

FACTORS INFLUENCING STUDENTS' SATISFACTION AND
EXPERIENCES IN HIGH SCHOOL ONLINE COURSES:
A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY

by

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ABSTRACT

The high school classroom setting is transitioning to meet the needs of the 21st century learner. Advancements in technology, such as the Internet and software platforms for web-based learning, have led to an increase in online learning over the last decade. The number of adolescents taking online courses has also increased due to these technological advancements and requirements from state departments of education for students to have an online learning experience in order to graduate from high school.

This multi-site case study examined students' experiences and factors that influenced their satisfaction in their online courses at four high schools. The ultimate goal was to determine which specific factors led to satisfaction or dissatisfaction for students in these courses in order to help educators improve the online learning experience for their students.

The results of the study indicated that the majority of the high school students were satisfied with the convenience and opportunities that the online learning environment provided for them. Communication and feedback were found to be vital components in determining whether or not the students had a positive experience in their courses. The data from this study can be used to provide insight for educators into the contributing factors that lead to satisfaction and dissatisfaction in the online learning environment and assist them in making the overall online learning experience positive for students.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my two children, Brooks and Reagan. You bring constant joy to my life, and you have motivated me to succeed in this endeavor. My love for you is immeasurable.

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Completing this dissertation was an enormous task and there were many people who provided me with much needed support and encouragement along the way. Those mentioned below are only a few.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

Introduction

According to Wallace (2009), distance learning programs that place an emphasis on technology have increased throughout the last decade. With this advancement, the online learning opportunities for adolescents have also increased. Wallace states that while these opportunities are expanding for students, many of the classes are planned around frameworks for older students. She also claims that there are a number of high schools that are now providing students with credit for completing distance learning classes.

According to the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (2009), the K-12 online learning programs that are the most reputable have been operating for more than 10 years, while there are many that have been offering programs between 5 and 10 years. Carr-Chellman and Duchastel (2000) define an online course as a course that is “primarily internet based (or intranet based, with an organization)” (p. 230). The International Association for K-12 Online Learning claims that “online learning within K-12 education is increasing access and equity by making high quality courses and highly qualified teachers available to students” (International Association for K-12 Online Learning, 2009, About Promising Practices section, ¶ 1).

The International Association for K-12 Online Learning (2011) declares that online learning in the PreK-12 environment is a recent and innovative arena, and it is growing faster than all other areas in the online learning market with an estimated increase of 16.8% annual growth. Currently, there are 38 states in the U.S. that have online initiatives or virtual schools

provided by the state. There are also 27 states in the U.S. that have full-time online schools across the state. Michigan was the first state to require online learning for high school graduation beginning in April of 2006, and in 2008 the state of Alabama began requiring the online learning experience as a requirement for graduation.

Mupinga, Nora, and Yaw (2006) maintain that all students enter the classroom with their own unique expectations, needs, and individual learning experiences. Mupinga et al. claim that teachers need to be in tune with these needs and characteristics in order to make the most of the learning experience for their students. However, due to the nature of the online course, they state that many teachers are unaware of what the make-up of their courses is when it comes to students' characteristics, and this makes it more difficult to deliver effective instruction. Mupinga et al. found that online students' primary expectations were to have (a) communication with the teacher, (b) feedback from the teacher, and (c) an online course that challenges them.

Statement of the Problem

High school students in some states are now being required to complete an online learning experience in order to obtain the default diploma for graduation. According to Roblyer, Davis, Mills, Marshall, and Pape (2008), a variety of student characteristics and learning environments can determine whether or not a student is successful in online courses. Student opinions regarding the online learning experience in high school, as well as examining the factors that influence student satisfaction in online courses could contribute to improving the online learning experience for students in the future.

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative multi-site case study is to examine factors influencing students' satisfaction and experiences in high school online courses.

Significance of the Problem

Some states are now requiring high school students to complete an online learning experience in order to obtain a high school diploma. Therefore, it is important to analyze factors that contribute to students' success and failure in online courses in order to improve the online learning experience for students and, in turn, possibly increase achievement. Exploring student and teacher factors related to online learning will allow for insight into how to improve instruction for teachers in the online learning environment and make improvements to the online learning experience for students so that they can be successful in this type of learning environment.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study evolved from previous research studies regarding twenty-first century skills. Factors that contributed to students' success in online learning environments emerged from the review of the literature on twenty-first century skills and online learning and provided the overall framework for this study.

Research Question

1. What are students' experiences in a high school online course and what factors influence students' satisfaction with a high school online course?

Assumptions

1. The study sample was representative.
2. Respondents answered honestly to the questions on the interview protocol, based on their knowledge, understanding, and experience.
3. Participants provided voluntary responses and were not placed under any undue influence when formulating their responses.

Limitations

1. The sample was taken from small suburban high schools in the deep South. Therefore, the results may not be generalizable to other populations.
2. The students were interviewed in focus groups, which may have affected their answers.

Operational Definitions of Terms

Achievement: course grade in online course.

ALSDE: Alabama State Department of Education.

FIRST CHOICE: According to ALSDE (2009), FIRST CHOICE will be the framework for Alabama high school graduation requirements beginning with the 2009-2010 school year.

Grade Level: The grade that the high school student is in according to age and number of courses passed.

Online Learning Experience: According to ALSDE (2009) it is “a structured learning environment that utilizes technology--consistently and regularly--with Intranet/Internet-based tools and resources as the delivery method for instruction, research, assessment, and communication” (p. 4).

Summary

This study is presented as a dissertation including five chapters. Chapter I is an introduction to the study involving the statement of the problem, the statement of the purpose, the significance of the problem, research questions, operational definitions of terms, limitations and assumptions. Chapter II contains a review of literature including student and teacher factors related to online learning. Chapter III describes the methodology and procedures used in the study. Chapter IV includes the research findings. A summary of the research, conclusions, and recommendations for future study are included in Chapter V.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

According to Brown and Slagter van Tryon (2010), “it would be difficult to find a K-12 school district’s technology plan that does not reference ‘twenty-first-century skills’ as building blocks for enhancing global citizenship and rendering future leaders equipped for the twenty-first-century world of work” (p. 235). The Partnership for Twenty-First Century Skills (2011) defines 21st century student outcomes as “the skills, knowledge and expertise students should master to succeed in life and work in the 21st century” (Overview section, p. 1).

Reynard (2008) claimed that many teachers in schools are choosing to use online tools to expand discussions in class, enhance group work and class projects, and heighten communication. Huett, Moller, Foshay, and Coleman (2008) maintained that efforts to expand K-12 distance education are increasing rapidly. According to the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (2011), “thirty-eight states have virtual schools or state-led online programs” (Fast Facts About Online Learning section, p. 1). The International Association for K-12 Online Learning states that “many virtual schools show annual growth rates between 20 and 45 percent” (Fast Facts About Online Learning section, p. 1). Further, it is stated that “data suggest that in about six years 10 percent of all courses will be computer-based, and by 2019 about 50 percent of courses will be delivered online” (Fast Facts About Online Learning section, p. 4). Michigan was the first state to require an online learning experience as a graduation

requirement beginning in 2006, and in 2008 Alabama amended the state's graduation requirements to include an online learning experience.

Twenty-first Century Skills

Pearlman (2006) claims that we have known since the early 1990s what knowledge students need to have and what they need to be capable of in order to be successful in the 21st century due to the results of the 1991 Secretary's Commission of Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) report that was published by the U.S. Department of Labor in 1991. This report resulted in evidence showing the necessity of a basic knowledge foundation, but it also proved that a significant collection of 21st century skills would also be required. These 21st century skills that the SCANS report stated would be vital to the workplace and society were "thinking skills, personal qualities (responsibility, self-management), project management, interpersonal skills (teamwork, leadership), information skills, systems skills, and technology utilization skills" (pp. 101-102). The SCANS report was then enhanced and revised by The Partnership for 21st Century Skills.

According to Pearlman (2006), The Partnership for 21st Century Skills also claimed that learning does need a core subject foundation, but showed

twenty-first century learning includes information and communication skills, thinking and problem-solving skills, interpersonal and self-directional skills, and the skills to use twenty-first century tools such as information and communication technologies. But what sets *Learning* apart from all previous studies is its finding that assessment and feedback to students is the key to skill mastery.

A framework for 21st century student outcomes and support systems is provided by The Partnership for Twenty-First Century Skills (2011), and the student outcomes include four main categories. The main categories for student outcomes in the 21st century are as follows: (a)

Core Subjects and 21st Century Themes, (b) Learning and Innovation Skills (which includes critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity), (c) Information, Media, and Technology Skills (which includes information literacy, media literacy, and ICT literacy), and (d) Life and Career Skills. Five support systems are also provided which are deemed to be vital to making sure the students achieve mastery of the 21st century skills. The five supports systems for the student outcomes in the framework are (a) 21st Century Standards, (b) Assessment of 21st Century Skills, (c) 21st Century Curriculum and Instruction, (d) 21st Century Professional Development, and (e) 21st Century Learning Environments.

According to Bruett (2006), the economy in the 21st century would not be possible without the modernizations in technology. Bruett claims that it is imperative that the United States prepare students to be competitors in a global economy. In order for this to take place, changes must occur in the classroom setting for students. Students should be able to apply what they have learned in school in the 21st century environment they will live and work in. Therefore, 21st century skill should be taught in the classrooms. Bruett further adds that teachers and principals should be advocating for 21st century skills to be infused into their curriculum.

Day (2000) claims that teachers could arguably play the most significant role in getting students motivated and committed. However, Day claims that teachers' needs are often neglected. Teachers face many challenges in the 21st century, and it is suggested that investment should be made into teachers' emotional and intellectual needs in order for schools and the education of students to be successful in the 21st century.

According to Brown and Slagter van Tryon (2010), technologies in the 21st century require teachers to prepare students to be better equipped with decision-making skills and

information selection skills for dispersing information. They state that it is the teachers' responsibility to prepare students in becoming valuable contributors to the global community.

Student Factors Related to Online Learning

According to Donlevy (2003), there are advantages in having virtual high schools for both teachers and students. Donlevy claimed that one advantage for students is that they acquire vital technology skills that will increase their marketability as individuals. Due to the increase in the number of jobs that are carried out online in the corporate world and in higher education, Donlevy suggested that the students who are graduates from virtual high schools will be at a great advantage when it comes to the use and understanding of this technology.

