (2011) found, students of economic disadvantage are dropping out of high school at much higher rates than their upper and middle-class counterparts. This trend is true, too, in rural schools, where students are not completing high school at the same rates as students

from non-rural districts (Alliance of Excellent Education [AEE], 2010; Provasnik et al., 2007).

Provasnik et al. found that students of economic disadvantage in rural territories were more

likely to drop out of school than individuals from the United States Census Bureau's defined

city, suburban, and town counterparts. The AEE stated that 25% of students in rural schools do

not graduate, making rural high schools an area of concern. Furthermore, "more than one fifth of

the nation's two thousand poorest-performing high schools are located in rural areas" (p. 3). The

AEE believed that the challenges facing rural schools include "shrinking local tax bases, federal

and state education funding inequities, challenges in recruiting and retaining highly effective

teachers and leaders, limited access to Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate

courses, and the out-migration of young people and professionals" (p. 3).

College Attainment

AEE (2010) claimed that many rural communities lack the social capital to motivate

students to take rigorous courses, graduate high school, and enter college. Provasnik et al.

(2007) found that parents in rural districts had lower postsecondary academic expectations of

their children than individuals from other environments. Furthermore, Provasnik et al.

discovered that fewer rural 18- to 24-year-olds were enrolled in any college or university than

individuals of city, suburban, or town environments, and very limited numbers of 25- to 29-year-

olds were pursuing undergraduate or graduate degrees. The occurrence of lower level education

continues through adulthood as only 39.6% of adults pursue any form of further education, the

lowest among all Census-defined territorial groups. Provasnik et al. maintained that 33% of all

individuals in rural districts have not obtained a high school diploma. These elements lead to

low college attainment expectations among students from rural schools (AEE).

Teachers' Perspectives

Hodge and Krumm (2009) wrote concerning the issue of rural districts obtaining highly qualified teachers. This problem creates other elements of discontent from the perspectives of educators. Provasnik et al. (2007) found that teachers in rural districts were dissatisfied with the amount of support they received when working with students receiving special education. Prater (2005) detailed issues regarding the ability to obtain highly qualified special education teachers in rural districts, and blamed federal legislation for the occurrence of this issue. With other concerns, significant percentages of teachers from rural districts found that they were not given appropriate support from parents and did not receive the materials needed to educate their students (Provasnik et al.).

Diversity within Rural School Populations

The diversity among rural student populations is growing. With the new diverse demographics of rural institutions, the AEE (2010) stated that "local high schools also find it harder to meet the changing needs of young people, including the special set of challenges facing low-income and minority students, English language learners, and others at significant risk for dropping out of high school" (p. 3). Due to the needs of diverse student groups, highly-qualified, multiculturally-competent teachers are needed. However, Hodge and Krumm (2009), McClure (2006), and Prater (2005) all agreed that rural districts struggle with hiring highly-qualified teachers for core courses. Provasnik et al. found that rural districts are unable to hire teachers of different ethnicities at the same levels as their city, suburban, and town counterparts. As rural territories grow more diverse and NCLB continues to make it difficult to meet AYP standards with rural districts' limited resources, the issues of academic success and college attainment are going to continue.

Lack of Research with Respect to Rural Education

In light of many issues concerning rural schools, literature about the subject is scarce (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005). Additionally, Hardré, Crowson, DeBacker, and White, (2007) wrote that issues of rural education are underrepresented in research literature. Truscott and Truscott (2005) stated, "We seldom hear about problems in rural schools. Perhaps we hear more about urban education because most major media outlets are located in cities, or because high population densities in cities make the challenges more visible, or because voters are concentrated in cities" (p. 123). Ayalon (2003) also found a lack of literature addressing the needs of students from rural schools and identified omissions and gaps in the literature that exist. The unique needs of these students, particularly those of economic disadvantage, should be addressed to close the achievement gap and raise college entrance rates.

Social Justice as the Change Agent

Students from traditionally more marginalized groups need more access to educational resources (Shealey, 2006). Inequity in education is a direct violation of the federal mandate for every child to have equal access to an appropriate education (USDOE, 2009). Concepts of privilege and social elements of prejudice and oppression can allow an institution to practice violations of equity, access, participation, and harmony with or without realizing that they are taking place (Crethar, Torres Rivera, & Nash, 2008). If better services for rural students and students of economic disadvantage are ever to be implemented, educational personnel, through the initiatives associated with social justice, can provide the means by which the achievement gap is narrowed, and college entrance rates increased.

The role of social justice in direct resistance to educational inequities is through the advocacy of and for oppressed groups to create change at micro, meso, and macro levels (Adams

et al., 2010). Ratts, Lewis, and Toporek (2010) called social justice the "fifth force" of counseling and consider advocacy that will seek to overcome oppressive structures as the basis for social justice work (p. 3). In addition, Ratts et al. asserted that not all individual psychopathological issues are self-invoked but that many are systematically based.

Goodman et al. (2004) acknowledged that developing a working definition of social justice takes a professional lifetime. However, in their review of literature, the authors created a definition that encompasses the concepts of oppression yet allows work through the American Counseling Association (ACA) Advocacy Competencies (Ratts, Lewis, & Toporek, 2010). Goodman et al. stated, "We conceptualize the social justice work . . . as scholarship and professional action designed to change societal values, structures, policies, and practices, such that disadvantaged or marginalized groups gain increased access to these tools of self-determination" (p. 795). The process of change can be addressed through the advocacy with or on behalf of individuals in the student/client, school/community, and public arena levels (Toporek, Lewis, & Ratts, 2010). The goal of social equity, access, participation, and harmony are met through the collaborative work of individuals at these levels and can lead to the desired changes in service to rural students and students of economic disadvantage.

Crethar (2010) focused on social justice work through the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) advocacy elements of the *National Model*. In development of comprehensive school counseling programs, professional school counselors can ensure social justice measures through the use of the ASCA standards and competencies that lead to equal efforts of academic, personal/social, and career development of marginalized students (Crethar, 2010). Crethar further stated that the ASCA *National Model* and ACA Advocacy Competencies

work seamlessly in that "they provide tools for school counselors to use to assure that students have every opportunity to meet the competencies clarified in the model" (p. 108).

Comprehensive counseling programs grounded in the competencies and carried out through advocacy efforts offer professional school counselors the best practices with which to serve their students and a means to end the social injustice and oppressive systemic structures that affect proper student development. Practice of the competencies can lead to the closing of the academic achievement gap and higher college entrance rates between rural students who are economically disadvantaged and their more affluent urban and suburban peers (Crethar, 2010). Teachers, administrators, and other personnel can use these frameworks to create educational institutions complete with the access needed for all students to achieve.

The advocacy framework of this study relies on a change in services through the narratives of participants from rural areas who identified as economically disadvantaged. While the qualitative responses can promote awareness and a foundation for better service, ultimately, the process of change lies with the audience and educational personnel. These individuals can consider the concepts from the participants' discourse and use this knowledge to begin to advocate on behalf of the marginalized students with respect to academic achievement and college entrance.

Summary

Students of economic disadvantage face many obstacles in their pursuit of higher education. These issues exist in the current state of education and legislation that governs the closing of the achievement gap between students of economic disadvantage and their more affluent peers, and many obstacles surrounding these students with respect to their academic achievement and postsecondary institution entrance efficacy. In addition, the issues prevalent in

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rural districts concerning educational success further complicate the student of economic disadvantage's journey to college entrance. However, some students have navigated this difficult terrain and have successfully enrolled in college, in spite of every obstacle that halted the academic development of peers with similar backgrounds. These students' voices can enlighten the educational community to the essence of the lived experiences of an individual of economic disadvantage with high educational aspirations.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Little research exists concerning the perspectives of students of economic disadvantage regarding elements that motivated them to academic success and college attainment. Furthermore, when adding the impact of rural education, the literature is limited even further. The research concerning students of economic disadvantage maintains a theme of identifying barriers to academic success for this marginalized group (Blair & Scott, 2002; Brookins-Bozeman, 2007; Farkas, 2003; Klopfenstein, 2004; Louie, 2007; Ndura, Robinson, & Ochs, 2003; Raffo, Dyson, Gunter, Hall, Jones, & Kalambouka, 2009; Shealey, 2006, Urrieta, 2004). However, information concerning the elements that assist students of economic disadvantage in their pursuit of college attainment is scarce, especially when considering rural education. Students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are not entering college at the same rates as their middle- and upper-class counterparts (Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008). Yet, the presence of students of economic disadvantage in college shows that some individuals who face these unique challenges do possess the desire to achieve academically and enter a postsecondary institution.

In their pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade matriculation, some students of economic disadvantage had experiences that negatively influence motivation for higher learning (Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008). Where other researchers reviewed the reasons that caused this group to drop out of high school or forego postsecondary education, the purpose of this research was to discover the experiences of those students of economic disadvantage who did choose to

graduate from high school or obtain a GED, and successfully pursued postsecondary education. The individuals who met these criteria were included in the study using qualitative inquiry following a phenomenological paradigm. Concerning the research of students who identified as economically disadvantaged in rural pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade institutions, it is necessary to discuss all methods and procedures needed to study their experiences that led to postsecondary enrollment.

Rationale for Qualitative Inquiry

The unique paradigm of a qualitative study provided the best methods with which to study the desired group. Creswell (2009) believed that qualitative inquiry was required when "exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 4). Researchers who have implemented this method were able to focus on an individual's meaning, research the complex nature of the human or social problem, and regard an inductive style (Creswell). Quantitative inquiry does not allow for the individualized nature of this study and would not have provided the necessary attention to each participant's perspective (Creswell). Creswell (2007) further stated concerning quantitative approaches, "Interactions among people, for example, are difficult to capture with existing measures, and these measures may not be sensitive to issues such as gender differences, race, economic status, and individual differences" (p. 40).

Perhaps the best definition for qualitative research comes from Denzin and Lincoln (2005):

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It

consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These

practices transform the world...At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive,

naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in

their natural settings attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the

meanings people bring to them. (p. 3)

The elements of this working definition were congruent with the aspirations of this study. To

understand the unique perspectives of students of economic disadvantage in rural schools, direct

interviews needed to be conducted to extract meaning from the student experiences. This

process could not be completed through the methods of quantitative inquiry that would result in

an understanding of the meaning these individuals place on the relationship of economic

disadvantage and education. For this reason, a qualitative study mirroring the definitions of

Creswell (2007, 2009) and Denzin and Lincoln (2005) was implemented for this research.

Rationale for a Phenomenological Paradigm

Whereas other approaches to qualitative research may focus on an individual, seek to

construct a new theory, study the unique traits of a culture, or review a case study, Creswell

(2007) stated that a phenomenological study describes the perspectives of many individuals with

respect to their lived experiences of a concept. By collecting participant responses through

interviews, the researcher was able to discover themes at the intersections of experiences and

discover the "essence" of the phenomenon (p. 58). However, Stewart and Mickunas (1990)

warned of entering qualitative inquiry with any presuppositions as to the meaning of the human

or social problem. Creswell stated, "Phenomenology's approach is to suspend all judgments

about what is real…until they are founded on a more certain basis" (p. 59). For this reason,

proper coding of responses and a review of themes from participant responses were necessary to

draw true meaning of the phenomenon.

The study that seeks to understand the experiences that led to college attainment of students enrolled at postsecondary institutions, who identified as economically disadvantaged at rural pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade schools, most closely fits the phenomenological paradigm. The value inherent in using multiple participants' experiences excluded most other qualitative approaches, and the goals of inquiry were congruent with phenomenology. In addition, the findings of this paradigm can lead to a better understanding of the educational and social construct and could allow for changes in service through the actions of advocacy and social justice. To meet this end, Koro-Ljungberg and Greckhammer (2005) called for qualitative studies to include dialogue of discontinuance of traditional practices and provide new methods of training, in addition to other elements with which to inform the audience and to promote change.

Theoretical Framework

For this qualitative study, the research modeled the philosophical assumptions of Creswell's (2009) *social constructivist worldview*. Creswell stated that this framework is most often applied in qualitative study, thus making it an adequate choice for this particular research approach. Due to the research inquiry with students of economic disadvantage from rural school districts, the constructivist worldview is congruent with the collaborative process that the study held as well as the methods of inquiry that were applied. "Social constructivists hold assumptions that that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live…[and they] develop subjective meanings of their experiences--meanings directed towards certain objects or things" (p. 8). Furthermore, this framework celebrates the unique perspectives of an individual of economic disadvantage and left room for them to construct and ascribe meaning to their own experienced reality (Prochaska & Norcross, 2010). These meanings were formed through interaction with other individuals and through the historical and cultural norms of their

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experiences (Creswell). In short, as an individual gains experiences, he or she will develop

meaning from these encounters, and the derived meaning is rooted with the person's learned

social and cultural norms.

The purpose of this study was to discover the experiences that motivated students who

identified as economically disadvantaged in rural pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade schools

to enroll in a postsecondary institution. To conduct this phenomenological study, open-ended

questions concerning the experiences of the individuals were asked (Creswell, 2007). As I

dissected the participants' responses, the meaning each individual placed on their experience

evolved into the essence of the phenomenon being studied. As I became further immersed in the

data drawn from the qualitative inquiry of each participant, a culmination of social constructivist

responses led to the holistic meaning behind the experiences of academically successful students

from economically disadvantaged and rural backgrounds.

In addition, assumptions of Creswell's (2009) "Advocacy and Participatory Worldview"

were applied to this study (p. 9). Much like the social constructivist framework, the advocacy

worldview is most often applied in qualitative study, thus, making it applicable for this form of

research (Creswell). Due to the nature of the study and the population to which the inquiry

pertains, advocacy is necessary to bring about the changes needed in education practices

implemented with this marginalized group. Creswell stated that the constructivist worldview, by

itself, does not place emphasis on advocacy, which is my ultimate goal and one that will be

addressed based on the findings of the study. This inquiry sought to discover the meaning of the

experiences that motivated students who identified as economic disadvantaged in rural pre-

kindergarten though twelfth grade schools to enroll in a postsecondary institution. The desire is

that educators will use the findings of this study to create new policies and develop programs that

will lead to better advocacy for members of this marginalized group and, thus, create more adequate college-going environments for students of economic disadvantage. This request for the audience to take advocacy action based on this research falls in line with the advocacy/participatory paradigm.

Research Questions

Creswell (2007) believed that qualitative research questions "are open-ended, evolving, and non-directional; restate the purpose of the study in more specific terms; start with words such as 'what' or 'how' rather than 'why'; and are few in number" (p. 107). The research showed that students of economic disadvantage faced obstacles with respect to academic achievement and college enrollment (Blair & Scott, 2002; Brookins-Bozeman, 2007; Farkas, 2003; Klopfenstein, 2004; Louie, 2007; Ndura, Robinson, & Ochs, 2003**;** Raffo, Dyson, Gunter, Hall, Jones, & Kalambouka, 2009; Shealey, 2006). Yet, the fact remains that some students do overcome these issues (Reddick, Welton, Alsandor, Denyszyn, & Platt, 2011). Because there is a lack of research concerning this phenomenon facing students of all ethnicities in rural districts, the central research question for this study was: What is the nature of the pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade experiences of students who identified as economically disadvantaged in rural schools with regards to their successful postsecondary institution enrollment? Creswell recommended "that a researcher reduce her or his entire study to a single, overarching question and several subquestions" (p. 108). For this reason, the following subquestions were addressed: What meaning is placed on being economically disadvantaged while aspiring to higher education? What is the essence of the intersection of economic disadvantage and academic aspiration? What meaning is placed on the motivating factors of the student of economic

disadvantage's college attainment? The central research question and the subquestions assisted in constructing the methodology and procedures of this study.

