A QUALITATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF FORMER MAINE ADULT EDUCATION STUDENTS WHO SUCCESSFULLY EARNED A HIGH SCHOOL CREDENTIAL

By

Kayla Sikora

Bachelor of Science in Leadership and Organizational Studies from the University of Southern Maine
Master of Science in Adult and Higher Education from the University of Southern Maine
Certification of Advance Study in Adult Learning from the University of Southern Maine

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Affiliated Faculty of
The College of Graduate and Professional Studies
at the University of New England

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Education

It was presented on
08/02/2023
and reviewed by:

Andrea Disque, EdD, Lead Advisor
University of New England

Jennifer Galipeau, EdD, Secondary Advisor
University of New England
This Dissertation was reviewed and approved by:

Lead Advisor Signature: Andrea F. Disque

Lead Advisor (print name): Andrea Disque, EdD

Secondary Advisor Signature:

Secondary Advisor (print name): Jennifer A. Galipeau, EdD.

Date: August 2, 2023
A QUALITATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF FORMER MAINE ADULT EDUCATION STUDENTS WHO SUCCESSFULLY EARNED A HIGH SCHOOL CREDENTIAL

ABSTRACT

Students who unenroll from traditional high school often seek a nontraditional pathway to earn a high school credential. Maine adult education programming provides a nontraditional pathway to a high school credential for high school non-completers. This qualitative phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of former students who obtained their high school credential through a Maine adult education program. Through one-on-one semi-structured interviews, eight participants shared their lived experiences working with Maine adult education programming to obtain their high school credential. Two themes emerged in this study: The significance of self-motivation and the importance of support. The significance of self-motivation was echoed throughout all eight interviews. Motivation was described as both intrinsic and extrinsic. All eight participants also described the importance of support in influencing their ability to succeed with Maine adult education programming. All eight participants described their experiences and what they believed aided in their success in obtaining a high school credential.

Keywords: adult learning, adult education, high school credential, motivation, self-directed learning, support
DEDICATION

To my husband, Adam, my partner in life, my biggest cheerleader, the person who believed in me when I didn’t believe in myself, this is for you. I could not have accomplished much that I have done without your love and support. Thank you for loving me and believing in me always.

To my children, Madalyn and Adam Jr., you have inspired me to push myself and be a better person. Though I sometimes wanted to give up, I never did because I knew you were watching. I love you both more than you will ever know, and everything I do in life is for the two of you. Always remember, you can do anything you put your mind to, and I will always support you in anything you do.

To my parents, Debbie and Ronald, thank you for supporting, encouraging, and never giving up on me. I wouldn’t be the person I am today without your love and guidance.

To all my former and future students, you may not fit society’s cookie-cutter model, but you matter, and your education matters.

In memory of my grandparents, Arthur and Virginia, thank you for always making me feel special. I hope that I have made you proud.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Completing this dissertation helped me believe in myself and my scholarly abilities. This process was both challenging and rewarding. There were times I wanted to quit, but then I remembered who was watching.

Dr. Disque provided me with support, guidance, and encouragement, even when I wanted to give up. I will forever be grateful for her guidance. She pushed me and helped me develop my work into something I could be proud of.

Dr. Galipeau was with me from the start, encouraging, listening, and supporting me. I will never forget her saying, “I am with you on this until you are done.” Dr. Galipeau, your support means more to me than you will ever know. I am so thankful for you.

To my participants, John, Warren, Amy, Trent, Jim, Alice, Rose, and Zeb, I couldn’t have completed this without you. Your voices helped guide my research and kept me pushing forward. It is an honor to share your experiences with the world. Thank you for working with me and believing in the importance of my study.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Key Terms</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions and Design</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual and Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale and Significance</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual and Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors Contributing to High School Incompletion</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty and Low Socioeconomic Status</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial or Minority Group</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Academic Success and Absenteeism</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Self-Esteem and Mindset</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COVID-19 Pandemic</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult Basic Education</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic Education Needs</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workforce Development</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Completion Programming</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Maine adult education programs have served students since the mid-1960s, making it possible for high school non-completers to earn a high school credential in the state (History of Maine adult education, n.d.). Maine adult education is listed as multiple pathways for obtaining a high school credential, but little is known about former students' experience obtaining a high school credential with a Maine adult education program (Instruction for individual students, 1983/2009). Student success can be defined as academic achievement (York et al., 2015) and plays a significant role in measuring the performance of an educational institution through student academic achievement (Alyahyan & Düştegör, 2020). Reflected within the data reported on EST 2020 Annual HiSET: 2019 annual Statistical report on the HiSET exam (n.d.), Maine adult education recently experienced an increase in test takers among young adults ages 18 to 23, who sought alternative education pathways to complete their high school credential. The HiSET is a series of tests that measure knowledge and competence in five subject areas, including reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social studies, resulting in a high school equivalency diploma (Klieger et al., 2022). Maine schools must provide learning opportunities, creating what is referred to as a multiple pathway for students to receive a high school diploma (Instruction, 1983/2009).

Maine adult education programming is the most accessible option for obtaining a high school credential once a student withdraws from high school, as there are 70 locally embedded adult education programs across Maine (Adult education | Department of Education, n.d.). Adult education programming was established to provide adults with lifelong learning opportunities and for nontraditional learners with a pathway to obtaining a high school credential (Federal Adult Education a Legislative History 1964-2013, n.d.). The Adult Education Act of 1966
supported the continuation of federal funding for adult education programming, specifically adult basic education (ABE) for adult learners (Mack, 1967). In the 1970s, the Adult Education Act was amended, allowing for funding for high school completion programming (Rose, 1991).

To enter Maine adult education to pursue either the HiSET or a high school diploma, students are required by law to withdraw from high school to obtain their high school credential (Eligibility, 1981/2005). Though adult education is listed as a multiple pathway to earning a high school credential, students may not transfer directly into Maine adult education based on the current laws requiring them to unenroll from high school first (Eligibility, 1981/2005). Little is known about student success in obtaining a high school credential in a nontraditional manner, such as Maine adult education, creating a gap in the literature. By understanding students’ lived experiences working with Maine adult education, the researcher will identify what may have contributed to former student success in obtaining a high school credential through this nontraditional pathway.

This qualitative phenomenological study will explore the lived experiences of young adults who successfully earned their high school credential with Maine adult education. Individuals participating in this study will share their experiences working with Maine adult education through semi-structured interviews. The interviews sought to identify the lived experiences of former students who successfully obtained a high school credential, instructional methods used to complete their high school credential, and characteristics the former students perceived they exhibited when completing their high school credential.
Definition of Key Terms

The terms used in this study address the research and the overarching topic of Maine adult education programming and students achieving a high school credential through Maine adult education programming. Words, phrases, and acronyms used throughout this study directly relate to adult education programming and are essential to the study. The following terms will be used throughout the study presented:

**Adult basic education:** Adult basic education provides basic education programming for adults with low literacy and numeracy skills or English as a second language classes (Larrotta, 2017).

**Adult education programming:** Adult education programming provides learners with a pathway to participate in lifelong learning and provides nontraditional students with a path in which to complete their high school equivalency diploma (“Federal Adult Education: A Legislative History 1964-2013,” n.d.)

**Alternative pathway:** Alternative pathways are educational pathways that differ from the traditional high school setting; alternative education pathways provide high school students the opportunity to obtain a high school equivalency diploma who otherwise wouldn’t have (Zukowski et al., 2021).

**Andragogy:** Andragogy is the theory of adult learning. Andragogy distinguishes the difference between adult learners’ needs for education and how they differ from that of a child (Machynska & Boiko, 2020).

**High school credential:** A high school credential includes two options to obtaining what is known as a high school credential in Maine: a high school diploma or earning a high school equivalency diploma (High school completion/HiSET™, n.d.).
High School Equivalency Diploma (HSE): An HSE is a recognized and accepted high school diploma in the U.S. The high school equivalency diploma is an alternative diploma for nontraditional learners, refugees, and high school dropouts alike (Zukowski et al., 2021).

High School Equivalency Test (HiSET): The HiSET is a nationally recognized exam that results in a state-issued High School Equivalency Diploma (Expanding Opportunities. Changing Lives. That’s HiSET®, n.d.).

Multiple pathway: Multiple pathways are multiple options for education; as defined in the Maine State statute, “students may demonstrate achievement of the standards through multiple pathways, including those identified in section 4703” (High School Diploma Standards, 1981/2021). Of those identified in section 4703 is adult education.

Student success: Student success, for the purpose of this study, is defined as academic achievement in obtaining a high school credential. Student success can be defined as academic achievement (York et al., 2015).

Statement of the Problem

It is unknown why students who do not complete high school find academic success in obtaining a high school credential with Maine adult education. There is a gap in the literature about high school non-completers who seek alternative educational pathways and what they perceive to be reasons for succeeding academically with Maine adult education, thus earning a high school credential. According to data reported on the Maine Department of Education website, graduation data reports indicate an increase in student dropouts and a decrease in graduation rates; Maine state high school graduation average in the school year 2018/2019 before the COVID-19 pandemic was 85.66% (Student outcome data | Department of Education, 2020).
In Maine, in order to obtain a high school credential after unenrolling from high school, students must enter into an adult education program to complete either the HiSET or a high school diploma (Eligibility, 1981/2005). Maine adult education programming was developed to help low-level learners, high school dropouts, and disadvantaged adults access education in their community (Federal Adult Education: A Legislative History 1964-2013, n.d.). The Maine Department of Education lists the implementation of multiple pathways and opportunities for students to obtain a high school diploma (Instruction for individual students, 1983/2009). Maine adult education is the most accessible option for high school non-completers to obtain a high school credential through either successful completion of the HiSET or a high school diploma program.

This study sought to identify why students who were not successful in a traditional high school setting found success in obtaining their high school credential with a Maine adult education program. Students who withdraw from high school need alternative pathways to obtain their high school credential (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009); Maine adult education programming helps to fill this void by offering local programming across the state (Adult education | Department of Education, n.d.). By gaining an understanding of what former students believed aided their success in obtaining a high school credential through nontraditional pathways, Maine adult education programs can better develop programming that aligns with best instructional practices. Gaining knowledge in this area may also help adult education teachers better support student learning, as student support is seen to have the highest impact on student success (Pettyjohn & LaFrance, 2014).

By exploring the lived experiences of students who have obtained their high school credential through Maine adult education, the data provided an understanding of how former
students perceived their experience with Maine adult education. This study allowed former students to reflect on instructional methods used in the completion of their high school credential and the characteristics they exhibited when working in the program. To better understand why students may find success in Maine adult education, the researcher explored former students lived experiences with adult education programming.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of former students who obtained their high school credential through an adult education in Maine. The researcher explored students’ lived experiences working with Maine adult education and how they successfully obtained their high school credential. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data related to what former students experienced when working with Maine adult education programming, instructional methods used, and characteristics former students exhibited when completing their high school credential. The data collected gave the researcher insight into this nontraditional education model and what aspects of Maine adult education contributed to successfully earning a high school credential.

Research Questions and Design

This study used a qualitative phenomenological research approach to explore the lived experiences of former students who successfully obtained their high school credential through Maine adult education. The qualitative phenomenological research approach allowed the researcher to learn about the former student’s perspective and experience obtaining their high school credential through this nontraditional pathway. The following questions guided this inquiry:
Research Question 1: What are the lived experiences of former students who earned a high school credential through an adult education program in Maine?

Research Question 2: How do former students who earned a high school credential through Maine adult education describe the instructional methods used in completion of their high school credential?

Research Question 3: How do former students who earned a high school credential through Maine adult education describe the characteristics they exhibited when completing their high school credential?

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework used to guide this qualitative phenomenological study included the researcher’s interests and goals surrounding Maine adult education. The motivation for asking the questions that guide the research is an understanding of nontraditional pathways for high school completion, such as adult education programming, including students’ experiences (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). The conceptual framework is an explanation of how the researcher will explore the problem presented (Liehr & Smith, 1999). The conceptual framework used to guide this study includes the researcher’s personal experience as a Maine adult education director with 10 years of experience in the field, as well as topical research in the literature review. Using the conceptual framework helps to ensure organization and connections to adult education and the lived experiences of former students who have successfully obtained a high school credential with a Maine adult education program, including instructional methods and characteristics of adult learners.

The literature reviewed supports adult learners’ success and achievement through student-centered learning, individualized learning plans, and goal-oriented education.
Instructional methods may play a role in student success in obtaining their high school credential. Adults are goal-oriented learners (Lieb & Goodlad, 1991). Student-centered learning builds on the student’s strengths (Peyton et al., 2010). An individualized learning plan helps students to understand what they need to learn and why while also fostering student-teacher relationships (King et al., 2018). The topics discovered in the literature review informed this study by identifying common teaching methods used in the adult education setting.

The theoretical framework also played a role in the development of this study. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) stated that theories give purpose and explanation to the phenomenon. In this phenomenological study, andragogy is used to explore the lived experiences and success of high school non-completers who obtained their high school credential through Maine adult education. Andragogy is a theory used in adult education to deliver instruction and guide teaching methods (Machynska & Boiko, 2020). Andragogy emphasizes adult students’ needs for education and how those needs differ from a child (Machynska & Boiko, 2020). Wozniak (2020) notes that andragogy is teaching designed for adults. Research related to andragogy led to Knowles’ (1980) model of assumptions, which outlines the characteristics of adult learners and indicates that adults learn differently than children. Little research has been conducted on adult learning theory compared to other learning theories (Knowles et al., 2020). The characteristics of adult learners are essential to understanding why high school non-completers may find success with Maine adult education.

**Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope**

Assumptions can be made when choosing the methodology and research design (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). This is often true when selecting a qualitative design; this study, a qualitative phenomenological study, used semi-structured interviews to collect data to explore
the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews of former Maine adult education students who obtained their high school credential. Assumptions are viewed as what a researcher believed to be true relative to the study (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). One assumption was that all participants would be open and honest regarding their experiences obtaining their high school credential, including their successes and struggles.

Limitations are present in all studies, and the researcher must identify the limitations or weaknesses of the study by stating them both honestly and openly (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). Examples of limitations include small sample size, lack of participation, and other factors related to data collection and data analysis (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Limitations can be valuable to other researchers who may conduct a similar study, so the researcher must be clear with the reader about the limitations (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Data collected was limited to the experiences shared by participants and not necessarily representative of every individual who has accessed Maine adult education. Relying on human subjects to report accurately also limits the accuracy of reporting (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). The former students participating in the study were offered the opportunity to review the transcript of their semi-structured interviews to ensure accuracy and transparency in reporting the collected data.

The scope of this research is based on population and sample. The population selected for this study were former students ages 18 through 23 who participated and completed their high school credential with a Maine adult education program within the past five years. This population was selected from a smaller sample that was limited to a single adult education program in a single school district in central Maine. The study focused on the lived experiences
of former students who completed the program by successfully earning their high school credential.

**Rationale and Significance**

This study is groundbreaking for Maine adult education, as there were not any studies identified in the review of the literature that specifically researched Maine adult education programming and students’ experience working with Maine adult education to obtain their high school credential. The study contributes to the body of research surrounding andragogy. Knowles (1980) was the first to identify that adults learn differently than children. The rationale for conducting this qualitative phenomenological study was to better understand what contributes to former students’ success in earning their high school credential with Maine adult education. High school non-completers face many barriers when it comes to education, and Maine adult education is a viable pathway option for non-completers. High school completion programming makes it possible for non-completers to seek and attain a high school credential who might otherwise would not (Zukowski et al., 2021). It was important to understand former students’ experiences to identify characteristics of successful learners and to provide best practices in instruction for adult learners.

This study is essential not only to the former students who successfully completed programming with Maine adult education and participated in this study but also to those who wish to enter programming. Both former and future students may benefit from this study by reflecting on instructional methods used in adult education programs and the characteristics exhibited by the adult learner. Andragogy identifies adults as self-directed learners (Loeng, 2020). Part of being a self-directed learner is understanding how one learns (Morris, 2018). By understanding the characteristics of the adult learner and how adults learn, former and potential
students may be able to better understand their own learning characteristics, what motivates them, and what intentional methods work best for them as a learner.

The characteristics of being an adult learner play a hand in student motivation (Rothes et al., 2016). Understanding student motivation is a key component for teachers when engaging with students (Filgona et al., 2020). Those working in Maine adult education programs could benefit from this study by better understanding instructional practices that may work best for adult learners in nontraditional educational settings. Being able to understand and identify the adult learning theory and apply it to instructional practice may help educators integrate theories into content areas to improve learning (Mukhalalati & Taylor, 2019). It is also important for adult education teachers to understand the characteristics of adult learners and what motivates them to learn (Morris, 2018).

Summary

Students may enter Maine adult education programming to obtain a high school credential after withdrawing from high school (Eligibility, 1981/2005), but it is not clear why some students are successful in this type of nontraditional pathway. Maine adult education offers two options for obtaining a high school credential: The high school diploma option and the HISET (High school completion/HiSET™, n.d.). Studies have shown that adults learn differently than children (Knowles, 1980) and that the characteristics of the adult learner and instructional methods used when teaching adults could impact academic success.

This qualitative phenomenological study included the analysis of data collected through semi-structured interviews with former Maine adult education students. The research questions helped to illuminate the perspective of former students about what contributed to their success. The conceptual and theoretical frameworks outlined were used to guide the study, providing
organization for the research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The researcher’s interests and goals surrounding Maine adult education and the theory of andragogy also guided the research in exploring the lived experiences of former students who successfully earned a high school credential.

The following chapters provide the necessary details of the overall study. Chapter 2 presents the literature that was reviewed related to the study. The literature review offers in-depth knowledge of adult education and examines emerging themes related to student success. Chapter 3 focuses on methodology, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter 4 discusses the outcome of the research study, providing the reader with detailed results and findings. Chapter 5 presents the overall conclusion of the study.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review provides an overview of relevant research related to the study presented (Efron & Ravid, 2018). Recent research on adult education and adult basic education was reviewed and organized into themes to provide a clear vision of relevant circumstances, student needs, outcomes, and student success and achievements with high school completion programming. This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences and success factors of high school non-completers who sought out and obtained their high school credential through Maine adult education. It is not known why students who unenroll from high school find success in completing their high school credential with Maine adult education. Though little research has been conducted specifically for adult education programming in Maine, the researcher found relevant studies related to adult learning theory and characteristics of adult learners (Knowles, 1980), the history of adult basic education, and instructional methods used when teaching adults.

Students who do not complete high school in the traditional manner are faced with different pathways to complete a high school credential. In the state of Maine, the most accessible means of obtaining a high school credential is through a Maine adult education program (Adult education | Department of Education, n.d.) The motivation for conducting this qualitative phenomenological study was to better understand what contributed to student success in earning a high school credential in this way. In general, and regarding the state of Maine, there is a gap in the literature regarding high school non-completers who seek alternative education pathways for high school completion. This literature review provides a greater understanding of adult basic education and how it relates to Maine adult education, including methods used to aid in student success in obtaining a high school credential, and the characteristics of adult learners.
The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of high school non-completers who successfully obtained their high school credential with a Maine adult education program. This literature review presents an overview of andragogy, contributing factors to high school non-completion, characteristics of adult learners, history of adult education programming, and instructional methods for teaching adults. The literature presented provides the foundation for understanding the basic framework and nontraditional approaches to adult basic education and high school completion programs.

**Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

The researcher has a personal interest in this study, having worked in the field of Maine adult education for ten years, first as a workforce educator, then as a HiSET prep and high school completion teacher, and most recently as a director in a Maine adult education program. As part of pursuing a doctoral degree and through work in the adult education field, the researcher discovered a lack of literature and research surrounding high school non-completers and how they obtain a high school credential once they have withdrawn from school.

The conceptual framework explains how researchers explore the problem presented (Liehr & Smith, 1999). The conceptual framework that helped guide this study includes the researcher’s personal interest in adult education. The conceptual framework helped to ensure organization (Liehr & Smith, 1999) and guided the researcher through the research process. The literature gathered was developed into themes that shaped the review.