Chandra and Lloyd (2008) examined two groups of students throughout a two-year period enrolled in Grade 10 science courses. The first-year students were enrolled in a traditional, face-to-face, course, and the second-year students were enrolled in a blended or e-learning course. Chandra and Lloyd determined that students can benefit from e-learning courses based on their findings of increased test scores and a rise in the number of students participating in the course. The students in the study stated that the self-paced environment and the ability to control part of their own learning were what they favored the most. However, Chandra and Lloyd mentioned that they were still unsure of what specific factors of the e-learning environment acted as the change agents.

Prior Experience

Dodd, Kirby, Seifert, and Sharper (2009) conducted a study to determine whether students who had previous experience in online courses at the high school level would have

increased determination and success in online courses during their first year in a course at the university level. They determined that student achievement and student persistence were greater when a student had a prior online distance education experience. Dodd et al. also claimed that the reason for students with experience being more successful in their first-year courses may be because of the students' characteristics. They suggested that students with prior experience may be able to be more self-determined and able to work as independent learners more easily.

Roblyer, Davis, Mills, Marshall, and Pape (2008) performed a study to determine the relationships between combining environmental and student factors, that they state have been shown to be predictors of students' success and failure in virtual school environments in prior research studies, in order to devise a model that could serve as a tool for predicting failure and promoting achievement in virtual school learning. They found that a combination of student characteristics and learning environments can be predictors of achievement for high school students enrolled in online courses.

Roblyer et al. (2008) determined that predicting failure was more difficult than predicting success. One factor they determined to be a predictor of success was students' past ability. The students' GPAs were able to predict their success in the online course. Some other student factors that made an impact on their success were the students' ability to access technology, organizational values, and sense of self-worth.

Roblyer et al. (2008) asserted that environmental conditions can be just as vital to whether or not a student is successful in a course as the student's characteristics. Learning environments where students are provided with enough time to be able to finish the online course and the students having access to a computer at home are some of the conditions that they mention. Roblyer et al. suggested that schools that provide online course opportunities need to

also offer support to help make certain that the students are able to succeed. One strategy they suggest is assigning a certain time of the school day with a specific site for the online course to take place. Furthermore, schools should also look at providing some type of access out of school for students who are not equipped with the technology needed at their homes.

Dobbs, Waid, and Carmen (2009) performed a study that focused on the differing opinions regarding online course experiences of students who had previous online course experience and those who did not. The results of the study revealed that opinions did differ for the total sample between those who had prior experience and those who did not, and there were also differences in opinions found between age groups, gender, and the amount of online experience.

Dobbs et al. (2009) claimed that while the study did indicate significant differences in the opinions of those who had prior online course experience and those who did not, the differences were, for the most part, related to the level of agreement/disagreement rather than actual differences in the direction of their opinion. Both groups had the opinion that traditional classes were easier than online courses. The students who had taken previous online courses generally disagreed that traditional courses had higher quality than online courses. However, those students who had not previously taken an online course agreed with this item. It was suggested that having prior online experience could possibly raise students' opinions of the quality of online courses, with more experience further raising the opinion.

Training

Gahungu, Dereshiwsky, and Moan (2006) found that teachers felt as though their students would be better prepared for online courses if the students had been provided with training in

using online tools. Some of the teacher responses indicated that they felt it should be mandatory for students to attend workshops, either online or face-to-face, that would train them on how to navigate through the course website, send an e-mail with an attached document, etc. Some of the teachers also provided responses that suggested some students were not prepared when it came to the computer knowledge needed to participate in an online course and that the students needed more computer literacy skills. Further teacher responses indicated that students should be able to do the following prior to taking an online course: use Microsoft Word and Excel, consistently take online quizzes and tests, use the discussion board, use the chat room, and participate frequently in interactive discussions. Teachers also indicated that they felt students should be provided with an orientation regarding online communication rules.

Interaction

According to Roblyer and Wiencke (2003), the theory of distance learning and the research involved with it proclaims that interaction is a vital contributor in determining the success of distance learning courses. According to Davidson-Shivers (2009), the online experience for both students and teachers can become very personal when there is interaction within the course activities between the teacher and the student. Davidson-Shivers conducted a case study at the College of Education at a southeastern United States university to investigate the amount of time faculty spent in online courses. The rate of occurrence and forms of instructor-to-student interactions that took place in an online course were examined. The results indicated that the bulk of the interactions between the instructor and the students were on an individual basis. These messages were primarily about class assignments and the content of the course. The main tool used for communicating was the grade book and then e-mails.

Davidson-Shivers claims understanding the kinds of interactions that teachers make, and to whom, assists in recognizing the effect online teaching has on faculty work. Suggestions from the study included using more group interaction than interaction on an individual basis. It was suggested to make general comments to the class as a whole about course assignments to decrease the amount of time spent in this type of interaction. Another suggestion was to develop less subjective assignments and more objective assignments in order to decrease time through the use of automated grading systems.

While investigating the characteristics of online interaction and collaboration, Nicholas and Ng (2009) found that in the beginning of the course, the students' participation and interest in posting to the discussion forum in Moodle, the e-learning software, was frequent. However, as the school term moved forward, the students' frequency to posting to the discussion forum and interacting declined. The number of postings did rise after an online interview 2 months into the project. Nicholas and Ng concluded that due to the inconsistencies in the patterns of the discussion posting, that outside support is needed to help maintain student interest. Another concern was that two-thirds of the messages that were posted on the discussion forum were social messages and not related to the discussion topic. Nicholas and Ng suggested providing additional space within Moodle for discussions not related to the topic.

In a study conducted by Yu (2009), students were surveyed to determine whether or not participating in an online discussion forum reflected a change in their level of comfort in face-to-face (F2F) discussions in their class. The survey resulted in a minor change in the comfort level in class for both groups surveyed: an intervention group and a comparison group. In the intervention group, students either did not experience a change in comfort level, or they felt a boost in comfort for 12 out of the 14 statements. However, the comparison group either did not

experience a change, or they felt a boost in comfort for 4 out of the 14 statements. The intervention group also took a survey related to their online experience. Fourteen students were in agreement that the online experience was helpful for them, while three students alleged to have unhelpful experiences. The data documented from the discussion forum showed a rise in student participation for the intervention group.

Yu (2009) claimed that online discussion can eliminate the drawbacks that go along with face-to-face discussion under time constraints and provided the following advantages for students who are given the opportunity for only discussion. Yu asserted that students are provided with a voice through the use of online interaction and discussion. It also allows those students who are already willing to participate in class another place to provide additional contributions. Furthermore, Yu claimed that some students need support before they are comfortable interacting in the traditional, face-to-face classroom and that online discussion can serve as that outlet. Yu stated that some students who are usually silent in class will also have a place where they feel comfortable getting their thoughts and opinions heard. Yu's study resulted in the class being enhanced overall by supplementing the online format.

Gahungu et al. (2006) surveyed teachers who were teaching online either web-based or web-enhanced courses at Chicago State University in 2003. The survey was in regard to concerns that the teachers and students had encountered throughout their online communication. The results from the study revealed that faculty members felt that teaching online made communicating with students easier. Some of the teacher responses indicated that they felt most students were able to use communication skills found within the online tools such as the discussion board forum, e-mail, Blackboard, and chat. Responses also indicated that the teachers

felt students communicated frequently and were more likely to communicate with them online than they were through a phone call or in a face-to-face setting.

Ni and Aust (2008) performed a study to examine the views of online students regarding teacher verbal immediacy and classroom community and the outcomes those views had on students' level of satisfaction, perceived knowledge gained, and the number of posts in an online discussion. The findings from the study revealed that there was a positive correlation between teacher verbal immediacy, a feeling of classroom community, the students' level of satisfaction, and perceived knowledge gained. The results also indicated that students in varying courses had views of different degrees of teacher verbal immediacy and a feeling of a classroom community. The only significant predictor of the students' level of satisfaction and perceived knowledge gained was a feeling of a classroom community. However, the only significant predictor of the number of posts the students made to the online discussion board was teacher verbal immediacy. Ni and Aust suggested that when teachers' message posts to the discussion board are more welcoming, students may feel a larger amount of teacher immediacy, which could lead to students' willingness to post to the discussion board more frequently.

Lin, Lin, and Laffey (2008) performed a study to explore how motivational and social factors may impact online learning experiences for students. Four concepts were included in the study: learning and goal orientation, perceived task value, self-efficacy, and social ability. Although 250 students who were enrolled in 11 online courses were surveyed in the study, the final analyses only included data from 110 students. The students in the sample were mostly graduate students in education programs. There were also some upper-level undergraduate students from a wide array of programs. None of the courses were required to have face-to-face meetings, and they were all totally online. The study results suggested that typically students

had positive opinions in regard to the four concepts used in the study. The students were found to be highly satisfied with their online learning experiences. The results indicated that students' self-efficacy and perceived task value significantly influenced their learning satisfaction. These results put forward that students who find value in the tasks that are being assigned to them are more satisfied with their learning. The four concepts, learning and goal orientation, perceived task value, self-efficacy, and social ability, were also found to be positively correlated to each other. Another finding indicated that the online students' feeling of connection to the community could be more closely related to the closeness and level of presence they encounter and observe through interaction with the other students in the course than with the teacher.

Furthermore, the results suggested that social navigation may be achieved through an awareness of the audience and interaction. The study suggested that students who actively participate in interaction are given opportunities to develop higher-order reasoning and communication skills, as well as opportunities to learn cooperatively while they are involved in the process of making meaning, which also involves providing responses to other students' questions, the elaboration and justification of viewpoints, and improving thoughts and beliefs. The findings also indicated that social ability could be an important concept for being able to understand a change in the student's ability to be able to contribute to the learning community.

Post-research interviews were also conducted with seven selected students. The results of the interviews suggested that a relationship may exist between motivation and social interaction. The respondents claimed that being in tune with others' actions and observing others' work motivated them to produce better work as well as participate and interact more.

Motivation

According to Xie, DeBacker, and Ferguson (2006), discussion in online environments can provide many advantages for students. They claim, however, that students are often unaccustomed and new to this type of class assignment. Therefore, they may not have knowledge of how to use the tools associated with discussion, and this could determine whether or not the students are willing to contribute to the discussion.

Xie et al. (2006) asserted that the primary reasons for being a part of online discussions are being able to communicate and interact. They claim that in order for the online discussion to be beneficial, it needs to have guidance and facilitation. This way the students will not only find it as an avenue to learn, but they will also feel that it is appealing. According to Xie et al., the students will show an increase in motivation and be more willing to contribute to the online discussion activity if they find value in it.