Participants

A partnership with individuals in Gainesville State College's (GSC) Student Affairs department offered access to meaningful participants for this study. To offer topic-appropriate comments, participants must have been currently enrolled in a postsecondary institution. For this reason, the study will seek students eighteen years of age and older. Additionally, the individuals must have received free or reduced-price lunch in congruence with federal legislation while enrolled in a rural pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade school district. Ten participants from the group of individuals who met these criteria were selected through purposeful sampling via snowball sampling with the assistance of the contacts at GSC. Of the ten selected, one individual removed herself from the study before the scheduled interview. In the end, I analyzed the resulting data from nine participants to construct the themes of this study.

Upon receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the University of Georgia (UGA) and GSC, the student affairs personnel at GSC allowed me to place flyers that included information about the study, my personal contact information, and expressed my desire for participation in an interview. The staff sent an email that outlined the study, participant criteria, study structure, and my contact information to all students on the GSC email distribution list. Individuals who were interested contacted me via telephone or email at which time I ensured that they met the necessary criteria through the use of a five-item questionnaire that ascertained their background (Appendix A). If the student did not meet the requirements of a person who identified as economically disadvantaged at a rural pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade school and enrolled in a postsecondary institution, they were thanked for participating to

that point, but they were not interviewed. For those who met the criteria, I offered further information about the study and scheduled a time for an interview. As an incentive to participate, each student who participated in the study received a $20.00 gift card to a local area gas station since gas prices are a major concern for students at the college.

The participants needed to meet three criteria to be included in the study. First, students must have been enrolled in a postsecondary institution or had been enrolled at a postsecondary institution in the past. In addition, the individual must have attended the institution at which they enrolled for at least one full semester. When considering that enrollment and attendance are separate concepts, I felt that more meaningful responses would come from participants who not only enrolled but also attended the institution for some period of time. Students who applied, enrolled, but never attended were excluded from the sample.

Second, students must have been identified as economically disadvantaged while in a pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade school. Students were identified as economically disadvantaged or non-economically disadvantaged based on their qualification of free or reduced-price lunch. This standard of measurement is consistent with the United States Department of Education's (USDOE) measurement for school Title I services which states that children eligible for free and reduced priced lunches under the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act will be categorized as low-income (Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965). Additionally, due to yearly applications for free or reduced-price lunch and varying annual family income, students needed to have received this service for at least four years during their pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade matriculation. Students who only received free or reduced price lunch for one, two, or three years out of twelve, may not have experienced the full

degree of obstacles of low socioeconomic status to the extent of more economically disadvantaged-consistent individuals.

Finally, due to the differences in urban, suburban, and rural resources, only individuals who attended school in rural districts were considered for participation (Provasnik et al., 2007). Rural schools were identified by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2006) map that defined each Georgia school district as rural or non-rural. The participant must have attended a school in a rural district for at least four years to have the desired educational experience. Students who attended pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade schools outside of Georgia would have been assessed by similar NCES maps for each state, but all of the participants had attended a Georgia school in a rural district for at least four years.

Ethical Considerations

Before conducting the study, IRB approval was obtained through the appropriate processes at UGA and GSC as one measure of ethical checks and balances. The University of Georgia requires that all researchers complete the Collaborative IRB Training Initiative Course (CITI) process and take an assessment concerning ethical guidelines for working with human subjects (Office of the Vice President for Research, 2012). All members of the research team completed this training.

In addition, I discussed the intent of the study, the methods and procedures of the study, as well as any limits to anonymity and confidentiality with all individuals who responded to the research inquiry. Those individuals who met the participant criteria and were interviewed received an informed consent document outlining all of the previously mentioned elements, and each person kept a copy signed by participant and myself. A pseudonym was assigned to each participant to protect his or her identity. A key that allowed me to keep track of the pseudonym

to participant matching was saved as an encrypted document as well. I also maintained an electronic, encrypted file of all informed consent documents. Furthermore, to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, each participant's audiotaped interview and transcription were saved to a computer and encrypted. A transcriptionist, who consented to confidentiality, transcribed each audio file. All participants were notified of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and those that wished to have their responses excluded would have been guaranteed to have the audio and transcription files permanently deleted.

Creswell (2007) outlined other additional ethical considerations. Creswell believed that a researcher needs to be sensitive in how he or she enters and exits the scene of a research study so that the participant does not feel overwhelmed or abandoned in the process. Due to power imbalances that my presence could establish in the participant's environment, I ensured that I was sensitive to how he or she worked within the social landscape (Creswell). A researcher needs to avoid bias and stereotyping in addition to respecting the individualization of the participant (Creswell). Each of the measures was implemented in an attempt to protect the participants from any harm.

Development of Interview Questions

Moustakas (1994) believed that participants should be asked two broad questions about their experiences concerning the phenomenon and then a series of open-ended questions that focus on gathering further data that will ultimately lead to an understanding of experiences. To achieve this purpose, I developed ten interview questions for qualitative inquiry (Appendix B). Questions one and four were developed with a broad range of responses in mind, while the adjacent questions were developed to gather more detailed information through the participant's recall of experiences. These questions met the Prochaska and Norcross (2010) concept of social

constructivism where each individual would gain a perceived reality based on the meaning they derive from their unique experience. The narrative form of the response maintains that knowledge of reality cannot be attained objectively or independently of the individual (Prochaska & Norcross, 2010). I developed these questions through the constructivist framework so that I could give power to each participant to voice the reality of their college attainment through their own experiences.

Maintaining the concept of Creswell's (2009) advocacy and participatory worldview, question nine was developed to allow the participant to engage in advocacy for students of economic disadvantage. By giving the individual power of voice, the participant was able to make suggestions that they felt could promote better services to students of economic disadvantage based on their experiences. The responses to this question could inform concerning the issues of empowerment, inequity, oppression, domination, suppression, and alienation that marginalized groups can often encounter (Creswell). Question nine served the purpose of empowering the participant and offering a collaborative inquiry as to the methods of social justice for students of economic disadvantage that are necessary at educational institutions.

Interview Procedure

After the participants were contacted and an interview dates and times were scheduled, I traveled to GSC, the participant's institution, to conduct many of the interviews. The insistence on traveling to the interviewee's site met ethical guidelines outlined by Creswell (2009), through which a participant could be expected to be most comfortable. During one visit, GSC's Student Center, my desired interview location, closed at a time that I did not anticipate. With two interviews scheduled, and both participants in route to the site, I was able to adjust my plans and secure the use of a quiet conference room at a nearby place of business for the final two

interviews of that particular day. In response to another participant's unexpected scheduling

conflict, one interviewee agreed to meet at a location off the GSC campus, due to its close

proximity to his work. At the initial time of the interview, I provided each participant a holistic

conceptualization of the study, consent documentation was signed, and the interview was

audiotaped. At the conclusion of the interview, I discussed the purpose of the study to inform

the participant of my goals and direction of research.

In the manner by which measures are taken to ensure validity and reliability of

quantitative research, similar action is necessary to ensure valuable qualitative data (Creswell,

2007). An important step to address the trustworthiness of a phenomenological study is through

a member check (Creswell). To verify that each participant was completely satisfied and

comfortable with his or her narrative, each individual received his or her encrypted transcription

to review. I asked the participants to make any amendments to the transcription that they felt

necessary and to submit the final transcription to me in an encrypted format. Each individual

was made aware that if they wished to have their narrative removed from the study, they could

do so at anytime, and I would permanently delete their audio taped interview and transcription.

Only one participant chose to edit her transcription by taking out one sensitive experience that

she disclosed; all other individuals responded that they were satisfied with the original response.

Data Management

Each interview was audio taped via the SoundNote application on the iPad. Utilizing the

electronic version of the responses made the transcription process much easier than the use of

cassette tapes. At the conclusion of each interview, the .mp4 file was removed from the device

and saved on a computer under an encrypted format. Transcriptions were saved to the same

computer under an encrypted format as well. All participants were given pseudonyms on the

transcripts to ensure anonymity. I also saved each encrypted file to an external hard drive for

back-up purposes in the event that the computer's hard drive malfunctioned. At the end of the

study, all audio and transcription files will be permanently deleted at the end of a length of time

prescribed by the UGA and GSC IRBs.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data through the elements of Creswell's (2007) "Data Analysis Spiral" (p.

151). This process initially calls for a researcher to develop an understanding of himself or

herself as analyst, which would allow the person to become aware of any held biases. The goal

of this bracketing of bias allows for the data to be dissected in a manner that demonstrates

trustworthiness. However, Creswell wrote that a person's bias cannot be completely removed

from the analysis process. My own personal bracketing can be found at the end of this chapter.

The first step in the Data Analysis Spiral involved organizing the data into uniform

methods of presentation (Creswell, 2007). Each interview was converted into a transcription in

an encrypted Microsoft Word format with each line of the document numbered. This numbering

allowed for the quick location of significant quotes and content when needed for discussion. All

document files were saved in the same folder location and on the same machine for easy access.

The second step in data analysis involved reading and memoing the entire database.

However, Agar (1980) recommended that the researcher "…read the transcripts in their entirety

several times. Immerse yourself in the details, trying to get a sense of the interview as a whole

before breaking it into parts" (p. 103). After gaining a holistic view of the participant's story,

each research team member began a more detailed dissection of the interview responses.

Creswell stated that writing memos and notes in the margins of the transcripts offered the

researcher an opportunity to gain a holistic view of the data. For the study, the research team

constructed memos via Microsoft Word's Review feature. This document tool allows a person

to highlight text and construct a comment bubble in the margin of the electronic document. The

research members that used this method typed their memos in this comment section for each

transcription. In a few instances, a research team member chose to use handwritten memos in

the margins of hard copies of the transcripts. Regardless of the memo format, all memos were

considered in the analysis of the data.

After reading through the transcript of a participant in an uninterrupted manner, thereby,

gaining a holistic concept of the individual's story, and then memoing of each interview, I began

to develop a list of significant statements, ensuring that I attached congruent quotations to each.

As Ryan and Bernard (2003) outlined, I chose to investigate repetitions, categories, metaphors,

analogies, transitions, similarities and differences, linguistic connectors, missing data, and

theory-related material of the participant responses. From this process, I pulled these concepts

from the data and completed a *horizontalization of the data*, that is, a list of "nonrepetitive,

nonoverlapping" significant statements concerning how the students experienced pre-

kindergarten through twelfth grade education in a home environment of economic disadvantage

(Creswell, 2007, p. 159).

With a list of numerous significant statements, phenomenological data analysis requires

that these statements be grouped into "larger units of information" (Creswell, 2007, p. 159).

From these bundles, "meaning units" or "themes" were constructed of the phenomenon (p. 159).

These themes led to a textural description of "what" the students experienced in their pre-K

through twelfth grade experience, and a structural description of "how" the experience occurred.

The process gave me the ability to construct a "composite description" of the intersection of the

textural and structural constructs (p. 159). The resulting concept was "the essence of [the

students'] experience and represents the culminating aspect of a phenomenological study" (p. 159).

To assist in my data analysis, I also chose to review Moustakas's (1994) proposed method of data analysis in which Creswell constructed his "Data Analysis Spiral" (2007, p. 151). The author defined steps of analysis that are applied by researchers in similar fashions across all phenomenological inquiry. These steps are:

1. The researcher provides personal experience with the phenomenon so that it can be set aside (bracketed) for focus on participants.

2. Develop a list of significant statements.

3. Group them into larger themes.

4. Write a textural description (facts from participants).

5. Write a structural description (the context of the experience).

6. Write a composite of both, the "essence" of the experience so that readers will understand what it was/would be like to experience the phenomenon. (p. 159)

By combining the concepts of Creswell and Moustakas, I was able to obtain a solid understanding of the process of phenomenological data analysis and ensured that this research possessed a detailed method that obtained the essence of the pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade experiences of students of economic disadvantage.

Strategies for Validating Findings

Credibility. Creswell (2007) believed that measures of validity need to be made to ensure trustworthiness in a qualitative study. Creswell defined validation as "an attempt to assess the 'accuracy' of the findings" (p. 206). The first measure of validity was preserved by member checks, allowing a participant to review his or her transcript before coding begins.

Creswell stated that "having our studies reviewed and corrected by participants" maintains good

validation strategies (p. 45). The Informed Consent document stated that each interviewee

would be given the opportunity to review their response to ensure that their narrative is exact and

true to the elements they were trying to communicate. Additionally, each participant reviewed

the themes and was able to give feedback before the data was presented in this study.

Due to the bias that an individual can consciously or subconsciously possess, measures to

remove this bias and gain reliable themes from the interview responses were congruent with best

qualitative practices. Before entering data analysis, I formally bracketed my biases. To further

validate the study, triangulation, the use of multiple investigators to collaborate and find themes

among the data, was implemented as well (Creswell, 2007). The three-member research team

that consisted of two colleagues and myself completed the process outlined in the data analysis

section of this prospectus for each transcript using Creswell's Data Analysis Spiral. One

research team member identified as a white male who had conducted a qualitative study and has

familiarity with qualitative data analysis. The other research member identified as a black

female who was in the process of conducting her own qualitative study. These individuals read

through transcripts, memoed, identified significant statements, and helped with the finalization of

themes. This use of research-based methods of analysis added to the validation of the findings of

the study.

Transferability. Due to the individualized nature of qualitative studies, especially a

study that relies on a social constructivist framework, the audience cannot generalize the findings

to other populations. However, Creswell (2007) stated, "Rich, thick description allows readers

to make decisions regarding transferability" (p. 209). Through the meaningful responses of the

participants and the nature of the advocacy and participatory worldview, readers can extract

meaning from the emerging themes and apply the knowledge gained through qualitative

responses to inform practice and advocate on behalf of students of economic disadvantage in

their educational workplaces.

Reliability. Creswell (2007) believed that reliability can be enhanced through writing

detailed field notes, ensuring a clear audio recording, and transcribing the interview (p. 209). In

addition, the use of the research team in the coding process, a process called "intercoding," can

ensure a reliable study as well (p. 210). Creswell added that harmony within coding and

agreement of code and theme labels adds to the richness of the data and the reliability therein.

Each of these measures were implemented to ensure that the findings of this study were as

reliable as possible.

Researcher as Analyst

To add to measures of trustworthiness, I would be remiss to exclude a discussion of the

experiences that may affect my perspective of the phenomenon being studied. Moustakas (1994)

defined epoche as the concept "in which investigators set aside their experiences, as much as

possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination" (Creswell,

2007, p. 60). While Moustakas admitted that bracketing of a researcher's experience is difficult

and seldom achieved, Creswell noted that many qualitative researchers discuss their own

experiences with the phenomenon and bracket their views before conducting a study concerning

the experiences of others. For this reason, my experience with students of economic

disadvantage in rural districts needs to be discussed to bracket the experiences and detail any

personal preconceived notions.