Andragogy, otherwise known as the adult learning theory (Knowles, 1980), is the theoretical framework that guided this research. Malcolm Knowles developed the term andragogy in the mid-1970s; there has been little research conducted on adult learning compared to other learning theories (Knowles et al., 2020). Loeng (2017) notes that andragogy is the
concept that relates to and should be used when referring to adult education or an individual adult learner. When exploring the lived experiences of high school non-completers and how they successfully obtained a high school credential with Maine adult education programming, there was a natural connection to andragogy.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that guided this study is andragogy. Andragogy is based on the assumption that adults learn differently than children (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020), and literature supports the idea that adults are self-motivated and self-directed learners (Morris, 2018). This study explored why students who withdrew from high school successfully obtained their high school credential through an adult education program. It was not known why students who do not complete high school find success in obtaining a high school credential with Maine adult education.

Andragogy is a theory that can be used to explore the characteristics of the adult learner (Knowles et al., 2020). Knowles coined the term andragogy, but literature supports that the theory was developed earlier by Alexander Kapp (1833). Research by Loeng (2017) notes that Knowles and Kapp differed in their view of andragogy. While Knowles focused on how an adult learns, Kapp’s idea of andragogy was “education in adulthood” (p. 630). This literature review uses principles of andragogy to review and analyze research and data related to this study.

Andragogy “explores adults’ motivation and disposition to learning” (Palis & Quiros, 2014, p. 115). Research related to andragogy led to Knowles’ (1980) model of assumptions which ultimately outlines the characteristics of adult learners and indicates that adults learn differently than children. The characteristics of adult learners are an important aspect when exploring the lived experiences of high school non-completers who found success with Maine
adult education. The literature reviewed supports the theory that adult learners find greater success and achievement through student-centered learning, individualized learning plans, and goal-oriented education (Leigh et al., 2015).

Knowles’ five assumptions are an important aspect of understanding the adult learner (Cercone, 2008). Knowles (1980) assumptions are as follows:

1. As a person matures, self-concept moves from that of a dependent personality toward one of a self-directing human being; 2. An adult accumulates a growing reservoir of experiences, which is a rich resource for learning; 3. The readiness of adults to learn is closely related to the developmental tasks of their social role; 4. There is a change in time perspective as people mature—from future application of knowledge to immediacy of application. Adults are more problem-centered than subject centered in learning. (pp. 44-45).

Knowles’ (1980) model of assumptions helped to shape andragogy and helped to guide teachers and educators with concepts for best practice. Chan (2010) reviewed applications of andragogy, stating that adults should be actively involved in the learning process and that the andragogy approach is best for adult learners. Identifying and understanding the characteristics of adult learners is an important aspect of exploring the lived experiences of students who have successfully obtained a high school credential with Maine adult education.

Andragogy expanded to include a fifth and sixth assumption which can be connected to both goal-oriented learning and student-centered learning theory: “5. The most potent motivations are internal rather than external; 6. Adults need to know why they need to learn something” (Knowles, 1984, p. 12). The two additions to Knowles (1984) assumptions provide a better understanding of the adult learner, and these assumptions were applied to this study to
better understand the former students lived experiences working with Maine adult education. Finn (2011) further concludes that programs created specifically for adult learners should include six core principles:

1. Adults are self-directed;
2. Adults draw from life experiences;
3. Social roles help to determine an adult’s readiness to learn;
4. Adults are more problem-centered than subject centered;
5. Adults are internally motivated to learn;
6. Adults need to know why they need to learn what they are learning. (p. 37)

Acknowledging that children and adults learn differently infers that students who do not complete high school and enter adult basic education may benefit from an andragogical versus a pedagogical approach. Pedagogy holds that children require extrinsic motivation to help them learn, whereas andragogy states that adults are self-motivated (Murray, 2018). Adults need to know what they are learning and why they need to learn it (Finn, 2011). Adult learners can identify learning needs, including what has and hasn’t worked for them in the past as a learner (Murray, 2018).

**Factors Contributing to High School Incompletion**

Understanding and identifying why a student may withdraw from high school is a key component of this literature review. The literature demonstrates that close to 39 million adults in the United States may not have earned a high school diploma (Rutschow & Crary-Ross, 2014). Significant research has been conducted on identifying why students withdraw from high school and what factors put students at risk (Doll et al., 2013). Dropping out of high school can impact an individual’s ability to advance in the workforce or earn livable wages, ultimately hurting the economy (Dupéré et al., 2017). Students in alternative high school completion programs are
often criticized and viewed as not equivalent to traditional high school graduates (Davidson, 2017).

In more recent years, that trend has changed. In 2017, 4.7% of students ages 15 to 24 withdrew from high school (Rose & Bowen, 2021), and just two years later, in 2019, students of the same age group were reported to have a withdrawal rate of 5.1% (Fast facts: Dropout rates, 2022). The Maine state graduation average for the school year 2018-2019 was 85.66% (“Student outcome data | Department of Education,” n.d.). In 2019, Maine adult education programs provided high school equivalency diplomas to more than 900 students (HiSET: 2019 annual Statistical report on the hiset exam, n.d.). These rates have only increased since the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted learning in 2020 (Dorn et al., 2020).

Themes were revealed when reviewing the factors contributing to high school incompletion. The themes that emerged throughout the literature review were poverty and low socioeconomic status, minority groups, low academic success/low GPA, low attendance and course completion, student self-esteem and mindset, and the COVID-19 pandemic (McKee & Caldarella, 2016; Obinna & Ohanian, 2018; Onyema et al., 2020; Rasmy et al., 2017). No single factor emerged as being solely responsible for a student not completing high school, so it is necessary to explore all possible contributing factors that could lead to withdrawal. Students who unenroll from high school often experience negative results personally and socially, as well as the inability to advance in careers and overcome poverty or low socioeconomic status (Lee-St et al., 2018). One of the leading variables in a student’s likelihood to withdraw from high school is poverty and low-family income (Vázquez-Nava et al., 2019).
Poverty and Low Socioeconomic Status

Poverty and low socioeconomic status are thought to play a role in student retention in traditional high schools (McKee & Caldarella, 2016). Poverty and low socioeconomic status are recurring themes when exploring contributing factors to high school incompletion. Research by Parr and Bonitz (2015) also identified risk factors as poverty, low socioeconomic status, and students coming from low-income families, and that these students were twice as likely to drop out of high school than students residing in middle-class homes (Chang et al., 2021).

The quantitative study conducted by Dupéré et al. (2017) identified that students are at risk for not completing high school when they are exposed to stressors, and this often occurs for those living in “disadvantaged environments” (p. 109). Societal factors, including poverty and low socioeconomic status, influence a student’s likelihood of not completing high school (Itzhaki et al., 2017). Students already living in poverty who unenroll from high school are more likely to stay in poverty (Kearney & Levine, 2014). Singu et al. (2020) noted that students that reside in low-income households may have less access to high-quality educational resources. The study goes on to explain the impact of non-educated parents, parents who did not complete high school, may not be able to adequately support their child’s learning needs (Singu et al., 2020).

Family dynamics and societal factors play a role in high school non-completion, as cited in McDermott et al. (2019). Interruptions in the family, such as moving, changing schools, or becoming homeless, can also increase a student’s risk of withdrawing from high school (Strohschein et al., 2008). Research by Şahin et al. (2016) reported that family dynamics, such as a death in the family, divorce, and domestic violence, can create a barrier for students and increase a student’s likelihood of not completing high school.
Family-related issues and constraints were connected to low-income, the educational level of parents, and socioeconomic status (Şahin et al., 2016). An additional factor that contributes to a student’s likelihood of withdrawing from high school is being a low-level learner (Boeren et al., 2020). Although research cannot identify just one factor that leads a student to unenrolling from high school, multiple negative life events can lead a student to drop out (Samuel & Burger, 2020).

Students who withdraw from high school are more likely to experience unemployment at one point in their life and earn significantly less than a high school graduate (McKee & Caldarella, 2016). Further research conducted by Dupéré et al. (2017) noted that students who do not complete high school will likely face poverty in their lifetime. Education is the most significant contributing factor to increasing social and economic status (Rasmy et al., 2017).

Students who withdraw from high school quickly find out that they need, at minimum, a high school equivalency credential for career advancement and the ability to earn a livable wage (Dupéré et al., 2017). A study connected by Trinidad (2022) focused on high school non-completers living in New York; the results of his study identified that low-income students’ had a greater likelihood of not completing high school. Trinidad (2022) also identified that racial minority groups may be at greater risk of not completing high school.

**Racial or Minority Group**

Racial minority groups are traditionally at-risk groups for not completing high school (Neely & Vaquera, 2017). Neely and Vaquera (2017) also note that there is an increased risk of African American and Hispanic students being non-completers, resulting in lower-paying jobs and an increased risk of poverty. Chang et al. (2021) noted that students who are either African
American or Hispanic are two times more likely to not complete high school than White students.

There is an increasing number of Hispanic students who are at risk of withdrawing from high school, and Obinna and Ohanian (2018) identified deportation as one major risk for this group not completing high school. Archambault et al. (2017) explored the connection between high school dropouts and immigration status. Archambault et al. (2017) concluded that many immigrant populations live in low-income neighborhoods and are more likely to not complete high school. Giraldo-García et al. (2018) reported that even though, in recent years, minority groups’ graduation rates increased, Hispanics remain at the top of the list with the highest non-completion rates.

Although Hispanics have the highest high school incompletion rates among minority groups (Obinna & Ohanian, 2018), Connor and Storper (2020) note that historically, the African American population has been the most at risk for not completing high school. Taylor et al. (2019) reported that in “2013–2014, high school graduation rates for African Americans were 73% compared to 87% of their White counterparts” (p. 215). Bottiani et al. (2017) suggest that African American students experience more and harsher discipline than White students, which may result in negative experiences in high school. Inequality can increase the likelihood of the student not completing high school (Bottiani et al., 2017).

Cooper and Sánchez (2016) note that racial discrimination plays a role in academic outcomes for minority groups. Malika et al. (2021) reported that students of racial minorities and from low-income families face “distinct challenges in attending school leading to lower academic performance, low graduation rates, and an indicator of diminished long-term social and financial stability” (p. 1046). Kantamneni (2020) noted that the COVID-19 pandemic also had a
negative effect on minority groups and how they accessed education. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic may disproportionately continue to impact low-income and racially diverse communities alike (Kantamneni, 2020).

**Low Academic Success and Absenteeism**

McKee and Caldarella (2016) reported that students who are most at risk of dropping out of high school have low attendance rates, low-grade point averages, and low course completion rates. Ricard and Pelletier (2016) note that academic achievement is closely linked to a student’s likelihood of withdrawing from high school. Wilkins and Bost (2016) report academic failure and absenteeism to be two of the leading reasons why a student doesn’t complete high school.

McDermott et al. (2019) discuss the effects of student engagement in school and how it affects the student's overall academics. Limited engagement in coursework, including homework and attendance, can affect the student’s academic performance (McDermott et al., 2019). Gubbels et al. (2019) identified a connection between chronic absenteeism and high school non-completion rates. Cook et al. (2017) linked student absenteeism to students who come from disadvantaged homes.

Students who failed in a traditional high school setting often experience barriers to learning related to self-perception and self-confidence, as supported by McKee and Caldarella’s (2016) research. Self-perception and self-confidence can be linked to common risk factors contributing to students withdrawing from high school, low GPAs, and low course completion rates (McKee & Caldarella, 2016). Therefore, when examining students’-needs, a connection can be made to Knowles’s (1980) model of assumptions and andragogy, based on student readiness, self-motivation, the need to understand why they need to learn something, and the outcome of learning.
Student Self-Esteem and Mindset

Research indicates that self-esteem may affect student academics (Pullmann & Allik, 2008). As cited by Borges et al. (2011) in a study by Lawrence and Adebowale (2022), low self-esteem is said to increase a student’s likelihood of withdrawing from school. The student’s perception of themselves plays a significant role in academic success in obtaining a high school credential. If a student suffers from low self-esteem or low self-confidence in academics, they may not be successful (McKee & Caldarella, 2016). Research conducted by Afoul et al. (2020) stated that self-esteem could affect a student’s ability to function academically and can affect what motivates them to learn.

Bhatt and Bahadur (2018) reported the importance of student self-esteem and how it relates to academic achievement and success. Both intrinsic and extrinsic factors play a role in one’s self-esteem (Bhatt & Bahadur, 2018). Self-confidence is developed through the fostering of fundamental relationships, such as family and friends, that promote love (Sandberg, 2016). Sandberg (2016) notes the importance of “intersubjective recognition, which occurs in three stages, (a) self-confidence, (b) self-respect, (c) self-esteem” (p. 267). Students who lack these three developmental stages may face barriers to their education regarding self-confidence and self-esteem. Self-esteem about one’s academics is an important component for adult learners (Lipnevich & Beder, 2007). Acknowledgment of a person’s success and achievements aids in the development of self-respect and self-esteem (Sandberg, 2016).

A case study conducted by Candy (2019) found that students in prison may have fixed mindsets regarding education. Dweck (2006) noted that there are two forms of mindset - fixed and growth. A fixed mindset limits students’ achievements and academic success, whereas a growth mindset can enhance academic achievement (Glerum et al., 2019). Student mindset about
self-belief is important when exploring what motivates students to succeed (Campbell et al., 2019). A student with a fixed mindset may believe they have certain strengths and weaknesses that cannot be overcome (Candy, 2019).

Students often have different mindsets when it comes to education and academic achievement. Yan et al. (2021) stated that some students believe that they cannot change their intelligence, while others believe that intelligence increases with time. This is considered a fixed mindset versus a growth mindset. Shifting to the growth mindset helps students see their true potential; a growth mindset fosters the idea that humans are not limited to what they can accomplish (Candy, 2019). Adopting a growth mindset leads to higher academic success (Paunesku et al. 2015, as cited in Glerum et al., 2019). There are key factors to consider when working with adult learners who have not completed high school. Relating to Knowles’s (1980) four assumptions, adult learners need internal motivation to help students apply and understand a growth mindset through the learning process, which aids in student motivation (Candy, 2019).

**COVID-19 Pandemic**

Further research indicates that not only do academic scores, attendance, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity play a role in student dropout rates, COVID-19 now affects student retention in traditional education (Zukowski et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic created a bigger gap for at-risk students (Postiglione et al., 2023). Many students experienced job losses, interruption in learning, limited access to learning, and increased poverty (Onyema et al., 2020). Across the country, many students faced up to a two-year interruption in their learning (Onyema et al., 2020). Students who were already struggling academically continued to fall behind in academics. There is estimated to be up to a 9% increase in high school non-completion rates nationally due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Dorn et al., 2020).
The COVID-19 pandemic increased the poverty gap among an already disadvantaged population, specifically affecting lower-income students (Dorn et al., 2020). COVID-19 interrupted student learning and contributed to additional barriers for adult learners (James & Thériault, 2020). An additional barrier to adult learning because of the COVID-19 pandemic was access to education; Dorn et al. (2020) reported that learning loss during the pandemic varies and depends on whether or not students had access to remote schooling and support at home.

James and Thériault (2020) reported that national adult education programs were able to provide students with necessary access to technology to maintain educational support. Adult basic education programs adjusted in light of the pandemic to provide students with distance and blended learning options (Goeman et al., 2020). James and Thériault (2020) also note that adult and community education programs supported adult learners in their communities, “produced online responses to lockdown reducing isolation, improving mental health and wellbeing, whilst increasing support for people affected by job insecurity” (p. 130).

The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted learning and created learning loss for students, which increased potential dropout rates across the country (Donnelly & Patrinos, 2021). It is believed that students who experienced learning loss will experience long-term effects for generations to come (Moscoviz & Evans, 2022). A study conducted by Moscoviz and Evans (2022) reports that non-completion rates among high school-aged students have climbed. Long-term effects associated with learning loss may result in poverty, higher high school non-completion rates, and impacts the ability to earn a livable wage (Abrams et al., 2022). Students already coming from disadvantaged families may be at an increased risk (Boeren et al., 2020).

Students who experience learning loss are more likely to withdraw from high school (Dorn et al., 2020). A study by Moscoviz and Evans (2022) addressed the fact that many students
did not have access to education during the initial shutdown, stating that students may be academically behind where they should be (Moscoviz & Evans, 2022). Students who are behind in school are at a greater risk of not finishing high school (Boeren et al., 2020).

Students who decided to unenroll from high school have options for alternative programming to continue their education. Rosen et al. (2019) noted that students who withdraw from high school often return in this way. One of the multiple pathways to earning a high school credential in many states is the General Educational Development (GED) program or through a high school diploma option (Rosen et al., 2019). The HiSET is also offered as an alternative way to obtain a high school credential (Klieger et al., 2022). Historically, adult basic education programs have offered high school completion programming for students who have decided to unenroll from high school (Kruidenier, 2002).

**Adult Basic Education**

This section of the literature review provides a foundational understanding of the importance of adult basic education and the role that it plays in society. Adult basic education (ABE) historically provided education for those who would otherwise not receive it (Federal Adult Education a Legislative History 1964-2013, n.d.). Adult basic education was designed for adult learners who dropped out of high school and who may be ineligible to attend high school (Kruidenier, 2002). Adult basic education provides access to education to a population who would be otherwise excluded (Clancy, 2019). This type of programming creates relationships within the community and promotes learning and training opportunities for disadvantaged populations (Clancy, 2019).

Knowles et al. (2020) identified the beginning of adult education programming when the American Association for Adult Education was founded in the late 1920s. Later in the 1950s,
adult basic education and the importance of lifelong learning were listed on the United States Office of Education chart (Federal Adult Education a Legislative History 1964-2013, n.d.). The focus on adult basic education programming and its importance continued through the early 1960s (Elfert, 2019). Federal efforts were made to support adult basic education through funding to help improve the economy and serve adult learners (Bannon, 2016). Belzer (2013) defined adult basic education as programming that provides many different services to adult learners to improve literacy skills, English language skills, high school completion programming, and workforce training.

Adult basic education programming was first established in the early 1960s under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (Bannon, 2016). This act was first established by President John F. Kennedy to help educationally disadvantaged adults and unemployed adults to access basic education, “improving their ability to benefit from occupational training and otherwise increasing their opportunities for more productive and profitable employment and making them better able to meet their adult responsibilities” (Federal Adult Education a Legislative History 1964-2013, n.d., p. 51). The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 helped fund several programs to target those in poverty, including adult programs such as adult basic education (Ellis, 1984).

The Adult Education Act of 1966 supported the continuation of federal funding for adult education programming, specifically adult basic education (Mack, 1967). This act was an important mark for adult education because it established federal support for ABE (Rose, 1991). In the 1970s, the Adult Education Act was amended, allowing for funding for high school completion programming (Rose, 1991). Adult learners could access adult education programming for basic education, high school completion, and workforce development and training (Aker & Carpenter, 1967).
In 1998, the Workforce Innovation Act (WIA) was signed into place by President Bill Clinton (O'Shea & King, 2001). The bill was established to improve employment needs, training, adult education literacy, and vocational programming (Federal Adult Education a Legislative History 1964-2013, n.d.). The Workforce Innovation Act was developed to help create one-stop training centers (Roumell et al., 2019). Adult education is among the requirements of one-stop training centers (O'Shea & King, 2001). Bishop (2020) notes that the purpose of the one-stop delivery system “was created to better coordinate the provision of multiple federally funded employment and training programs to benefit workers, job seekers, and employers” (p. 3).

The Workforce Innovation Act (1988) shifted the approach of adult basic education to include the need for education among all adults and the training programs needed to support economic growth (Bishop, 2020). In 2014, the Workforce Innovation Act was amended, and President Barack Obama signed the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (Darabedyan, 2018). The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 implemented a mandate “to have integration between the adult education and literacy actives of Title II and the workforce development activities” (Satish & Starace, 2022, p. 4).

Historically there was a push toward workforce training programs for adult education programs under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014, but adult education programs continue to provide high school completion programming (Rutschow & Crary-Ross, 2014). Adult basic education provides learners with a pathway to participate in lifelong learning, as well as complete their high school equivalency credential, and obtain workforce training for career advancement (Kim & Belzer, 2021).

Adult basic education offers a variety of different courses, including basic literacy, numeracy, high school completion, English as a second language classes, and workforce training
(Kim & Belzer, 2021). Adult basic education programs are often community-based and easier for students to access (Goeman et al., 2020). Community-based programming provides student access to education (Pickard, 2021), and community-based education increases adult learning (Holland & Robinson, 2008).