Xie et al. (2006) conducted two studies to determine how students' intrinsic motivation was related to their willingness to participate in online discussions, how the level of motivation differed over time, and the reasons that the students provided for their change in motivation. Their results indicated that intrinsic motivation was a factor related to the students' willingness to contribute in the online discussion activities. In other words, if the students were able to find value in the discussion and they enjoyed it, they were more likely to contribute. They also determined that the students' technological skills were not a factor in determining their level of contribution. Xie et al. claimed that one reason for this finding could be that only lower-level technological skills were required. The students provided responses in their interviews that stated that the discussion board was user friendly and easy to use.

Xie et al. (2006) also found that students' attitudes about the course were a factor in determining their motivation level. If students viewed the course to be an enjoyable learning experience, then they also showed the same view toward the online discussion assignments. Throughout a period of time, all sections of the course showed a decrease in student contribution to the discussion board. Another contributor to the motivation of the students was the teacher's attitude and guidelines. When the students felt that the teacher placed a higher emphasis on the online discussion and continued to encourage students to contribute, the results showed an increase in the number of postings and the number of times that the students logged in. Some students also responded that the teacher gave clear guidelines about how they needed to contribute to the discussion board. Student responses showed that the ability to communicate with their peers also played a key factor in their attitudes toward the course. When students were allowed to voice their opinions on particular hot topics, it also helped to increase their motivation to participate.

Xie et al. (2006) offered suggestions for teachers of online courses. They first suggested that the teacher should have an enthusiastic attitude regarding online discussion if he or she is planning to use it in class. Teachers should also give clear guidelines to the students in regard to the contributions to the online discussion and the requirements. The teacher should also show that he or she finds the online discussion activities valuable and encourage the students to interact with each other. The teacher should also take an active part in the discussion board and provide guidance to the students. The last suggestion they provided is to select a user-friendly tool to host the discussion board.

Richardson and Newby (2006) performed a study to determine the extent to which students were cognitively engaged with their online courses. "Cognitive engagement was

defined as the integration and utilization of students' motivations and strategies in the course of their learning" (p. 23). The sample included 121 students. There were 68 students enrolled in a post-baccalaureate engineering program, and 53 of the students were enrolled in an online master's degree program. This study was the first to use Bigg's SPQ in online learning environments. Richardson and Newby stated,

Biggs' 1987 SPQ includes scales that measure students' approaches to learning by evaluating their learning strategies and motivations in order to create a learner profile. The scored scales place students in categories related to their motivation and strategy levels, including (1) Surface, Deep, or Achieving strategies and (2) Surface, Deep, or Achieving motivation. (p. 25)

Richardson and Newby's (2006) study examined whether self-selected variables, such as program area and demographics, impacted students' utilization of Bigg's six learning strategies and motivations. The specific variables investigated included "prior online experience, program area focus, gender, age, and employment status" (p. 31). The results revealed that students' strategies were different as they progressed to additional online courses. Students who had more online experience were found to use the Deep Strategy. The students with prior experience could make connections between the content and the courses. Students who had previous online experience were also found to be more self-motivated. Further findings indicated that the younger the student was the more likely he or she was to utilize the strategy that was limited to the bare essentials, or just getting by, which Bigg's labeled the Surface Strategy. Richardson and Newby suggested that the reason for this could be the lack of educational experience as a whole. They suggested that the younger students may not have been exposed to the higher-level motivations and strategies used. Another reason proposed is that younger students are still learning how to juggle school and the other facets of their lives. Additionally it is suggested that the younger students may not have reached the point where they "consider learning for the sake

of learning” (p. 33). Richardson and Newby recommended that teachers, as well as designers of online courses, need to consider the various characteristics of their class population when developing an online course.

Feedback

According to Lemley, Sudweeks, Howell, Laws, and Sawyer (2007), students who are enrolled in courses that occur in a traditional, face-to-face classroom often work together in a cohort. In this traditional cohort environment, the students are receiving their lessons at the same time from the same teacher, and they are receiving continuous feedback from the teacher in this environment. However, the students who are enrolled in distance learning courses might not be a part of a cohort. They are often in courses where the students pace themselves to complete the course almost independently. The only feedback received by the students in these independent type courses is usually assignments or exams that have already been graded.

Lemley et al. (2007) conducted a study to examine high school students enrolled in independent study courses offered through Brigham Young University. The study was performed to determine the differences in final exam grades and time to finish the course between students who received immediate feedback and those who received delayed feedback. They used the final exam scores for English, history, character education, and health courses as a dependent variable. In the English course, the students who received delayed feedback scored almost an entire grade lower than those students who received immediate feedback. In the character education course, the students who received delayed feedback scored over one-half of a grade lower than those students who received immediate feedback. There was not a statistically significant difference in the final exam scores for the health and history courses. However,

students who received delayed feedback still had lower scores than those who received immediate feedback.

Gahungu et al. (2006) found that teachers felt as though teaching online allowed them to provide better feedback to students because the teachers were better at managing the assessments and assignments when teaching online. Some of the teacher responses indicated that they felt online teaching allowed them to give feedback regarding grades and tests, keep track of the students' comments, post the course requirements, post assignments, provide clarity regarding the specifics of the assignments, and provide resolutions to any confusion regarding assignments.

Gender and Age

Fahme (2009) conducted a case study to determine how students felt about online learning depending on their age and their gender. An online survey was provided to Sakarya University students who were enrolled in distant education courses, including online courses. Out of 118 students who completed the survey, it was found that 65% of the students perceived online education too reliant on technology, and about 44% of the students claimed they would rather take traditional courses than online courses. In conclusion, it was suggested that the students had apprehension about whether or not the teachers were competent, the students struggled to meet time constraints, and with the lack of oral communication. The results of the study showed that male students had a more negative attitude toward online learning than female students. The results also indicated that older college students would rather take courses in a traditional classroom than an online learning environment.

Honigsfeld and Dunn (2003) performed a study to examine high school male and female learning style differences and similarities in different countries. From the results of the study,

Honigsfeld and Dunn determined that male students were more peer oriented and kinesthetic type learners than were females. However, the results indicated that female students were more self-motivated, persistent, responsible, had the need for more sociological variety, and were more likely to be motivated by their parents and teachers than were male students. Honigsfeld and Dunn suggested that people who work with female and male students should be conscious of the ways they are motivated, and that they should then take advantage of those tendencies in order to maximize learning. Another suggestion provided was that teachers provide more diverse learning experiences for female students, because they preferred more sociological variety in their learning than male students.

According to Hoskins and van Hooff (2005), age plays an important role in predicting students' use of online learning. A study was performed to determine whether studying methods, gender, ability, and age were determinants of college students' use of the online learning environment using Web Course Tools (WebCT). The study results revealed that using the web in general (access length period and hits on the home page) increased with older students. Students who were older also posted more to the discussion board. In this particular study, males participated more in discussion with their colleagues and with their instructors. However, Hoskins and van Hooff claimed that the differences in these groups cannot be attributed to motivation.

Rovai and Baker (2005) performed a study to examine gender differences in online learning. The primary focus was to determine whether there was a difference in the sense of classroom community and learning perceptions between men and women. The results revealed that there was a difference in these factors according to gender. Females scored higher in all three areas, which included social community, learning community, and perceived learning.

Further findings indicated that males posted significantly fewer messages to the discussion board than females. Rovai and Baker suggested that the study revealed the advantage of online learning is not just simply access but also educational value. Females were shown to participate in the courses more frequently than men. Females were also found to have a stronger sense socially in their online experience than the male students.

Gifted Ability

Wallace (2009) conducted a study to determine what effects distance learning had on gifted students in the K-12 environment. The study investigated student and parent assessments as well as final grades. Age group was used to compare the findings. The findings revealed that the gifted students' overall assessments returned positive opinions, and the different age groups showed no significant difference. The final grades for the students were also high among all of the age groups. For the most part, students of all ages also reported that they had rising interest in the particular subject after taking the course. Parents had positive opinions about the course that their child was taking despite the age of the child. Wallace concluded that, according to the findings of the study, gifted students in the K-12 environment, regardless of age, all gain an advantage from distance learning.

Summary

This review of the literature provides information on 21st century schools and many student factors that are related to the success and failure of online learning, particularly at the high school level. According to Roblyer et al. (2008), the factors that play a part in determining whether or not a student is successful include both student and environmental characteristics.

The factors addressed in this particular review included prior experience, training, interaction, motivation, feedback, gender and age, and gifted ability. Each of these factors was presented in the literature as contributors to whether or not students were successful in online courses.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multi-site case study was to examine factors influencing students' satisfaction and experiences in high school online courses. The conceptual framework for this study evolved from previous studies regarding student factors that influence student success in online learning environments. The student factors that emerged from the review of the literature that were found to be related to student success in online learning environments include prior experience, training, interaction, motivation, feedback, gender, age, and gifted ability.

The Alabama State Department of Education (2009) agreed to accept the FIRST CHOICE Implementation Guide on December 11, 2008. FIRST CHOICE is a framework that lists the graduation requirements for all ninth graders beginning with the 2009-2010 school year. One of the requirements within in this framework is that all students will be required to complete an online experience before graduating.

The Alabama State Department of Education (2009) defines the online experience for the purpose of meeting the FIRST CHOICE requirements as “a structured learning environment that utilizes technology--consistently and regularly--with Intranet/Internet-based tools and resources as the delivery method for instruction, research, assessment, and communication” (p. 4). Because students will now be required to participate in an online experience to obtain the default diploma option in the state of Alabama, it is important to examine the factors that have contributed to

students' success in online courses over the last few years. In turn, this study should provide the information that could be used to improve the online learning experience for high school students and teachers.

According to ACCESS Distance Learning (2010), the Alabama ACCESS distance learning initiative was unveiled on November 1, 2004. The objective of the ACCESS distance learning program is to create equity through providing additional educational course offerings for all Alabama public high school students. ACCESS is now available to all Alabama high school students and there are over 9,000 students enrolled in online courses in 174 school districts.

Research Question

What are students' experiences in a high school online course and what factors influence students' satisfaction with a high school online course?

Researcher Positionality

According to Creswell (2007), reflexivity "means that the writer is conscious of the biases, values, and experiences that he or she brings to a qualitative research study" (p. 243). Being reflexive allows researchers to be able to become familiar with their own biases that they bring to studies and allows for taking those biases into consideration in order to determine what part the researcher plays in relation to the context of the study.