Let me begin with my own pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade experience. I grew up

in a rural school district as an individual in a middle-class household. I never experienced any

occurrences that could be associated with being economically disadvantaged. By no means was my family monetarily wealthy, but I possessed every avenue of access and privilege that middle-class socioeconomic home allowed. High school graduation and a Bachelor's degree were required by my parents. I graduated from the same high school in which I now work, and I work with a population where approximately 60 percent of the students are identified as economically disadvantaged by NCLB (Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2011b).

I feel my professional work cannot be understood outside the scope of my own motivation to work with students of economic disadvantage. I am inspired by those who can achieve in areas where, if put in a similar position, I believe I could not. I am not inherently special nor do I possess any uncommon motivational discipline. However, my wife, Bobbie, possesses an internal drive that can only be described as insatiable.

Bobbie was called "Girl" for the first two weeks of her life because the doctors told her biological mother and father that it would be easier to mourn the loss of their premature child if she did not have a name. So, out of the womb, this young lady was a fighter. Predominantly raised by her father alone, she and her two siblings lacked the monetary and social capital that comes with a home of economic disadvantage. If placed in her position, I believe that I would follow the statistical norm of the student of economic disadvantage, which demonstrates that these individuals enroll in college at a lower rate than their more affluent peers. Bobbie, however, possessed an uncommon drive that allowed her to graduate high school with Honors in an International Baccalaureate program, receive her Bachelor's degree *magna cum laude*, and successfully obtain a Master's degree. She inspires me and because I have watched her achieve these academic goals, I know firsthand that students of economic disadvantage can achieve

academically. This knowledge drives me to advocate on these students' behalf and assist them in their own college entrance.

My first professional encounter with the issue of students of economic disadvantage and academic performance happened as a mathematics teacher at my worksite. The institution missed AYP due to Georgia High School Graduation Test (GHSGT) math scores for the economically disadvantaged subgroup. Due to this occurrence, the administration selected the Payne (2005) literature as professional development to enhance student learning. I became skeptical about a lot of what I read in Payne's book but found other elements to be helpful in my practice. However, students of economic disadvantage at my school continued to fall short of academic standards, and the staff failed to close the achievement gap. I heard many hypotheses from staff members as to why this group struggled academically, most using the language of Payne's literature, and I found that the professional development that was supposed to assist in practices became the vocabulary by which teachers disregarded high academic standards for the group. Teachers stated that they could not overcome the cultural issues of these marginalized students. Due to the popularity of Payne, I wondered if this scenario was occurring at other institutions as well.

As a former mathematics teacher and current professional school counselor, my personal mission involves assisting all students in all educational ventures by helping them develop self-advocacy proficiency and academic, social, and career awareness. However, the population of students of economic disadvantage has been close to my heart due to my work with these students and the observed struggles that they endure. I see potential in the members of this group. I know what the literature states as obstacles to their achievement. I know that not enough students of economic disadvantage enroll in college each semester. My desire is to

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understand the experiences that these college enrollees have so that educational institutions can recreate the experiences for all students of economic disadvantage. Rather than simply recognizing and further defining the problem, I seek a solution. For this reason, I find myself interested in the positive experiences that lead to motivation for students of economic disadvantage. I feel that I generally look to the positive because the negative factors make me uncomfortable. I know that the essence of the experiences of my participants will come with good and bad. I need to be open to hear the holistic narratives of their journeys and ensure that I do not silence any aspects of their responses.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

In appropriate data analysis within the phenomenological paradigm, the researcher must
"set aside experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon
under examination" (Creswell, 2007, p. 60). Moustakas (1994) stated that the phenomenological
researcher must look upon a topic with no preconceived notions, guide the inquiry with research
questions, and determine findings to be discussed for future research implications. Through
semi-structured interviews, I sought to discover the essence of the pre-kindergarten through
twelfth grade experiences of students who identified as economically disadvantaged in rural
schools with regards to their successful postsecondary institution enrollment. This chapter
serves the purpose of presenting the data analysis as outlined in the methodology. The synthesis
of data and horizontalization, a discussion of themes, the construction of textural and structural
meanings, and a description of the essence of the participants' experiences guide this
presentation of the phenomenological data analysis.

Background Methodology

To develop the context of the interviewees' experiences and the data analysis, I must
discuss the participants' backgrounds and the interview site. The purpose of this section
provides a more comprehensive concept of the participant sample.

Participant Backgrounds

Each of the nine participants attended Gainesville State College (GSC) at the time of the
interview. All of the participants had completed or were about to complete at least one semester

of postsecondary education. The sample consisted of eight individuals who obtained a high

school diploma and one person who received his GED. Six of the participants entered GSC

immediately after high school, two individuals enrolled after a short period of work experience,

and one person transferred from a culinary arts school. Two of the individuals lived in a self-

described urban environment early in their experience but disclosed that they resided for the

majority of their lives in the rural Hall County area. One individual lived in a non-disclosed

section of California until she moved to rural Georgia at the age of four. All other participants

identified as living in a rural area for all of their lives. Regardless of their backgrounds, all nine

participants met the requirements for the study. Table 4.1 serves as a tool to assist the reader in

understanding each participant and his or her demographic. My hope is that this information will

allow the reader to separate one participant's story from another and better identify the individual

quoted.

Table 4.1

Participant Information and Demographics

Pseudonym	Demographic and Background Information
Allie	White female. Second-year student. Single. Obtained a high school diploma.
Barry	White male. Second-year student. Married. Dropped out of high school and obtained a GED.
Carrie	Hispanic female. First-year student. Single. Obtained a high school diploma. Parent of one child.
Doug	Hispanic male. Second-year student. Single. Obtained a high school diploma.
Evelyn	Hispanic female. First-year student. Single. Obtained a high school diploma.
Fred	White male. Second-year student. Single. Obtained a high school diploma.

Harold	White male. First-year student. Single. Obtained a high school diploma. Grew up in a household with parents who constantly argued about money.
Iris	Hispanic female. Second-year student. Single. Obtained a high school diploma.
Jenny	Multiracial female. First-year student. Single. Obtained a high school diploma.

Interview Site

Because each of these individuals attended GSC, I conducted all of the interviews either in a study room in the Student Center, in a nearby conference room off campus, or a different location convenient to the participant's travel schedule. These locations were familiar to the individuals, and I specifically chose these sites in an effort to ensure that the participants were comfortable. However, I moved two of the interviews off campus in response to an unexpected closing time of the Student Center.

In my reflexive journal, I noted a description of the location of GSC and elements of my observations. Traveling to the campus, I noticed a lack of infrastructure on some of the preceding exits along Interstate 85. However, once I arrived at the GSC's exit, I observed many restaurants, shopping centers, gas stations, and a mall. The campus of GSC is located off of this main street. My first visit was on a Friday, so the parking lots were at approximately 75 percent capacity. I had no issue finding a parking space near the entrance of the Student Center. However, my second visit was on the following Thursday, and the campus appeared to be much more populated. I had to park at the adjacent Lanier Technical College and walk a considerable distance to the Student Center. Once in the building, I noticed many students interacting through conversation or card games in the food court. Additionally, there appeared to be a game room where I saw many students playing video or computer games together. The room in which I

conducted interviews on the campus was comfortable, quiet, and easily accessible from the Student Center.

Analysis of Data

To analyze the interview data, I chose Creswell's (2007) proposed method of data analysis, which he considers "a simplified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method described by Moustakas (1994)" (p. 159). Through this process, I thoroughly dissected the data to arrive at the essence of the phenomenon of students of economic disadvantage from rural districts achieving college entrance.

Synthesis of Data and Horizontalization

After bracketing my own experiences concerning the phenomenon, I read each transcript and listened to each recording multiple times to develop a holistic view of each participant's experience. I then separately read through and memoed the transcripts. I used my research team's notes and memos as checks and balances for my own and followed the process of horizontalization, by which I constructed a list of significant statements about how the participants were experiencing the phenomenon. Per Creswell (2007), I "treat[ed] each statement as having equal worth, and work[ed] to develop a list of nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statements" (p. 159). From nine verbatim transcripts, I extracted 69 significant statements. Table 4.2 includes a few examples of identified significant statements with their formulated meanings.

Table 4.2

Selected Examples of Significant Statements of Students Who Identified as Economically Disadvantaged at P-12 Rural Schools

Significant Statement	Formulated Meaning
Yes, I just always considered what I come from and where I'm going; two completely different things. I try to detach myself.	Early understanding that he wanted to change from his socioeconomic experiences.
The way that … like I said how they treated you differently that kind of made me feel I didn't fit in there, but after I realized that's where I need to be I was like, "Screw what everyone else thinks. This is me. I belong here. I'm going to do it."	Resiliency to the lack of access he had to teachers and resources. Found a sense of belonging through that.
People that got married that had maybe a lesser job than I did if not the same job, how could they support a family with so little per week? For me, I just couldn't imagine living off with that, having a family off that and then going to work and being disrespected by people being treated like you weren't anything just because you don't have a higher education.	Low wages in work experience and perceived lack of respect due to no higher education experience motivated student to go back to school.

Construction of Themes

Creswell (2007) stated that upon creating a list of significant statements, the researcher needs to categorize these statements into groups of information to construct "meaning units" or "themes" (p. 159). To achieve this end, I implemented the most literal form of grouping that I could model. I printed my list of 69 significant statements with their paired formulated meaning. With scissors, I cut each statement into its own separate strip. With the 69 strips of paper spread out over the surface of a table, I began to group these statements into separate piles, disaggregated by the perceived formulated meaning. I approached my research team with ten overarching themes for their approval and discussion; both of my colleagues responded with positive feedback and agreement on all themes.

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Discussion of Themes

To ensure trustworthiness of the findings, I emailed the list of themes to the nine participants for feedback. Because the methods of phenomenology rely on the co-creation of meaning between the researcher and participants, receiving their feedback is essential to ensuring trustworthy themes. Of the nine participants, only two responded negatively to two of the discovered themes. One individual stated that she did not experience the *parent/guardian indifference to educational success* or the *feelings of marginalization* themes, although she did understand that others with a similar background did possess feelings of marginalization in her experience. The other conflicted responder wrote that she did not have familiarity with parent/guardian indifference either. The other participants who responded felt that all of the themes resonated. Three individuals of the sample did not respond to the email at all. Due to my own knowledge that the theme of *parent/guardian indifference to educational success* was considerably weaker than the others based on limited significant statements, as well as the two participants' negative responses during member checking, the research team decided to remove the theme from the findings. Although one member possessed no experiences with the *feelings of marginalization* theme, the fact that she disclosed that she knew other people that did possess this experience gave the research team confidence the theme's inclusion.

After I began writing the chapter, I noticed that a few themes began to show similarities. With the assistance of my research team, I identified the *Valuable Work Experience* theme as a subtheme of the overlapping *Desire to Improve Socioeconomic Status* cluster. My rationale was that the participant's work experience led to a desire to find a higher paying occupation and change their financial standing. Therefore, due to the feedback of a member of the research team, I combined the themes.

In another example of overlapping clusters, the *Sense of Belonging in Schools* theme seemed to appear more like a subtheme of *The Presence of Positive Influences* theme. As I wrote this findings section, it appeared that a sense of belonging in school was a positive influence that helped the participants reach their goals. Therefore, I placed the subtheme within the overarching theme of positive influences. Additionally, I felt that the *Motivational Relationships with Individuals of the Upper/Middle-class* theme also shared many of the attributes of the *Presence of Positive Influence* theme. Initially, I viewed the two topics as separate, but upon further deliberation, I decided to simply place the concept of the special motivational relationships into the larger theme of positive influences.

Nothing has been removed from my data analysis or published findings concerning any of these subjects. My decisions are simply a matter of organization. However, because the participants received the member check email with *A Sense of Belonging in Schools, Motivational Relationships with Individuals of the Upper/Middle-class,* and *Valuable Work Experience* as distinct themes and not subthemes of their respective clusters, I felt it necessary to discuss the reasoning behind the list of the finalized six themes. Through the co-creation of meaning clusters, the efforts of the research team, and trustworthiness measures of the participants, the following themes were agreed upon: (1) resiliency in spite of negative familial circumstances, (2) desire to improve socioeconomic status, (3) education as a means of improvement, (4) the presence of positive influences, (5) feelings of marginalization, and (6) demystification of higher education.

Resiliency In Spite of Negative Familial Circumstances

Each of the participants spoke of the hardships that came with their family's low socioeconomic status. However, the participants felt that I should understand that the family

members are not the origin of these negative experiences, but the social construct of poverty and lack of financial and social capital are the culprits of this disadvantage. Fred best solidified this point at the beginning of his interview.

> I do want to point something out here: When I talk about my home life, it was rougher than most people's, but I don't want to sound like I'm complaining because I don't like playing the victim almost, but when I talk about my past, people think I'm a victim and I don't like … separate it. I don't want to fall into that category.

Fred detached himself from the blame of his circumstance. He is *in* economic disadvantage, but not *of* economic disadvantage. This discussion is included in this section to illustrate that these individuals of poverty are not to blame for their circumstances, nor do they identify as a victim. Economic disadvantage is only one aspect of the development of who they are and one element in their journey to who they will become.

Descriptions of negative familial experiences. To discuss the overarching theme of resiliency, I must first illustrate the context of the participants' negative familial experiences. The disclosed negative attributes of economic disadvantage included financial woes but also contained many limits to social capital. The participants expressed many difficulties in their family's financial situation and the intrapersonal relationships at home. While they all cited their home-life as difficult, their responses to economic disadvantage and outlook on the family system varied. Although two individuals spoke of some of their experiences while living in an urban setting, to adequately answer the research questions, only the shared experiences with respect to rural environments were considered.

One of the most prevalent concepts concerning hardships was that of transient living. Allie told her story of her living situations throughout her pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade

experience. Her long and detailed quote serves the purpose of informing about the frequency with which her family moved.

> Then I moved around lots…When I left Georgia after kindergarten the house that I lived in, the little village, the lady died. The next owner who took over the house was the person who built the house and he basically was like, "I want to live here so you have to get out." We went to live in Florida with a friend, a close friend of my mom's, because we were homeless. We lived there with her. Then we actually didn't stay with her very long because my father didn't get along with her. I actually went to live at the Salvation Army there. Then my family got a place to live, but my mom left my dad so we moved back to Georgia. From then on, we came back to Georgia and we lived with a friend. I wasn't going to school at all because it was summertime. I got a residence in Gainesville and started going to the city school. There was actually a fire that happened where I lived, and so our landlord kicked us out because there was a fire. He was going to remodel. Actually, I was living in a hotel that the school put us in. From there, we moved to another residence in Oakwood. That's why I had to change schools again. We changed residences again before fourth grade, but still in Oakwood. I stayed there for fourth grade and for fifth grade and for a part of sixth grade. We were evicted, so then I moved to … For seventh grade, we went back to the place that we lived in when there was a fire. We re-rented there after it was remodeled. We lived there for seventh and I think part of eighth. I was evicted again. We had nowhere to go … we actually spent a weekend on somebody's couch, spent a weekend with some friends, got into a homeless shelter, My Sister's Place, and started school there still in eighth grade. I was able to stay in Gainesville, but I was still in a homeless shelter. Then I moved. We had a residence

on MLK which was basically like a remodeled storage unit. I lived there for a while, got evicted and moved. I'm pretty sure from there we moved into Lake Forest, which is low-income housing. From that point on, I was stable. I think it was about tenth grade. It might have been a little bit of the ninth.