**Basic Education Needs**

Morgan et al. (2017) reported that a large percentage of adults in the United States have a third-grade reading level or below and that adults living in poverty have low literacy skills. Desjardins (2013) reported that 27% of adult education learners in the United States are low literate. Reports by Morgan et al. (2017) validate the need for basic education. Basic education helps not only low-level learners but also the immigrant population (Larrotta, 2017). Adult basic education programming is federally funded and needed to provide basic education programming for “adult students lacking in literacy, numeracy, or English language skills” (Larrotta, 2017, p. 62).

Larrotta (2017) also notes that these basic skills are needed for life, work, and continuing education. Yan et al. (2021) note the importance of basic education, stating that basic education is important to not only human development but also the economy. Basic education, such as basic literacy and numeracy, is important to improve adult learners’ basic skills (Reder et al., 2020). Improving basic skills increases an adult learner’s employability (Midtsundstad, 2019). As noted in a study by Belzer and Kim (2018), adults who score low in literacy may have a harder time increasing their skill level enough to impact their employability or annual earnings.

**Workforce Development**

Adult basic education programming supports and prepares learners to enter the workforce (Belzer (2017). Adult basic education programming is listed under the Workforce Innovation and
Opportunity Act of 2014 Title II, and the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act as a workforce training partner (Cherewka & Prins, 2022). A goal for adult basic education programs is to get their learners to a place where they can successfully enter the workforce and earn a livable wage (Belzer, 2017). Adult basic education programming has contributed to the labor market for decades by providing workforce training opportunities for adult learners (Raghupathi & Raghupathi, 2020).

**High School Completion Programming**

Stark and Noel (2015) note that high school non-completion rates have declined in recent decades. Davidson (2017) reports that even though rates declined prior to 2020, there is still a great need for high school completion programming. Morgan et al. (2017) reported, “Individuals participating in ABE programs were more likely to obtain an HSE credential than nonparticipants” (p. 8). The High School Equivalency (HSE) diploma is a recognized high school diploma in the U.S. (Morgan et al., 2017). There are different options for high school completion nationally, including the GED or through a high school diploma option (Rosen et al., 2019). The HiSET is also offered as an alternative way to obtain a high school credential (Klieger et al., 2022). The HiSET results in a state-issued diploma, both a recognized and accepted high school diploma in the United States (Zukowski et al., 2021).

**High School Completion Programming for Adult Learners**

Another important aspect of this literature review is high school completion programming for adult learners and instructional methods for success in adult learning. Students who unenroll from high school may seek out alternative education programs for high school completion for adult learners (Rosen et al., 2019). High school completion programming offers a non-traditional approach to obtaining a high school credential (Smith & Thomson, 2014). Most
adult education programs offer evening options, flexible course schedules, as well as online programming, allowing students the opportunity to work and attend school (Nanton, 2016). Supporting students who enter high school completion programming may aid in their success, and student support is believed to have the greatest impact on student success (Peyton et al., 2010).

**Instructional Methods for Success in Adult Learning**

Adult learners bring with them various life experiences, different backgrounds, learning experiences, and learning styles (Palis & Quiros, 2014), all of which can impact their learning and motivation to learn. The adult educator is responsible for identifying student motivators and understanding why they enrolled in programming in the first place (Lieb & Goodlad, 1991). Identifying student motivation and the needs of adult learners is an important component of this study. When looking further at student support strategies in the adult basic education setting, the literature reveals three main themes emerged: Individualized learning plans, student-centered learning, and goal-oriented education.

**Individualized Learning Plans**

Knowles (1986) noted the importance of creating a student-individualized learning plan to help students understand learning outcomes and targets and to develop learning timelines. Individualized learning plans are developed with both the student and the teacher by listing goals, developing a plan to achieve them, and identifying learning outcomes (Lockspeiser & Kaul, 2016). The individual learning plan is an action plan that the student and teacher develop together (Lockspeiser & Kaul, 2016). Individualized learning plans can be connected to andragogy, directly relating to the student's need to know why they are learning something and to self-directed learning (Wozniak, 2020). The individualized learning plan not only helps a
student to better understand what they need to learn and why, but it also builds the student-teacher relationship, which helps to meet the student’s needs, fostering student and teacher engagement (King et al., 2018).

Individualized learning plans are an important component of adult learning and success (Loeng, 2020). Developing individualized learning plans helps the student and teacher focus on the student’s unique needs (Lockspeiser & Kaul, 2016). Research on the benefits of individualized learning plans found that students and learners who share individualized learning plans with instructors help promote self-directed learning (Kiger et al., 2020). This process also helps students align teacher feedback with learning goals and outcomes (Kiger et al., 2020). This method has been used in colleges and universities and has proven successful among students (Hackmann et al., 2019).

Hackmann et al. (2019) stated that individualized learning plans became a widely used strategy to help students achieve goals. Lockspeiser and Kaul (2016) reviewed the importance of individualized learning plans and how plans can be an effective tool for fostering student-centered learning. Students who create individualized learning plans with teachers are noted to progress in their educational achievements and growth (King et al., 2018).

**Student-Centered Learning**

The field of adult education has implemented the practice of student-centered learning for many years (Peyton et al., 2010). Student-centered learning aids in the success of student achievement. It is also builds the student-teacher relationship, an important component of student learning and growth (King et al., 2018). Research suggests that strengthening trust and building connections aids in fostering student success (Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, 2009). Research
supports that students who feel supported by their teachers are more likely to succeed academically (Iivari et al., 2020).

Rogers (1983) defined student-centered learning as an approach where teachers not only help students choose and decide what they learn but also help them to understand how and why they are learning it. Student-centered learning builds on the student’s strengths and experiences and focuses on learning needs and interests (Peyton et al., 2010). Student-centered learning motivates students and increases engagement (McCombs & Miller, 2007). Teachers guide students through the learning process and share control of learning with the students (Doyle, 2018).

Student-centered learning changes the roles of the educator and the learner in a way that also adapts how instruction is given and the overall learning itself (Federal Adult Education a Legislative History 1964-2013, n.d.). Student-centered learning is implemented to enhance student engagement and involvement in their learning (Brown, 2003). The practice of student-centered learning increases academic achievement (Asoodeh et al., 2012), which is important to this research study when exploring the experiences of students who found success with Maine adult education.

Research supports four areas of student-centered learning in the classroom: 1. Learning is personalized; 2. Learning is competency-based; 3. Learning happens anytime, anywhere; 4. Students take ownership of their learning (Centered on Results Assessing the Impact of Student-Centered Learning. Nellie Mae Education Foundation, 2015). The four areas of student-centered learning in the classroom directly correlate to the principles of adult learning. Reflecting on how adult education students learn (Knowles, 1988), adults learn based on but not limited to, a need
to know, their self-concept, life experiences, self-motivation, their readiness to learn, and orientation to learning (Franco, 2019).

**Goal-Oriented Education**

Goal-oriented education is the third theme related to student success in adult basic education. Lieb and Goodlad (1991) noted that adults are goal-oriented learners. Goal-oriented learning results from intrinsic motivation (Hee et al., 2019). Suprayogi et al. (2019) identified a connection between goal orientation and academic achievement. Goal-oriented education can be connected to the characteristics of the adult learner.

The characteristics of the adult learner are specific: The attitude associated with the learning process, independence, the need for clear, concise, targeted goals, the need to apply what has been learned, and the realization of their ability to learn (Boeren et al., 2020). Adult learners meet goal orientation by developing a new or mastering a skill (Dweck, 1986). Student success and achievement are connected to what motivates students to want to learn or their goal orientation (Zhou & Wang, 2019).

Goal-oriented education is a strategy that is highly successful in adult education (Tiwari et al., 2021). Research conducted on goal-oriented learning and self-regulated learning determined that students who are self-motivated and gain a sense of achievement through mastering goals will likely use critical thinking skills and learning strategies that will aid in their academic success and achievements (Shyr et al., 2017). Research on goal-oriented education shows that when students actively participate in learning, the focus can be on change and growth in the students’ goal achievements (Mensah, 2015). The student’s perception of learning plays a role in their academic achievement and goal orientation (Pulkka & Niemivirta, 2013).
Further research supports the idea that students are more successful when goal-oriented education is practiced, connecting student motivation and the instructional practices put in place by the instructor (Pulkka & Niemivirta, 2013). Goal-oriented tasks are beneficial to adult education students and aid in student academic achievement and success (Tiwari et al., 2021). Looking at the benefits and outcomes of goal-oriented tasks, research suggests that students who set dynamic goals with a focus on student fulfillment achieve greater success (Tiwari et al., 2021). When students reach goals and complete tasks, it motivates them to continue, thus helping them succeed.

**Characteristics for Success in Adult Learning**

The characteristics of adult learners have been outlined in Knowles’ (1980) model of assumptions which ultimately outlines the characteristics of adult learners (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Kellenberg et al. (2017) note that adults must be engaged in their learning, “self-determined, self-regulated, and reflective” (p. 28), to be successful. Additional research by Morris (2018) reports that self-directed learning is a vital piece to success in adult learning. Rothes et al. (2016) note that student motivation also plays a role in the success of adult learners. Literature supports both self-directed learning and student motivation as characteristics of adult learning success.

**Self-Directed Learners**

Self-directed learning provides learners with the opportunity to take the lead on their learning (Setlhodi, 2019). Brandt (2020) noted the importance of self-directed learning in today’s world in regard to adults. The relation between self-directed learning and adult learning is important to consider when exploring the lived experiences of students who have found success.
with Maine adult education. Wang and Cranton (2012) stated that the field of adult education has implemented and promoted self-directed learning more than any other field in education.

Robinson and Persky (2019) define self-directed learning as “the outcome of creating an experience that empowers learners to make decisions about the information they want to become proficient in” (p. 292). Khalid et al. (2020) note that self-directed learning is a skill that can be developed through different teaching strategies. Teachers can help adult students become self-directed learners by practicing a flipped classroom model and by creating learning contracts with students to help them set and obtain learning goals (Robinson & Persky, 2019).

A study conducted by Khiat (2017) on the academic performance and practice of self-directed learning for adults discovered self-directed learning indicators, the top indicators listed being “Goal Setting, Time Management, Procrastination Management, Assignment Preparation” (p. 56). Students who participated in a study conducted by Janakiraman et al. (2018) reported the importance of learning that resonates with real-life experiences. Student motivation determines whether a student is a self-directed learner, directly correlating to the student’s readiness to learn (Saeid & Eslaminejad, 2016).

**Flipped Classroom Model**

Mehta (2020) describes flipped classrooms as “a model of instruction in which instructors reverse, or ‘flip,’ their classes such that lectures traditionally given during class periods are watched by students outside of class” (p. 364). Traditionally, the flipped classroom model was used in higher education (Bond, 2020). This approach allows students to be introduced to course materials prior to attending class (El Miedany, 2019). As noted by El Miedany (2019), the flipped classroom model helps to create a better working relationship between students and teachers, allowing for a more student-centered learning type of environment.
Bond (2020) noted that the flipped classroom model helps to increase student engagement. This type of learning model is typically used in adult education programs for English Foreign Language students (Çakıroğlu & Öztürk, 2020). The flipped classroom model directly relates to the student-centered learning model that is widely used in the adult education setting (Davies, 2019). Li and Yang (2021) report that “The flipped classroom is a student-centered teaching approach” (p. 84) that not only provides students with the opportunity to engage during the teaching process but also helps to develop better peer interaction among students (Li & Yang, 2021). Jia et al. (2021) identify the flipped classroom approach to be beneficial for adult learners.

**Creating Learning Contracts**

Learning contracts can be an effective way to create successful learning (Noviyanti, 2021). Creating learning contracts for adult education students helps in the development of self-directed learning (Robinson & Persky, 2019). Learning contracts are a way to create student engagement while helping students take control of their learning by developing their plans (Knowles et al., 2020). Research by Robinson and Persky (2019) noted that “learning contracts can be used to keep individuals organized, normalize expectations, and increase communication between the learner and instructor (p. 295).

Knowles et al. (2020) discussed how learning contracts can be used for academic programming in adult education. Creating learning contracts is an important aspect of the goal-setting process (Morris, 2018). Learning contracts are used to help students identify and develop goals (Knowles et al., 2020). Conway (2022) noted that “a learning contract can help promote greater autonomy, as students actively participate not only in developing their own individual
learning objectives but also in establishing how their work will be evaluated” (p. 374).

Individualized goals can be built into learning contacts, aiding in goal setting (Conway, 2022).

**Goal Setting**

Research supports that it is important for the adult learner to be involved in the goal-setting process (Adams, 2000). Goal setting is linked to lifelong learning outcomes for adult education students (Hee et al., 2019). Geng et al. (2019) noted the importance of goal setting and choice and how this can positively impact students learning and outcomes.

Self-directed learning is linked to goal setting, “Self-directed students also have a stronger willingness to achieve learning goals” (Geng et al., 2019, p. 7). Knowles et al. (2020) also noted the important impact that goal setting has on student motivation and success. Teachers can encourage student learning and growth by setting short-term goals with them (El-Adl & Alkharusi, 2020).

Vanslambrouck et al. (2019) stated, “For adults, setting goals is necessary because they mostly have busy life schedules related to their jobs, families, and other responsibilities in addition to education.” (p. 193). Goal setting helps stimulate interest and create focus for the student (Adams, 2000). Pelikan et al. (2021) reported a connection between goal-setting and time-management skills.

**Time Management**

Time management can be an important aspect of adult learning and academic achievement (Khiat, 2019). Adams and Blair (2019) note that effective time management skills can have an impact on academic achievement and performance. Being an adult student means incorporating time management practices into daily routines. Adult students may find it difficult to manage school, work, and other family obligations (Lee et al., 2019). There are many
connections to self-directed learning and the importance of self-directed learning for adult learners (Khiat, 2017). Khiat (2017) identifies time management as a component of being a self-directed learner. Students who set short-time academic goals can manage their time better (Adams & Blair, 2019). Poor time-management skills and difficulty setting goals are directly related to procrastination among students (Grunschen et al., 2018).

**Procrastination Management**

Irwansyah et al. (2021) reported that time management skills and procrastination can impact a student's academic performance. Nayak (2019) describes procrastination as a psychological condition that causes delays in starting tasks or the completion of tasks that negatively impacts academic performance. Academic procrastination may be reduced if students practice self-regulation learning strategies (Setayeshi Azhari, 2019).

Gutiérrez-García et al. (2020) found that academic procrastination is common in educational settings. Planning and creating study strategies can help reduce procrastination (Gutiérrez-García et al., 2020). Limone et al. (2020) notes that there has been much research conducted on academic procrastination, concluding that procrastination can be related to personality characteristics.

Wang et al. (2021) describe procrastination as an inability to self-regulate. Anxiety and depression are characteristics directly related to students who procrastinate (Constantin et al., 2018). Research by Motie (2013) concludes that procrastination can be significantly reduced by conducting pre-tests and post-tests and following up with students on their goals. Time management skills, including study habits, preparation for tests, completing assignments on time, and participation in projects, can also help reduce procrastination among students (Motie, 2013).
**Assignment Preparation**

Preparing for a class through study habits and assignment preparation can be beneficial for adult learners (Wong, 2018). Creating habits and routines can aid in student academic success and achievement (Heacox, 2018). The flipped classroom model encourages students to come to class prepared and ready to engage in learning (Çabi, 2018). A study by Çabi (2018) reported that students who participated in assignment preparation reported that “coming to the classroom prepared and completing the assignments in the class so that they do not have to do them at home are among the positive aspects of this model” (p. 214). Self-directed learners often engage in assignment preparation through the use of a rubric or syllabus that is provided by the instructor (Caruth, 2018). Pre-class assignments prepare students for learning and empower students to be active participants in their learning (Hurtubise et al., 2015).

**Student Motivation**

Student motivation plays a role in adult learning (Mukhalalati & Taylor, 2019). Janakiraman et al. (2018) noted the connection between self-directed learning and motivation to achieve learning goals. Motivation guides the learner and their determination and effort to achieve learning goals (Filgona et al., 2020). When exploring the lived experiences of Maine adult education students who successfully obtained a high school credential, it is important to remember the impact of student motivation on academic achievement. Learners must see their learning as purposeful, which helps adults not only learn but also to make choices in their learning (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2017). Lieb and Goodlad (1991) stated that the best way to motivate adult learners is to increase their reasons for enrolling and to break down barriers that interfere with their education.
Mellard et al. (2012) identified the two most significant motivators for adult students, employment and family. As stated earlier in the literature review, socioeconomic status and poverty are the two biggest risk factors contributing to students dropping out of high school (McDermott et al., 2019). Hogan (2018) also noted that high school non-completers motivation for returning to obtain their high school credential is related to income and employment. By understanding what motivates students and identifying their instructional needs, adult education programs may be able to implement instructional methods that aid in student success.

**Employment as a Motivational Factor**

Students who withdraw from high school are at a higher risk for unemployment (Miller et al., 2023). Kim (2021) reported that people who do not complete high school often work low-wage jobs. Campbell and Clayton (2022) state that “high school graduates earn on average $10,000 more each year than high school dropouts” (p. 15). A study conducted by Liu (2021) explored why students were motivated to enter GED programs to obtain a high school credential. By earning a high school credential, students can seek employment opportunities (Liu, 2021).

Education plays a significant role in reducing poverty and increasing employment opportunities (Cage, 2019). Klieger et al. (2022) link quality of life to the completion of the HiSET to obtain a high school credential. Further research by Klieger et al. (2022) concludes that “the most commonly cited reasons for taking the HiSET battery were educational in nature, followed by personal reasons, then employment reasons, and finally governmental/legal reasons” (p. 11). Being a high school non-completer not only affects employment opportunities but can also have a negative impact on families for generations to come (McDermott et al., 2019).
Family as a Motivational Factor

Adelstein and Peters (2019) report that “21% of working parents do not have a high school diploma or GED” (p. 12). Adult education students often have to balance a lot of different roles in their life, like being a parent, a worker, and a student attending school (Khiat, 2017). Parents and community play a role in whether a student withdraws from high school (Fatimah et al., 2021). Children whose parents did not graduate from high school are at a greater risk of not graduating from high school themselves (McDermott et al., 2019). Adults can better provide for their children once they have earned a high school diploma, increasing support for their families (Chaney et al., 2020). As reported by Reynolds and Johnson (2014), family support and encouragement can be a motivator for returning to school.

Summary

This literature review provides an overview of relevant research related to the study presented. The most recent research in adult education and adult basic education programming was reviewed and organized into themes helping to provide a clear vision of relevant topics in relation to student needs, outcomes, and student success and achievements with high school completion programming. This chapter supported the need to study the lived experiences of former Maine adult education students who successfully earned a high school credential. The literature reviewed supports the idea that traditional high school education does not meet the needs of every student, and students who withdraw from high school need alternative pathways to obtain their high school credential (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

The literature reviewed outlines the factors contributing to high school non-completion; themes that emerged throughout the literature review were poverty and low socioeconomic status, minority groups, low academic success/low GPA, low attendance and course completion,
student self-esteem and mindset, and the COVID-19 pandemic (McKee & Caldarella, 2016; Obinna & Ohanian, 2018; Onyema et al., 2020; Rasmy et al., 2017). The literature also identified factors and student characteristics leading to academic success. Instructional methods such as individualized learning plans, student-centered learning, and goal-oriented education were methods identified in relation to successful high school completion programming.

Creating individualized learning plans helps students focus on the area of their needs and builds a trusting student and teacher relationship (King et al., 2018). Individualized learning plans make student-centered learning more obtainable (Lockspeiser & Kaul, 2016). Goal-oriented education may play a role in why students who are not successful in high school find success in adult basic education programming; goal-oriented education is a highly successful strategy in adult education programming (Tiwari et al., 2021). Setting and achieving goals also motivates the student, connecting back to andragogy (Knowles, 1980) and Knowles's (1986) model of assumptions.