In considering my position as a researcher, my goal was to maintain reflexivity throughout the study and to be as objective as possible. As a teacher in the Instructional Technology field, I was very passionate about this study. I am very determined to serve my students the best way that I can. I will soon be teaching online, and I had a strong desire to get

feedback from students on what they felt made them successful in an online learning environment or what could be done to make them successful. Although I realized that I might have different findings than what I agreed with, I was determined to maintain reflexivity and consider all statements equally.

Participants

The research was conducted at four public high schools in four different school systems in Alabama that were offering online courses at the time of this study. The participants were high school students enrolled in online courses. There were a total of 27 participants. The participants were selected by using the purposeful sampling method due to the need of using high schools that have had students enrolled in online courses. Students were selected based on gender and grade level. There were 17 females and 10 males interviewed in Grades 10-12. Courses were not a part of the sampling because which courses students were selected from could not be controlled. Demographic information will be presented in table format in Chapter IV.

Materials

The students were interviewed informally as focus groups at each school site using a developed protocol of questions. The questions were open-ended and allowed for interaction within the group. The students were provided with a short demographic survey to respond to prior to the interviews.

Observations were conducted of the students while participating in the online courses. The researcher used a checklist during observations in order to gain more knowledge about what

the students were actually doing. Therefore, the researcher had some background knowledge prior to completing the focus group interviews. Documents concerning the online courses were examined, including the course syllabus and grading procedures.

Data Collection

A request was made to the superintendents of the four school districts by e-mail to conduct the study. Once permission was received from the superintendents, principals of the schools were then e-mailed requesting permission to conduct the study in their schools. Once the principals had given permission, the school counselors were contacted to identify possible participants. When possible participants had been identified, they were asked whether they wished to participate. Informed consent forms were sent home to the parents of students who wished to participate. After informed consent from the parents had been obtained, those students who agreed to participate were asked to sign assent forms. Once all forms had been signed and returned to the researcher, the researcher worked with the school counselors to set up times with the students to conduct the observations and focus group interviews. The researcher conducted the focus group interviews at each of the four schools. The focus group interviews lasted approximately one hour and were tape recorded. Students had given prior permission for tape recording. The student participants were asked to answer questions from an interview protocol. However, the interviews were informal and allowed for the students to have discussion and interact. The goal of the interviews was to understand the students' experiences in the online courses and the different factors that influenced their satisfaction in these courses. Student participants were given numbers during the focus groups to identify who made statements without having names associated with the statements. No names are mentioned in the study.

This insures that confidentiality is maintained for the students. The data from the interviews were transcribed for future analysis.

Data Analyses

According to Yin (2000, as cited in Creswell, 2007), an analytic strategy for a multi-site case study “would be to identify issues within each case and then look for common themes that transcend the case” (p. 75). Creswell (2007) stated,

When multiple cases are chosen, a typical format is to first provide a detailed description of each case and themes within the case, called a within-case analysis, followed by a thematic analysis across the cases, called a cross-case analysis, as well as assertions or an interpretation of the meaning of the case. (p. 75)

The data analyses were ongoing throughout the study. According to Creswell (2007), triangulation “involves corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or prospective” (p. 208). Triangulating the various sources of information gathered from observations, documents from each site, and focus groups aided in the validating the study. Each interview transcription was coded to determine major themes, ideas, and concepts to provide for future analysis. Creswell provides a template for coding a case study using a multiple case approach, which was the approach used in this study. A detailed description of each case is provided, as well as a within-case theme analysis and a cross-case theme analysis. The data were also coded by assertions and generalizations across all cases.

Every response in the interviews was given equal consideration while pertinent responses that transpired were highlighted. Horizontalization was used to remove any unrelated, redundant, or overlapping responses that occurred. All interview statements were read and re-read, many

times in order to depict the data as a big picture. The researcher exercised reflexivity throughout the analysis of the data in order to be objective in the data analysis process.

CHAPTER IV

WITHIN-CASE ANALYSES

Introduction

Chapter III presented the methodological framework and data collection procedures utilized for performing the current research. This chapter explains and concludes the findings of the research topics of the study for each of the four case studies. The findings are a result of the analysis of the data collected through focus group interviews with high school students from each site, observations of students participating in their online courses, and demographic surveys. The findings from each specific case are shown in this chapter in order to present a description of each case and to present the key issues within each case, which will provide understanding of the complexity of each case (Creswell, 2007).

The within-case analysis draws attention to the individual themes of each case and leads to the analysis of common themes that transcend all cases that will be presented in the cross-case analysis. By presenting each individual case first, the online learning environments at each school were examined within their own context. Therefore, the chapter is organized as follows: (a) within-case analysis for Berry High School, (b) within-case analysis for Spencer High School, (c) within-case analysis for Ashton High School, (d) within-case analysis for Jackson High School, and (e) cross-case analysis. Detailed descriptions of each online learning environment and direct quotes taken from the various focus group interviews in the data collection are included to exemplify the findings.

The purpose of the focus group interviews was to gain a full understanding of (a) how high school students are participating in online learning environments, (b) which factors influence high school students to become satisfied or dissatisfied in their online learning environments, and (c) which factors influence high school students' overall experiences in online courses. Observations of each student participating in his or her online course were also carried out to aid in the validation of the study.

The within-case analysis chapter begins with a brief summary of each individual case study. The names of the schools and participants have been changed to protect their confidentiality.

Case 1: Berry High School

Berry High School (BHS) is located in a rural area in a southeastern state. BHS is a community school and has approximately 1,000 students enrolled in Grades K-12. All grades share the same campus. The school became a high school only 6 years ago. Prior to becoming a high school, the school only served Grades K-8. After Grade 8, students were bused to a nearby high school in a local town. The school planned to graduate 40-45 seniors. According to the school's website, their mission was as follows:

The mission of Berry High School is to provide students a competitive curriculum in a safe, positive learning environment that prepares students to succeed in an ever-changing and diverse world through a partnership of educators, parents, and the community.

Seven students that were enrolled in one or more online courses were interviewed in a focus group at BHS. Five of the seven students interviewed were females and two were males. The data from the demographic surveys revealed five of the seven students were in 11th grade and two were in the 12th grade. Four of the seven students indicated they did have home

Internet access. Four students had been identified as being gifted. Five of the students indicated they expected to receive an A for a grade in their current online courses, and two students indicated they expected to receive a B. One of the students indicated he was in his third online course, five students had taken two online courses, and one student was in her first online course.

Table 1 illustrates the demographics of the focus group students.

Table 1

Focus Group Demographics for Berry High School

Student	Gender	Grade	Home internet	Gifted	Grade expected	Courses taken
Maria	F	12	Y	N	A	2: Creative Writing; Fitness & Wellness
Blake	M	11	Y	Y	B	3: Creative Writing; Web Design; Nutrition & Wellness
Tyler	M	11	Y	N	A	2: Web Design; Nutrition & Wellness
Courtney	F	12	N	Y	B	2: French I; French II
Jasmine	F	11	N	Y	A	1: Creative Writing
Sarah	F	11	N	N	A	2: Spanish I; English 11
Nicole	F	11	Y	Y	A	2: Spanish I; English 11

The students have a variety of assignments in their online courses. Some of the assignments included reading and answering study guide questions, vocabulary assignments, projects, and slideshows. Courtney, a senior, was taking French I. She said, “Everything that we have is projects. Like right now, we are learning about the house and house items. We have to take pictures of rooms and describe the furniture in them.” Maria added, “We had to make slideshows and tables in the nutrition and wellness class. We had to have a certain number of slides, and each slide had to have certain information on it.” The students submit their assignments through a drop box contained in their online course web-based program. They also

have a discussion board and section for submitting quizzes and tests. The facilitator at their local school has to fax some assignments to the online instructor.

Themes

The major themes that came forward during the analysis of the qualitative data from Berry High School include convenience, interaction, blended courses, approaches to assignments, benefits, success in online courses, fears, and problems. The major themes and resulting subthemes are discussed below.

Convenience

The students commented that taking online courses were convenient for several reasons, including flexibility, schedule conflicts, and there were no other options for electives that were interesting.

Flexibility. The students saw the online courses as offering them flexibility in their schedules. Nicole commented, “It can help your schedule; like I wouldn’t be able to go to the tech. school if I didn’t have the online class.”

Schedule conflicts. The online courses allowed the students to enroll in courses they wanted to take that might not be available at their own schools or at a time they could take the courses. Maria explained, “Well, for me it’s kind of like a specialty class because I want to be a nutritionist, and I get to take ‘fitness and wellness,’ which isn’t offered during the normal school day.”

Electives. The online courses allowed students to select electives that they found interesting and which were not offered at their own school. Courtney, who was taking her second French course said, “You can learn something different that is not offered with a teacher at your school.” Tyler said, “I have more choices of classes I can take.”

Interaction

The students discussed several components of interaction within their online course, including interaction with students and teachers, discussion boards, feeling isolated, course subject, and feedback.

Interaction with students. The students at Berry High School had little interaction with other students in their online courses, and what little interaction they did have was generally through e-mail. A few of the students viewed the interaction as meaningless. Courtney, a senior, stated that if they did have interaction with other students, it might help. “If I had interaction with them, I think it would help me to understand the stuff we both might have trouble with. I could help them or they could help me.”

Interaction depends on course. Some of the students believed that interaction was based on the type of online course. Nicole, a junior, explained that it depended on the class because students wanted to be sure they did not copy someone else’s thoughts or ideas. She said, “With creative writing, it’s kind of like your own thing. So, it probably wouldn’t help because I don’t want to copy someone else’s thoughts.”

Isolation. Students felt isolated in the online courses. They saw online courses as individual where they set their own pace and so did not have much interaction with other students in the course. Courtney and Sarah both agreed they felt isolated in online courses and they did not collaborate with other students. During the observations of the students at BHS, none of them interacted with other students in their online courses.

Discussions. Students commented about their participation in the online discussion board. They stated that it was only for assignments, and it only helped with their grades because they received a grade for the discussion assignment. Courtney said, “It is for a grade. Otherwise, I would not go on the discussion board.” During the observations of the students at BHS, three of the seven students posted to the discussion board.

Interaction with teachers. The students said they communicated through e-mail with their teachers, and they often had to wait until at least the next day for a response. Courtney felt the interaction did help with her grade because the communication allowed for clarification and answers to her questions. She stated, “It helps you get things straightened out. If you have a question and you are not too sure about it, you can ask her and she straightens it out.” During the observations of the students at BHS, two of the seven students e-mailed their teachers to ask questions. None of the other students interacted with their teachers during the observation time.