Fred disclosed that his family was transient as well. He stated, "We lived in one part of Canton for a while, and we moved in that house immediately after us was condemned, and then I moved to another house."

The participants cited many other negative experiences concerning the familial effects of economic disadvantage. Subthemes of abuse, fears related to safety, stress, and the presence of undesirable behaviors in their surroundings were prevalent. In terms of abuse, Barry spoke of the times when he lived with his mother.

My bad times were always with my mom. She was diagnosed bipolar. For a while when I was growing up, for half my life I hated her. I wanted her to die. I used to pray for it. I hated her; I really did, until I was about 15…because I was being abused by my mom. I was scared of her.

Similarly, Carrie talked about her fear and the abuse from her father.

It was pretty rough, since my dad was using drugs, beating my mom and sometimes he would go at my school to try and find me in my class and take me out, just so he could take me home and beat me too.

Many of the participants implied that stress was present due to these negative familial experiences. A few of the memos that the research team included in the margins of the transcripts contained items stating "stress present in the home," "participant seemed stressed by financial situation," and "fear led to stress," amongst others. Jenny spoke in depth concerning

the stress she felt as a child in a home of economic disadvantage. She stated, "They would argue a lot in front of me and my brothers and I didn't like it, so I would tell them, you know, just divorce because I got tired of them putting stress on me." Harold's scenario also illustrates the stress felt in his home of economic disadvantage. He told the story of how financial woes created anxiety in his life as a child.

> We pretty much lived pay check to pay check, and that caused a bunch of stress throughout the whole family…I was the little kid that got upset when their parents started fighting. I got upset quite a bit because they fought all the time and that was just the stress that I had.

Other participants cited displeasure with some of the family or community members' behaviors. The concept of drug use in the home and community was mentioned by most of the participants. An element of the resiliency piece of the holistic theme was in response to the prevalence of drug use. When talking about the intersection of illegal substances and economic disadvantage, Carrie stated, "…it's poor kids that end up doing drugs." Later in the interview, she spoke of her shock with respect to the children in her community who were discovering drugs at an earlier age than she had imagined.

> I remember seeing it in middle school when I was growing up. Now there's elementary kids talking about gangs and drugs…It has gotten to a point [where] it's in elementary school. One time, [I spoke to] elementary kids [and they] were like, "Do you know where we can get weed at, or can you get weed for us?" I was like, "You all are in elementary school and you all already know about this?"

Other participants experienced the prevalence of drugs in their communities. Barry spoke of the ease of which he had access to drugs, "You got to remember, there are drugs being sold in the

high school, there are things going on." Harold recalled the frequency in which he saw drugs in his community, "I live in Alta. There's a bunch of drugs, and like the big drugs, like meth, [are] really high in Alta."

Student resiliency. Within the narratives, there existed many other citations concerning negative attributes of living in economic disadvantage. After a holistic review of the data, I discovered that each participant cited some form of displeasure in their experiences with respect to family and community interactions. However, in their pursuit and successful attainment of college entrance, each individual demonstrated some resiliency to these factors. The participants disclosed instances where friends and other members of their community fell subject to the attributes of economic disadvantage. However, the respondents were able to avoid the consequences of influences in their pursuit of academic success.

The concept of an internal drive or motivation became the most prevalent theme with respect to overcoming disadvantage. Initially, Allie stated, "I just had motivation to finish, to do something." She later elaborated on her own personal driving force.

My teachers who knew that were like, "I don't understand how you can handle that." People just were amazed that a high school student could go through all of that. I was like, "It was me. It was what I had to do." I knew how hard it was, but at the same time I didn't. It affected me more emotionally and physically than it did mentally. But I was kind of like, "I've got this."

Other participants' responses contained concepts of resiliency to the stress of the household and how that can allow an individual to focus on education as a means to change from their current circumstances. These participants discussed not just their lived hardships but also their drive to overcome their situation. One individual stated when discussing the numerous

obstacles that he was continuing to face, "I didn't give up. I didn't give up and I'm trying to do the right thing, and just succeed." Although he still felt the anxiety that came through his experiences in economic disadvantage while enrolled in college, he discussed the difficulty that he and his peers felt growing up in a home of poverty and how his motivation that led to resiliency.

> I'd take what [my mom] said and I applied it to my education and the family stress and I was like, "Family stress, I've got better stuff to worry about; my education." A lot of kids, they don't have that same mindset. They let the stress get to them.

> Other participants gave insight regarding their views of resiliency. They voiced their internal monologue and driving force that assisted in college entrance. When discussing his peers of similar socioeconomic status and their lack of academic motivation and success, Fred spoke in tones of frustration. Fred possessed a motivation to improve his economic standing; he saw those that did not share this drive as "playing the victim."

> From what I've noticed about people dropping out is they feel like they can't do it. They feel like the world is against them. They play the victim card so much, and I hate it. They think life's handed them just a pile of just nothing and they had to climb their way out of it, and they don't have the motivation to climb out of their situation because they think it's too hard. They think it's not worth doing and they think any attempt that they do are like just futile. They just give up easy. Then, when asked about it, or when talked about it, it's like, "Well, I didn't have a good home life," or, "I didn't have this." It's always like, "I didn't or something was done to me."

Fred did continue to better himself as he enrolled in multiple postsecondary schools in the years after high school. While functioning through a demanding work schedule, he faced further obstacles in college. Yet, he was still resilient to the effects of his disadvantage.

I'd say, "Hey, I can do better at this. I can find a path or I can do my own things." Even, though I constantly failed in culinary school, I failed a lot of stuff, but I tried it. I didn't have any hard feelings…but [you have to] think about what you can be, and think about what you will become, and just to individualize yourself from your background.

For Fred and others, the resiliency to economic disadvantage was internal, although assisted by external forces. Economic disadvantage brought obstacles that the individuals could not control. Yet, in the wake of hardships, the participants refused to be constrained and through some form of resilience in their unique journey; they achieved their goal of college enrollment.

Desire to Improve Socioeconomic Status

In the participant narratives, there existed many experiences concerning negative attributes of their family's economic disadvantage. Although experienced hardships are consistent throughout all nine transcripts, the desire to leave this low socioeconomic status proved to be a strong clustered theme as well. The participants disclosed displeasure with their living arrangements and the negative experiences they felt in limits of financial and social capital. Each individual shared a desire to improve his or her socioeconomic standing and leave a status of poverty. Iris disclosed that she wants her life to change from the characteristics of her past and current experiences. She stated, "I don't want to be like [my parents]. I don't want to always want to live paycheck-to-paycheck." Breaking family ties of difficult financial and social hardships became a subthread within the theme. Their experiences in economic disadvantage were often disclosed with a negative connotation and implied as something from which to

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escape. In some of the participants' journeys, this desire rested solely in the individual while the family members seemed unaffected by the financial experience.

Yet, in some cases, the participants' families, specifically their parents, had an effect on their desire to improve socioeconomically. Doug disclosed that his parents actually laid the groundwork for him to begin to break the generational pattern. He spoke of his home-life and his parents' desire for him to have more.

> Because you're at home. You're hungry. You're cold. You can't think. Your situation
> is really bad… when we lived up there my parents wanted us to have a better future.

Doug's family considered living in economic disadvantage as being "nothing." His parents pushed him to become better. Initially this desire seemed to focus on the monetary elements of improvement, but once in American culture, Doug's family began to see education as the means to improve financially and exit poverty. Concerning his parents' efforts to motivate him to improve his financial situation and leave the hardships of poverty, Doug stated, "I was constantly told, "You're nothing…You're not going to be 'nothin' if you don't [get an education]." This insistence on becoming *something* was a main motivational factor of Doug's desire to improve his socioeconomic standing. He attributes his educational ventures to his parents due to their motivation for him to change his socioeconomic status.

Other participants disclosed instances of their parents' desire for the child to change his or her own socioeconomic standing. Harold discussed his mother's desire for him to break the pattern of the family's generational poverty. In these attempts to encourage him in this journey, she would often use the family's difficult financial situation as motivation to him to attempt to better himself.

Mom encouraged me basically, when I got old enough, to where she could talk about

financial situations. She was like, "Look around us; do you want end up this way?"…

She said, "Do you want to live in something like this or do you want to live in a two-story

brick house," or something like that.

Other members of the sample disclosed that their parents used material capital as a means in

which to encourage the child to better his or her financial standing. These participants said that

their parents' used statements like, "Don't you want to drive a nice car?" or "Don't you want to

live in a nice neighborhood?" in attempts of motivation. Jenny's parents encouraged her to do

what she could to improve her financial standing as well.

[My dad] would tell me all the time, "You don't want to do this. You don't want to live a

life where you work in a factory for the rest of your life. You don't make enough." He

doesn't have a job right now. Once I was in high school, I could tell that both of them…I

don't know…I could just tell that I couldn't live the life that they both gave me. We live

decent, but for me personally it's not enough.

The concept of parents or guardians using the life experiences of economic disadvantage as

motivation for improving financial standing was quite prevalent in the participant responses.

However, a parent's insistence on financial change was not always the motivational

origin with respect of family dynamics. One particular participant possessed a unique

perspective on the theme from an experience that no other individual of the sample could

compare. For Carrie, the desire to improve her socioeconomic status was not a selfish ambition

or the plea of her parents. As the only participant to have a child, she spoke of her relationship

with her son and the effect that being a mother had on her desire to improve her financial status.

She stated, "I want…to set an example for my son. I don't want him leading to a way that's

drugs or gangs. I want to move up and be out of this kind of life." She also shared that she "wanted a better life for her baby" on multiple occasions. The love that she possesses for her son, the desire to give him financial capital that she lacked growing up, and the hope of an escape from the negative experiences that she encountered in her own economic disadvantage are the motivational aspects of her experience.

Education as a Means of Improvement

As the negative life experiences of the participants' economically disadvantaged backgrounds led to the desire to change their socioeconomic status due to displeasure with the financial and social hardships, education consistently emerged as the means to achieve the socioeconomic transformation. At some point, education and academic success became important to each of the participants. For some individuals, like Iris, her parents expected academic success beginning her first day of school. She stated, "They've always motivated me [in education], for as long as I can remember." For others, experiences throughout their pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade years created these aspirations. Two individuals actually cite experiences from outside pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade education as their turning points toward postsecondary enrollment. Nonetheless, education was valued as a change agent in each of the participant responses.

Work experiences as motivation for education. During their journey to college, many of the participants cited valuable work experiences that assisted in creating a value of college education. Many of the students worked long hours in unfulfilling jobs; this displeasure in their working conditions or job description further motivated the student to obtain a college degree. For others, their job experiences assisted in developing character that they attribute to assisting them in their college aspirations.

Carrie discussed the effect that her unfavorable work experience had on her holistic life direction. After graduating high school, Carrie needed to obtain a job so that she could work and provide for her baby. However, the job offered her more than just a paycheck.

> I was working at the chicken plant. It was the type of job that you would just stand there working on the assembly line, and it's when you reflect on many things. I got to a point that I was crying, because I didn't want this for the rest of my life. There were people that were there for 20 years or longer…It was enough money for me to live on my own, but it was just something that I didn't want to be until retirement. It was hard, and so I was like, "I should probably quit and start school, start going to college."

Carrie said, "I remember telling my mom that I didn't want to go to college, because I really didn't see no point in it, but after my son was born, I had to get a job." The resulting experience was a major influence on her desire to go to college and improve her financial standing.

Evelyn also attributed an unfavorable work experience to her desire to go to college. Her work in retail demonstrated low pay and what she experienced as a lack of respect. She initially did not even consider college as a choice after graduation.

> To be honest, after high school I never thought I was actually going to go to college. I didn't know what I was going to do. I knew I was going to work, but I didn't know what I was going to do with my life. I've never known. After high school I worked at Wal-Mart for a year.

However, she disclosed that her work experience changed her outlook on higher education.

> The money was okay, but I couldn't understand how people could…support a family with $400 per week? For me, I just couldn't imagine living off with that, having a family off that and then going to work and being disrespected by people being treated like you

weren't anything just because you don't have a higher education. That's actually what motivated me working how many hours…I was like, "No, I have to go to school." Displeasure in the job, respect, and wages created a need for Evelyn to go to college. She discovered that her desire to change her socioeconomic status was not going to happen through working many hours; she decided that education was needed.

Other individuals cited work experience as a minor event that contributed to their academic aspirations. Barry talked about the work he found after dropping out of high school and how it helped shape his future goals. He talked about the occupational demands that his stepfather placed on him. However, after meeting his soon-to-be wife and the motivation that she brought concerning education, he left his mom and stepdad, along with the jobs that his family desired. He stated that work "got me to where I am" and that now he wants to be a teacher. Barry disclosed, "What led me to be in education was that I decided to be a coach. I really liked that. I wanted to help out students like me." He knew that to become a teacher and coach, he would have to attend college.

Other participants talked about jobs that they held in high school. Holistically, the students did not place an emphasis on work experience as a major factor of their journey to college attainment. However, participants like Carrie and Evelyn believe that their negative work experiences were one of the most critical aspects of their experience. Regardless of the emphasis placed on work experience, the participants, as a whole, spoke about occupations as they told their stories and the work experiences did play some part in their college aspirations.

Education in response to experiences concerning poverty. When discussing their desire to achieve a better financial standing, the participants consistently cited education as the means in which to achieve these goals. One participant stated, "I don't really understand how I

understood it, but I understood at a really young age that education was going to be the difference between me and my parents." Similarly, Harold spoke of his perspective concerning the necessity of education.

> I just realized [poverty] is not where I want to be in life, I wanted to have a wife in a subdivision with two dogs. I wanted that. I knew that I couldn't get that from anything else besides school and besides like … you get a job and make more money and all that.

In the minds of the participants, education would lead to better paying jobs, which would lead to an escape from the negative attributes of economic disadvantage. In addition, he experienced stress brought on by his parents' financial arguments. This stress was one of the most difficult hardships of economic disadvantage that Harold experienced. He saw his parents' circumstances, wanted something different, and learned that education would assist him with this change through opportunity via high paying jobs.

> Well, you know, growing up and seeing my parents argue about bills and stuff, and seeing in the news that we can't really go anywhere without a degree. It's either get a degree or work at Burger King, or retail, or whatever it is that you can work at, you know? I don't want to end up working at Burger King or Target for the rest of my life.

Harold was displeased with his experiences in economic disadvantage and knew he wanted to improve his own financial standing. He agreed that there existed many occupations that would not help him achieve these goals. Education became the means by which he could escape economic disadvantage. He later wrapped up his holistic view on the power of education and the importance of college enrollment.