Characteristics for success in adult learning were identified as self-directed learning and student motivation. Morris (2018) identifies self-directed learning as a vital piece to success in adult learning, and Rothes et al. (2016) note that student motivation also plays a role in success for adult learners. There is a gap in the literature regarding high school non-completers who seek alternative educational pathways for high school completion, and no research is available relating specifically to Maine adult education. The lack of research and literature supports the need for further research on adult basic education. It is not known why students who drop out of high school find success in completing their high school credential with Maine adult education.

This qualitative phenomenological study allowed the researcher to better understand the lived experiences of high school non-completers who found success obtaining a high school
credential with Maine adult education programming. The researcher built upon research already conducted regarding adult education and addressed gaps around research on Maine adult education. The study provided greater insight into why students may succeed in obtaining their high school credential with Maine adult education.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The National Center for Education Statistics reported that high school incompletion rates are rising (Fast facts: Dropout rates, 2022). It was reported in 2017 that 4.7% of students ages 15 to 24 did not complete high school (Rose & Bowen, 2021), and in 2019 students of the same age group were reported to have a non-completion rate of 5.1% (Fast facts: Dropout rates, 2022). Upon reviewing the Maine state graduation rate for the 2020-2021 school year, 72 high schools in Maine had a graduation rate of less than 90%, with the state average graduation rate being 85.17% (Student outcome data | Department of Education, 2020). The state graduation average in the school year 2018-2019 before the COVID-19 pandemic was 85.66% (Student outcome data | Department of Education, 2020).

Students who do not earn a high school diploma are at higher risk for poverty, unemployment, and the ability to earn a livable wage (Dupéré et al., 2017). Maine adult education programming offers an alternative pathway for students who withdraw from high school to obtain their high school credential (Instruction for individual students, 1983/2009). Students who may have otherwise not gained a high school credential can do so through adult education programming (Clancy, 2019).

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of former students who obtained their high school credential through Maine adult education. To achieve this purpose, the researcher explored former students' lived experiences working with Maine adult education and what they believed contributed to the success of obtaining their high school credential. The qualitative phenomenological approach allows the researcher to learn about the former student's perspective and experience. The following questions guided the inquiry:
Research Question 1: What are the lived experiences of former students who earned a high school credential through Maine adult education?

Research Question 2: How do former students who earned a high school credential through Maine adult education describe the instructional methods used in completion of their high school credential?

Research Question 3: How do former students who earned a high school credential through Maine adult education describe the characteristics they exhibited when completing their high school credential?

In Maine, the most accessible option for obtaining a high school credential after withdrawing from high school is Maine adult education programming. There are 70 local programs across the state (Adult education | Department of Education, n.d.). The study was conducted in Central Maine to understand contributing factors to student academic success. One adult education program in Central Maine was identified as the site location based on the researcher's ability to access the site's former students. This qualitative phenomenological study used semi-structured interviews to explore the lived experiences of former students who unenrolled from high school and successfully obtained their high school credentials with Maine adult education. The semi-structured interviews addressed former students' perspectives on why this education model may have helped them obtain a high school credential and what aspects of Maine adult education may have influenced their completion.

The qualitative phenomenological approach allows the researcher to explore lived experiences to help guide research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The conceptual framework used to help guide this study includes the researcher's personal interest in Maine adult education. The conceptual framework helped to ensure organization (Liehr & Smith, 1999) and helped the
researcher make connections to adult basic education and how it relates to Maine adult education, as well as methods used to aid in students obtaining their high school credential and the characteristics of adult learners. The theoretical framework that guided this study is andragogy. Andragogy is a theory used in adult education to deliver instruction through suggested teaching methods (Machynska & Boiko, 2020). This qualitative phenomenological study relied on the voices of former students who found academic success with Maine adult education, demonstrated through obtaining a high school credential. Students’ voices guided this study through semi-structured interviews that drew on lived experiences.

**Site Information and Demographics**

All participants in this study were former Maine adult education students, 18 to 23 years old, who successfully obtained their high school credential in the Central Maine region within the past 3 to 5 years. Maine adult education programming is the most accessible option for obtaining a high school credential in Maine once withdrawing from high school, as there are 70 local adult education programs across Maine (Adult education | Department of Education, n.d.). According to Education Testing Service (ETS) 2020 Annual Statistical Report on the HiSET Exam, the Maine adult education programs tested 1,087 students, with 505 completing the HiSET, demonstrating a 46.5% completion rate for adult education students in Maine (High school completion/HiSET™, n.d.). The numbers indicated that Maine adult education programming is helping close the gap between the reported Maine state high school dropout rates and Maine state HiSET completion rates.

Maine adult education programming is part of the public education system, providing learning opportunities for both education and career pathways (Adult education | Department of Education, n.d.). Adult education is defined in statute as “an education program primarily

Maine adult education programs follow the College and Career Readiness Standards for Adult Learners for curriculum alignment along with student goals (Adult education | Department of Education, n.d.). The College and Career Readiness Standards (CCR) for Adult Education were aligned with the Common Core State Standards to develop programming for adult learners (Pimentel, 2013). The purpose of the College and Career Readiness Standards is to help prepare students for college, career training programs, work, and citizenship for multilingual learners (Pimentel, 2013).

Maine adult education programs are controlled locally, and not all public school districts in the state offer adult education programming as it is not a requirement of the state (School approval requirements, 1983/2021). The size of Maine adult education programs varies by region and local contributions to programming. It is important to note that “from state to state, requirements for entry into the field for adult basic education instructors vary widely” (Belzer, 2005, p. 33). The Central Maine site selected for this study employs four full-time teachers, two part-time teachers, two administrative assistants, a program coordinator, an advisor, and an adult education director. Participants in this study were former Maine adult education students who successfully obtained their high school credential in the Central Maine region within the past 3 to 5 years.
Participants and Sampling Method

Participants for this study consisted of former Maine adult education students who successfully obtained a high school credential in the past 3 to 5 years, earning a high school credential in the years 2018-2023. The students selected for the study were currently ages 18 to 23 and completed their high school credential with Maine adult education after unenrolling from high school. The sampling method used for this qualitative phenomenological study was purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling was the chosen method because of the sections of specific participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Purposeful sampling is used to learn about and gain an understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

This study sought eight former Maine adult education students to participate in semi-structured interviews. Creswell (2013) noted that the common sample size for a phenomenological student could range from 5 to 25 participants. The justification for this size is that the smaller size is typical in a qualitative research study due to the in-depth exploration of lived experience (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Upon receiving permission from the superintendent of the school district in Central Maine and the University of New England (UNE) Institutional Review Board, recruitment emails (Appendix A) were sent to former Maine adult education students through the researcher’s UNE email. This recruitment email included the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C) as an attachment, requesting volunteers to participate in this qualitative phenomenological study. To incentivize the former Maine adult education students to participate in the study, the researcher entered each participant who completed an interview into a raffle to win a $100 gift card. The researcher used an online raffle generator called Wheel of Names to select the raffle winner randomly. The winner was notified and mailed the $100 gift card.
The researcher accessed former student email addresses through a database called MaineSTARS, which the researcher has access to as an adult education director. All students entering Maine adult education programming sign a Family Education Right and Privacy Act (FERPA) Model Notice for Directory Information Form (APPENDIX E). Students can either permit their directory information to be released without their written permission or decline permission for it to be released without their written consent. Only students who gave permission to release their information were contacted to participate in this study. The Family Education Right and Privacy Act (FERPA) Model Notice for Directory Information form is included in Appendix E of this document.

Participants were limited to the Central Maine area and the school district where the researcher received permission to conduct this study. A recruitment email, including the Participant Information Sheet, was sent to former Maine adult education students ages 18 to 23 years old who graduated from a Maine adult education program in the past 3 to 5 years, earning their credential in 2018-2023. Participants were asked to self-identify as meeting the criteria and to reach out to the researcher at her UNE email. A master list was used to collect participants’ contact information, and all names and emails collected during the recruitment phase were recorded and linked to the participant’s assigned pseudonym. All interviews were scheduled via email, and a Zoom link was sent to participants, including the date and time of the scheduled interview.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the data collection instrument to be used for this phenomenological study to provide student insights and personal experiences related to their experience with Maine adult education. One-on-one interviews with each participant were
conducted over Zoom and were expected to last approximately one hour. The eight one-on-one interviews varied in length from 30-60 minutes. The interview protocol used in this study is available under Appendix B. Interview questions were developed using both conceptual and theoretical frameworks. The conceptual framework includes the researcher’s personal interest in Maine adult education, the topical research conducted in the review of the literature, and andragogy, the theoretical framework. The data collection process is a key component of any research study. Clear and precise questions are needed so the researcher and the interviewee understand what is being asked (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019).

All interviews were audio recorded using Zoom and transcribed using Zoom’s auto-transcription feature. Interviews were conducted in a private setting to ensure privacy for the participant. Participants had the option to have their cameras on or off during the Zoom interview session. The researcher reviewed the transcripts by listening to the recording and checking against the transcript. Upon the researcher’s review and verification of all transcripts, participants were sent their transcripts for review to ensure accuracy. Participants had five calendar days to review and verify the transcripts. One participant of the eight interviewed replied to the researcher verifying their transcript. For the seven participants that the researcher did not hear back from after five calendar days, the transcripts were assumed accurate.

Pseudonyms were used for all participants, and any personally identifying information was removed from the interview transcript. Once the transcripts were reviewed for accuracy by the participant, the master list of personal information was destroyed, and the recording was destroyed. All data collected was stored on a password-protected computer, only accessible to the researcher to ensure privacy for the participant. All other study data will be retained on record for three years after the completion of the project and then destroyed.
Data Analysis

After participants reviewed their transcripts for accuracy, the researcher coded the data and separated it into themes and subcategories to reflect the research findings. Analyzing the data to form answers to the research question was conducted through the coding process. Examining the data using the coding process allowed themes to emerge, describing what the research discovered (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Coding the collected data is a way to reflect and gain an understanding of the data collected through interviews, drawing on themes that emerged (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

By reviewing the collected data and breaking the data into themes and subcategories, the researcher allowed the participant’s voices to guide the study. The process that the researcher used was Creswell’s (2013) steps for analyzing data. The steps outlined by Creswell (2013) were reviewed and used for the coding process. The researcher reviewed and organized the data, looked for meaningful phrases that related to the experiences being shared, identified codes, broke the codes into themes, and then reported the findings of the data collected (Creswell, 2013).

To accurately represent and report findings, the researcher created a comparison table that used a thematic analysis approach, interrelating themes to interconnect emerging themes (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). This approach allowed the researcher to use the data from the participant interviews to uncover recurring themes to answer the research questions. Using the thematic analysis approach allowed the researcher to connect themes and display a sequence of events (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The researcher first examined the transcripts to understand the lived experiences. While reviewing the transcripts, the researcher looked for and identified any meaningful themes related to the participants’ experiences, resulting in the
grouping of themes (Creswell, 2013). This analysis helped the researcher better understand what led students to academic success and obtaining their high school credential with Maine adult education.

**Limitations, Delimitations, and Ethical Issues**

As a researcher, it is important to be open and upfront with the limitations of the study, showing awareness of the limitations and how they affect the study (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). Choosing the Central Maine region provided only a fraction of the Maine adult education population. A larger sample size may be needed to gain a greater understanding of student success with Maine adult education. The research has limitations, delimitations, and possible ethical issues. To ensure trustworthiness and transferability, the researcher must identify and report any limitations, delimitations, or possible ethical issues.

**Limitations**

Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) noted that limitations are weaknesses found in a research study. Limitations for qualitative studies are said to be “threats to transferability, credibility, confirmability, and dependability” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 13). Phenomenological studies aim to gain an understanding of lived experiences (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). A limitation of the phenomenological study is the researcher’s ability to interpret the meaning of the reported lived experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Limitations to a study are the researcher assuming that participants will be truthful, open, and honest in their responses to the interview questions (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). The researcher aims to make the participants feel comfortable to share their experiences truthfully. However, there is always a possibility that the participant is not open and honest, which could limit the research. The interviewer must take proper steps to provide questions that help to identify experiences in ways that gain a deeper
meaning (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Limitations are conditions outside of the researcher’s control that may affect the outcome of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

**Delimitations**

Delimitations refer to the boundaries of the research study (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). This study focused on former students ages 18 to 23 who obtained their high school credential with a Maine adult education program in the past 3 to 5 years. Only former students who successfully obtained their high school credential were interviewed, creating a delimitation. Delimitations are used to clarify the research being conducted, establishing boundaries for the researcher (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The researcher set the delimitation to focus on recent high school non-completers who sought help with Maine adult education to obtain a high school credential, and completed programming.

**Ethical Issues**

High ethical standards were used when conducting the research. When conducting a research study that includes interviewing individuals, it is important not to disclose any personal information or information that may harm the interviewee (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Students participating in the interviews had their identities kept confidential to protect the individual and preserve the integrity of the information being shared (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The rights of human subjects were protected throughout the entire research process, including informed consent and confidentiality (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019).

The researcher also used the Belmont Report (1979) to guide and ensure ethical standards were maintained throughout the research process. The Belmont Report indicate the three basic ethical principles (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979) are respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. The researcher
ensured that the three basic principles were met when conducting the research. The participants’ identities in the study were protected, and sharing their lived experiences was confidential. The researcher respected participant privacy by following the first basic ethical principle, respect for persons, as outlined in the Belmont Report (1979). All participants in the study were treated ethically by ensuring that two general rules were followed, “1. Do not harm, and 2. Maximize possible benefits and minimize possible harms” (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979, p. 5).

Lastly, the researcher ensured justice for all participants. This means that each former student who participated in the study was held to the same standards as outlined in the Belmont Report: “1. Each person an equal share; 2. To each person according to individual need; 3. To each person according to individual effort; 4. To each person according to societal contribution, and 5. To each person according to merit” (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979, p. 5). By following the Belmont Report, the researcher ensured that the study was held to high ethical standards when working with human subjects.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is a necessary component of any research study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). To ensure the research is trustworthy, the researcher must accurately report any data collected to ensure reliability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher reported the data as accurately as possible to ensure that the research is trustworthy.
Credibility

Qualitative research aims to establish credibility and is a crucial part of the research design (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Credibility is the overall legitimacy of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) note that the basis of credibility addresses “the researcher’s ability to take into account and explain all the complexities that present themselves in a study and to address the patterns, themes, and issues that might not be easily or simply understood” (p. 202).

The researcher used the data analysis steps outlined by Creswell (2013) to ensure patterns, themes, and issues emerge, and the researcher reported the findings in a manner in which they can be applied and understood. This qualitative phenomenological study took a deeper look at students’ lived experiences and addressed contributing factors to academic success working with Maine adult education. By reflecting on personal experiences, each former student that participated in the study provided the researcher with unique experiences. The researcher used interview protocols to ensure the interviews were standardized. Each participant underwent the same interview process and were asked the same questions. All participant interviews were audio-recorded using Zoom and transcribed using Zoom’s auto-transcription feature. Auto-transcriptions were reviewed by both the researcher and the participant to ensure accuracy.

Transferability

This study was reliant on students sharing their experiences with Maine adult education. The sample was made up of students who withdrew from high school and found academic success with Maine adult education, obtaining their high school credential. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described transferability and discussed how findings in one research topic can be applied
to another research topic. Findings were not expected to be generalized and applicable to all other settings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019); the researcher sought to identify lessons that may be helpful to educators and directors working in the field of Maine adult education.

**Dependability**

Dependability is defined by Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) as the “stability and consistency of data over time” (p. 204). The researcher is responsible for ensuring that the research process is documented, using adequate processes and procedures for collecting data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). In addition to the data-collecting methods, the researcher verified the transcripts with the participants to ensure the accuracy of the data collected. Dependability is important to any research, ensuring that research is conducted accurately and appropriately (Ravitch & Carl, 2019).

**Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to the researcher’s ability to deliver their findings truthfully and deliver the data collected (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). To ensure clear and concise data, the researcher used coding to reflect data collected through interviews, drawing on emerging themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher kept detailed records and notes to ensure unconscious bias did not affect the interpretation of the interview responses. Thoughtful review and reflection of the interview responses helped the researcher to eliminate potential bias. Using recurring themes such as student support and motivation aided in identifying trends in the interviews conducted.

**Summary**

It is not known why students who do not complete high school find success in obtaining a high school credential with Maine adult education. The purpose of this qualitative
phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of former students who obtained their high school credential through Maine adult education. The methodology was chosen to gain a greater understanding of former students. Eight former Maine adult education students between the ages of 18 to 23 participated in semi-structured interviews that were conducted via Zoom. All interviews were recorded in Zoom and transcribed using Zoom’s auto-transcription feature. The data was analyzed and organized using Creswell’s (2013) steps for analyzing data.

This chapter provided the methods used to conduct the research study and the site information, demographics, participants, and sample methods. The chapter presented the instruments used to collect the data, data analysis and limitations, credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and ethical issues concerning the study. Chapter 4 reviews the results of the study, including the analysis method and the presentation of results and findings.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of former students who obtained their high school credential through Maine adult education. Maine adult education is listed as a multiple pathway for obtaining a high school credential in Maine. Maine adult education programming is the most accessible option for obtaining a high school credential once a student withdraws from high school, as there are 70 locally embedded adult education programs across Maine (Adult education | Department of Education, n.d.). Students are required by law to withdraw from high school before entering a Maine adult education program to pursue a high school credential (Eligibility, 1981/2005). Little is known about student success in obtaining a high school credential in a nontraditional manner, creating a gap in the literature. By exploring students' lived experiences working with Maine adult education, the researcher sought to understand what may have contributed to former student success through this nontraditional pathway.

The researcher explored former students' lived experiences working with Maine adult education and what they believed contributed to their success in obtaining their high school credential. Recruitment emails were sent by the researcher, including the Participant Information Sheet, to former Maine adult education students who had successfully earned a high school credential within the past 3 to 5 years, aged 18 to 23 years. Former students were asked to self-identify as meeting the eligibility requirements for the study. Recruitment was open for two weeks, but all eight participants were identified within ten days. Eligibility for this study required that the former Maine adult education student had successfully obtained a high school credential in the past 3 to 5 years (2018-2023) and were age 18 to 23. Eight participants were interviewed using an interview protocol (Appendix B). Participant identity was kept confidential
using pseudonyms for any identifying information. The following questions were used to guide the inquiry:

**Research Question 1:** What are the lived experiences of former students who earned a high school credential through Maine adult education?

**Research Question 2:** How do former students who earned a high school credential through Maine adult education describe the instructional methods used in completion of their high school credential?

**Research Question 3:** How do former students who earned a high school credential through Maine adult education describe the characteristics they exhibited when completing their high school credential?

After each interview was completed and transcribed using the auto transcription feature in Zoom, the transcripts were sent to each participant for verification, allowing five calendar days to review and verify the interviews. The researcher deidentified the transcripts before sending them to the participants for review. After verification from the participants, the deidentified transcripts were coded. Coding the collected data is a way to reflect and gain an understating of the data collected through interviews, drawing on themes that emerge when reviewing the collected data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The presentation of themes and supporting documentation from the semi-structured interviews to explore the lived experiences of former Maine adult education students will be reviewed in this chapter.

Chapter 4 reviews the summary of the study, outlining the purpose, research questions, and methodology used to collect data. The chapter will also review the eight participants' backgrounds and experience working with a Maine adult education program to earn their high
school credential. The themes identified through the coding process will be reviewed and discussed, depicting the student's experiences with Maine adult education.

**Analysis Method**

The researcher sought permission from the superintendent of schools in the Central Maine region where this phenomenological study was conducted. Upon receiving permission from the superintendent and the University of New England (UNE) Institutional Review Board (Appendix D), recruitment emails (Appendix A) were sent to former Maine adult education students through the researcher’s UNE email. Participants in this study were former Maine adult education students who successfully obtained their high school credential in the Central Maine region within the past 3 to 5 years and were age 18 to 23 years old. Former Maine adult education students were accessed through a database called MaineSTARS, which the researcher received permission to use for recruitment, and had access to as an adult education director in Maine.

All students entering Maine adult education programming sign a Family Education Right and Privacy Act (FERPA) Model Notice for Directory Information Form (Appendix E). Only students that permitted the release of their information were contacted to participate in this study. Twenty-four former Maine adult education students were sent the recruitment email. Eight former students replied stating they wished to participate in the study. The former students communicated with the researcher via email, scheduling an agreed-upon date and time. The researcher then sent Zoom links to the participants individually using email. All eight participants were identified within a week and a half of the recruitment email.

The Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C) was emailed to each participant, along with the recruitment email, and reviewed with the former Maine adult education student via
Zoom before starting the interview process. Each interview was conducted via Zoom and utilized the recording and transcribing feature. The researcher adhered to the interview protocol (Appendix B) for each semi-structured interview. Participants granted permission to be recorded during the interview and gave consent prior to the start of the interview. Recordings of the completed interviews and transcripts were stored on the researcher's password-protected computer to ensure privacy for the participant. Although the researcher aimed to conduct one-hour interviews, the interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes. Seven of the eight participants opted to have their web cameras on during the interview process.

All interviews were audio recorded using Zoom and transcribed using Zoom’s auto-transcription feature. The researcher reviewed the transcripts by listening to the recording and checking against the transcript. There were minimal errors identified in each transcript. The researcher had to correct the spelling of Maine adult education on all the transcripts, as Maine was generated as “main” in almost every occurrence. Upon completion of the review and verification of all transcripts, the participants were sent their transcripts for review to ensure accuracy. All participants were allowed five calendar days to review the transcripts for accuracy. The transcripts were assumed accurate if the researcher did not hear back from the participant after five calendar days. One of the eight participants replied to the researcher verifying their transcripts. The other participants did not respond to the email asking them to review and verify the interview transcripts.

The researcher began the coding process once the eight transcripts were assumed accurate. Although the participants chose not to adopt pseudonyms, the researcher created pseudonyms for each participant, and any identifying information was removed to ensure privacy. The researcher read each transcript carefully, creating codes that accurately represented
the participant's replies to the questions. The researcher used descriptive comments to connect the participant's experiences, identifying how each participant felt about their experience based on keywords used throughout the interviews (Smith et al., 2021). During the coding process, the researcher looked for commonalities participants shared about their experiences. The process that the researcher used was Creswell’s (2013) steps for analyzing data. Throughout the coding process, the researcher continuously reviewed and organized the data by looking for meaningful phrases that related to the experiences being shared, identified codes, and separating the codes into themes, and then reported the findings of the data collected (Creswell, 2013).

After the coding process, the researcher reviewed all codes to find commonalities to develop themes. Examining the data using coding allowed themes to emerge, describing the research uncovered (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The two themes that emerged were the significance of self-motivation and the importance of support. All the participants described self-motivation as a key component to their academic success in obtaining a high school credential. Examples of self-motivation were embedded in participants' experience with goal setting and extrinsic motivators, such as postsecondary education and employment. The importance of support emerged throughout all the interviews. Participants discussed opportunities for self-directed learning, guidance, encouragement from teachers and staff, and family support.

**Presentation of Results and Findings**

Phenomenological studies aim to gain an understanding of lived experiences (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of former students who obtained their high school credential through Maine adult education. The qualitative phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to learn about eight former students' perspectives and experiences obtaining their high school credential.
through Maine adult education. The eight participants are introduced in this section, including the necessary background information. After introducing the participants, the researcher will review the themes, findings, and, ultimately, the phenomenon of successfully earning a high school credential through a Maine adult education program. The researcher reviewed the findings, experiences, and similarities of the participant's answers to the interview questions.

**Introducing the Participants**

The first section of the interview questions provided the researcher with background information about the participant, including when they unenrolled from high school, what age the participant was when they entered Maine adult education programming, and why they decided to seek a high school credential. Below is an introduction to each of the eight participants providing background information. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participant's identity and ensure confidentiality.

**John**

John unenrolled from high school at age 16 during his junior year. At age 17, John enrolled in Maine adult education programming to begin work on his HiSET. John decided to seek a high school credential to better his future, allowing him to gain better employment and enroll in college. When asked, “What made you decide to seek a high school credential?” John said, “to be able to work in most jobs or go to college, which I'm going to now.”

**Warren**

Warren unenrolled from high school at 16 as a junior and immediately enrolled in Maine adult education programming. Warren explained that he chose to unenroll from high school due to the COVID-19 learning interruption, falling behind in credits, and his girlfriend becoming
pregnant. Warren sought his high school credential with Maine adult education because he wanted a better future for himself and his family. He wanted to be able to earn more money.

Amy

Amy unenrolled from high school as a freshman at age 15. She enrolled in Maine adult education programming when she was 17 years old. Amy decided to seek a high school credential to enhance employment opportunities and pursue higher education. Amy said, “I knew that I wanted to work with animals and that I would need a high school diploma. I knew that, eventually, I wanted to continue my education in some platform.”

Trent

Trent unenrolled from high school as a senior at age 17. Trent explained that he unenrolled due to moving around and that different states had different graduation requirements. When Trent was a senior, he moved from Maine to a southern state and then back to Maine. The moves resulted in him not being able to meet the graduation requirements in Maine. Trent entered the Maine adult education program at age 21. Trent sought a high school credential for career advancement and to enroll in nursing school.

Jim

Jim unenrolled from high school at 15 as a freshman. Jim discussed how his learning was interrupted by COVID-19, leaving him feeling isolated and magnifying his disinterest in school. He entered Maine adult education at age 17, just before his 18th birthday. Jim stated that he sought a high school credential to better himself and his future. Jim said that it was hard to find a job without a high school credential, stating, “I was finding it hard to land successful interviews. I wasn't really hearing back from a lot of places, even though I was constantly applying, really
trying to get a job.” Career advancement and the opportunity to attend community college for free also motivated him to earn a high school credential.

Alice

Alice unenrolled from high school as a senior at age 17. She enrolled in Maine adult education immediately after unenrolling from high school. Alice stated that she sought a high school credential with Maine adult education to better her future and enhance job opportunities. Alice said, “I know how difficult life can be without a diploma, and I didn't really want to see myself go down a path of, like, not being able to find a stable job.”

Rose

Rose was a junior and age 18 when she unenrolled from high school. She entered Maine adult education programming at age 18 upon her withdrawal from high school. Rose sought a high school credential for a better future, life, and job opportunities. When Rose explained why she sought out Maine adult education programming, she said, “I wanted to have a better life, have a better future, and have opportunities like everybody else does.”

Zeb

Zeb unenrolled from high school as a junior at age 17. He entered Maine adult education at the age of 18. Zeb stated that he sought a high school credential to take advantage of the free community college opportunity for anyone who graduated between 2020 and 2023. Zeb said, “So my mom was telling me that if I graduated within 2023, I'd get two free years of college. So, it motivated me to step it up, get my HiSET and get my two free years.”
Interview Question Responses

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews using the interview protocol (Appendix B). One-on-one interviews with each participant were conducted over Zoom to provide student insights and personal experiences related to their experience with Maine adult education and why they were able to earn a high school credential with Maine adult education successfully. The eight participants gave the researcher insight into their lived experiences through the semi-structured interviews. Participants reflected on their personal experiences with Maine adult education by answering the interview questions and conversing with the principal investigator.

Transitioning to Maine Adult Education

At the beginning of the semi-structured interviews, participants were asked to reflect on why they chose Maine adult education as their pathway to a high school credential and what it was like to transition from the traditional high school setting to a Maine adult education program. Two of the eight participants discussed learning interruption due to COVID-19. All eight participants described transitioning from the traditional high school setting to adult education as easy and seamless. They all expressed how the staff made them feel welcome, staff were helpful and straightforward, and the transition was a positive experience. Motivations for entering a Maine adult education program to obtain a high school credential were employment, career, and educational opportunities.

Warren and Jim both shared that COVID-19 impacted their education in the traditional high school setting. Warren explained how COVID-19 interrupted his learning and that he was also behind on credits before the interruption of the pandemic. The interruption in learning further added to his credit deficiency. Jim discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted
his learning and how this interruption only magnified his lack of interest in school. Jim stated, “I just found it very hard with the pandemic. I found it very isolating.” Jim also discussed how he was already disengaged with school prior to the pandemic, stating, “I was just disinterested in school. I didn't have that one-on-one interaction I need.”

All the participants described their transition from traditional high school to Maine adult education as “easy.” John said that the staff was welcoming and inviting and that the staff took the time to talk with him and made him feel comfortable. Warren described transitioning from traditional high school to a Maine adult education program as “welcoming, easy, and flexible.” Flexibility was important to Warren because he wanted to be able to work and provide for his family. Having spent very little time in the traditional high school setting, Amy described the transition into the Maine adult education program as a very easy transition. Trent said that transitioning to Maine adult education was “probably one of the easiest transitions I've ever made. There was no judgment at all.”

Jim described the transition from traditional high school as an easy transition, stating, “I found the transition quite easy.” Alice said she made a “smooth transition” from the traditional high school setting to a Maine adult education program. Alice said she no longer felt the traditional high school setting fit her needs as a learner, and she expressed her need for a “different pathway.” Rose said that entering Maine adult education programming was an “easy adjustment.” Zeb, like the other participants, said the transition was easy for him, stating that the transition was made easy by the adult education staff. “They're very helpful. They're actually there for you,” Zeb said.
Learning Environment

Participants were asked to describe the learning environment when attending Maine adult education programming. Positive characteristics of the learning environment were described as positive teacher and staff interactions, the location of the Maine adult education program, flexible course schedules, and small classroom sizes. They were also asked about their interaction with the teachers and staff. All eight of the participants had positive descriptions of both the learning environment and staff interactions. John said, “The focus is on you. It’s all very one-on-one learning with the teachers.” Warren, Alice, Trent, and Jim all described the learning environment as welcoming. Warren said, “The learning environment, it was very, I mean, very, very, open, and welcoming. Right from the start.” Trent said teachers made “in-person classes so personable.” and that “the classes were really fun.” Jim said, “Oh, it was just very welcoming. Everyone was awesome.”

Alice described the learning environment as “pretty laid back.” She went on to say, “You're not forced to sit at a desk and, like, read all day. Teachers and, like, administrators and staff, are pretty laid back about that stuff.” Alice also described the teachers as knowledgeable and responsive. Rose said that she worked directly with teachers in a one-on-one setting. She said the environment made it easier for her to learn and understand. Rose said, “The teachers were patient with me.” Zeb discussed how he was nervous at first about entering a new learning environment. He said, “Obviously, you know, it was a new environment for me. So, I was a little rattled when I first got there, but after a day, I felt welcomed, and it felt like a great environment to learn in.”

The location also had an impact on the learning environment and access to education; participants discussed being able to access Maine adult education based on location and
proximity to their homes. Participants discussed that they had chosen this Central Maine adult education site because it was closest to their home or was in their school district. This is important to note because Maine adult education programming has 70 locally embedded programs across the state (Adult education | Department of Education, n.d.).

Interactions with teachers and staff were positive amongst all the participants. Students described working both independently and one-on-one with adult education teachers. Six out of the eight participants described themselves as self-directed learners. Part of being a self-directed learner is understanding how one learns (Morris, 2018). Andragogy identifies adults as self-directed learners (Loeng, 2020). The opportunity for self-directed learning was discussed when participants reflected on the characteristics needed to be a Maine adult education student. When discussing self-directed learning, participants stated that they liked the ability to have a say in their education, choose classes, work at their own pace, and have the flexibility to learn on their own time. Morris (2018) reported that self-directed learning is a vital piece to success in adult learning.

Alice said being a self-directed learner means, “You’re able to take the time with what you're learning instead of having to move on really quickly to something else before understanding the first concept.” Warren said that self-directed learning played a part in his academic success, stating, “Self-directed learning was just something that worked for me personally. Being a self-directed learner helped me stay focused on my goal and not get overwhelmed by the schoolwork or the teachers or anything.” Amy also described herself as a self-directed learner, saying, “I've always been more of a self-directed learner. I like to learn what I’m interested in, and you know, direct what I want to learn about.” Trent said that being a self-directed learner helped him to manage work and school, saying, “Having say in my learning
was very helpful for me to kind of balance other aspects of my life with that.” Jim said that being a self-directed learner helped motivate him and kept him on track to achieve his goals.

**Goal setting**

The importance of goal setting came up across all interviews. All participants described goal setting as playing a role in their educational experience working with Maine adult education. Participants discussed the importance of working with the advisor and staff to set both short-term goals and long-term goals toward completing their high school credential. Goal orientation is linked to academic success and achievement, as identified in research by Suprayogi et al. (2019). Participants discussed the need to better their life and their future. Goals were linked to family and employment as motivation for learning and obtaining a high school credential. In relation to bettering themselves, participants discussed the need for a better life, including entering postsecondary education and advancements in employment to support themselves and their families.

Working with Central Maine adult education staff to set goals also had a positive impact on all participants. John said that setting goals for himself “helps me stay motivated, and I got what I needed to get done, done.” Warren said that goal setting was especially helpful when he first entered Maine adult education programming, stating, “In the beginning, it helped me progress through the program.” Amy and Alice both said that setting goals helped to keep them focused and on track in the program. Trent described goal setting as a collaborative process between him and the staff, stating:

We just kind of collaborated and talked a lot about my goals, and it made the process pretty easy. They also kind of did it in a visual way, as well, like there were printouts they gave me. We looked at pathways to success that they were hoping for me to achieve,
and that made it easy, as well. They sent me home with a copy of exactly what I needed to do.

Jim reflected on his time spent with the advisor setting and reviewing goals. Jim said, “The student advisor there was very helpful. She was helpful in going over the steps I needed to succeed.” Rose discussed how she felt overwhelmed at first when setting goals, so she and the advisor set smaller goals to help her succeed.

All participants expressed the need to better their life and their future. Whether to further their education or employment opportunities, all participants had a goal that motivated them. John, Jim, Trent, Amy, and Zeb discussed employment as a motivator for earning a high school credential. John described the importance of being able to go to college and having a career. Jim reflected on the difficulty he had trying to find a job without a high school credential. Jim said, “I was finding it hard to land successful interviews. I wasn't really hearing back from a lot of places, even though I was constantly applying, really trying to get a job.”

Trent discussed how earning a high school credential allowed him to earn a better-paying job and enter nursing school. Alice discussed that her need for a high school credential was motivated by job stability and the future. Alice said, “I know how difficult life can be without a diploma, and I didn't really want to see myself go down a path of, like, not being able to find a stable job.” Zeb described not wanting to be stuck in a job, saying, “I didn't really want to keep the same job that I'm working at right now for the rest of my life.”

Amy and Rose also discussed bettering themselves and their futures. Amy’s aspirations for a better-paying job and higher education helped motivate her to seek a high school credential with Maine adult education. Rose discussed how she felt more comfortable in the Maine adult education setting than in the traditional high school setting. Although it was a change, she
adjusted more easily than she had anticipated. She was motivated to obtain a high school credential with Maine adult education for a “better life, better future, and more opportunities.”

Post-secondary education and training opportunities were described as motivators for all participants. John, Jim, and Zeb all explained how they wanted to take advantage of the state of Maine’s free community college program for graduates who completed in the years 2020-2023. Jim said he needed to complete his high school credential so that he would be able to enter college. Jim said, “I heard about the free college, and I just thought I got to get it over with now. It's like it's now or never. It's two years of free college. I can't pass that up.” John said that being able to go to college for free after earning his high school credential motivated him. Zeb discussed how his mom helped motivate him by telling him about the free community college opportunity.

Support

All participants reflected on their lived experiences in Maine adult education, describing support among teachers, staff, and family as being a motivator for success. All participants reported teacher and staff support. Many of them reflected on their time spent in Maine adult education, recalling positive interactions with teachers, staff, and administrators working in the program. Teacher support went beyond the classroom setting. John recalled, “Teachers would talk to me as if I was a friend if we had any extra time.” John also said that the teacher would talk to him if he was feeling stressed out, saying, “Teachers would talk to me if I was stressed out. It was a very comfortable place.”

Other participants also described the teachers and staff in Maine adult education as supportive, friendly, kind, and welcoming. Warren and Amy said that staff was both encouraging and supportive. Amy said, “They just encouraged me. They helped me work towards my goal of
earning my HiSET.” Warren said, “I think I was able to because there was plenty of help and support from staff and friends and family, of course, and there was no doubt in my mind that I wouldn't be able to do it.” Jim, like the other participants, reflected on the support that he received from the entire adult education staff. Jim said, “It was overwhelmingly positive. I felt truly supported there. It was awesome.” Trent described positive interaction with staff and teachers:

Well, the way they interacted with me was definitely very positive, and that's not something I'm going to forget at all. Even if it was just, you know, one of the secretaries who was checking me in to see one of the advisors, they were always so kind and so sweet, and you know, we had even developed a little bit of a rapport after a while. They all took an interest not only in just my education, but also, you know, other aspects of my life. They just wanted to see how I was doing there and overall.

Alice described her experience earning her high school credential with Maine adult education as positive. Alice reflected on the support she received, saying:

There was always someone reaching out to me, making sure that I was still doing okay. Whether it was the actual administrators of the program or teachers, somebody was always reaching out to make sure that I was still on top of my work, and that I was still doing okay, and if I needed help. They're always there when you go in and willing to help you if you need it.

Rose and Zeb, like the other participants, reflected on the support that they received when working with the program. Rose said the teachers helped her understand her work and would “make things easier to understand.” Zeb discussed how he connected with the program coordinator and that she made a huge difference in his time spent in the program. Zeb said, “She
definitely helped me throughout my entire process of setting everything up. She was kind and motivated me, as well.”

The participants reflected on not only the support that they received from staff, but also the support they received from their family and friends. When John reflected on his experience, he discussed how his family helped motivate him, saying, “My mom and my sister were my big motivators.” Warren discussed his need to obtain his high school diploma to help with job opportunities and support his baby. Warren said that his family encouraged him to earn his high school credential. Amy explained that her cousin supported and encouraged her to earn her high school credential because she herself had earned her high school credential with Maine adult education. Trent, like John, discussed how his mom supported and encouraged him, saying:

My mom was very supportive. I think she might have actually been the person to find the Maine adult education program and tell me, you know, to seek them out. She was very helpful in checking in with me, seeing if there was anything she could do and kind of just supporting me and pushing me there, as well.

Zeb also expressed how support from his mother helped him work towards his high school credential. Zeb said, “My mom definitely helped motivate me.” Alice discussed how her parents motivated and supported her. She said she wanted to make her parents proud, saying, “I mean, I feel like everybody wants to make their parents proud, and, like, wants to make their family proud and, like, wants to feel good when their parents feel good about them, you know.”

Both Jim and Rose discussed how their siblings motivated and supported them on their journey with Maine adult education. Jim reflected on his experience, saying:

My sister walked me through the beginning part of the process and was just very helpful and every step of the way, supporting me and just being there to hear the good news. She
was actually the first person I got to tell when I got the news that I had passed and got my degree.

Rose discussed her sisters' encouragement and support of her as she pursued her high school credential. Rose said, “My sisters. Every time I would do something, doing some of my homework, they would also read along with me or just sit there and keep me company.”

**Characteristics of the Adult Learner**

Across all interviews, former students reflected on their experiences as adult learners and what they believe aided in their success in earning a high school credential. When reflecting on his experiences, John said, “You need to put effort into showing up and being open-minded about things.” Warren discussed the importance of being self-motivated and about adult learners, he said, “I think they need drive. It's really on the student to push through, and I don't know, go for what they want.” Amy reflected on the importance of goal setting and how adult learners should have a goal when they enter the program. Amy said, “I mean, I think they need to have a goal. But that's the main point. You guys have so much support that really, if you have that goal, the adult education program finds a way to help.”

Trent, Jim, and Zeb all discussed the importance of self-motivation. Trent said that motivation is an important characteristic as an adult learner. He reflected on his time working with Maine adult education:

You do need to find a way to keep yourself motivated. You can't always have your instructor or a teacher there pushing you. You know, they can't be with you. 24/7, of course, but also being goal-oriented; as I said, that's something that's going to keep you motivated, but also just being patient with yourself.
As Jim reflected on his experience, he said, “Just really all you need is the motivation to see it through.” Zeb said, “I definitely think if you're motivated enough to get your stuff done, you're more than able to complete it.”

Self-discipline is something that came up for participants when reflecting on their experiences and what characteristics an adult learner needs. Alice and Rose both reflected on their experience and expressed the importance of self-discipline. Rose said that to be a successful adult learner, you need “patience and a lot of discipline.” Alice reflected on her experiences and said that to be successful:

You need a lot of, like, self-discipline, like, you need to set goals for yourself, and you need to actually sit down and carve out the time to make those goals because it will not get done if you don't.