Feedback. The students commented that they did receive feedback from their instructors in their current courses, but had been in previous courses where they did not receive feedback. They all agreed that receiving the feedback affected their grades because for some classes they

were allowed to correct their mistakes and re-submit assignments for a higher grade. Blake, a junior, stated, “It can help explain what you have done wrong, so that you can go back and re-do it and make it right.” Courtney commented, “Last year my teacher wouldn’t grade stuff, and just fall behind and it made me fall behind.” Jasmine added, “I had that happen too, but it was the end of the semester. I guess she was grading everyone else’s. I turned like nine things in at one time, and I still had a low grade. She finally graded it and added to it.” Nicole also responded, “Yeah, last year our teacher didn’t grade stuff until like the day before our grades had to be submitted.” The students agreed they felt like receiving feedback did help their grades. During the observations of the students at BHS, all seven students checked their course grades.

Blended Courses

There were not any students in the group at BHS who were taking a blended course. However, Courtney said she could see how a blended course would benefit her by helping with pronunciation of words.

Approaches to Assignments

The students at BHS discussed how they approached their online class work differently than in their traditional classes. The assignments tended to be given at least a week in advance.

Individual pace. According to this group of students, the online format allowed them to have more freedom and set their own pace. Maria, a senior, stated, “I kind of feel like I have more freedom with some of my assignments because most of the time in class, teachers want it done that day.”

Self-discipline. The students agreed online courses take more discipline than traditional courses. According to Courtney, “It is a bit of self-discipline because it’s like if you don’t want to do them now, you don’t have to, but you have to do them eventually. If you don’t do them now, you’ll just lag behind.” Jasmine, a junior, agreed with the comment, “and that will be more work piled up on top of it.” The BHS focus group students complete their online coursework in the online learning lab at school and at home.

Motivation. When discussing motivation in their courses, the students agreed they were more motivated to do well in their online classes. One reason for more motivation was they get to set their own pace, which requires self-discipline. Courtney commented that being self-disciplined gave her a sense of accomplishment. “It kind of goes back to self-discipline. I mean if you can do it, and you know you are setting your own pace, it kind of makes you feel accomplished.” Another reason for being more motivated was that the teacher was not negative when making corrections. Also, students gave the reason that it was more one on one if they needed to ask the teacher questions and they did not have all the distractions as in a traditional class.

Benefits

The students mentioned the following benefits of taking an online course: preparation for college and employment, preparation for future online courses, being able to learn something that was not offered at their school, avoiding schedule conflicts, and specialty classes for their career choice.

Preparation for college and employment. BHS students said participation in the online course might better prepare them for employment because of the self-discipline it required along with responsibility, determination, self-motivation, and the overall online learning experience. The students felt the online courses would also better prepare them for college. Nicole said it would help her be prepared for her online courses in college. Jasmine stated, “My counselor suggested taking creative writing to help me through college. That’s what got me to take it, and I like it so far.” This course was only offered in an online environment at her school. According to Courtney, “The professors in college will just give you the work and expect you to do it. Sometimes our assignments are like that. So, having experience with that will help you with whatever subject.” Blake said the online learning environment was just like being in college and further added, “I am planning on going to one of the online colleges anyway. So, it is giving me that experience.”

Preparation for online courses. In order to be successful in online courses, the students commented that it helped to be prepared. Some of the areas the students discussed included self-discipline, computer knowledge, and subject area. Maria stated, “The student probably needs to take a basic computer class.” Blake added students should know, “how to use the internet.” Courtney felt the preparation needed would depend on the online course the student was planning to take. She said, “It depends on which course you are taking. If you are taking a language course, then I would say at least the basic knowledge for that course.”

Success in Online Courses

The students discussed what factors they believed affected whether students could be successful in an online course. These factors included the students' grade level, the maturity of the students, and the students' attitudes toward the online courses.

Grade level. The students in the focus group at BHS were all juniors and seniors, and they all agreed online courses are a good option for students in their grade level. In response to which grade levels they thought were appropriate for online courses, the students indicated 10th-12th grades.

Maturity. The students believed that online courses required a level of maturity that would be more evident in students in Grades 10-12 because online courses require self-discipline. Sarah, a junior, said, "There is no one there to tell you, 'do this or do that.'" Jasmine added, "You are on your own."

Attitude affecting grades. The students talked about how their attitude toward the online classes affected their grades. All of the focus group students had a positive attitude about the online courses they were enrolled in at the time of the interview, and responded as a group that they liked their courses. The students indicated they did feel having a positive attitude about their courses did affect their course grades, and a few of them offered insight in regard to the previous courses they had taken when they did not do as well because of the negative attitudes they had toward those courses. Nicole explained, "Last year I had Spanish, and my teacher

didn't help very much. I didn't want to do it because I didn't understand it." Sarah added, "It's hard to learn Spanish in our online program."

Fears

The students also expressed some fears they had about taking an online course. Nicole and Tyler stated they thought the online course would be harder than and not as easy to understand as a traditional course. Nicole and Jasmine feared there would not be enough help in the online course and there would not be enough explanation. Blake and Maria expressed they feared deadlines and getting behind.

Problems

The students discussed problems they had experienced with their online courses. These included problems with the teachers and with assignments,

Problems with teachers. Blake, Jasmine, Nicole, and Sarah all complained about difficulties with their previous online teachers. Jasmine stated, "It's like they don't care and don't tell you what's going on and everything. They don't tell you how to do work if you send them an e-mail. They don't grade the work you have turned in." Tyler commented, "How the teacher teaches and how he or she explains things," determines whether or not he is satisfied in his online courses.

Problems with assignments. Another problem was that teachers did not release assignments and quizzes for completion when the students were supposed to be taking them.

Courtney also felt the language courses should have more listening assignments. She said, “We have to submit things where we have to speak the language, but we don’t know how to pronounce it, not all of the words anyway. They expect us just to know.” Nicole agreed and added, “My problem was that there wasn’t enough English saying what the Spanish words meant.”

Students were also frustrated that many times the assignments contained broken links. Blake explained, “A lot of times for assignments, they will tell you to go to a certain website to do research, and they will not work, or the website will be blocked.” Maria was disappointed sometimes with the way the content was set up. She gave the example of the reading material. Maria explained, “Sometimes the page cannot be found.” The students often have to e-mail their teachers for different links. She said, “It has a lot of typos.” Blake added,

Sometimes you might be in one section, and they will tell you to go to a certain section to find the content, and you can’t ever find the work or quizzes. The quiz won’t be there. It will be somewhere else.

Nicole disagreed and commented on how she was satisfied with the organization of her online course. She said, “Everything is right where it should be. Nothing can really get lost.” Some students were disappointed with the amount of space allotted for them to save their work within the online course web-based program. Blake said, “The locker doesn’t have very much space.”

Case 2: Spencer High School

Spencer High School is located in the suburban community of a southeastern state. Spencer High School (SHS) was built approximately 10 years ago in order to accommodate the overcrowding of secondary level students at the existing high school within the system and has approximately 1,500 students enrolled in Grades 9-12 alone. SHS is a state-of-the-art facility

and an award-winning high school. According to the school’s website, the mission statement is as follows:

The future belongs to the educated, and Spencer High School exists to promote and prepare students for academic excellence while empowering our young adults to live and thrive in that future.

Six students who were enrolled in one or more online courses were interviewed in a focus group at SHS. Two of the students interviewed were females and four of them were males. The data from the demographic surveys revealed one of the students was in the 11th grade and the five others were in the 12th grade. All six students indicated they had home Internet access. Four of the students had been identified as gifted. Three of the students indicated they expected to receive an A in their current online courses, and the others indicated they expected to receive a B. Two of the students were in their second online course, three were in their first course, and one student indicated he was in his third online course.

The assignments the students had in their online courses included discussion posts, typed document assignments, quizzes and assessments, writing computer programs, vocabulary, blogs, and reading assignments. The students submit their assignments within the online courseware.

Table 2 illustrates the demographics of the focus group students.

Table 2

Focus Group Demographics for Spencer High School

Student	Gender	Grade	Home internet	Gifted	Grade expected	Courses taken
Adam	M	11	Y	N	A	1: US History
Sam	M	12	Y	Y	A	3: AP Government; AP Economics; AP English 11
Robert	M	12	Y	Y	B	2: AP Government; AP Economics
Claudia	F	12	Y	N	B	1: English 12
Jessica	F	12	Y	Y	B	1: English 12
Eric	M	12	Y	Y	A	2: AP English 11; AP Computer Science

Themes

The major themes that came forward during the analysis of the qualitative data from Spencer High School include convenience, interaction, blended courses, approaches to assignments, benefits, success in online courses, fears, and difficulty with assignments. The major themes and resulting subthemes are discussed below.

Convenience

Reasons for taking online courses. The reasons the students provided for taking their online courses were having a shorter day at school and that they had scheduling conflicts for the courses they wished to take. The online courses allowed them to enroll in courses that they couldn't fit in at the regular time the courses were offered.

Flexibility. According to Claudia, the best benefit to taking her course online was more free time:

There are actually a lot of things. Like for us, our online class is during 7th period. So after 6th period, we can even go home, and that gives you like more free time at home. If you have a job, you can get to work earlier. If you have something you need to schedule, like a doctor's appointment, and you don't need to miss school, you can do that then. It just gives you more time I guess. I mean you get out of school before your friends, and that's always like a plus, and you just have a lot more free time. It's not much harder than any other classes, as long as you don't procrastinate or anything. The workload isn't like any different, so I think it's better than like sitting in a classroom for another like 50 minutes. I think free time is like the best part of it.

Interaction

The students discussed several components of interaction within their online course, including interaction with students and teachers, discussion boards, feeling isolated, course subject and feedback.

Interaction with students. The students at Spencer High School discussed their interaction with other students in their online courses. Robert and Sam, both seniors, discussed how their only interaction was with the students at their local school who were taking the same online course. Robert said,

There are four of us here taking Advanced Placement (AP) Government and Economics online. Sam is one of them, and the other two are not in this room. We talk with each other about the assignments that we've got and how we did on quizzes and test and things like that, and it helps us out a lot.

Jessica and Eric, also seniors, believed the online course was more independent. Jessica said, "It's more independent. I only work with people if they are in the same room with me. Like sometimes we go to the library, and we like ask each other, but it's more independent."

Robert, Claudia, and Jessica felt their participation in the online courses did help them to work with other students who were actually in the classroom with them. However, Adam explained why he did not believe the online course helped him to interact with other students. He said, "I don't have an opinion or anything of like anybody that's in my online class. I just work at my own pace. So, it doesn't help me to talk to anyone else." During the observations of the students at SHS, there were four students who had minimal face-to-face interaction with the students at their local school who were taking the same online course. There was not any interaction that took place with other students in the online courses outside of the local school during the observations.