I looked at my family and I knew that we weren't successfully, like, well-off or anything. Actually I'm not that well-off. I made sure that I made good grades to where I could go farther than that in life and that is what pushed me to actually come [to college].

Identifying as educationally adequate. As students discovered that they could be successful in school, or "good at school" as one participant worded it, education became entrenched as a means in which they could change their life. While in pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade schools, Allie's experiences were generally positive and her natural success led to further educational motivation. In addition, education was an escape from the negative effects of disadvantage.

For me it was kind of like, "I'm not struggling like these other kids." I did not struggle in school. School was the place I got away from my mom and my dad and my problems. Not that I was a different kid or I was happy or I was social or anything, but I could at least be academically sound.

Harold learned that he could be academically successful as well. The demystification of success led to education becoming a figurative life jacket in a sea of financial hardship.

My teacher said, "I think you'll be really good at [academics]." That helped me so much in getting out of that mentality of, "I'm going to be stuck living on a disability check or a workman's comp." All of that stuff. I don't have to do that. I'm actually good at something. That made me want to nurture it; that made me want to be better at it. That made me motivated to do better.

Finding out that he could be successful in school ignited the motivation that he was not destined for a particular lifestyle; Harold had a voice in his own aspirations. Initially, he felt that there

was not a way to break the cycle of poverty. However, once he found out that educational success was possible, his hope, motivation, and aspirations changed.

Education was viewed as the means by which these students of economic disadvantage could improve their financial standing. Through some form of experience, the individuals became dissatisfied with their socioeconomic status; thus, they sought an avenue in which to improve. Interestingly, each individual arrived at the concept of a college education to achieve the desired change. They concluded that higher education brought better occupational options, and these options would lead to better wages and a higher financial standing.

The Presence of Positive Influences

Along with the hardships associated with economic disadvantage as discussed by the participants, the individuals included many statements and stories concerning the positive influences in their experiences. Some of the sample added further depth to the theme through their belief that the positive influences were imperative to the attainment of their goals. The origin of these positive influences varied.

Consequences of negative versus positive experiences. Carrie's story creates a detailed picture of the necessity of her "good friends" over bad influences. To demonstrate the necessity of these influences with respect to her goals, she shared the following experience. She began, "In middle school, I had really good grades…I was in soccer, and there was this teacher, her name was Miss Goodson…she helped me a lot. She helped me get in soccer." Miss Goodson's influence and Carrie's involvement in soccer assisted in her academic performance. However, later in her experience, her life's direction changed.

In high school, I wanted to be in soccer again, but that's when I was turning 15, and

that's when I was going to have my quinceanera, which is a big deal for Hispanic ladies.

My mom was like, "You can't join soccer, because you're going to have to be practicing

for your dance, or for your quinceanera," and I did that, and I guess without being

involved in school more, led me to the wrong path, which I regret.

The concept of a sense of belonging will be discussed later, but it is important the Carrie

sees this experience as a turning point. She talked about the importance in the interpersonal

relationships that soccer fostered, and consequences of the decision to quit the team.

Being involved in an activity in school led to people that actually wanted to do better,

too…and me not being involved in an activity led me to hang with these people that

didn't care.

With these new relationships with people who "didn't care," Carrie began a journey that led her

away from her academic goals. Carrie began to associate with these new individuals and began

using drugs. She also became pregnant and had her baby. She stated of the individuals, "Most

of them didn't have a high school diploma, and they didn't want to get their GED." In short,

these influential figures did not value school.

However, Carrie talked about her desire to change her life. She said, "I wanted

something better. That's when I started having new friends, friends from high school that are

actually in school. They motivate me, too." She discussed friendships and people that did have

academic aspirations and the influence they had on her.

They were like, "We'll help you if you need help with homework. If you need someone

to watch your son, we'll watch him." There is this one guy…he was into soccer, and

that's when I was into bad influences, and he would always criticize me and I would cuss

at him, almost to the point that I wanted to punch him. Until senior year, I had him in all

of my classes…We would team up for group work, and we always sat right next to each

other. He would give me advice, and he would help me, he would tell me, "Do your homework, and try to do good. You have the opportunity to do stuff, and you don't take advantage of it." He just gave me good advice. By the end of the semester of the school year, I ended up…giving him class notes and he was like, "Wow, now you're the one helping me." He was like, "I'm proud of you."

Harold discussed his fight against negative influence and the assistance positive influences gave in his college attainment. He spoke of a friend that led him away from his goals.

I had friend, and we became friends at seventh grade, and he didn't really come from that good of a family, but his house was upper middle class and everything … he had name brand clothes, everything; it's just the history of his life wasn't that good. He got involved with drugs like pain medications. I was his best friend, but before he ever got involved with the pain medication, he loved marijuana. He loved it and I was his best friend. At the time, we did what we did, and that whole time when me and him are hanging out and doing whatever, I was … in that current state of mind I was like, "Man I don't want to do anything. I don't want to go to school. I don't want to work." That was, I guess, a negative, because it made me not want to try.

Through this negative influence, Harold suffered academic consequences.

I look at my report cards and progress reports and I put in from when I wasn't hanging out with him all that much to when I was hanging out with him more and then just the phases that me and him went through and I can see that in my grades.

Harold did have a positive influence that helped turn things around and regain his motivation. He spoke in depth about his soccer coach.

If I could put it on a scale, the positivity that he put in my life it would be off the scale; like a thermometer, it will just break the glass at the top. He wasn't mean. He will listen to what you had to say and consider it and he would push everyone with their grades. He was more focused on people's grades than he was with soccer…He tells me to push as hard as I can give. That just motivated me in my life and what he said before motivated me at my academics.

Harold would credit his soccer coach with getting him on track and motivating him toward going to college. This positive influence was an integral aspect of his overall experience.

Motivational relationships with individuals of the upper/middle-class. As previously discussed, many of the participants expressed a desire to change their financial status. However, when living in a home of economic disadvantage, these individuals initially lacked an understanding of the standards of living of more financially affluent families. Evelyn spoke of this separation and misunderstanding.

A lot of people, in my personal opinion, they see people have money, but you never interact with them because you kind of feel awkward because they kind of don't understand where you come from. They don't understand. It could be culture-wise; it could be financially…I think a lot of people are just naïve to the other side. I think that was has kept each side apart, because they're kind of, I guess sometimes there's concern of, "I don't want to make that person feel bad because they're poor." "I don't want him to feel bad for me because I don't have money and he does." I think that's the disconnection and miscommunication with both of the kids to see the other side.

The misunderstandings left students of economic disadvantage marginalized among their more affluent peers and educational constructs, a theme that will be discussed later. However, for

many of the participants, gaining an understanding of the middle class brought motivation and a desire to leave economic disadvantage and gain a more financially stable lifestyle. This understanding came through their relationships with individuals of the upper/middle-class.

Allie's home life was very transient from birth to her high school years. Her living experiences with her mother were often turbulent. When circumstances became even more troubling, Allie's mother temporarily allowed her to live with others.

> About the age of three, my dad went to jail, or prison, or somewhere. My mom hid it by taking me to a babysitter or whatever. Then I actually spent five months with a friend of hers. My mom was trying to get on her feet.

Allie stated that what happened next is "an important part of [her] story."

> [The person I was living with] was middle class, so she didn't work. Her husband supported her. There were differences in that home that I saw as a kid. Seeing that she dressed me well, she took time to do my hair and she made sure that I was bathed. My mom and dad were not good on hygiene at all. So I learned to brush my teeth every night. She would bring me to bed and read me a story and give me cookies and milk. Those were the things that I noticed really quickly from my home to her home, was the nurturing…. just making sure that I was well taken care of and she was very proud to be my mother at that time.

This "second mother," as Allie called her, had a lasting effect on the child that it changed the direction of her life aspirations.

> That five months of seeing an economic status that wasn't mine showed me really quickly that there was a difference in my family. I think she might have had some education, but she definitely didn't have any college degrees. At that time, she wasn't

working. It wasn't like she was some career woman or anything, but just the economic

status was really obvious to me. She was my second mom, I looked up to her and I

wanted what she had.

Allie voiced the impact the experience of living with the middle-class family had on her. She

stated, "After that, my life was changed. I knew that there was a difference between her and my

parents and I quickly learned."

Another participant talked about his valuable experiences with friends of the middle-class

and the difference he saw in their lived experiences.

My friends, they were the ones … or the people I became friends with, they were the

ones that had the decent size middle class houses and some of them seemed that they

were rich, but they were just upper middle class. Being friends with them and going over

to their house, I was like, "Man, you guys have good."

Concerning these relationships with more financial affluent individuals, the participant stated,

"[Seeing] how easily they lived made me really try hard in my academics."

Other participants had similar relationships with individuals of the upper/middle-class

that brought forth the desire to live within those means. Evelyn spoke of her epiphanies through

the friendship with her sister's boyfriend.

She got married to … I think that's the reason why I went to school was … she got

married to her husband. He was homeschooled, he had a different life from us,

completely different financially, religion, every different way. He was at Gainesville

State. He was getting his associate's. Then he went to UGA for his bachelor's and that's

when they got married.

The family's relationship with this academically driven person offered Evelyn and her sister the confidence to enroll in college.

> I think that's the reason why I went to school, was that my sister saw something different and she kind of … she was like, "You have to go to school." I was just like, "Okay, whatever." Then me and my older sister did. I have two sisters, so the second to the oldest, we started school the same day and we've been there since then.

The experiences that Evelyn gained through her relationship with her eventual brother-in-law led to the motivation to exit a life of economic disadvantage.

> I think that was what kind of motivated us…my sister I guess getting married to another person that had a different lifestyle that we kind of was like, "Okay, this is life."

Evelyn remains at Gainesville State because she feels that education is the means to increase her financial stability and live the desired life of her sister and brother-in-law.

> Barry's relationship with an individual of the middle-class turned into a life-long commitment. Similar to Evelyn's sister, romance initiated the relationship with the person of the middle-class. Barry states, "My wife, I think, is the main reason I'm [in college]". His love and affection for his girlfriend, and later wife, along with his knowledge of her experiences concerning middle-class social capital and wealth, motivated him to go to college.

> She had plans for the future and she was middle class. I was really determined to keep it good with her. I wanted to be her caliber, (laughing) on her caliber. I didn't want her to think, "Oh, I'm just dating this bum and he's just going to go to work and he's never going to have plans, never going to have anything, not going to be able to provide for me and that kind of stuff." That was why I was really motivated, was to be able to keep her.

Each of the participants cited some meaningful relationship with an individual of upper/middle-class in their experiences concerning college aspiration and entrance. They all claimed that these relationships showed them that there was something beyond economic disadvantage. In addition, they all saw these individuals as being educated, and thus, saw education as the means with which to increase their financial liberty. Be it a friend, family friend, mentor, teacher, or coach, the presence of these relationships were highly valued by all participants.

Other examples of positive influences. The previously discussed relationships each included an individual of the upper/middle-class. However, the other participant experiences involved positive influences that did not included financially affluent individuals.

Fred spoke of a friend with a similar background who became a confidant when coping with the negative effects of economic disadvantage. As both would get discouraged about their hardships and experiences, they would assist each other through frustrations.

> We'd say "How do you let yourself get like that?" Because of that, we played off each other a lot. If things got bad or when we were hanging out, we would always joke around. We made light of the situation. That turned into, "We're definitely better than this. We can't let ourselves get trapped into this, and so we have to better ourselves." It was just a play off each other.

Doug believed he was very fortunate to have a friend who could empathize with his circumstances. Together, they were able to assist each other through the more frustrating experiences.

For one of the participants, she had her parents as her positive influence with respect academic goals. Iris stated, "I was motivated by my parents…they always told me 'you're going

to college.' It really wasn't a choice." Her parents did all that they could to motivate her and keep her on the right track and instill the value of education.

[My parents] pinpoint how we would be in a much better situation had they'd gone to school. That's very impacting. I don't want to be like them. I don't want to always want to live paycheck-to-paycheck. It motivates me, of course. They just tell me that education is the most important thing. They've always told me that. I've been raised with that. It's always been with me.

Iris claimed that she "was very fortunate to have parents that motivated her."

Other participants cited teachers or counselors as positive influences. Fred recounted his experience with a counselor who was specifically motivating.

He was a counselor at the middle school. We kind of [synced] up; he kind of taught some stuff. I guess he just believed in me a lot. He knew we'd create a video that had won the school like talent show thing, and a bunch of the kids ended up really liking me for it…I was so thankful for him for pushing me that way.

The counselor developed a relationship with Fred and the outcomes of the relationship enhanced his educational experience and helped him find and academic activity that he enjoyed. He spoke of how that experience fostered another positive relationship.

There was another drama teacher who came in halfway through my stint in high school, and he would always ask me to do stuff. Just asking me to do little things, showing kind of [confidence] in me; like, "Hey, will you make this little video for this?" or, "Hey, will you do this?" That made me really grateful, because it felt like it brought up my self-esteem, which had been lowered [by my family]. I just get it knocked down, but when I came to school, those little things meant so much to me, that they just boosted it.

Both of these relationships with educational personnel had a positive effect on Fred's academic aspirations, self-esteem, and resilience to the negative factors of this socioeconomic status. When the factors of economic disadvantage and home life discouraged him and "knocked him down," these positive influences would give him the strength to press onward.

Sense of belonging in schools. Many of the participants felt a sense of belonging in school; the students felt like they were valuable members of the student body. For many, this feeling came due to their experience with an extracurricular activity. One participant said of her extracurricular activity participation, "It gives me a reason to come to school." Similarly, Allie spoke of the difference between her sense of belonging and how it differed from other students of economic disadvantage.

> I saw [a lack of belonging] when I was in high school and my friends were like, "I hate
> this school, I hate whatever." They were doing well, but they just didn't buy in to the
> school spirit I guess. For me, I was like you know how many people have come from this
> school … we have a podium from Roosevelt at our school. To me that meant something,
> to know that Roosevelt had been there, had spoke at our school…Those kinds of things
> matter to me. I was a big school spirit person for the first time in high school.

Doug talked about his experiences with his membership on the football team. He stated, "Going to high school, football is more of a family, a second family. That's another thing that most students don't have is another family." He talked about the great lengths his coaches would go to assist his fellow students of disadvantage.

> [There are] kids on the team that didn't have a ride home so there was always a coach
> who had to dedicate into that student to help them out and help them out with food and

whatnot. Our coaches said no matter what if you get kicked out of the house, you have a

place to stay no matter what. I know some kids don't have that kind of thing.

Harold and Carrie cited the sense of belonging they had through their soccer teams. Harold

stated, "Soccer was one of my main reasons to go to school." Additionally, Carrie spoke of the

friendships that she had with her soccer teammates and how those relationships assisted her in

school. She said, "[Soccer helped] because being involved in an activity in school led to people

that actually wanted to do better, too."

Fred did not participate in a sport but became very involved with the drama club at his

school. These experiences led to a greater self-concept and an influential relationship with a

teacher. He talked about his positive experiences through drama.