All participants said that they would recommend Maine adult education to anyone struggling in the traditional high school setting. They all described their experiences as positive. John and Warren both said that they would recommend Maine adult education to any student struggling in high school. Warren said, “I think schools should switch to how Maine adult education does things. Independent learning. If you need help, you get help. It was just a lot more stress-free and enjoyable.” Zeb said that he would recommend Maine adult education to others because “they're very open to your needs. It's a much more peaceful learning environment.” Zeb also went on to say that he has recommended Maine adult education programming to his friend, who recently unenrolled from high school.

Emerging Themes

The eight participants provided the researcher with over eight hours of transcripts to review, code, and analyze. The semi-structured interviews were reviewed numerous times, and
coding helped the researcher to develop themes of the former student's experiences obtaining a high school credential with Maine adult education. Coding the collected data is a way for the researcher to reflect and gain an understanding of the data collected through the interviews, drawing on themes that emerged (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher was able to identify two themes: The significance of self-motivation and the importance of support.

**The Significance of Self-Motivation**

The significance of self-motivation was a recurring theme amongst all eight participants. Motivation included both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors. All eight participants described the need to better their lives and futures, identifying motivators such as postsecondary education and employment. All participants reflected on the need for motivation to better themselves, whether through employment or postsecondary education. They were all motivated by the hope of a better future for themselves or their families. The participants also described the importance of goal-orientated education to help them stay motivated and on track.

**Goal-Oriented Learning.** All eight of the participants were able to describe goal-oriented learning and the influence it had on their educational success working with Maine adult education. Goal-oriented learning results from intrinsic motivation (Hee et al., 2019). John said that setting goals and working towards them “helped me stay motivated, and I got what I needed to be done, done.” Amy, like John, said that meeting with the advisor and setting goals helped her work toward them and earn her HiSET.

Warren also reflected on his time as a Maine adult education student, saying, “Bettering myself is what motivates me as a learner.” Warren went on to describe how goal setting helped him, saying, “The adult education program was right down to business. I meet with the advisor,
and it was, what is the plan? What are we going to do? Here's how we're going to do it.” Warren also discussed how having a plan in place helped him to stay on track and stay focused.

Trent described himself as a goal-oriented person and discussed his interactions working one-on-one with an advisor and academic coordinator saying:

I'm a pretty goal-oriented person. So just having those clear steps that I could take, you know, check things off every part of the way, seeing that kind of makes things a little bit less stressful for me. I'm definitely someone who needs a lot of guidance per step. So, them helping me to set those little goals that eventually caused the end was very helpful in my success.

Trent went on to describe how being a goal-orientated learner helped him stay motivated as an adult learner saying, “But also being goal-oriented, as I said, that's something that's going to keep you motivated, but also just being patient with yourself.” Jim also reflected on how goal-oriented education played a role in his success. Jim described his experience, saying, “I was able to set very realistic goals, and they were easy to accomplish, and they provided the correct steps.” Alice said that Maine adult education was “Pretty much all goal-based.” Alice said setting and achieving goals kept pushing her forward. She felt motivated every time she set and achieved a goal.

Rose described goal-oriented learning when she reflected on her time as a student in Maine adult education, saying that it helped her with progression through the program. “It made the progress a little quicker, but it also kept me focused,” Rose said. Zeb, like the other participants, described goal-oriented learning as an attribute to his success in earning a high school credential with Maine adult education. Zeb said, “Setting goals was a great way for me to really step it up, get done what I wanted because it was a great visual seeing what I needed and
wanted.” Zeb expanded on his experience by saying, “They told me where I was, as far as, like, my strengths, my weaknesses. They worked with my weaknesses and improved on them by setting goals with me.”

**Postsecondary Education.** All participants described continuing their education as a motivator for obtaining a high school credential. John said, “Being able to go to college was a motivator for me.” Amy said, “Definitely going to college because I want to work in the animal field, I need some degree. You need to have that higher education.” Trent said that his motivation for earning his high school credential was to better himself and his future and to enter college to become a nurse:

> Well, I had taken a couple of years to figure out what I wanted to do after earning my high school credential and what I wanted to work towards, and I had decided I wanted to enroll in college to work towards a nursing degree.

Trent also reflected on his success in becoming a nursing student, saying, “Because of where I'm at in my college career, I just know I wouldn't have been able to do it without Maine adult education.”

Jim discussed how he was recently accepted to college and said, “I am very excited to go to college and start taking college courses, and that was just the biggest motivation for earning my HiSET.” He added, “I am really excited to be able to go to college now.” Warren and Alice discussed the future and keeping their options open to be able to further their education. Alice said, “I want to earn money and keep my options open for the future.” Rose discussed plans for the future, saying, “If I wanted to go to college, I can go to college, and if I wanted to go to work, I can go to work. That required me to get a high school diploma.” Zeb said that the option to have two free years of community college helped to motivate him to earn his HiSET.
**Employment.** Future employment opportunities were described when participants reflected on their time in Maine adult education as a reason for obtaining a high school credential. All eight participants described employment as a motivator. Both Rose and Alice discussed and reflected on their motivation for earning a high school credential as employment and the future; both expressed the need for a high school credential to be able to secure employment that paid a livable wage and to better their future. Rose said that earning a high school diploma would allow her to better her employment and said, “I guess that it means I could possibly better myself.” Like Rose, Alice discussed the possibility of a better life, saying, “You want to make sure that you have a good, decent, paying job so that you can take care of yourself, and you can support yourself.”

John, Jim, and Zeb all expressed the importance of not only entering college but also future employment. John said, “I want to be able to work in most jobs or go to college,” and that he “wants a better future for himself.” Jim said that trying to find a decent-paying job without a high school credential was difficult for him. He said, “I wasn't really hearing back from many places, even though I was constantly applying.” Zeb said, “As I turned 18, I started to wonder what type of job I would be able to do without a high school diploma. So, employment was something that I took into consideration when deciding to get my HiSET”.

Warren discussed his immediate need for employment to be able to provide for his growing family. Warren said that enrolling in Maine adult education allowed him to work more hours than he would have been allowed to work if he stayed in traditional high school. Warren said:

> At the job that I was currently working, I could work more hours because it wasn't seen as a traditional high school. I could work more hours a week than I could at a normal
high school. Instead of working only 30 hours a week, I could work up to 50 hours a week if I wanted.

Both Amy and Trent were able to relate postsecondary education to employment. Amy described employment as a motivator as it related to her postsecondary education to enter the veterinary field. Trent had big goals when entering the Maine adult education program. He knew that he needed to earn a high school credential to work in the field of medicine, enter nursing school, and be employed as a nurse. Trent reflected on employment as a motivator saying, “Future employment as a nurse was my motivation. I have a pretty huge passion for nursing and medicine and all the different aspects that come into play there.”

The Importance of Support

The importance of support was the second theme that emerged among all eight former Maine adult education students. While reflecting on their experiences all eight participants described the support offered through the program by teachers and staff. Areas of support included one-on-one teacher support, feeling valued, and positive interactions. Participants also reflected on and discussed support from family, such as parents, siblings, and extended family. Success in obtaining a high school credential was connected to the support that all eight former students received.

Teacher and Staff Support. All eight participants discussed teacher support. When John reflected on his interactions with teachers, he said, “The teachers helped me. They supported me. If I was stressed out, they would make me feel comfortable.” Warren described how the teachers showed interest in him, both academically and personally, and helped him to achieve his goals. Warren reflected on his work with teachers, saying, “They helped me with my independent work. They focused on me and what I had to work on, and how to reach my goals. I don't know,
it was really nice.” Amy described the teachers in Maine adult education as “caring and nice.”

Amy, who attended classes with her service animal, described the teachers as:

All very, very nice and very, very respectful. A big thing with me is respect for the disability and the dog, and you guys were just outstanding. Yeah, and you make it very, very easy, very simple, and everything is laid out in simple steps.

Trent, Jim, and Alice all had positive interactions and support from Maine adult education teachers. Trent reflected on his experience, saying:

The teachers and advisors that I did meet with were nice. They took an interest not only in just my education, but also, you know, other aspects of my life. It became a very personal experience and relationship, and I do still stay in contact with some of my former teachers.

Jim reflected on the support that he received from the teachers, stating that they “were super helpful. They answered all my questions and got me the help I needed.” Alice discussed the support she received from the teachers while reflecting on her time with the Maine adult education program saying:

I worked directly alongside one of the teachers. I was able to be a student instructor, which was really fun. I worked with my personal finance instructor, too, and she was really helpful. All the teachers, they're really responsive. They get back to you quickly if you have questions and help you.

Rose reflected on how she struggled academically in the traditional high school setting, and she discussed her experience working with Maine adult education teachers as being different from her experience working with regular high school teachers. Rose said that the Maine adult education teachers worked directly with her, providing her with the support she
needed. Rose stated, “Oh, they made it easy for me to understand anything I was learning, and I had a lot of fun learning the material for once.”

Zeb, like Rose and the other six participants, discussed positive teacher support. Zeb reflected on smaller classroom sizes and how he received one-on-one instruction from teachers. Zeb said, “There were maybe two other students in the class, but the teachers, they go around, and they help you with what you are working on. So, it was good.” Zeb described his interactions with teachers, saying, “They're very, very friendly. They're very open people. You feel like you could talk to them about anything. You know they're always going to be there for you.”

In addition to teacher support, several of the former students discussed support from different Maine adult education staff, including the advisor, academic coordinator, and administration. John said, “They made it feel very comfortable while working with them.” Both Amy and Trent had positive interactions with the advisor of the program. Amy described working with the advisor, saying, “She was great. I loved working with her. She was very fun and made everything easy to understand.” She added, “The rest of the staff were also very, very welcoming and very nice.” Trent reflected on his experience, saying, “The advisor I worked with most closely with, and she was amazing. I went to some of her in-person classes, and she was just so personable. She made the class really fun, and she kind of like was just so nice to everyone. So, that was a very good interaction.”

Jim, like other former students, reported positive interactions and support amongst the Maine adult education staff. Jim said his interaction and experience with the Maine adult education staff was “overwhelmingly positive. They were cheering me on every step of the way. I felt truly supported there. It was awesome.” Alice also described feeling supported by the Maine adult education staff, saying, “They basically adjust to whatever you need. So, if there is
something specific you need from them, they are always there and willing to adjust to what you need so that you can be successful.”

Zeb reflected on his experience working with staff, saying that he received:

A lot of personal attention, and a lot of checking in, and just being very supportive. That's one of the best things that helps me as a learner is knowing that there's someone very close by if I need to ask questions or need a little bit more guidance. That's what kept me going through my learning program and feeling supported. Just the fact that I knew I had them there that helped me through it.

Family Support. Along with the importance of support from staff was the importance of support from family. Warren attributed his success in obtaining his high school credential to the support of the Maine adult education staff, friends, and family. Warren said, “I think I was able to earn my high school credential because there was plenty of help and support from staff and friends and family, of course.” Warren also reflected on support from his girlfriend, who was pregnant at the time he was attending Maine adult education, saying, “With a baby on the way, we knew we wanted to progress our lives.”

John, Trent, Rose, and Zeb specifically identified their mothers as supporters. John said when reflecting on how his family motivated him to earn a high school credential, “My mom and my sister were my big motivators.” Trent also attributed the support of his mother to his academic success in earning a high school credential, stating, “My mom was very supportive.” Rose credited her success to her mother and her family not letting her quit, saying, “My mother, she doesn't let me quit. Well, actually, my entire family doesn't let me quit.” When reflecting on the support that he received while enrolled in Maine adult education, Zeb highlighted the support he received from his mom, saying, “My mom especially. She definitely motivated me.” Zeb even
reflected on how his mother was the person who initially encouraged him to enroll in a Maine adult education program in the first place.

The other participants also reflected on the support they received during their time in Maine adult education, speaking of different family members who supported them along the way. Jim felt supported by his sister and even reflected on how she initially helped him to enroll in a Maine adult education program. Jim said that his sister “supported me every step of the way.” Amy said that family encouragement played a role in her ability to stay focused and earn her high school credential, specifically support from her cousin, who also is a graduate of a Maine adult education program. Alice reflected on the support that she received from her parents and remembered how she wanted to make them feel proud of her. She said, “My parents have always driven me to be good in school, and I still want to make them proud.”

Although family support didn’t seem to have as great an impact on the former students compared to teacher and staff support, all eight participants were influenced by some family support. Most of the family support was attributed to mothers and/or parents. Four out of the eight participants described the support that they received from their mother, attributing their success in earning a high school credential to the support. One student, Alice, discussed how her parents motivated her to do well in school and succeed in earning a high school credential. Other family members, such as sisters and cousins, supported other participants.

**Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of former Maine adult education students who successfully earned their high school credential. Eight former Maine adult education students participated in semi-structured interviews allowing for their voices and their experiences to be heard. The eight participants
discussed their lived experiences working with a Maine adult education program and what they believed contributed to their success in earning a high school credential.

The eight semi-structured interviews were reviewed and coded into themes. The themes that emerged were categorized to best describe and reflect the former student's experiences working with Maine adult education programming to earn their high school credential. The former student's voices helped to guide the study and to allow for the themes to emerge organically.

The significance of self-motivation was echoed throughout all eight interviews. The participants described their experiences and motivation as both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Goal-oriented learning, postsecondary education, and employment all motivated students to succeed in earning a high school credential. Along with the significance of self-motivation was the importance of support. Support was provided primarily by Maine adult education teachers and staff. However, the former students also discussed the importance of family support and its role in their success.

According to Knowles (1988), adults are self-directed learners. As reflected on and supported by the literature, student motivation plays a role in adult learning (Mukhalalati & Taylor, 2019). Research by Peyton et al. (2010) supported the idea that student support has the highest impact on student success in high school completion programs. The former students who participated in this study discussed their own lived experiences and the importance of teacher and staff support. Though the road is not always easy for students who unenroll from the traditional high school setting, students can find success through alternative pathways such as Maine adult education.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Maine adult education is listed as a multiple-pathway option for obtaining a high school credential in the state of Maine (Instruction for individual students, 1983/2009). With 70 locally embedded programs across the state, Maine adult education is the most accessible option for students who have unenrolled from high school to obtain a high school credential. Due to a gap in the literature, little is known about former students' experience in obtaining a high school credential with a Maine adult education program. Significant research has been conducted on identifying why students withdraw from high school and what factors put students at risk (Doll et al., 2013), but little research has been conducted on how students succeed in obtaining a high school credential after withdrawing from high school. It was reported that in 2017, 4.7% of students ages 15 to 24 had withdrawn from high school (Rose & Bowen, 2021).

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of former students who obtained their high school credential through Maine adult education. To achieve this purpose, the researcher explored students' lived experiences working with Maine adult education to successfully obtain their high school credential. The researcher used semi-structured interviews to gather data and answer the proposed research questions. The research questions focused on former Maine adult education students' lived experiences working with a Maine adult education program to obtain their high school credential. The researcher sought to understand what instructional methods were used and the characteristics exhibited when completing their high school credential.

To understand the lived experience of the former Maine adult education students, the following three research questions were used to guide this study:
Research Question 1: What are the lived experiences of former students who earned a high school credential through Maine adult education?

Research Question 2: How do former students who earned a high school credential through Maine adult education describe the instructional methods used in completion of their high school credential?

Research Question 3: How do former students who earned a high school credential through Maine adult education describe the characteristics they exhibited when completing their high school credential?

Eight former Maine adult education students were interviewed as part of this study. The eight semi-structured interviews were conducted and transcribed via Zoom. The researcher reviewed the interview transcripts for accuracy and sent the transcripts to participants for verification. The transcripts were then reviewed again for emerging themes. Two themes were identified when reviewing the former Maine adult education student's lived experiences while obtaining their high school credential. The themes included the significance of self-motivation and the importance of support. Former students' voices guided this study, and their experiences helped identify what aided in their success in earning a high school credential with Maine adult education.

Interpretation and Importance of Findings

The qualitative phenomenological approach allows the researcher to explore lived experiences to guide research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). According to Rutschow and Crary-Ross (2014), 39 million adults in the United States did not earn a high school diploma. Little is known about student success in obtaining a high school credential in a nontraditional manner,
such as Maine adult education, creating a gap in the literature. Knowles et al. (2020) noted that compared to other education theories, little research has been conducted on adult learning.

**Research Question 1**

Research Question 1, “What are the lived experiences of former students who earned a high school credential through Maine adult education” was developed to understand better the lived experiences of former Maine adult education students who successfully earned a high school credential working with a Maine adult education program. The former students described their lived experiences working with Maine adult education. All eight former Maine adult education students earned a high school credential within the past 3 to 5 years. All eight participants were able to provide in-depth reflections on their experiences working in a Maine adult education program.

**Experiences Were Positive**

Davidson (2017) reports that even though noncompletion rates declined prior to 2020, there is still a great need for high school completion programming. All eight participants in this study shared their need to seek a nontraditional pathway for high school completion. High school completion programming, such as Maine adult education, offers a non-traditional approach to obtaining a high school credential (Smith & Thomson, 2014). Participants described a positive experience when reflecting on their time in Maine adult education earning their high school credentials. The information collected through the semi-structured interviews paints a vivid picture of the positivity that the former students experienced in the program. All eight participants said that they would recommend Maine adult education programming to anyone who is seeking a high school credential.
Participants attributed their success in earning a high school credential to support, self-motivation, positive interactions with teachers and staff, a comfortable learning environment, and flexibility. Warren said he believes he was able to successfully earn a high school credential with Maine adult education because of help and support from staff, family, and friends. Amy described the learning environment as a caring environment, stating that the Maine adult education program was “incredibly well set up” and that all helped contribute to her success. Alice also attributed her success to the learning environment, saying, “It is an easier environment to work in.”

Interactions with teachers and staff were also regarded as positive experiences. Filgona et al. (2020) noted the importance of understanding student motivation as a key component for teachers when engaging students in learning. The former students reflected on positive connections with teachers, which ultimately contributed to their success in earning a high school credential. All eight participants described the importance of the one-on-one interactions they had with teachers and felt supported in their learning.

Rose described the teachers as patient and understanding. John described positive interactions beyond the classroom setting, discussing how teachers and staff seemed to take an interest in his life and really cared about him. John described his experiences by saying, “Teachers would talk to me as if I was a friend if we had any extra time.” Trent described classes as fun and engaging. He also reflected that teachers and staff took an interest in his life, stating, “They all took an interest not only in just my education but also, you know, other aspects of my life.” All of the participants reflected on their time spent in a Maine adult education program, recalling positive interactions with teachers, staff, and administrators.
Experiences Were Life-Changing

All eight participants reflected on the importance of earning their high school credentials and that their motivation for earning the high school credential aided in their success. Many of the former students entered postsecondary education programs, and others obtained employment. Reasons for obtaining a high school credential may have varied among the eight participants, but one theme echoed throughout all eight interviews: They all wanted to create a better future for themselves or their families. John said that he “wants a better future for himself.”

Rothes et al. (2016) noted that student motivation also plays a role in the success of adult learners. The former students were able to describe how they were motivated to earn their high school credentials through both extrinsic and intrinsic motivators. Jim and Zeb both reflected on the need to earn a high school credential to be eligible for a free community college opportunity in Maine. Zeb said, “If I graduated within 2023, I'd get two free years of college. So, it motivated me to step it up, get my HiSET and get my two free years.” Jim reflected on his experience saying, “I am very excited to go to college and start taking college courses, and that was just the biggest motivation for earning my HiSET.” Other participants reflected on how earning a high school credential allowed them to follow their dreams. Trent said, “Because of where I'm at in my college career, I just know I wouldn't have been able to do it without Maine adult education.”

Employment was another factor the participants described when reflecting on their motivation to earn a high school credential. Research by McKee and Caldarella (2016) noted that students who withdraw from high school are more likely to experience unemployment at one point in their life and earn significantly less than a high school graduate. All eight participants were able to identify employment and future opportunities as a motivation to obtain a high school credential. Jim reflected on having difficulty finding a job or even landing an interview
without a high school credential. Jim said, “I was finding it hard to land successful interviews.” And John said, “I want to be able to work in most jobs or go to college.” Mellard et al. (2012) identified the two most significant motivators for adult students, employment, and family.