Discussions. The students at Spencer High School did not indicate that they spent very much time in the discussion board within their online course. Sam said, “It’s really not that much time at all. They ask you a question, and you answer it. You’re pretty much done until the next question comes up.” A few students explained the need for a discussion board, and that the amount of time they spent on it depended on the particular online course and assignments. Eric stated,

Last year I took an online course for English, and that one had us posting on the discussion board a lot. This year, in the class that I am in, we basically never post on the discussion board. I mean like, kind of like what Sam was saying, I think it depends on the class. Like this year, the class that I am taking is computer science, and I said it was kind of independent. It’s kind of tough, I guess, to make a discussion board about some of the computer science topics because it’s kind of like you get it or you don’t. With things like English, it’s a lot easier for like your views or interpretations because more of it is opinion based.

When the students were asked if the discussion board helped with their grades in their online courses, Adam felt it depended on the course. Sam stated, “We have to do them for our grade, but I don’t think it helps improve our knowledge of the class that much.” Three of the students discussed why they thought the discussion board was a complete waste of time. Claudia explained,

Honestly, I feel like it’s just a waste of time. It doesn’t improve your grade in the class because it only counts for like several points. I really don’t get that much out of it. I feel like I am going on there just to answer the question, and then like respond to the other person’s post, and the like I’m done with it.

None of the students at SHS posted to the discussion board during observations.

Interaction with teachers. Interaction the SHS students had with their instructors for their online courses included e-mail for misunderstandings, but the majority of the students indicated there was not much communication with the teachers otherwise. However, Claudia and Jessica

were taking a blended course and met with their teacher once a week for quizzes tests, and any questions they might have. Claudia stated,

In our online class, we actually meet with our teacher once a week. So, we do like get to be in a classroom for tests and quizzes. If we have questions, she'll answer them and like go over the stuff that we are reading or like anything that we're doing in class. It's actually really helpful because like some other online classes, they don't even like know their teachers or talk to them. We can like see her at school or like go up to her in the hall and like ask her a question. She'll like answer it for us. So, it's helpful because she is here and we do meet once a week.

None of the students at SHS were interacting with their teachers during observations.

Feedback. The majority of the students at SHS indicated most of the feedback they received from their online instructors came in the form of comments that were provided on the assignments submitted. Adam commented,

The only feedback I like really get from my teacher is that she will edit the file and show me what I did wrong or type out what I did wrong. It really doesn't matter. I really don't get much feedback unless I have a question. It's kind of work at your own pace.

However, Robert appreciated the feedback from his instructor. He stated,

Usually if we submit an assignment, that's not a quiz or something like that, our teacher responds. He's got his little comments box. He'll usually be like, you did a good job on this specific question, you answered this, or we should be thinking like this. . . . He'll give me feedback on specific questions. Usually if he takes points off, he lets me know why. This has helped me be able to think, ok this is what he's looking for, or this is how I should be thinking about this. I guess it's different from what I would normally think about it, and so that specific feedback really does help.

During the observations of the students at SHS, six of the seven students checked their course grades.

Blended Courses

Claudia was one of two students in the group taking a blended course. Jessica and Claudia were both taking a blended English course and their teacher for their course was at their school. Both of them agreed it was very beneficial to actually have a relationship with their teacher, and they both liked having the meetings once a week to ask questions. Jessica said she liked taking their quizzes and tests in the classroom because this way she does not get distracted.

Approaches to Assignments

The students discussed how they approached their assignments in the online learning courses and how it differed from traditional courses. Topics include pace, procrastination, location and motivation.

Individual pace. The group of students at SHS felt the online learning environment was more flexible and more laid back than the traditional classroom environment. They liked that they were able to work at their own pace and shift assignments around to fit their individual schedules.

Procrastination. The students agreed that sometimes the flexibility and being able to work at their own pace could get students in trouble if they procrastinated. According to Eric,

A lot of online courses are different from the school, of course, in the fact that you have a group of assignments that are due by the end of the week instead of specific assignments that are due on a certain day, and when you have a group of assignments that are due weekly, it is easier to shift them around. If you have a lot of work one day, you can push it off or try to get ahead, but I think that also means that people, I guess if they procrastinate a little bit, then that means that they push them off, and they are doing things on a weekly standard. Other than that, if it was due by the end of the semester, I

think things would get out of hand. When you know at least you have some responsibility weekly, it's not that bad.

Location for homework. The students did their online coursework at home, in the school library, in the class period at school that was designated for their online courses, and in the school computer lab. Eric said he did most of his assignments at home due to the nature of his course. He had to write a lot of programs and he said it was easier to do it at home rather than going to the trouble of transferring files between computers.

Motivation. All of the students commented on their motivation in their online courses, compared to motivation in traditional courses, and agreed they were less motivated in their online courses. The reasons given were that there was not a teacher present to get mad, and it was easier to procrastinate in the online courses. Adam said,

I am more motivated in like an actual classroom because it's like if I don't do this, the teacher's going to be mad at me. I could get like three assignments behind in my online course, and I won't even hear anything from my teacher.

Sam agreed and said,

I am definitely less motivated to do well in my online course than any of my face-to-face classes, and I really can't put a finger on why. When I miss an assignment one day in my online course, it just doesn't bother me as much as if I missed an assignment in like math or something like that.

Eric and Jessica did discuss that while they were less motivated in their online courses, the online course did give them a sense of self-fulfillment that they were able to work independently and fulfill the responsibility. Eric stated,

I do think it's kind of important because it kind of requires you to expect more of yourself. Hopefully, you can become more responsible and get more done independently, which I think is probably better like in the long run.

Benefits

SHS students discussed many benefits to taking their courses online which included preparation for college and employment, preparation for online courses, leaving school early for jobs and appointments, scheduling conflicts, and course availability.

Preparation for college and employment. The students agreed some of the difficulties they had would better prepare them for college and employment. They felt their online courses were forcing them to be more independent, and, in the long run, this would prepare them for both college and employment. According to Eric,

When you are working independently, it's helping better prepare you for things in the real world where you have less resources, and sometimes you have to turn to yourself instead of, say, a teacher. I mean, not that you can't turn to the teacher, but I just think it helps change the way that you work, which I think is beneficial.

Preparation for online courses. In order to be successful in online courses, the students commented that it helped to be prepared. The students thought in order to be prepared to take an online course, the student should not be a procrastinator and should be able to keep up with assignments at a decent pace. Also, before taking an Advanced Placement (AP) course online, Robert felt the student should take an AP course in a traditional classroom setting first.

Success in Online Courses

The students discussed several factors they believed affected success in online courses. These included students' grade levels, maturity, work ethic, course subject, and students' attitudes.

Grade level. The students had different opinions about which grade levels are appropriate for online learning. They felt maturity, work ethic, and courses were factors in determining which grade levels were appropriate.

Maturity. Claudia and Adam agreed that high school freshmen would not be capable of taking online courses because of the responsibility and maturity it requires. Adam also felt online learning was not for everybody in general either. Claudia stated,

I'm in the 12th grade. So now, I think that since I have been through more school, obviously, I am more mature than like I was when I was a freshman. It's better for like students in our grade level because they'll actually like go home and like be responsible and like do the work. Not every student is going to be like that, but I think it is a good option for the kids my age opposed to like the younger ones because I just don't think they would be able to like handle it.

Adam agreed and said,

I am in the 11th grade, and I agree. Like, if I was a freshman, then I probably wouldn't be able to do it. In the same right, even if you are in the 11th or 12th grade, I don't think it's for everybody. Some people just won't do it.

Work ethic. Sam agreed that even though online courses have benefits, they are not for everyone. He did not feel that it depended on grade level but more on a student's work ethic. He said, "I think a 9th grader who has a good work ethic would be able to handle an online course pretty easily." Jessica said it's not just about how intelligent a student is, but also about how disciplined the student is. Robert felt work ethic, which was being discussed in the group as one of the main concerns in regard to whether or not a student could handle an online course, was something that did develop through higher grade levels. Robert stated,

I definitely think that work ethic will develop as you get older. I'm a 12th grader, and I know that I did have a good work ethic when I was in 9th grade, but I've been revamping my course work as I've gone through high school and putting on more AP classes and

stuff like that. So, I've had to develop my work ethic because I've been getting more assignments with all these AP classes. So, like they were saying, I think a 9th grader could handle it, but I think an 11th or 12th grader that has learned to reprocess his or her work ethic and has learned how to make everything fit, everything that they want to do. . . It's probably a little easier for an 11th or 12th grader to do it.

Courses determine grade level. Eric said he felt it also depended on the course as to which grade levels would be appropriate for taking it online. He said,

I think it really depends on the course. Since a lot of these are requiring you to be independent, and a lot of them are geared for advance level courses, like say an AP Course, then naturally you probably need to be a junior or senior and have a good work ethic. Of course, there are some exceptions. I think in general, it would probably be for older students who have more experience.

Attitude affecting grades. Overall, the students discussed their attitudes as being laid back in their online courses. Robert said he had a mixed attitude about his course because it did not seem to matter whether or not he studied because the quizzes were really hard for him either way. He felt this attitude did have a negative effect on his grade. Sam commented that his attitude was almost too laid back, and this could get him in trouble where his course grade was concerned. He said,

I guess I am kind of laid back toward it. So like, sometimes if I don't get something done a day that I don't necessarily have to get done, I'm just like whatever I'll do it later. So, I guess it does kind of affect my grade because pretty much throughout the whole semester. Like last semester, I was pretty much catching up the whole time, so my grade would never actually be accurate because he would put in zeros for things I hadn't finished yet, but later on he would give me the grade that I deserved when I turned it in. So, I would always find myself behind, and you know I guess it did kind of affect my grade a little bit.

Fears

The students discussed fears they experienced while taking an online course and these included problems not understanding what to do in the online course software, falling behind, and that the course would be more challenging than traditional courses.

Understanding the online courseware. Robert said,

I was afraid that I wouldn't know what to do basically. Like, I knew we would have the directions there, and we'd have some interaction with our teacher, but I guess I was afraid that of stuff like that, and that I would get so lost after a little while that I wouldn't know what I was going to do.

Falling behind. Sam said, "Its' not like the work they give us is hard, but they do give us a lot of work. You can easily get behind, and that can cause a lot of dissatisfaction."

Problems with Assignments

Difficulties the students mentioned regarding their assignments included broken links, password malfunctions, not receiving instant feedback from their teachers when they had questions, and the difficulty of the quizzes when there was no interaction or help.