> [My drama teacher] put me as one of the leads. I just didn't care, but he thought I was
>
> very energetic…He just taught me a lot about theatre and everything, and then he would
>
> tell me [that] I needed to do it after school. Then for the next three years, he would cast
>
> me as not a lead role because I didn't really like lead roles, but as a secondary role, and
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> then I ended up winning a best supporting actor award and everything. That just really
>
> got me, like it just boosted my self-esteem to where I thought I could do it. I could do
>
> stuff, because he gave me that little push of just, "You need to do it. You'd be good at
>
> it." I have not stopped that since.

These experiences with extracurricular activities promoted a sense of belonging and "a

reason to come to school." In many cases, the relationships gained through these sports or clubs

became highly motivational aspects of the participant's journey. In Carrie's case, the

relationships she possessed while involved with soccer versus the friendships she possessed

while not involved led to completely difference academic outcomes. She said, "Not being

involved in an activity led me to hang with these people that didn't care." These people led her away from academic success and towards more negative outcomes. Not every participant felt a sense of belonging at school. Yet, those that did feel as if they belonged to a group usually gained this sense through extracurricular activities and not through the general school population. Only one participant discussed as sense of belonging through resiliency. He stated, "After I realized that's where I need to be I was like, 'Screw what everyone else thinks. This is me. I belong here. I'm going to do it.'"

Feelings of Marginalization

Although most of the participants spoke of a sense of motivation and belonging through their participation in extracurricular activity, most of the participants felt that they did not "fit in" with the teachers and upper/middle-class students in the school. One participant simply stated, "It's how they treated you differently that kind of made me feel I didn't fit in there." Harold discussed his experiences with feeling that his teachers did not value him as much as other students.

> Where I went to school, the middle class students were known in the community because of their families and the teachers knew all those kids. They were treated better. Teachers would reward them more I guess. Say you get a chocolate for every math question you get right or something. [For] the kids who [the teacher] knew they would walk up and they're like, "You did a good job. Good job. Here have two chocolates." Then say if I got a question right "Oh good job, uh, [Harold]?" because they had to remember my name and then, "Here's a chocolate."

The participant expanded on the limits he felt with respect to access to working relationships with his teachers.

I feel like the relationship you can have with teachers was kind of limited. You could

have a good relationship with a teacher, but a kid who is known in the community,

because of his family, and who had a lot of money in their family, it seemed like they

always had a better relationship with every teacher and it was better than what you could

ever have.

Harold further illustrated the difference between the relationships that students of

economic disadvantage and their more financially affluent peers could gain with their teachers.

He spoke of "politics" and the role they played in his experience.

Politics [are prevalent] throughout the school…Like well known families, people who,

just because they are who they are, they can get what they want throughout the school.

That also comes down to money and everything…If you're a dad and your son wants to

play basketball and you are giving good amount of money to the booster club; this school

is not going to be like, "Your son is not going to play."

These experiences had an effect on Harold and he saw his financial status as the culprit.

Say you're talking to [a teacher], [the middle-class students] come up and they can get

whatever they want basically because if they want you out of that conversation, all they

got to do is talk to them and then you're tuned out. I think that does come down to

economics.

Some of the other students talked about the difficulty they had gaining access to teachers

due to their financial status. Jenny defined these students as "jocks," cheerleaders," and "rich

kids." Evelyn, a Hispanic female, discussed the limits to access as economic and racial. She

talked about the "white and black kids who had money and dressed nicer." Regardless of

definition, the participants felt like an "other" based on their socioeconomic status. Jenny recalled her experiences with the issue.

> I was just a loner. I just went to school and I tried to pass all my classes without getting in trouble. I remember I got in trouble in middle school and that was the last straw for my parents, I guess. I was always getting trouble, I would talk back to the teachers every now and then, but I wasn't a big troublemaker. I guess I wanted attention from somebody.

She felt that she was unnoticed by her teachers, going as far as to call herself "a loner." Jenny stated that she would get in trouble to gain the attention of her teachers. She talked about how the teachers treated other students by saying, "I found that the teachers, they had their favorite students, you know, like the cheerleaders, the basketball players, and all that." The more financially affluent students she characterized as "popular." She talked about her desire to achieve a similar type of relationship with her teachers.

> Once I went to school, I only had a couple of friends and I wasn't really popular. I guess I wanted to be popular, one of those kids that was going to be favorited by teachers. It never really happened.

Jenny spoke about how she was not alone in this marginalization and limit to access relationships with her teacher. She talked about how she, and other students of economic disadvantage, coped with feeling outcast.

> At first I was a little jealous, you know, they get along, they get to get away with things and I don't. I have to be a good kid. I have to not speak my mind, I have to just sit there and finish my work and stuff like that, and I can't goof off. I just felt I guess out of the

circle. Then there were students like me who didn't get along with teachers that way and we just all grouped, we had our own little groups really.

Evelyn discussed the divide that she saw between the upper/middle-class individuals at school and herself. She felt like her teachers and more financially affluent peers could not understand the hardships that she experienced.

[More financially affluent people] don't understand that in your fridge there's nothing to eat. For them, they see something so minimal like, "I'm going to take a take taxi home," and there are some kids that don't have that! That's not even an option! Not even for their parents is that an option. I think a lot of people are just naïve to the other side. I think that was has kept each side apart.

Not being understood created a gap between her, her peers, and teachers. In fact, this gap segregated students into separate classes at school. Evelyn discussed the academic placement and how financial status played a role.

When I went back to the city schools, you could tell there were Hispanic classes, and there were classes where blacks and Caucasians would go that you could tell they had money…In eighth grade they did the division of, kind of like a program. It was earth science, humanities or classical studies. The white kids that had money or black kids that had money entered classical studies. The Hispanic kids and black kids [without money] usually entered earth class.

Another student stated that he was academically stereotyped by his socioeconomic status. He stated, "I think it's just getting lost, kids getting lost in the system." However, he discussed the limits that he felt based on a teacher's opinion of his disadvantage.

[I felt the teacher was saying] "Yes, we really don't … we don't think that you're going

to succeed." They never said it, but that's how I feel, the way they reacted to me. That's

how I felt, and the way I felt was that they didn't think that any kid [of economic

disadvantage] was going to make it academically.

Iris, who felt a similar stereotype, simply stated, "It was unfair."

The participants felt limits to the access they had with teachers. Some of the participants

found access through coaches or sponsors in extracurricular activities. However, Evelyn saw

inequities with respect to these after-school activities based on financial status.

The wealthier kids were actually in programs and actually involved in school, so teachers

knew them. They did the afterschool program, they were at pep rallies, there were

involved in the school. Even [with the] kids of the lower end that are into sports, you can

still tell the difference to other kids that didn't do any afterschool programs.

However, some students did gain access to teachers through their involvement in extracurricular

activities. Other participants found one or two teachers with whom they did form positive

relationships. Yet, in the data, I found that feeling marginalized at school became an obstacle

that these students of economic disadvantage had to overcome in their pursuit of college

entrance.

Demystification of Higher Education

For the participants, higher education was a largely unknown venture. All of the

participants were first generation college goers with the exception of Evelyn, whose mother

obtained a degree in Mexico. Even for her, the American system of higher education was a

mystery. At some point, experiences demystified aspects of higher education, and the

participants gained confidence that they could actually attain a college degree. For some, the

demystification process came through watching someone close to them begin or finish the process; for others, the process became more of a trial and error experience.

Knowing someone in college. Barry's girlfriend and soon-to-be wife enrolled in school while they were dating. As a person of middle-class, Barry's wife had some knowledge of higher education through her family. She assisted Barry in the process of applying and attending Gainesville State College. He discussed the effect she had on his college outlook.

> Before I met her, I never really thought it was on the table for me to be in a big college. There was no way. I had no money, and I always found reasons why I wouldn't be able to go. Then that all kind of changed when I met her. She found out that college here wasn't really that expensive. You could get help. I have gotten help…I do now qualify for aid, and I get it and that helps…She kind of broke down all of those barriers.

In addition to the financial issues, Barry's wife also helped him find confidence in handling the academic load.

> Before that, I just never thought that I would be able to make through. If I would be able to get to college, would I be able to academically make it through all four years? Would I be able to do all the work that is required and that kind of thing? She kind of changed that around and thought that I could do it, and so I did. I do, and I did well.

Having someone to help him demystify some aspects of college gave Barry confidence and motivation that he could not only go to college, but finish.

Another participant discussed her family's relationship with her cousin and the demystification that experience brought her. Jenny spoke of her cousin's experience and how that motivated her to attempt postsecondary education as well.

Because, I don't know, the other kids were saying how they were going to go to UGA. My cousin, he's really smart, he goes to UGA and everything. He has a scholarship. My mom and dad were like, "Well your cousin's going this and this and this, and he's studying this to be this." I was like, well maybe I could do it too.

Having the knowledge of an academically successful person instilled confidence that she could achieve. Additionally, her cousin assisted in the transition process and remained a valuable source of information.

Demystifying the finances of college. Paying for college was a major obstacle for these students of economic disadvantage. Doug stated, "I had no idea if I could afford it," and other participants shared that same outlook. However, through financial aid, many of the participants found that they could go to college without financial strains. Harold spoke of his decision to come to Gainesville State College and the manner in which finances played a role in those decisions.

I wanted to come to Gainesville because I learned you can pretty much get the same education for cheaper and that's really what it came down to was it was cheaper. Plus … this might sound bad, but because it was cheaper and I get the Hope and Pell Grant, I knew that I was going to have more money left from Pell Grant and that is really the main reason I came here is, because it's [in the] University System of Georgia…Having that money, it made me feel really good at the time that I did have it because I never been able to just … I never seen this much money in front of me before.

The existence of extra money from scholarships as a benefit also assisted another participant in going to college. Iris stated, "[My parents] are, kind of, depending on my scholarships as well. That's how we're paying half the rent."

Fred felt that paying for college would be a major obstacle. However, with the help of a

school counselor, he was able to draft a plan to assist him in making a sound financial decision.

He spoke of this plan of action that began with a local school to attend.

I thought I wouldn't be able to afford it, so I didn't know what to do. Then I realized you

can do the whole community college or tech college and then transfer out. That would be

way easier. At that moment, I was like, "Okay. There is an option. That is something I

can do." At that moment, I was like, "Okay. If anything else fails, I am definitely going

to do two years community college." Then, ever since then, it just gradually built to

where I know I can do more, and so I just keep going with it.

Breaking his college aspirations into two parts, first attending a local school, and then

transferring out not only would help him pay for college by avoided expensive room and board,

but would also help him assure some academic success.

However, one of the biggest issues of applying and going to college was navigating the

Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Allie spoke of her difficulty navigating

FAFSA.

I had to learn how to do financial aid, which was a process because I had to try and ask

my mom for help, "Mom, I'm going to need you to help me," and my mom was like,

"What?" Her sitting there, "All I need you to do is sit there with your taxes and tell me

what's on line 11," stuff like that, but I didn't know what it was going to be like. Doing

it the first time, I was kind of nervous. My mom was very frustrated, thinking, "I don't

know what you need from me. Why can't you just do this yourself?" I was like,

"Because I need you to look at your taxes," because I didn't think I will understand her

taxes. But I just had to figure it out. My teacher had just kind of pushed me. He was

like, "Just go to the website. You'll be fine. You can handle it." I'm like, "Okay, I'll try it."

Although her mother was reluctant, Allie was able to persevere and navigate through the process. When she got frustrated, a teacher was there to answer her questions and encouraged her.

Many of the participants spoke of the necessity of demystifying the cost of college and the realization of financial aid. Evelyn spoke of her initial thoughts toward college tuition rates and how to educate students of economic disadvantage with respect to paying for college.

I think [we need people] teaching kids that there's other ways if you can't pay for [college]. Because a lot of kids are like, "A thousand something for like three classes, are you serious?" That's like my dad's rent, car payment. He's like, "For three months, I'm going to pay this much money to get some credits, then I have to go so far [over many] years to get an actual diploma." Because I think a lot of people just think of the "right now."

However, forward thinking and obtaining financial aid attributed to Evelyn overcoming financial obstacles. She stated, "The reason why I went to school was because of FAFSA, because of Pell Grant, because of Georgia HOPE. Otherwise, I don't think that [I'd] still be in school."

These students were reluctant to enter college because of the unknown. However, through relationships with individuals who knew the integral aspects of going to college, and gaining an understanding of paying for college, these students were able to overcome any uncertainty and successfully enroll. The demystification process for each of these students promoted a new motivation and confidence that they could be academically successful and

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overcome the financial woes of tuition. Without the experiences that demystified this process, many of these individuals may not have attained the college entrance that they had desired.

Synthesis of Experiences

Eight total themes were found in the nine participant interviews. After discussing these eight meaning clusters with verbatim examples, the final step in phenomenological inquiry is to synthesize the experiences to capture the essence of the phenomenon. Following Creswell's (2007) data analysis, these themes led to a textural description of "what" the students experienced in their pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade experience and a structural description of "how" the experience occurred. The process gave me the ability to construct a "composite description" of the intersection of the textural and structural constructs (p. 159). The resulting concept "is the essence of [the students'] experience and represents the culminating aspect of a phenomenological study" (p. 159).

Textural Meanings

The participants experienced many home environment hardships associated with economic disadvantage that stemmed from transient living, drug use in home, heated arguments over finances, stressful living situations, and verbal and physical abuse. Another prevalent family hardship related to education consisted of their indifference towards the students' educational success. Additionally, the participants felt marginalized by educational staff and peers while associated with the school. In response to all of these hardships, the participants met the obstacles with a headstrong internal motivation that led to a resiliency to the negative attributes of economic disadvantage. However, many of them still cite that they felt a sense of belonging through the efforts of individual teachers and coaches and through their participation in extracurricular activities. For some, this association led to positive relationships with

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individuals who posed motivation. The individuals cited that the relationships with success-minded peers motivated them to succeed themselves; while other individuals cited relationships with non-motivated individuals and how those interactions led to negative outcomes.

Each participant possessed a strong desire to change his or her socioeconomic experiences. Relationships with individuals of upper/middle class gave the participants insight that there existed a different way to live. These relationships help foster the desire to change their socioeconomic status. All of the participants found education to be the means with which to achieve this change. However, a lack of knowledge about American colleges, the entrance requirements, and the culture that surrounds higher education remained obstacles to their college attainment. Through some experience or relationship, these individuals experienced the demystification of postsecondary education. By some combination of the themes, these students overcame to obstacles of economic disadvantage and enrolled in college where many of their financially disadvantaged peers could not. Holistically, *what* these participants ascribed as meaningful in their experiences were the obstacles that they overcame through internal and external motivation with respect to college enrollment.

Structural Meanings

Themes concerning the hardships of economic disadvantage offer meaning in terms of the structural qualities of these rural students of economic disadvantage. With respect to *how* these students experienced the phenomenon of college attainment as economically disadvantaged, these students experienced hardships of transient living, abuse, drug use in the home, stress from financial woes, marginalization of peers and school faculty, and combinations of positive and negative influences. The participants' experiences were ones of overcoming obstacles that economic disadvantage created. Comprehensively, *how* the participants

experienced their journeys to college enrollment were through homes and lifestyles of economic disadvantage with inherent hardships of financial insecurities, many negative attributes of poor communities, and feeling of marginalization through limits of access to teachers and resources.