Since obtaining their high school credentials, all eight participants either entered postsecondary educational programs or found sustainable employment. Research conducted by Liu (2021) stated that by earning a high school credential, students can seek employment opportunities. John, Jim, Trent, and Zeb are all enrolled in college. John, Jim, and Zeb are taking advantage of the free community college opportunity offered to those who graduated in the years 2020 to 2023. Zeb described not wanting to be stuck in a job by saying, “I didn't really want to keep the same job that I'm working at right now for the rest of my life.” Rose is exploring the possibility of entering college and continuing to work. Rose said she wants a “better life, better future, and more opportunities.” Alice, Amy, and Warren reported that they are employed and have opportunities to enroll in college and advance in the workforce because they have high school credentials.

**Research Question 2**

Research Question 2, “How do former students who earned a high school credential through Maine adult education describe the instructional methods used in completion of their high school credential” was focused on the instructional methods that helped former students obtain their high school credential. The purpose of asking this question was to gain a greater understanding of the participant's experiences in Maine adult education and what instructional methods were used by staff and teachers. Palis and Quiros (2014) note that adult learners enter programming with various life experiences, different backgrounds, learning experiences, and learning styles, all of which can have an impact on student learning and motivation to learn.
Through the semi-structured interviews, all eight participants reflected on the time spent in Maine adult education programming, and described the instructional methods used. Through description and reflection, the former students identified instructional methods as goal-oriented and student-centered learning. Tiwari et al. (2021) identified goal-oriented education as a strategy that is highly successful in adult education programming. Student-centered learning helps to build relationships between students and teachers, fostering student learning and growth (King et al., 2018). All eight participants described what instructional methods were used and how they believed they contributed to their success in earning a high school credential.

**Goal Setting**

When reflecting on their ability to earn a high school credential with Maine adult education, all eight participants described goal-oriented education and the influence that it had on their education. Goal-oriented education can be defined as task-oriented learning or mastery goal-oriented (Zhou & Wang, 2019); in other words, students are motivated by successfully mastering a task or achieving a goal. Hee et al. (2019) reported that goal-oriented learning is a result of intrinsic motivation, but can also be an extrinsic motivation through goal setting. The eight participants reflected on goal setting in considering instructional practices used in Maine adult education.

Goal setting is an instructional practice used in adult education, allowing students to have a choice in their education, and positively impacts student learning and outcomes (Geng et al., 2019). Teachers can encourage student learning and growth by setting short-term goals with students (El-Adl & Alkharusi, 2020). John discussed the influence goal setting had on his educational journey and working towards goals. He said setting goals “helped me stay motivated, and I got what I needed to be done, done.” Like John, Warren also discussed how having a plan
in place helped him to stay on track and focused. Goal setting is linked to lifelong learning outcomes for adult education students (Hee et al., 2019).

Setting goals allows students to participate in their learning activities and focus on change and growth through goal-orientated achievements (Mensah, 2015). Trent described himself as a goal-oriented learner stating, “I'm a pretty goal-oriented person. So just having those clear steps that I could take, you know, check things off every part of the way seeing that kind of makes things a little bit less stressful for me.” Like Trent, other participants reflected on how setting goals and participating in goal-oriented learning helped them be successful in Maine adult education. Jim described his experiences, saying, “I was able to set very realistic goals, and they were easy to accomplish, and they provided the correct steps.”

Knowles (1980) reported that setting and achieving goals helps to motivate students. Tiwari et al. (2021) noted that goal-oriented education is a highly successful strategy used in adult education programming. Alice said that Maine adult education is “pretty much all goal-based.” Rose also described how goal-oriented learning helped her to be successful. Research and literature support the idea that adults are goal-oriented learners, and Lieb and Goodlad (1991) support this idea. Zeb said, “Setting goals was a great way for me to really step it up, get done what I wanted because it was a great visual seeing what I needed and wanted.”

The participants reflected on their experiences and described how goal setting helped them in a positive way and supported them in achieving their educational goals. Warren said that goal setting was helpful when he first entered Maine adult education programming, stating, “In the beginning, it helped me progress through the program.” Trent also described the goal-setting process, saying that it was collaborative. Trent explained how teachers helped supported him by providing him with a copy of his written goals and plan, saying, “They sent me home with a
copy of exactly what I needed to do.” Goals were discussed and laid out for the participants. This practice helped participants set and achieve academic goals, which ultimately aided in their success in earning a high school credential.

Zeb also reflected on the positive impact that goal setting had on his experience working with Maine adult education. He said, “Setting goals was a great way for me to really step it up.” He went on to describe working with teachers, saying, “They worked with my weaknesses and improved on them by setting goals with me.” Research by Knowles et al. (2020) identified the important impact that goal setting has on student motivation and success.

**Student-Centered Learning**

Student-centered learning is an approach where teachers not only help students choose and decide what they learn, but also understand how and why they are learning it (Rogers, 1983). One-on-one teacher support was described by the participants throughout the data collected. John described the instructional methods used by the teachers, saying, “The focus is on you. It’s all very one-on-one learning with the teachers.” Warren, like John, said, “They helped me with my independent work. They focused on me and what I had to work on, and how to reach my goals.”

Iivari et al. (2020) noted that students who feel supported by their teachers are more likely to succeed academically. Student-centered learning is a method that helps to build on the student’s strengths (Peyton et al., 2010). Alice described how instruction is tailored to the student's needs. She said, “they are always there and willing to adjust to what you need so that you can be successful.” Asoodeh et al. (2012) noted that the practice of student-centered learning increases academic achievement.
Student-centered learning helps build the student/teacher relationship, an important component of student learning and growth (King et al., 2018). Centered on Results Assessing the Impact of Student-Centered Learning, Nellie Mae Education Foundation (2015) reported that there are four areas of student-centered learning in the classroom: 1. Learning is personalized; 2. Learning is competency-based; 3. Learning happens anytime, anywhere, and 4. Students take ownership of their learning. The eight participants described two of the four areas of student-centered learning in the classroom – that learning is personalized, and students take ownership of their learning. All eight participants described these two areas of student-centered learning in the classroom.

The eight participants described personalized learning when reflecting on their experiences creating goals with Maine adult education teachers and staff. Setting goals is a way for teachers to support students and develop individualized plans (Leigh et al., 2015). Participants reflected on their interactions with teachers; Zeb described personalized learning by saying, “There were maybe two other students in the class, but the teachers, they go around, and they help you with what you are working on.” Zeb added that he received “A lot of personal attention and a lot of checking in and just being very supportive.” Individualized learning plans are a widely used strategy to help students achieve goals (Hackmann et al., 2019).

The participants described how they took ownership of their learning by working closely with the staff and instructors to achieve their goals. When reflecting on her time spent with Maine adult education, Alice said, “you’re able to take the time with what you’re learning instead of having to move on really quickly to something else before understanding the first concept.” Rose also reflected on how teachers helped her to be successful, describing her experience in the classroom by saying that the teachers helped her understand her work and provided one-on-one
support. Student-centered learning is said to motivate students and increase engagement (McCombs & Miller, 2007).

**Research Question 3**

Research Question 3, “How do former students who earned a high school credential through Maine adult education describe the characteristics they exhibited when completing their high school credential” was developed to better understand the characteristics that the adult learner exhibited during their time with Maine adult education. The researcher asked participants interview questions that provided opportunities to reflect on their experiences and the characteristics they believed helped them to be successful in obtaining high school credentials.

The characteristics of being an adult learner play a role in student motivation (Rothes et al., 2016). Knowles (1980) created the model of assumptions for adult learners, outlining the characteristics of the adult learner. Knowles (1980) assumptions are as follows:

1. As a person matures, self-concept moves from that of a dependent personality toward one of a self-directing human being; 2. An adult accumulates a growing reservoir of experiences, which is a rich resource for learning; 3. The readiness of adults to learn is closely related to the developmental tasks of their social role; 4. There is a change in time perspective as people mature—from future application of knowledge to immediacy of application. Adults are more problem-centered than subject centered in learning. (pp. 44-45)

Knowles (1984) expanded his assumptions to include fifth and sixth assumptions: “5. The most potent motivations are internal rather than external, and 6. Adults need to know why they need to learn something” (Knowles, 1984, p. 12).
The eight participants identified characteristics that they believed they exhibited when they were enrolled in Maine adult education. The two recurring characteristics that they described were motivation to learn and being a self-directed learner, both of which are connected to Knowles model of assumptions. The participants described themselves as self-directed human beings, aligning with Knowles first assumption (Knowles, 1980), their readiness to learn, connecting to Knowles third assumption (Knowles, 1980), and that the largest motivators are internal rather than external, aligning with Knowles fifth assumption (Knowles, 1984).

**Self-Directed Learning**

Knowles (1980) identified that adults learn differently than children. Andragogy states that adults are self-motivated, whereas pedagogy holds that children require extrinsic motivation to help them learn (Murray, 2018). Adults need to know what they are learning and why they need to learn it (Finn, 2011). Andragogy identifies adults as self-directed learners (Loeng, 2020), and further research by Morris (2018) notes that adults are self-motivated and self-directed learners. The eight participants described how the characteristic of being a self-directed learner played a role in their success in obtaining their high school credentials. Warren said, “Being a self-directed learner helped me stay focused on my goal and not get overwhelmed by the schoolwork or the teachers or anything.” Like Warren, Jim said that being a self-directed learner helped motivate and keep him on track to achieve his goals. Self-directed learning is linked to goal setting: “Self-directed students also have a stronger willingness to achieve learning goals” (Geng et al., 2019, p. 7).

Self-directed learning provides learners with the opportunity to take the lead in their learning (Setlhodi, 2019). Amy described herself as a self-directed learner, saying, “I've always been more of a self-directed learner. I like to learn what I’m interested in, and you know, direct
what I want to learn about.” The field of adult education implements and promotes self-directed learning more than any other field in education (Wang & Cranton, 2012). Trent said that being a self-directed learner helped him as an adult learner, saying, “Having a say in my learning was very helpful for me to kind of balance other aspects of my life with that.” Part of being a self-directed learner is understanding how you learn (Morris, 2018).

Robinson and Persky (2019) define self-directed learners as “the outcome of creating an experience that empowers learners to make decisions about the information they want to become proficient in” (p. 292). The participants in this study described being supported in their learning, which helped them to become more proficient self-directed learners. Student motivation determines whether or not a student is a self-directed learner, which directly correlates to the student’s readiness to learn (Saeid & Eslaminejad, 2016).

**Internal Motivation to Learn**

Knowles (1980) model of assumptions can be connected to the participant's experiences working with Maine adult education. Knowles (1984) fifth assumption is that the most potent motivations are internal rather than external. The participants reflected on their experiences and described internal motivation as playing a role in their success in obtaining their high school credential. The significance of self-motivation was echoed throughout the eight semi-structured interviews and linked to the former student's success. Motivation guides the learner and their determination (Filgona et al., 2020) and plays a role in the success of adult learners (Rothes et al., 2016). Though not all the experiences were identical, all eight participants described the significance of self-motivation through both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. Examples of self-motivation were embedded in participants' experience with goal setting, which aligns
Knowles sixth assumption, adults need to know why they need to learn something (Knowles, 1984). Knowles (1988) identifies adults as self-directed learners. Self-discipline, self-motivation, patience, drive, and time management skills were all expressed as characteristics exhibited by the participants. The characteristics described by the participants directly connect to Knowles (1980) first assumption that as a person matures, self-concept moves from that of a dependent personality toward one of a self-directing human being. Warren said that he believes that students need to have a “drive” to be successful in Maine adult education. He said, “It's really on the student to push through.” Alice said that to be successful, “you need a lot of self-discipline,” and added, “you need to actually sit down and carve out the time to make those goals because it will not get done if you don't.”

Mukhalalati and Taylor (2019) note that student motivation plays a role in adult learning. Students need to practice not only self-discipline, as described by Alice, but also patience. Rose said that to be a successful adult learner, you need “patience and a lot of discipline.” Trent said, “You do need to find a way to keep yourself motivated. You can't always have your instructor or a teacher there pushing you.” Jim and Zeb also reflected on the importance of self-motivation. Jim said, “Just really all you need is the motivation to see it through.” And Zeb said, “I definitely think if you're motivated enough to get your stuff done, you're more than able to complete it.”

The eight participants in this study identified the importance of self-motivation and how it played a role in their success in obtaining a high school credential with Maine adult education programming. Research by Finn (2011) identifies adults as self-directed learners and are internally motivated to learn, aligning with the participant's described experiences. In addition to the described internal motivation to learn, participants also described external motivation to learn.
External Motivation to Learn

Motivation to learn varied among the eight participants, but all the participants identified extrinsic motivations such as postsecondary education and employment opportunities. Knowles (1980) third assumption is that the readiness of adults to learn is closely related to the developmental tasks of their social role. The participants explained how their social roles have changed from the time they were unenrolled from high school and entered Maine adult education. Warren has since welcomed a baby and needed to work more hours to provide for his family. John, Jim, Trent, and Zeb had goals of enrolling in college, which they have done since earning their high school credentials. Amy, Alice, and Rose discussed the need for better futures, whether through employment or postsecondary education. All participants described their external motivations to learn, how they played a role in their willingness to learn, and the characteristics they exhibited when working with Maine adult education.

Hogan (2018) also noted that motivation for high school non-completers to return to school is related to income and employment. Motivation for a better life is something that all participants described. John said that a big motivator for him was the ability to go to college; he shared, “Being able to go to college was a motivator for me.” Amy, like John, identified the future and college as a motivation for learning; she said, “Definitely going to college because I want to work in the animal field, I need some degree.” Jim discussed how he was recently accepted to college and said, “I am very excited to go to college and start taking college courses, and that was just the biggest motivation for earning my HiSET.” Trent's motivation for learning was linked to future plans to become a nurse, saying, “Future employment as a nurse was my motivation.”
Motivation for learning wasn’t limited to postsecondary education; the participants also discussed employment and the endless opportunities for the future. Alice said, “I want to earn money and keep my options open for the future.” Rose, like Alice, discussed future plans saying, “If I wanted to go to college, I can go to college, and if I wanted to go to work, I can go to work. That required me to get a high school diploma.” Warren discussed his motivation for learning, stating that he needed to be able to provide for his new baby. Motivation guides the learner's determination and effort to achieve learning goals (Filgona et al., 2020). External motivators played a role in the participant's determination to achieve their learning goals, which led to earning a high school credential.

**Implications**

By conducting this research study, the researcher contributed to the body of research in the field of adult education programming. This research is groundbreaking with regard to the field of Maine adult education, as no research has been specifically conducted in Maine on this topic to this point. The participants shared their lived experiences working with a Maine adult education program to earn their high school credential. The researcher identified a gap in the literature regarding high school non-completers who seek alternative educational pathways for high school completion, and no research in the reviewed literature was available relating specifically to Maine adult education. Allowing the participants to have a voice and share their experiences is beneficial not only to the field of Maine adult education, but also to similar adult education programming nationally. All the participants provided insight into their unique experiences, describing what they believed contributed to their academic success in earning a high school credential.
The data collected through the semi-structured interviews was connected to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. Each student who enters Maine adult education to obtain a high school credential brings with them various life experiences, different backgrounds, life experiences, learning experiences, and learning styles (Palis & Quiros, 2014), all of which play a role in the student's ability to succeed in programming. This study has given these participants a voice and the ability to help not only the field of Maine adult education but also future students who may need an alternative pathway to high school completion. Research by Lieb and Goodlad (1991) stated that the best way to motivate adult learners is to increase their reasons for enrolling and to break down barriers that interfere with their education. All eight participants described the positive impact that Maine adult education had on their lives and the importance of earning their high school credential.

Education is the most significant contributing factor to increasing social and economic status (Rasmy et al., 2017). Warren entered Maine adult education programming because he needed to provide for his family. With a baby on the way, Warren was motivated more than ever to earn a high school credential. Research by Adelstein and Peters (2019) reported that “21% of working parents do not have a high school diploma or GED” (p.12). All eight participants discussed the need for a better future, whether postsecondary education or employment. Jim described how difficult it was to look for a job without a high school diploma, saying, “I wasn't really hearing back from a lot of places, even though I was constantly applying, really trying to get a job.” Alice, like Jim, recognized the challenges she might face without a high school diploma, saying, “I know how difficult life can be without a diploma.” Students who withdraw from high school are more likely to experience unemployment at some point in their life and earn significantly less than a high school graduate (McKee & Caldarella, 2016).
Maine adult education programming plays a vital role in the public education system. Maine schools must provide learning opportunities, creating what is referred to as a multiple pathway for students to receive a high school diploma (Instruction for individual students, 1983/2009). Students who withdraw from high school need alternative pathways to obtain their high school credential (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009), and Maine adult education programming helps to fill this void by offering local programming across the state (Adult education | Department of Education, n.d.). High school completion programming makes it possible for non-completers to seek and attain a high school credential that otherwise would not have (Zukowski et al., 2021).

The importance of support was echoed throughout the interviews. Participants described their interactions with staff and teachers as positive, welcoming, and inclusive. All eight participants said that they would recommend Maine adult education programming to a student struggling in high school or someone who has unenrolled from high school. The participants were able to describe Maine adult education as a viable educational pathway. Warren said, “I think schools should switch to how Maine adult education does things. Independent learning. If you need help, you get help. It was just a lot more stress-free and enjoyable.” Zeb said that he would recommend Maine adult education to others because “They're very open to your needs. It's a much more peaceful learning environment.”

This study is significant in understanding not only the importance of Maine adult education programming but also the lifelong impact on students obtaining their high school credential and the significance that obtaining a high school credential has on students' lives and future. Adult basic education programming, such as Maine adult education, provides learners with a pathway to participate in lifelong learning, as well as complete their high school equivalency diploma, and obtain workforce development training for career advances (Kim &
Belzer, 2021). The data collected provides insight into this nontraditional education model and what aspects of Maine adult education may contribute to the successful completion of a high school credential.

**Recommendations for Action**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of former students who obtained their high school credential through Maine adult education. Participants in this study shared their lived experiences through semi-structured interviews. Data that was collected through the interview process, as well as the literature reviewed, and the themes that emerged through the coding process, led the researcher to recommendations for action.

The first recommendation comes from feedback that the participants provided; Maine adult education should be viewed as a viable educational pathway for high school completion. This option should be presented earlier by the high school guidance counselor to at-risk students or students who may benefit from different instructional models that Maine adult education offer. High school equivalency students are often criticized and viewed as not equivalent to traditional high school graduates (Davidson, 2017). Although Maine adult education is listed as a multiple-pathway option, it is often not discussed with students until they fall behind in high school or prepare for unenrollment. Warren reflected on his decision to unenroll from high school, saying:

> I was very far behind on credits and probably wasn't going to graduate on time. So that was already a factor. And then, learning that my girlfriend was pregnant kind of just added to that where it just came to a decision that I couldn't continue public school, and I should find alternative learning.
High school completion programming, such as Maine adult education, offers a non-traditional approach to obtaining a high school credential (Smith & Thomson, 2014). The students who participated in this study identified their need for a nontraditional pathway. None of the participants said that Maine adult education was discussed with them by the high school guidance department as an option for a high school credential until they had already made the decision to unenroll or they had fallen behind to the point where they wouldn’t be able to graduate on time.

Jim unenrolled from high school without a plan in place to obtain his high school credential. He reflected on how his sister helped him enroll in Maine adult education, saying, “My sister walked me through the beginning part of the process and was just very helpful, and every step of the way supporting me and just being there to hear the good news.” It may be possible to help students transition from the traditional high school setting to a Maine adult education program by identifying students who need a nontraditional approach to learning.

The second recommendation is that high schools review the Maine adult education model and implement more student-centered learning practices. It is important to understand that the traditional high school model does not work for every student. All but one of the participants said that they unenrolled from high school before the age of 18. By adopting similar instructional methods as Maine adult education programs, it may be possible to retain students who are in danger of unenrolling. Warren said, “I think schools should switch to how Maine adult education does things. Independent learning.” Incorporating student-centered learning into the traditional high school setting could be beneficial for students in danger of unenrolling.