Case 3: Ashton High School

The Ashton City school system has approximately 4,000 students in six schools. The one high school, Ashton High School (AHS), has approximately 1,000 students enrolled in Grades 9-12. According to the school system's website, the mission statement is, "A Superior Education Today-Tomorrow-Together." The high school was brand new with state-of-the-art facilities, and this was the first year that students were able to attend it. The students enrolled in online courses

had a specific lab designated for those online courses throughout the day with new I-Mac computers.

Eight students enrolled in online courses were interviewed in a focus group at Ashton High School. Seven of the students were females and one was a male. According to the demographic surveys, three students were in the 11th grade and five were in 12th grade. All eight students indicated they had home Internet access. Seven of the students indicated they had been identified as being gifted, and one had not. All eight students expected to receive a grade of an A in their online courses. One of the students was taking her third online course. Two students were taking their second online course, and five of them were taking their first online course.

The students were taking online courses through an online courseware system that was being used by many schools throughout the state, and some of them were taking dual enrollment courses online through a local community college using the online courseware provided by the college. The courses that the students were taking, and had previously taken, included sociology, art, English literature, speech, dual enrollment history, advanced placement calculus, Spanish II, advanced placement history, health, and personal and business finance.

The assignments the students had in their online courses included essays, tests, quizzes, document analyses, book work, and creating tables. The students submitted their assignments through the online courseware drop box, and their quizzes and tests are submitted directly through the online courseware. They have a submit button at the end of them. They had also used e-mail to submit some assignments. Table 3 illustrates the demographics of the focus group students.

Table 3

Focus Group Demographics for Ashton High School

Student	Gender	Grade	Home internet	Gifted	Grade expected	Courses taken
Nia	F	12	Y	Y	A	1: Sociology
Deidra	F	12	Y	N	A	3: Art; English Literature; Speech
Lauren	F	11	Y	Y	A	1: Dual Enrollment History
Shelby	F	12	Y	Y	A	2: AP Calculus; Dual Enrollment History
Candace	F	11	Y	Y	A	1: Dual Enrollment History
Ayla	F	12	Y	Y	A	1: Spanish II
Molly	F	11	Y	Y	A	2: AP US History; Health
Caleb	M	12	Y	Y	A	1: Personal & Business Finance

Themes

The major themes that came forward during the analysis of the qualitative data from Ashton High School include convenience, interaction, approaches to assignments, benefits, success in online courses, fears, and problems. The major themes and resulting subthemes are discussed below.

Convenience

The students at Ashton High School took online classes for a variety of reasons. Nia took her class online because she wanted to set her own pace, and she felt she learned better on her own, which made learning more convenient for her. Four of the students said they took their courses online due to scheduling conflicts. Other reasons were that the course they wanted to take was not offered at the local school, and the desire to have a different teacher than the one at the local school.

Interaction

The students discussed several components of interaction within their online course, including interaction with students and teachers, blended courses, discussion boards, feeling isolated, course subject, and feedback.

Limited to students at local school. The students said they interacted with the students that were in their actual classroom taking the same class they were taking online. They said they sometimes called each other if they needed help, but not generally. They also said that they would interact some through e-mail, but that it was not course related. None of the students at AHS were interacting with other students in their online courses during observations.

Blended courses. Deidra, a senior, said she was taking a blended course, and that the interaction with others helped her. She said, "I have speech, and it is a blended class. So, there are four times we have to meet. Our first meeting, we just got to know everybody, and I think that kind of helped me personally." The students in the blended course also interacted some through the discussion board. Ayla, also a senior, said, "We also have discussion boards where we have to respond to other people's posts about the lesson." All of the students agreed that the interaction with other students did not seem to help their grade or help them to work better with other students, but Deidra commented that it did make her feel more comfortable.

Discussions. The students in the group did not spend any more time than what was required in the online discussion board. Responses indicated that they did not want to participate in the online discussion board or think their participation in online discussion board helped with their grades, other than getting the actual assignment grade for the required discussion posts.

Ayla said, “I haven’t logged into the discussion board since the first nine weeks. So, no I don’t think it affects my grade.” Caleb, a senior, responded, “Only when I need to turn in certain assignments that relate to the discussion board, and even so, I am only there long enough to make sure I get a grade.” He admitted that it did affect his grade somewhat. He said, “Some projects that I have are discussion board related. Like, we have to discuss it with other people or just put something on the board just where we will get the grade.” Lauren, a junior, commented, “I have one, but we don’t really discuss anything. We put up like these statements and that’s it. Like, you comment on other people’s, and we really don’t do anything with it.” Ayla felt the discussion board could be more beneficial if it was in a different format that allowed for verbal responses and listening to audio. Ayla said,

I would like it if it was a verbal discussion board, but writing Spanish really doesn’t help me. I would rather be talking to someone. They don’t have that option. If the discussion board was verbal, you could actually talk to other people.

During the observations of the students at AHS, only one of them was posting to the discussion board.

Interaction with teachers. A few AHS students had minimal interaction with their online course instructors. Caleb said the he had none. Nia, a senior, and Molly, a junior, said the only times they have interacted with their teachers was when they had questions or needed them to extend a quiz. Other students had more interaction with their teachers. Ayla said, “We are supposed to e-mail each other everyday. We usually do it about three times a week, but she always responds. She always answers questions.” Molly’s online instructor was at a high school that was nearby and actually agreed to meet her in person. Molly said, “I have actually been able to go the past couple of weeks and get help with Calculus, but I can also e-mail her whenever I

need to.” Four of the students agreed that the interaction with their teacher did seem to help their online course grades. Two of them felt it really depended on the type of learner a student was as to whether or not interaction with the teacher was needed and helped with their grades. Nia commented,

Honestly, it kind of depends on what kind of learner you are because, personally, I learn better by teaching myself and having the textbook set out in front of me and teaching myself. If the teacher explains it in a different way to me, I don’t understand it. So, I think it just depends on the type of learner.

None of the students at AHS interacted with their teachers during observations.

Feedback. The feedback the students received from their online instructors included notes from their instructors on the assignments they had submitted. For example, “Good job” or “You missed this.” Molly said she only received comments when she did something wrong, but her grades were always updated. Candace, a junior, and Deidra commented that receiving feedback did help with their grade in the course. Caleb did not feel that the feedback helped him very much. He said,

It all just matters on how I do on a quiz or test. So, whether I get compliments or no compliments or get told whether I do right or wrong, it really doesn’t help me or not help me. It’s just kind of there.

Caleb did say that it would be problematic if his grades were never updated though. During the observations of the students at AHS, four of the students checked their course grades.

Approaches to Assignments

The students approached their work differently in online courses than in their traditional classes. Candace, Molly, and Nia said they did almost all of their online coursework at home.

One reason was the Internet was faster at home. Shelby and Ayla said they did some at home and school. Ayla commented,

I do most of mine here, but I do my voice activities at home because it is quieter. If we have cultural assignments, I do that at home too because it's a bunch of Internet, and the Internet here is slow.

Lauren, Caleb, and Deidra said they did most of their work at school during their class time designated for their online courses.

Individual pace. Ayla said she looked at her assignments weekly instead of daily. Caleb liked that he could get ahead of schedule in his online courses. Nia said her teacher gave her all of her assignments for the whole semester. This made it easy for her to plan ahead. The students all agreed that their online courses allowed them to work at their own pace.

Motivation. The motivation to do well in their online courses was different for different students. Molly, Lauren, and Deidra said they were less motivated to do well in their online course than their traditional courses. Deidra said, "I think it's a lot easier if I have someone right there, face-to-face explaining to me what I have to get done." Shelby and Nia said they were both more motivated to do well in their online courses. Nia commented,

I am more motivated to get my grades better in my online class because it is a college course. If I don't keep my GPA up with all of my other college courses, I can lose my scholarship for next year because of something I did this year.

Benefits

Benefits of taking an online course the students mentioned included being able to be more successful because of an independent learning style, being more prepared for college and

college online courses, working around schedule conflicts, being able to take courses that were not offered at their local school, and having the opportunity for a different teacher.

Learning styles. Candace felt that if you are an independent learner, online courses might be a better option. She said, “I think it’s better because you can teach yourself, and do better that way.”

Opportunity for a different teacher. For her course, Ayla said, “There is only one teacher at this high school, and I really didn’t learn from her last year as well as I thought I could. So, I like having the opportunity to have a different teacher that teaches me better.”

Blended courses. Deidra was taking a blended speech course. She discussed the benefits of having a blended course. She said,

I think blended courses are better for me personally because the one meeting where we got to meet everybody, we got to meet the instructor. He told us basically what the course was going to be like, that he would help us, and just getting to know him and meet him personally helped me I think.

Shelby, a senior, agreed a blended course format would be better for math courses too. She said, “I just think math is much more difficult to learn if you don’t have a teacher to explain any of the problems to you. So, getting to meet with my teacher has been really helpful this semester.”

Preparation for college and employment. Nia said she thought her online course would better prepare her for employment by allowing her to learn to communicate professionally electronically. Lauren also said the online courses prepared them for employment by making them more responsible and better at time management. Candace and Deidra agreed that the time

management skills acquired would also help prepare them for college. Ayla said, “Whatever college I get will be online. So, it’s kind of an introductory on how it works.”

Preparation for online courses. In order to be prepared to take an online course, the students at AHS said the student must know how to manage his or her time wisely and be able to work independently. Nia felt students taking online courses should also have more than average intelligence. She said,

I think that most people need to have a little bit higher than average intelligence for their grade level because a lot of the courses that you take online are not your everyday high school courses. A lot of them are college courses that require a little more thought and learning in them. I guess.

Success in Online Courses

The students discussed several factors they believed affected success in online courses. These included students’ grade levels, maturity, work ethic, course subject and students’ attitudes.

Grade level. The students in the group were all juniors and seniors, and they all agreed that online courses were a good option for students at their grade levels. When asked what grade levels the students felt were appropriate for taking online courses, some students felt that it should be strictly for 11th and 12th grade students.

Depends on individual. Others felt that it depended on the individual student. Nia said,

I think it should be strictly for juniors and seniors because I have a little brother who’s a freshman, and I know a lot of sophomores. I don’t think they could handle it because their not up to the same responsibility level the juniors and seniors are. Most of us have

jobs, and we kind of take care of ourselves. So, we kind of know that we've got to get things done. Freshmen and sophomores are kind of still in that babying stage.