The Essence of the Phenomenon

Through Creswell's (2007) phenomenological inquiry, the textural and structural meanings of the participants' experiences led to the essence of the phenomenon as a whole. This study was guided by the central research question: What is the nature of the pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade experiences of students who identified as economically disadvantaged in rural schools with regards to their successful postsecondary institution enrollment? The experiences of students of economic disadvantage in rural districts are meaningful through the hardships faced when living in a home of low socioeconomic status. Their experiences are also meaningful, through the resiliency that the participants showed in response to these obstacles as well as all of the sources of motivation that supported their experience. The individuals ascribed meaning to the negative attributes of their economic disadvantage, yet they also attribute meaning to the people, places, and events that assisted them in overcoming their hardships and realizing education as an escape from a lower financial status.

Summary

The participants recalled positive and negative experiences that impacted them in their journey to successful college attainment. Through the co-creation of meaning, the research team and participants were able to find the themes present in the holistic data set. The result of the process is an accurate depiction of the essence of the experiences of college students who identified as economically disadvantaged in rural pre-kindergarten through twelfth grades schools.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this chapter is to summarize and discuss the findings of this study with
respect to the current literature concerning the challenges of students of economic disadvantage
in pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade schools and rural education. The content of this
chapter will also address the limitations of the study and implications for future research. To
conclude, I will discuss future directions for work with students of economic disadvantage with
respect to their academic performance and aspirations during their pre-kindergarten through
twelfth grade years.

Summary of the Study

Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, and Perna (2008) found that socioeconomic status has an effect on
college attainment, and the factors present in situations of poverty are linked to high school
dropout and low college entrance rates. The issues of institutional bias, lack of social capital,
low levels of parent efficacy, issues in education policy, and additional academic factors may
contribute to the academic tendencies of students of economic disadvantage (Blair & Scott,
2002; Brookins-Bozeman, 2007; Farkas, 2003; Klopfenstein, 2004; Louie, 2007; Ndura,
Robinson, & Ochs, 2003**;** Raffo, Dyson, Gunter, Hall, Jones, & Kalambouka, 2009; Shealey,
2006, Urrieta, 2004). I found that most studies focus on the relationship between poverty and
college attainment through the barriers that impair students of economic disadvantage in their
academic aspirations and success (Crosnoe, Mistry, & Elder, Jr., 2002; Deil-Amen &Tevis,
2010; Lee Daniels, Puig, Newgent, & Nam, 2008; Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, and Perna, 2008). In

short, these researchers discuss why students of poverty do not enter college at the same rates as their more financially affluent peers. However, few authors have reviewed the experiences of students of low socioeconomic status who have obtained college entrance. Additionally, little research addressed students who lived in rural environments. I decided that more research was needed concerning the experiences of college students who identified as economically disadvantaged when attending pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade schools in rural districts. Therefore, understanding the essence of the lived experience of these students was the central goal of this study.

To achieve my research goals, I used the qualitative approach of phenomenology as the basis for my study. Additionally, I acted through the social constructivist theoretical framework and Creswell's (2009) Advocacy and Participatory Worldview. To collect this phenomenological data, I conducted nine semi-structured interviews with students at Gainesville State College who identified as economically disadvantaged in rural districts. After data analysis, I was able to outline discovered themes from the participants' responses. Through the co-creation of meaning clusters, the efforts of the research team, and trustworthiness measures of the participants, the following themes were determined: (1) resiliency in spite of negative familial circumstances, (2) desire to improve socioeconomic status, (3) education as a means of improvement, (4) the presence of positive influences, (5) feelings of marginalization, and (6) demystification of higher education.

The themes led to a textural description of *what* the students experienced in their pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade experiences and a structural description of *how* the experiences occurred. With this information, I developed the essence of the participants' experiences of the phenomenon at the intersection of the textural and structural meanings. The

participants placed meaning on the hardships of a life in a lower socioeconomic status, the limits of access, and the lack of social capital they experienced in their journey to college enrollment. These hardships included lack of financial stability, transient living, stress, substance abuse in the home, physical abuse, limits to access in positive teacher relationships, feelings of marginalization from peers and school staff, and limits to knowledge concerning postsecondary schools. However, the participants also ascribed meaning to their own internal motivation, personal relationships, and critical events that allowed for the development of resiliency to the negative factors of economic disadvantage.

Relation to the Literature Review

The findings of this study concerning elements of hardship and resiliency to economic disadvantage hold varying relationships to the literature. Concerning some topics, the findings and literature share many similarities; yet, in other instances, the findings of this study differ from the literature review. Some of the participants spoke of academic placement inequity concerning students of economic disadvantage. The participants also disclosed their perceived limits in access to positive student/teacher relationships. I found that students who shared the socioeconomic status of their teachers possessed better relationships with the educator. The students of economic disadvantage were often the victims of the politics of social class in the school system.

With respect to the legislation governing education and the issues therein, the participants vocalized aspects of inequity to access that the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was drafted to resolve (Shealey, 2006; Urrieta, 2004). While the NCLB did not alleviate these issues for students of poverty, it should be noted that the legislation is no longer the governing accountability measure of the state of Georgia (Badertscher, 2012). However, due to the sample

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members' dates of college enrollment compared with the requirements of the recent

implementation of the Building Resourceful Individuals to Develop Georgia's Economy Act

(BRIDGE) and the College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI), the participants

were unable to discuss any experiences concerning these new measures.

Of nine participants, eight were first generation college students, and in many cases, they

were the only child in the family and one of the few members of the community to attend

college. One participant shared that going to college was an escape from the other members of

her community. In fact, when forced out of school activities, it was the friends she made in the

community that brought negative consequences to behavior and low academic aspirations.

Another participant was so different from his siblings that he felt that it would be easier to tell his

parents that he was in jail than for him to disclose that he was going to college. The literature

showed that a small number of students of economic disadvantage enroll in college, a much

lower rate than students of the upper/middle class (Hernandez, 2011; Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, &

Perna, 2008). The participants broke generational low-academic aspirations and are the

individuals who make up the small percentage of college students of economic disadvantage that

the literature demonstrates.

Some of the participants spoke of their observations that financially affluent students'

parents and guardians may hold leverage in terms of relationships with teachers of congruent

socioeconomic status and possess the ability to work more seamlessly within educational

institutions. As previously mentioned, the participants disclosed that teachers had better

relationships with upper/middle class students and that these students received better services

and advocacy due to the sociological relationships present among the financially congruent

families and teachers. Students often felt "othered" by the educational staff due to the lack of

social capital and extracurricular relationships that other peers and families possessed with teachers and coaches outside of the normal school construct. Louie (2007) stated that students of economic disadvantage possess a lack of social capital that hinders them in the educational system and can lead to lower academic success.

Concerning upper-level classes, many of the participants expressed their experiences of inequity in access to these forms of coursework. These students often did not personally identify as "smart kids" due to their socioeconomic status and often felt stereotyped as such by education personnel. However, three of the participants recalled their experiences of being identified as gifted and receiving a more rigorous course load. Of these three participants, one individual still felt marginalized by limits to access within the gifted program. Holistically, the experiences of the participants were congruent with the inequity discussed in the literature. Klopfenstein (2004) and Ndura, Robinson, and Ochs (2003) found that students of economic disadvantage were often absent from rigorous academic courses. These authors found that educational staff members were placing these students in Advanced Placement courses at much lower rates than the students' more affluent counterparts. Even at the elementary level, Farkas (2003) found that students marginalized by race and socio-economic status were not placed in gifted classes at the same rate as their peers.

Concerning parents or guardians of economic disadvantage, the participants' experiences correlated with the literature in many areas. For the majority of the sample, the parents or guardians did not possess a negative perspective on education. If asked, most of these adults would agree with the necessity of academic success. Many of the participants stated that their parents were motivational figures. However, this motivation was at the surface level and usually consisted of only words of encouragement, absent of advocacy actions. The literature indicated

that parents of economic disadvantage often lack the necessary skills to advocate for their child in the educational system; the participants' experiences reflect this concept (Louie, 2007). At no time did participants speak of their parents advocating on their behalf concerning school matters. If a participant was identified as gifted or enrolled in an Advanced Placement course, it was the effort of a teacher who created the opportunity. The parents would agree with these placements, but they rarely advocated on the child's behalf to ensure that the student would receive these services. In general, it appeared that parents trusted the schools to handle the education of their children, and the parents did not have much interaction with the school. This lack of communication was especially true for the Hispanic participants who cited that language and cultural barriers made it difficult for their families to interact with school personnel.

One of the subthemes in the findings of this study was the participants' experiences with a sense of belonging. Although the participants often felt marginalized by their teachers and some school staff members, many participants felt that they had a positive association with their institution, often found through extracurricular activities. Interestingly, most of the participants cited limits in social capital as an issue of marginalization, but even with this obstacle, these individuals were still able to gain a sense of belonging. The participants may have possessed a resiliency to the feelings of marginalization and were able to develop a sense of belonging through other school elements. Conversely, it may be that other students of economic disadvantage lacked this resiliency and were unable to connect with any aspect of the school construct due to their felt oppression. Louie (2007) stated that economic disadvantage does have an effect on a student's sense of belonging, but the issue is based more on social capital than monetary deficiency. The literature showed that students of economic disadvantage often lack a

sense of belonging in their schools (Louie). Still, the unique experiences of some of the

participants in this study evidenced a sense of belonging.

The concept of rural education was a central element of the literature review. Each of the

participants resided in a rural district for a minimum of four consecutive or nonconsecutive

years, although most of the participants lived in a rural area for their entire lives. Interestingly,

the participants rarely spoke about the effects of rural education on their experiences. *Rural*

seemed to be the area in which the individual resided. In the findings, rural education was not a

significant occurrence in the statements of the participants. Provasnik et al. (2007), though,

discussed the diversity within rural districts, a concept repeated by members of the sample.

Additionally, some of the participants spoke of their difficulty participating in

extracurricular activities due to the isolation of their home in the larges expanses of their rural

school district, another element of rural education discussed by Provasnik et al (2007). These

participants showed resiliency to the high drop out rates, low college entrance rates, teacher

perspectives, and other negative attributes often associated with rural education (Provasnik et

al.). As with the hardships of economic disadvantage, the members of the sample lived as

exceptions to the literature with respect to rural education demographic outcomes. However,

while the participants consistently spoke in depth concerning their experiences in economic

disadvantage, they did not attribute any significance to living in a rural area.

Limitations of the Study

As with all phenomenological research, limitations exist concerning this study. The

participants in this study came from Gainesville State College, an institution of the University

System of Georgia. Thus, this study does not include any individuals who attended a four-year

research institution. Additionally, Gainesville State College is an institution located in a rural

section of northeast Georgia. As with all qualitative inquiry, the findings cannot be generalized.

However, since all participants resided in this small region, the views of the participants remain

even more localized than in other qualitative studies. In addition, some of the participants

attended the same pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade schools, although none of the

participants had congruent experiences with respect to matriculation through the exact same set

of schools. These factors limit the study by the exclusion of current four-year students and

inclusion of only those attending Gainesville State College, although many participants

expressed goals to attend a four-year college to obtain their Bachelor's degree in the future.

The study required that participants received free or reduced price lunch for at least four

years of their pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade experience. The requirement of free or

reduced price lunch data is congruent with the definition of students as economically

disadvantaged through the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (Elementary and

Secondary Education Act of 1965). This four-year threshold is required to ensure that the

participant's experience in economic disadvantage is as holistic as possible and not limited to a

short period of their experience. However, this requirement excludes the possibility of valuable

data collected from participants who received free or reduced price lunch for three years or less.

Additionally, the voices are silenced of those students who qualified for free or reduced price

lunch but chose to forego the benefits thereof, yet still experienced all of the effects of economic

disadvantage. Furthermore, other individuals who responded to the recruitment flyer and email

were nontraditional students whose pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade experience preceded

the No Child Left Behind Act and the definition of economically disadvantaged. For this reason,

I excluded these individuals from the participant sample.

Implications for Practice

In light of the findings of the study, I identified many implications for educational personnel, specifically professional school counselors. Social injustice is a societal issue (Ratts, Lewis, & Toporek, 2010). Educators should not blame students of economic disadvantage for their lack of financial and social capital; rather, they should meet the students in their disadvantage and advocate on their behalf (Ratts, Lewis, & Toporek). I conducted this study using Creswell's (2009) "Advocacy and Participatory Worldview" (p. 9). Creswell stated that the constructivist worldview, the other framework from which I originally used to guide the research, by itself, does not place emphasis on advocacy. Ultimately, using the Advocacy and Participatory Worldview at the conclusion of findings should bring desired action. Goodman et al. (2004) stated that social justice work is "professional action designed to change societal values, structures, policies, and practices, such that disadvantaged or marginalized groups gain increased access to these tools of self-determination" (p. 795). From this precept come the implications for educational personnel.

Relationships

One of the most salient points found in the participants' responses is that of the necessity of relationships. When discussing elements of their motivation, the participants cited relationships with teachers, counselors, coaches, friends, and other influential individuals. Additionally, the participants identified most of these people as middle-class. These close, positive relationships fostered personal growth, academic success, high aspiration, and resiliency to hardships. For this reason, educational personnel should make attempts to establish relationships that develop these aspects for students of economic disadvantage.

Many of the students felt marginalized by their teachers. The student would experience a faint connection with their teachers but would often feel pushed aside for students of upper/middle-class. However, all participants found a positive relationship with some member of the school staff. Due to the social constructs of limits to access and a lack of social capital for students of economic disadvantage, school personnel should make additional efforts to foster relationships with these marginalized students. Louie (2007) stated, "Teachers and administrators, who often do not know much about the family and neighborhood backgrounds of their students…cannot tailor instruction" (p. 2228). Teachers who possess respectful and nurturing relationships with their students can gain the individualized knowledge of the students' hardships. Understanding the student's background can lead to empathy and better services for the marginalized individual.

Whether it is a teacher making the extra effort in the classroom, a school counselor specifically founding a relationship of advocacy for a student, or the foundation of a teacher-advisor program, school staff members have to make individualized efforts to create positive, motivational relationships with students of economic disadvantage. Each participant was able to name a specific individual at his or her school who had an effect on their college aspiration. With many people employed by an institution, if each could make the effort to create individualized relationships, then the majority of the population of students of economic disadvantage could be reached and possess access to a knowledgeable adult inside the school building.

Some of the participants cited relationships with motivated students as a positive element related to their college attainment. One participant spoke of her multiple experiences of positive and negative outcomes based on her associations with friends. When she was involved in soccer,

she was surrounded by students who had a positive effect on her behavior and motivated her to succeed academically. When she was not involved in extracurricular activities, she associated with individuals who were not academically motivated and fostered many negative attributes. Finally, she created friendships with more positive influences that assisted in her motivation to graduate from high school and ultimately enroll in college. For students of economic disadvantage, school personnel need to make efforts to assist in promoting these positive types of relationships with peers.