Student-centered learning is said to help build on the student’s strengths (Peyton et al., 2010) and is also said to help build the student-teacher relationship, an important component of
student learning and growth (King et al., 2018). One-on-one instructional practices were described as playing a role in participant success in obtaining a high school credential with Maine adult education. Jim described his longing for one-on-one interaction with teachers and staff in the traditional education setting; he reflected on his experience in high school, saying, “I was just disinterested in school. I didn't have that one-on-one interaction I need.” Zeb reflected on his experiences with Maine adult education, saying, “They told me where I was, as far as, like, my strengths, my weaknesses. They worked with my weaknesses and improved on them by setting goals with me.”

The third recommendation is to strengthen the goal-setting practices with high school students. As previously stated, all but one of the participants in this study was unenrolled from high school before the age of 18. The ages that the participants unenrolled are as follows: John was 16, Warren was 16, Amy was 14-15, Trent was 17, Jim was 15, Alice was 17, Rose was 18, and Zeb was 17. Goal setting is also something that should be practiced in the traditional high school setting and could have an impact on student retention (Reparaz et al., 2020).

Goal setting had a large impact on the young adults who participated in the study and completed their high school credential with Maine adult education. Goal orientation is linked to academic success and achievement (Suprayogi et al., 2019). Alice said that Maine adult education is “pretty much all goal-based.” Rose said that having goals set helped her to stay focused and on track. Jim described his experience, saying, “I was able to set very realistic goals, and they were easy to accomplish.” The research conducted provides data supporting the benefits of setting goals and goal-orientated education. If this practice could be incorporated into the traditional high school setting, it may be possible to retain students.
Recommendations for Further Study

The research acknowledges that there are potential limitations associated with this research study. Limitations can be valuable to other researchers who may conduct a similar study, so the researcher must be clear with the reader about the limitations (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). From the findings of this qualitative phenomenological study, the researcher has identified three recommendations for further study. The first recommendation is to recreate the study but interview students who were unsuccessful in earning their high school credential with Maine adult education programming. This study focused on only the former students who successfully earned their high school credential. Students who did not earn their high school credential with Maine adult education likely have different experiences to report. It would be interesting to understand what didn’t work for them and compare their experiences with the experiences of those who successfully earned a high school credential with Maine adult education programming.

The second recommendation would be to interview parents or guardians of former Maine adult education students. The parents or guardians of former Maine adult education students may have insight into why traditional high school did not work for their child and why Maine adult education was the better option for completing a high school credential. The participants shared their experiences transitioning from the traditional high school setting to the Maine adult education program and what they believe aided in their success in obtaining a high school credential. Still, it would be interesting to hear the perceptions of those close to the participants during their time as a student in the Maine adult education program. A study such as this could focus on how the parents and guardians supported the students while working with Maine adult
education. The study could also explore how the parents or guardians believed their support was beneficial in helping the student to succeed in earning a high school credential.

The third recommendation would be to recreate this study using two site locations, one in a rural area and one in an urban area in Maine, comparing the differences in student needs between the two demographics. The researcher could explore the instructional practices used at the two Maine adult education programs, reviewing what practices were similar and which were different. Understanding how Maine adult education programs function in more rural communities versus larger cities would be interesting. Focusing on students' needs and how they may vary depending on which part of the state they live in, including what barriers students face in rural versus urban settings, would be valuable. Lieb and Goodlad (1991) stated that the best way to motivate adult learners is to increase their reasons for enrolling and to break down barriers that interfere with their education. This study could identify how students residing in different parts of the state face different barriers and could help Maine adult education programs break down barriers that students may face depending on their demographics.

Conclusion

This study focused on the lived experiences of former students who obtained their high school credential through Maine adult education. Students who withdraw from high school need alternative pathways to obtain their high school credential (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009); Maine adult education programming provides these students with a pathway to a high school credential. It was reported that in 2017, 4.7% of students ages 15 to 24 had withdrawn from high school (Rose & Bowen, 2021), and in 2019, students of the same age group were reported to have a withdrawal rate of 5.1% (Fast facts: Dropout rates, 2022). The lived experiences of the eight former Maine adult education students can now be used to advocate for the importance of
multiple pathways for high school completion, making Maine adult education a more viable pathway for students who are not successful in the traditional high school setting.

The literature reviewed supports the idea that traditional high school education does not meet the needs of every student, and students who withdraw from high school need alternative pathways to obtain their high school credential (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). The participants in this study shared their lived experiences, including why they believe they were able to successfully earn a high school credential with Maine adult education programming. Before conducting this research, little was known about student success in obtaining a high school credential in a nontraditional manner, creating a gap in the literature. This research addresses the gap and provides insight into why students successfully earned their high school credential in this nontraditional manner.

Two themes emerged from the data collected, the significance of self-motivation and the importance of support. The significance of self-motivation was echoed throughout all eight semi-structured interviews. The participants described the need to better their lives and futures, identifying motivators such as postsecondary education and employment. All eight participants discussed the need to better their lives and how they were motivated by both extrinsic and intrinsic motivators. Goal setting was also identified as a motivator for learning and achieving success in earning a high school credential.

The second theme identified was the importance of support. All eight participants described the support offered through the program by both teachers and staff. The participants spoke of the support they received, reflecting on one-on-one teacher support, feeling valued, and positive interactions with Maine adult education teachers and staff. Participants also described support from family, such as parents, siblings, and extended family. All eight of the former
students expressed the importance of support and its impact on their ability to earn a high school credential.

The findings of this study provided the researcher with answers to the questions presented. The participant's voices helped guide the study and allowed themes to emerge. Eight participants described their experiences obtaining a high school credential with Maine adult education, stating that they found their experiences to be positive and rewarding. All eight participants reflected fondly on the support they received from the teachers and staff. Trent reflected on his positive interactions with the teachers and staff saying, “The way they interacted with me was definitely very positive, and that's not something I'm going to forget at all.”

Research by Peyton et al. (2010) noted that student support positively impacts student success in high school completion programs. The participants in this study discussed their own lived experiences and the importance of support. Unenrolling from high school is not a discussion to take lightly, and the road for high school non-completers can be difficult. Still, students can find success in obtaining their high school credential through alternative pathways such as Maine adult education.
REFERENCES


https://doi.org/10.1016/j.anai.2021.10.022


https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244018824506


https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-80/pdf/STATUTE-80-Pg1191.pdf#page=1


https://doi.org/10.18844/gjgc.v10i1.4874


Caruth, G. D. (2018). Student engagement, retention, and motivation: Assessing academic success in today’s college students. *Participatory Educational Research, 5*(1), 17-30. [https://doi.org/10.17275/per.18.4.5.1](https://doi.org/10.17275/per.18.4.5.1)


Cooper, A. C., & Sánchez, B. (2016). The roles of racial discrimination, cultural mistrust, and
gender in Latina/o youth’s school attitudes and academic achievement. *Journal of

relationships for student success. Sage publications.

methods approaches*. SAGE Publications.

Creswell, J. W., & Guetterman, T. C. (2019). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and
evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Pearson.

approaches*. SAGE.

on negative emotions and goal setting when initial performance falls short of one’s
performance goal. *Human Performance, 18*(1), 55-80. https://doi.org/
10.1207/s15327043hup1801_3

in education: practical steps forward. In *30th annual conference for the 118ustralasian
association for engineering education (AAEE 2019): educators becoming agents of
change: innovate, integrate, motivate* (pp. 299-306). Engineers Australia

Darabedyan, K. (2018). *The workforce innovation and opportunity act and its impression on
America’s economic workforce system* [Doctoral dissertation].

https://scholarworks.calstate.edu/downloads/db78tf84s


Kapp, A. (1833). *Platon’s Erziehungslehre, als Pädagogik für die Einzelnen und als Staatspädagogik, Oder dessen praktische Philosophie*.


individualized learning plans to facilitate feedback among medical students. *Teaching and Learning in Medicine, 32*(4), 399-409.

https://doi.org/10.1080/10401334.2020.1713790


https://doi-org.une.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/19415257.2017.1398180


https://doi.org/10.1177/07417136211002155


https://doi.org/10.1080/10598650.2015.1126058


https://doi-org.une.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/1045159520961470


pandemic: A review of the evidence two years after schools shut down (pp. 1-24). Center for Global Development.


Parr, A. K., & Bonitz, V. S. (2015). Role of family background, student behaviors, and school-


Satish, N., & Starace, J. (2022). A process evaluation of the integration of title I (workforce development) and title II (adult literacy) services under the workforce innovation and opportunity act in New Jersey.


https://www.mainelegislature.org/legis/statutes/20-a/title20-Asec4502.html


students: The role of self-leadership. Personality & Individual Differences, 178, N.PAG.


Dear Former Maine adult education Student,

I am currently a doctoral student at the University of New England. I am conducting a study titled *A Qualitative Phenomenological Study of Former Maine adult education Students Who Successfully Earned a High School Credential for my dissertation*. The purpose of this research study is to explore the lived experiences of former students who obtained their high school credential through Maine adult education. I am seeking eight participants to participate in my doctoral research study.

You are eligible to participate in this study if you are:
- 18 to 23 years old
- Obtained your high school credential with Maine adult education in the past 3 to 5 years, 2018-2023.

Participation in this research is voluntary. Participation will consist of one interview of approximately 60 minutes, which will be recorded. The interview will be conducted on Zoom at a time of your convenience. If there are more than eight people who express interest, only the first eight who complete the interviews will be included in the study. All data will be kept confidential, and pseudonyms will be used to protect the identities of respondents. All identifying information, including school names, locations, or staff, will be deidentified.

Please review the attached Participant Information Sheet which outlines the specific details of this study including confidentiality and privacy measures. Upon completion of the interview, participants will be entered into a drawing for a chance to win a $100 gift card.

If you are interested in sharing your experience with Kayla Sikora, please contact me via email at ksikora@une.edu and we can set up a time for an interview over Zoom.

If you would like additional information or have any questions, please reach out to me at the above listed email.

Thank you for your consideration of participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Kayla Sikora  
Doctoral Student  
University of New England

Version Date: 4/28/2023
APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Script before the interview:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview for my doctoral study. As outlined in my email, I would like to better understand the lived experiences of former students who obtained their high school credential through Maine adult education.

The interview will be approximately 60 minutes long. I will ask you background questions regarding what led you to Maine adult education and questions related to your experience working with Maine adult education.

Before we begin, I would like to review the Participant Information Sheet with you. This sheet was also sent to you in an email when you were asked to participate in this study.

Do you have a pseudonym that you would like to use?

Do you give permission to be recorded during the interview process? ____Yes _____No

Yes: Thank you, at this time, we will move forward with the interview. You may stop the interview at any time.

No: We will not move forward with the interview at this time. Thank you for meeting with me.

You are not required to answer any question you don’t feel comfortable answering.

Do you have any questions for me before we start the interview?

Questions:

1. At what age and grade level did you unenroll from high school?

2. At what age did you enter Maine adult education programming?

3. What made you decide to seek a high school credential?

4. What was it like to transition from a traditional high school setting to learning at the Maine adult education program?

5. Please describe the learning processes or learning environment when you attended Maine adult education programming.
6. Describe your interactions with the adult education teachers. Did you work directly with teachers or independently?

7. What does self-directed learning mean to you?

8. How did self-directed learning help you in your success in obtaining a high school credential?

9. Please describe your experience setting goals with the Maine adult education program.

10. What role, if any, did goal setting have in your progress toward earning a high school credential?

11. Describe how you developed your learning plan with the adult education staff.

12. Discuss how the Maine adult education teachers and staff interacted with you throughout your educational programming.

13. How did Maine adult education staff support you as a learner?

14. Why do you believe you were able to earn a high school credential with Maine adult education?

15. What motivates you as a learner?

16. What characteristics do you believe an adult education student needs to be successful?

17. Describe your time management skills when working towards your high school credential.

18. How did you prepare for classes, assignments and exams, during your time as a student in Maine adult education? Did you approach these tasks differently than you did when enrolled in traditional HS? (If the approach was different – what led you to adopt a different approach? How did the different approach impact your outcome?)
19. Were there any aspects of the Maine adult education program that you found challenging?

20. Why did you choose to earn a high school credential with Maine adult education?

21. Can you describe employment as a motivator?

22. Can you describe family as a motivator?

23. Would you recommend Maine adult education to other students who are struggling in high school? Why or why not?

24. Please feel free to share any additional information about your experience with Maine adult education.

Version Date: 4/28/2023
### INTRODUCTION
- This is a project being conducted for research purposes. Your participation is completely voluntary.
- The intent of the Participant Information Sheet is to provide you with important details about this research project.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions about this research project, now, during or after the project is complete.
- The use of the word ‘we’ in the Information Sheet refers to the Principal Investigator and/or other research staff.

### WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS PROJECT?
The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of former students who obtained their high school credential through Maine adult education. Eight participants will be invited to participate in this research as part of the principal investigator’s dissertation research.

### WHY ARE YOU BEING ASKED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT?
You are being asked to participate in this research project because you are 18 to 23 years-old and you have successfully obtained your high school credential with Maine adult education in the past 3 to 5 years, 2018-2023.

### WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THIS PROJECT?
- You will be asked to participate in one semi-structured interview with the principal investigator that will last approximately 60 minutes over Zoom.
· You can choose a pseudonym to be used in place of your name for the study.

· You will be given the opportunity to leave your camera on or off during the interview, and your interview will be recorded using Zoom.

· You will be emailed a copy of your interview transcript to review for accuracy. You will have five days to respond, or the PI will assume that you have no comments, and the transcript will be assumed to be accurate.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS INVOLVED FROM BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

The risks involved with participation in this research project are minimal and may include an invasion of privacy or breach of confidentiality. This risk will be minimized by using pseudonym for each of the participants names and by eliminating any identifying information from the study. Participants will have the opportunity to review their transcripts for accuracy and will be given the choice to have their cameras off during the interview. Participants have the right to skip or not answer any questions, for any reason.

Please see the ‘WHAT ABOUT PRIVACY & CONFIDENTIALITY?’ section below for additional steps we will take to minimize an invasion of privacy or breach of confidentiality from occurring.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS FROM BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

There are no likely benefits to participants by being in this research project; however, the information we collect may help further understand the experiences of former Maine adult education students who have successfully obtained their high school credential with Maine adult education programming.

WILL YOU BE COMPENSATED FOR BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

Upon completion of the interview, you will be entered into a drawing for a chance to win a $100 gift card. Your odds of winning would be 1 in 8. The drawing will be conducted after all interviews are complete in late May or early June of 2023. The prizewinner will be notified via email, and the gift card can either be mailed to the participant's home address or picked up at August Adult and Community Education in the main office.

WHAT ABOUT PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY?
We will do our best to keep your personal information private and confidential. However, we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Additionally, your information in this research project could be reviewed by representatives of the University such as the Office of Research Integrity and/or the Institutional Review Board.

The results of this research project may be shown at meetings or published in journals to inform other professionals. If any papers or talks are given about this research, your name will not be used. We may use data from this research project that has been permanently stripped of personal identifiers in future research without obtaining your consent.

- Data will only be collected during one on one participant interviews using Zoom, no information will be taken without participant consent, and transcribed interviews will be checked by participants for accuracy before they are added to the study.
- Pseudonyms will be used for all participants, and any personally identifying information will be stripped from the interview transcript.
- All names and e-mails gathered during recruitment will be recorded and linked to a uniquely assigned pseudonym within a master list.
- The master list will be kept securely and separately from the study data and accessible only to the principal investigator.
- The interview will be conducted in a private setting to ensure others cannot hear your conversation.
- Participants are given the option to turn off their camera during Zoom interview.
- Once member checking of the transcribed interview is complete, the recorded Zoom interview will be destroyed. Once all transcripts have been verified by the participants, the master list of personal information will be destroyed.
- All other study data will be retained on record for 3 years after the completion of the project and then destroyed. The study data may be accessed upon request by representatives of the University (e.g., faculty advisors, Office of Research Integrity, etc.) when necessary.
- All data collected will be stored on a password-protected personal laptop computer accessible only by the principal investigator.

WHAT IF YOU WANT TO WITHDRAW FROM THIS PROJECT?

You have the right to choose not to participate, or to withdraw your participation at any time until the Master List is destroyed without penalty or loss of benefits. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in this project.

If you request to withdraw from this project, the data collected about you will be deleted when the master list is in existence, but the researcher may not be able to do so after the master list is destroyed.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS PROJECT?
You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research project. If you have questions about this project, complaints or concerns, you should contact the Principal Investigator listed on the first page of this document.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT?

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Office of Research Integrity at (207) 602-2244 or via e-mail at irb@une.edu.
APPENDIX D
IRB EXEMPTION LETTER

Office of Research Integrity
Institutional Review Board
Biddeford Campus
11 Hills Beach Road
Biddeford, ME 04005
(207) 602-2244 T
(207) 602-5905 F
Portland Campus
716 Stevens Avenue
Portland, ME 04103

DATE OF LETTER: April 28, 2023
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Kayla Sikora
FACULTY ADVISOR: Andrea Disque, Ed.D.
PROJECT NUMBER: 0423-24
RECORD NUMBER: 0423-24-01
PROJECT TITLE: QUALITATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF FORMER MAINE ADULT EDUCATION STUDENTS WHO SUCCESSFULLY EARNED A HIGH SCHOOL CREDENTIAL

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project
SUBMISSION DATE: April 27, 2023
ACTION: Determination of Exempt Status
DECISION DATE: April 28, 2023
REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption Category # 2ii

The Office of Research Integrity has reviewed the materials submitted in connection with the above-referenced project and has determined that the proposed work is exempt from IRB review and oversight as defined by 45 CFR 46.104.

You are responsible for conducting this project in accordance with the approved study documents, and all applicable UNE policies and procedures.

If any changes to the design of the study are contemplated (e.g., revision to the research proposal summary, data collection instruments, interview/survey questions, recruitment materials, participant information sheet, and/or other approved study documents), the Principal Investigator must submit an amendment for review to ensure the requested change(s) will not alter the exempt status of the project.

If you have any questions, please send an e-mail to irb@une.edu and reference the project number as specified above within the correspondence.

Best Regards,

Bob Kennedy, M5
Director of Research Integrity
APPENDIX E
FAMILY EDUCATION RIGHT PRIVACY ACT (FERPA) MODEL NOTICE FOR
DIRECTORY INFORMATION

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)
Model Notice for Directory Information

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), a Federal law, requires that
Maine Adult Education, with certain exceptions, obtain your written consent prior to the disclosure of
personally identifiable information from your education records. However, Maine Adult Education may
disclose appropriately designated “directory information” without written consent, unless you have
advised the program to the contrary in accordance with District procedures. The primary purpose of
directory information is to allow Maine Adult Education to include this type of information from your
education records in certain school publications. Examples include:

- The annual yearbook
- Honor roll or other recognition
- Graduation programs

Directory information, which is information that is generally not considered harmful or an invasion of
privacy if released, can also be disclosed to outside organizations without your prior written consent.
Outside organizations include, but are not limited to, companies that manufacture class rings or publish
yearbooks. In addition, two federal laws require local educational agencies (LEAs) receiving assistance
under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) to provide military recruiters, upon
request, with three directory information categories — names, addresses, and telephone listings — unless
you have advised the LEA that you do not want your information released without your prior written
consent.¹

If you do not want Maine Adult Education to disclose directory information from your education records
without your prior written consent, you must notify the program in writing at intake. Maine Adult
Education has designated the following information as directory information. [Note: An LEA may, but
does not have to, include all of the information listed below. Check with your superintendent’s
office to see what your district includes as directory information.]

- Student’s Name
- Address
- Telephone Listing
- Electronic Mail Address
- Photograph
- Date and Place of Birth
- Dates of Attendance
- Degrees, honors, and awards received
- The Most Recent Educational Agency or Institution Attended

I give permission for my directory information to be released without my written permission

Signature: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

I do not give permission for my directory information to be released without my written permission

Signature: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

¹ These laws are: Section 9528 of the ESEA (20 U.S.C. 7908), as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (P.L. 107-110), the
education bill, and 101 U.S.C. 903, as amended by section 544, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2002 (P.L. 107-107), the
legislation that provides funding for the Nation’s armed forces.