Teachers and school counselors could foster these relationships through placing more students of economic disadvantage into highly rigorous courses. The participants felt that education was the means by which to escape poverty. Yet, they agreed that they felt marginalized in academic placement. These students saw discrimination concerning the financial divide between lower and upper-level coursework. Students in higher-level classes generally go to the same classes for all academic content areas. For this reason, they are able to create learning communities and relationships that lead to academic success. Placing students of economic disadvantage into these courses will not only support them with a better curriculum but will also offer access to the positive relationships with motivated peers and teachers.

Most of the participants discussed a motivational relationship with an individual of the middle-class as a factor that led to their college enrollment. For some of the members of the sample, their relationship concerned an adult; for others, the individual was a peer. Regardless, the relationship provided an experience with persons of middle class, which demonstrated another facet of access to individuals of economic disadvantage. The participants shared a desire to leave financial hardship. Most found this motivation after seeing how the person of middle-class lived. Although the school institution may be limited in the manner in which they could

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foster the friendships of students of economic disadvantage and their more financially affluent

peers, the school counselors and teachers could create experiences in which these students of

poverty could experience the access and social capital that greater financial privilege can offer.

Mentorships with community members of the upper/middle-class could promote realistic

experiences, and this newfound concept of social and financial capital could promote motivation

for the student.

Parent Involvement

VanSciver (2006) stated, "Parents of low-income and minority students trust school

officials with the academic future of their children. This they do to a fault. Without question,

they trust educators to make the appropriate decisions for their children" (p. 57). The parents of

students of economic disadvantage and the school are disconnected. While some of the

participants voiced that their parents were very motivating concerning pre-kindergarten through

twelfth grade academics, most found that their parents or guardians were indifferent to college

entrance. The individuals found that their parents would agree that college was a satisfactory

goal, but their approval and motivation were only words and lacked action or advocacy. The

participants felt that their parents did not want to interact with school officials. School staff

members must find better ways to engage marginalized students and their parents or guardians.

Meeting with the parents is an easy answer, but Wood and Baker (1999) found that,

although parent education programs are available, those of low socioeconomic status were less

likely to attend for many varying reasons. Therefore, individualized contact and interaction may

be a more adequate and successful method. By individualizing relationships, school staff

members can communicate the steps required to graduate and enter college as well as teach the

parents methods of advocating for their child. Educators must understand the trust level that

these parents have in the school to protect and assist their child in graduation and college entrance. Due to this sensitive relationship, the school staff members need to place specific emphasis on this population. Future research concerning individualized school-to-parent interaction could offer information for the success of such procedures.

Extracurricular Activity Involvement

Although many of the participants felt marginalized by their teachers, they were still able to develop a sense of belonging in their school. For most of these individuals, their involvement in extracurricular activities brought the relationships that fostered their sense of belonging. School staff members, particularly coaches and club sponsors, need to seek out students of economic disadvantage to increase involvement for this group. A few of the participants discussed limited involvement in after school activities due to transportation issues. Due to his or her family finances, the student was required to ride a bus to and from school; thus, staying after school hours was not an option. However, one participant discussed the role of his coaches concerning transportation issues, and he felt that those efforts increased the membership of marginalized students.

Students of economic disadvantage may also lack the financial freedom to purchase expensive resources for the extracurricular activity. Coaches and sponsors may need to find creative methods of fundraising to assist these students with the costs of participation. As discussed in the findings of this study, students of economic disadvantage face many difficult hardships that they must overcome daily. If participation in extracurricular activities causes even more daunting obstacles, the students may choose to forego participation. School staff members, coaches, sponsors, and members of the community should make efforts to find support systems to help with transportation for after school activities and to assist with financial requirements.

This will increase these students' access to teams and clubs. Additionally, community members and local business could create sponsorships for the disadvantaged students in attempts to pay for fees, uniforms, and other expenses often associated with extracurricular activities. Tactical and tactile encouragement is needed to motivate the students of economic disadvantage to participate in highly influential activities.

College Transition Assistance

The participants of this study echoed the findings of the Deil-Amen and Tevis (2010) and Perna et al (2008) studies when discussing their college transition process. Additionally they discussed that their high school counseling programs were not adequate with respect to college transition or entrance information. For many of the students, the logistics of the college school day and requirements of college coursework were a mystery. They were unaware of the college atmosphere, schedule, and operations. They had unrealistic perceptions of costs, requirements, and rigor. Professional school counselors could create and implement programs that could assist students of economic disadvantage with "how" to get into and go to college, as well as "what" college is like.

Through additional collaboration with student services personnel at the post-secondary level, information sessions and other programs could assist in the demystification process for students of economic disadvantage. Furthermore, due to the voiced issues of the sample, these students need more information about financial aid and completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. The cost of college remained an obstacle for the participants of this study. Many of the participants voiced their need for better information from school counselors concerning the cost of college and methods by which students of poverty could pay for courses.

Higher Education

In addition to pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade educational personnel, the findings of this study led to implications for student affairs personnel in higher education. The most influential factor of the participants' experiences is that of motivational relationships. College student affairs officials need to create and foster similar experiences for their students of economic disadvantage. For incoming freshmen, having a sophomore mentor system could assist these new students from their first moment on campus. Having an informed *buddy* who is aware of the logistics and culture of the campus can alleviate anxiety in the transitioning student's mind and can inform the individual concerning what to expect and how to be successful. Creating a support cohort of freshmen students of economic disadvantage could also assist in retention efforts. This group of students could meet, support, and matriculate together through their college journeys. The cohort could assist students through informational sessions about what is coming up in college culture, academic, and billing requirements. Additionally, the group could allow for counseling aspects of normalization, universality, and catharsis with respect to the obstacles, limits of access, instances of lacking social capital, and marginalization that these students could encounter.

College student affairs personnel should also become more involved in the college transition element for high school students. Setting up tables in a lunchroom or at a *college fair* does not lead to the more intimate relationships that the participants of this study discussed. Current college recruitment and transition services require the student to initiate the process in some manner. The participants of this study demonstrated hesitation to similar efforts due to a lack of advocacy from their parents or guardians, a lack of social capital as first generation college students, and feelings of marginalization in educational ventures. These students

required personal relationships and individualized attention to learn about college logistics and complete the required forms and applications. True individualized attention to high school students may be an unrealistic venture for college student affairs personnel, but some attempt to individualize the information dissemination could create a better experience. Additionally, higher education needs to understand the lack of advocacy available to many students of economic disadvantage, as well as the feelings of marginalization they feel towards the educational construct. Sensitivity to these issues and a strategic plan to meet the unique needs of these individuals could promote healthier relationships between students of poverty and the perceived costs, accessibility, and success of college entrance.

Recommendations for Future Research

The limitations of the current study lead to many opportunities for future research. The study required that participants received free or reduced price lunch for at least four years of their pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade experience. This limitation creates two potential opportunities for research. First, a study could be conducted with students who experienced greater extents of economic disadvantage. In other words, a study could limit the sample to only those individuals who received free or reduced price for every year that they attended school. Although some of the individuals of the study would have met this new criterion, I would have been required to exclude other participants if I had used this more restrictive parameter. The second opportunity would consist of removing the free or reduced price lunch requirement altogether and rely solely on family income data to include or exclude and individual. This process would offer a much more detailed selection of participants.

Another limitation to consider is the sample's specific locale. Each of the participants attended Gainesville State College at the time of the study and lived in the rural region

surrounding the institution. Future studies could obtain a greater participant population by including individuals from multiple colleges spread over a much larger region, if not expanding over the entire country. Students from areas outside northeast Georgia may have different experiences, and their voices need to be heard as well. Additionally, Gainesville State College is a two-year, non-research institution. Even within the confines of the state, more perspectives of college attainment among students of economic disadvantage from four-year, research institutions could add to the literature as well.

The participants of this study resided in rural districts for a minimum of four consecutive or nonconsecutive years as a requirement for participation. Future research could review the experiences of students of economic disadvantage who reside in suburban or urban environments. Gaining an understanding of the essence of the experiences of these students in different social environments as they relate to the literature could assist the educational personnel who serve students of economic disadvantage in differing areas. Furthermore, qualitative or quantitative studies that review the similarities and differences among students of economic disadvantage across the rural, suburban, and urban landscape would add to the literature as well. The educational field needs to gain a more in-depth understanding of the experiences of students of economic disadvantage in their home environment. While this study focused on rural areas, any study that increases the literature concerning a rural population or any demographic of students of poverty would be beneficial to the educational community.

As I reviewed the findings, I identified a few questions that could inform future research. The participants in my study each spoke of an internal motivation that offered academic aspiration and assisted in resiliency to negative attributes of economic disadvantage. However, when asked, the participants could not voice how they obtained this motivation or why they

possessed it. How did they obtain this self-motivation? How do they keep it through all of their experienced hardships? Is self-motivation genetic, developed, or learned? A study that inquires as to the origin of self-motivation in resilient individuals of economic disadvantage could create an impact on the literature and services for these students.

Concerning relationships with school staff members, I encountered two interesting questions. How are resiliency and a sense of belonging related? How does resiliency vary with respect to marginalization, lack of social capital, and limits to access? I found that most of my participants felt marginalized by the behavior and attitudes of their teachers. However, each of the participants still developed a sense of belonging in their school. As the researcher, I would consider each of my participants to be resilient to obstacles brought on by financial hardships, lack of social capital, and limits to access. This resiliency is much of the reason that the student enrolled in college. Studies that looked into the relationship between resiliency and a sense of belonging in school could expand the literature concerning students of economic disadvantage. Furthermore, when considering the effects of limits to access, feelings of marginalization, and lack of social capital to the issue, the intersections of all of these ideas could lead to really interesting data.

For students of economic disadvantage who dropped out of high school or chose to forego college enrollment, do they lack the resiliency to overcome the limits to access and marginalization felt by my participants? Are they resilient to these factors but lacked the development of a sense of belonging? A study that researched students of economic disadvantage who did not enter college and the relationships that they possessed with school personnel could inform the community as to the significance that these relationships have with respect to college entrance. In addition, a comparison study of the levels of resiliency between

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students of economic disadvantage who entered college and those who decided to forego higher education could lead to interesting implications as well.

For generalization purposes, quantitative studies with students of economic disadvantage could increase the literature base. Specifically concerning the findings of this study, Likert-scale items with respect to resiliency of hardships and limits to access could be conducted with a large sample to decrease the limits of qualitative inquiry. Furthermore, quantitative assessments that test students' motivational factors could inform as well. Due to the accessibility of a large sample through quantitative measures, researchers could access their participants in a larger geographical area and from multiple regions of the country. Further quantitative inquiry into the resiliency and motivation of students who identify as economically disadvantaged could be generalized to similar students, and could impact current policies and services for these individuals.

Researchers who seek to fill the gap in current literature concerning students of economic disadvantage, including research that expands or improves upon the current study, can lead to a better understanding of their experiences. Research that seeks inquiry with students from different regions of the state of Georgia and the United States can expand on the limited findings of this study as well. Students of economic disadvantage are not entering college at the same rates as their more financially affluent peers; any research into the cause of this issue or how to alleviate the problem would greatly benefit the educational community.

Conclusion

My work with students of economic disadvantage has consumed my efforts in advocacy for the past ten years. The inspiration of my wife's story of resilience has promoted my hope for all students of poverty. In efforts to improve services for these students, I am honored to have

had the opportunity to hear the experiences of my participants. It will be exciting to see how this research impacts the efforts of other educational personnel as well as where it takes my own practice with this marginalized group of students of economic disadvantage.

From the voices of Allie, Barrie, Carrie, Doug, Evelyn, Fred, Harold, Iris, and Jenny, I found the essence of the experience of what it means to be a student with college aspirations in an environment of economic disadvantage. These individuals ascribed meaning to the negative attributes of their economic disadvantage and the multiple hardships they faced due to financial deficiencies, a lack of social capital, and limits to access. Their experiences are also meaningful through the resiliency that the participants showed to these obstacles as well as all of the factors of motivation that they received through the people, places, and events that assisted them in overcoming their hardships and realizing education as an escape from poverty. These brave, first generation college students blazed a trail for future generations of their families. They possessed the resiliency and motivation to improve their financial status where others could not.

As an educator, I now seek to find methods in which I can assist pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade students like my participants. My efforts need to concern assisting students of economic disadvantage and advocating on their behalf with respect to their felt injustices. My advocacy work needs to be implemented at the individual, school/community, and public levels to create better forms of equity, access, participation, and harmony for these students. I see so much promise in the students of economic disadvantage where I serve. I also have become much more aware of the social constructs and hardships that limit their perceived levels of success. If my colleagues and I can find methods with which to foster internal motivation, assist in resiliency, and remove societal barriers, then we can begin to alleviate the issue of low college entrance rates among this group. The participants voiced that they found education to be an

escape from financial hardship; as educational personnel, we must make greater efforts to help more students of economic disadvantage attain this dream.

The participants of this study are some of the most courageous and motivated individuals that I have ever encountered. Their dreams of college attainment and success in achievement carry the banner of hope for other individuals of economic disadvantage. These individuals are not responsible for their circumstances; yet, instead of succumbing to the effects of poverty, they rose above the hardships and achieved heights that past generations of their families did not attain. If educational personnel and advocates for students of poverty possessed the same drive and motivation as the participants of this study, then the goal of equity in college enrollment among all social classes would not be daunting. I am indebted to Allie, Barry, Carrie, Doug, Evelyn, Fred, Harold, Iris, and Jenny, and I am honored to have given voice to their experiences. I am forever changed by their stories, and I hope to stand with them one day as co-advocates for students of economic disadvantage in our communities.

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APPENDIX A

BRIEF SCREENING QUESTIONS: DEFINING ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE AND

RURAL EDUCATION

Screening Questions: Defining Economic Disadvantage and Rural Education

Christopher M. Bruton

Prospective participants need to answer the following:

1. Are you currently, or have you ever enrolled in and attended a postsecondary educational institution for at least one full semester?

2. From Pre-K to twelfth grade, did you receive free or reduced-price lunch for at least four consecutive or non-consecutive years?

3. Please list the counties and states in which you attended school from Pre-K through 12th grade. In order to be included in the study, you must have attended school for at least four consecutive or non-consecutive years in a rural district. The researcher will cross-reference your school location with a rural school database to see if each institution meets the criteria.

County   State

1. _____   _____

2. _____   _____

3. _____   _____

4. _____   _____

5. _____   _____

6. _____   _____

7. _____   _____

APPENDIX B

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. Please tell me about yourself and your academic journey.

2. Please describe the community in which you grew up.

3. You were identified as economically disadvantaged as determined by educational legislation at some point during your pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade experience. What does the term *economic disadvantage* mean to you?

4. Would you explain the relationship between economic disadvantage and the school institution, as you experienced it?

5. At some point, academics became important to you. What led to this desire?

6. What motivated you to apply and enroll to a postsecondary educational institution?

7. What, if anything, diminished your motivation for academic success and college attainment?

8. Research shows that students of economic disadvantage are less likely to possess high academic achievement, graduate high school, and enter college when compared to students from a higher social class. What caused you to differ from the individuals that the research studies discussed?

9. From your experience, how can schools be better prepared to meet the unique needs of students of economic disadvantage and increase college enrollment rates for this group?

10. Is there anything else I have not asked that you would like to share or feel is important?