Responsibility. Ayla disagreed with Nia and said to her,

No, I don't think online courses are really about responsibility. They're about how people learn. So, you would have done well in a freshman classes because you learn better by yourself. So, I think they should have the opportunity because they're going to learn the same no matter how old they are. Teaching them responsibility would be a better thing to do younger.

Shelby elaborated on this issue and said,

I think it really just depends on the individual student because there are some freshmen and sophomores that would be able to learn well taking an online course, and they wouldn't have a problem taking the initiative to get all their work done on time. Some other students need a teacher there. In any grade, they need a teacher there to tell them exactly what to do and make sure they get their work done.

Maturity. Nia and Deidra both agreed that 11th and 12th grade students were usually more mature and that would make them more capable of handling an online course. However, Deidra also agreed with Shelby that it does depend on the individual student. Deidra said,

I agree that it should be 11th and 12th grade. However, I also agree with Shelby. It depends on the individual because I do know some seniors that I doubt could take an online class because of the maturity level.

Attitude affecting grades. Candace and Deidra said they had good attitudes about their online courses. Both of them felt their attitudes did affect their grades. Deidra said, "If you have a positive attitude, it just makes everything so much easier." Nia disagreed and said,

My attitude really doesn't affect my grade because I know whether I like it or not, I am still going to have to make a good grade in that class, and I am going to have to study. I am going to have to work hard. So, my attitude really doesn't affect my grade.

Ayla discussed her relaxed attitude in her online course because she felt she was guaranteed a good grade. She said,

Even though I want to learn what I am learning, I don't put a bunch of heart into it because I know the grades don't really matter. It really doesn't matter because we always get more than one shot at each worksheet; more than one shot at each quiz, and I know the material when I take it, so it's pretty much guaranteed.

Shelby elaborated a little on Ayla's comment and said,

I can take each quiz twice. Sometimes, if we have done really badly on the quiz, she will give us another try, but she is not going to just give you a 100. You still have to work for the grades.

Fears

Three of the students said they had no fears about taking an online class. Others mentioned a few fears they had. Shelby said her fear was being alone and teaching herself. She said, "Calculus is hard whether you are in a classroom or online." Deidra said, "I'm very forgetful. So, I'm always afraid that I'm going to forget something." Lauren commented, "I wasn't sure about the coursework and how it would be. So, I was a little fearful of how everything would be set up."

Problems

Problems with assignments. Shelby said she had tests that were not open the day that she was supposed to take them. Molly and Deidra said they were disappointed with the inconsistent information they sometimes received. Molly said the teacher was two chapters behind sometimes on the location of the information in the textbook.

Time constraints. One of the difficulties the students had faced during their online courses was not having enough time because of after-school activities. Molly said, “My main difficulty is that I don’t really have enough time to get all of my assignments done because the estimated time for almost every assignment is like three hours, and I do a lot after school.”

Case 4: Jackson High School

Jackson High School (JHS) is located in a suburban area in a southeastern state. JHS is made up of Grades 10-12, and is one of the largest high schools in the state, with approximately 2,000 students enrolled. It is one of five high schools within the county district. The growth of Jackson High is a result of suburban sprawl, and within the last 10 years the school system made the decision to build a separate school for 9th grade. According to the school’s website, the mission statement of Jackson High is to, “mold students with diverse learning needs into competent, productive citizens in a global society by ensuring a safe and challenging instructional environment incorporating community resources and parental support.”

Six students enrolled in online courses were interviewed in a focus group at Jackson High School. Three of the students were females, and three of them were males. According to the responses on the demographic surveys, one student was in the 12th grade, two were in the 11th grade, and the other three students were in the 10th grade. All students indicated they had home Internet access. Three of the six students had been identified as gifted. Three of the students indicated that they expected to receive an A for their online course grades, two expected to receive a B, and the other student expect to receive a C or D. Two students had taken three online courses, one had taken two online courses, and three of them were enrolled in their first online course. The students were taking online courses through an online courseware system

that was being used by many schools throughout the state. The online courses the students were taking, or had previously taken, included nutrition and wellness, English, government, economics, computer applications, German I, German II, French I, and accounting.

The students had writing assignments, speaking assignments, discussions, projects, and singing assignments in their online courses. Natasha was taking an accounting class, and she said she also had to complete charts and bills. The students submitted these assignments in a drop box in their online courseware system, through e-mail, and their quizzes and tests were submitted automatically using a submit button in the online courseware. Table 4 illustrates the demographics of the focus group students.

Table 4

Focus Group Demographics for Jackson High School

Student	Gender	Grade	Home internet	Gifted	Grade expected	Courses taken
Sloan	F	10	Y	Y	A	1: Nutrition & Wellness
Darius	M	12	Y	Y	C or D	3: English 12; Government; Economics
Christy	F	11	Y	N	B	3: Computer Applications; German I; German II
Matt	M	10	Y	N	B	1: French I
Natasha	F	10	Y	Y	A	1: Accounting
Will	M	11	Y	N	A	1: German I; Computer Applications

Themes

The major themes that came forward during the analysis of the qualitative data from Jackson High School include convenience, interaction, approaches to assignments, benefits, success in online courses, fear of failing, and problems. The major themes and resulting subthemes are discussed below.

Convenience

The students at Jackson High provided several reasons for taking online courses, including flexibility, course availability, and graduation requirement.

Flexibility. Darius said the only reason he was taking his courses online was so that he could leave school early to go to work. The courses that he needed were not offered at the local school in the morning hours. Sloan and Christy thought taking online classes was beneficial because of the flexibility. Sloan said, “You can get on at home and do your homework. You will have everything for your week. You can do it all at home in one night, or you could do it in class.”

Course availability. Will and Christy both wanted to take German. It wasn’t offered at JHS, and this was why they were taking it online.

Graduation requirement. Matt and Sloan were both taking courses online in order to meet a graduation requirement. The courses were not offered at their school, so without the ability to take online courses, they would have had difficulty meeting the graduation requirements.

Interaction

The students discussed several components of interaction within their online course, including interaction with students and teachers, blended courses, discussion boards, feeling isolated, course subject and feedback.

Interaction with students. The students at JHS discussed their interaction with other students in their online courses. Will, a junior, said he had discussions that he had to respond to, and he interacted with other students in his online course that way. Will thought the interaction did help with his grade because it seemed to help with solutions to problems.

Isolation. Darius did not think taking an online course helped him to work with other students. He said, “You’re isolated pretty much.” He did not collaborate with other students.

Limited to students at local school. Darius, a senior, and Christy, a junior, said the only interaction they had was with the students taking the same online course that were actually in the classroom with them at JHS. Darius said, “The only interaction I’ve had is when they’re actually in the same classroom; the same computer lab with me. That’s it; no online communication.” During the observations of the students at JHS, one of the six students posted responses on the discussion board. None of the other students were interacting with others in their online courses.

Discussions. Discussion board posting assignments seemed pointless to the group of students at JHS. They did not spend anymore time than necessary in the discussion board because of these opinions. Christy said, “I go to it just to write the assignment and then get off of it because there is no point in me being on it because it’s just an assignment.” Darius said, “It’s pointless.” Will said, “I would like to participate in it more if some of the discussions weren’t just . . . you know . . . say . . . just describe yourself or stuff like that, if it was actually more of a discussion than just a writing assignment.” Only one of the six students at JHS posted something to the discussion board during observations.

Interaction with teachers. Will and Darius both commented that they interacted with their teacher through e-mail. They felt this interaction was beneficial. Will said, “It gives me more confidence in what I am doing.” Matt, a sophomore, said that he did interact with his teacher some through e-mail, but he did not think that it helped his grade. Christy said she had the same teacher for two courses now, and she did not think she was very helpful. However, she felt that if she did have more interaction with her teacher, then she might be able to understand the content better. Darius said, “I wish we actually had like a podcast type thing, like an actual video lesson versus just saying, here’s the material; hope you pass.” Darius said he did not see any benefit in taking online courses. He said they were more difficult, and he did not like the loss of personal connection with his teacher. During the observations of the students at JHS, two of the students sent an e-mail to their teachers. There was no interaction otherwise.

Feedback. Christy was disappointed with the amount of feedback that she received from her online course instructor. She said,

My teacher just highlights what’s wrong in red and doesn’t tell you why it’s wrong or how to fix it. So, there’s not really a correction or explanation of why you got it wrong. You just know it is wrong, and she deducts points big time for just one misspelled letter or reverse of letters. So, that really doesn’t help me much.

However, Sloan’s and Will’s teachers would tell them what was wrong and allow them to correct their assignments and re-submit them. During the observations of the students at JHS, four of the six students checked their course grades.

Approaches to Assignments

Location for homework. Natasha, a sophomore, and Will said that they completed most of their assignments for their online class during the period they had at school. Sloan and Darius said they had to do their quizzes and tests at school, but they did their other assignments at home.

Individual pace. The students said they approach their work differently in online courses than traditional courses because they look at their assignments weekly instead of daily. They are able to set their own pace.

Procrastination. According to Darius, being able to set one's own pace could be problematic if the student is a procrastinator. He said, "I really tend to procrastinate and put things off."

Motivation. JHS students said they were less motivated to do well in their online class than in traditional face-to-face classes. Will and Darius said they were not as motivated because they could not see disappointment in the teachers' faces if they did not complete their assignments. Sloan, a sophomore, said, "You don't have anyone to compete with because you don't know anyone else's grades. So, it's not as motivating."

Benefits

The students saw several benefits to taking online courses. These included having blended courses, preparation for college and employment, and preparation for online courses.

Blended courses. There were not any students in the group at JHS taking blended courses. However, Will said he could see the benefit of taking a blended course. He said,

I could see the benefit of getting to meet with your teacher at least once a week, just so she could tell you more. I know if I get told in person what I'm doing wrong, it's easier than reading it in an e-mail. There's not as much communication.

Preparation for college and employment. Will and Christy agreed their online courses had helped to prepare them for employment through time management skills, and being able to work for someone they might not like. Sloan said her course had given her experience in learning a different way, which she may have to do in her work environment. Darius said he thought it was an eye opener for taking college courses online.

Preparation for online courses. In order to be successful in online courses, the students commented that it helped to be prepared. In order to be prepared to take an online course, Christy felt students needed to know how to use a word processing program and any other software that might be required for a specific course. Natasha said students must be prepared to work independently.

Success in Online Courses

The students discussed several factors they believed affected success in online courses. These included students' grade levels, self-discipline, maturity and students' attitudes.

Grade level. The students in the focus group at JHS were in Grades 10-12. Sloan, Will, and Christy all stated that they felt that online courses were a good option for students in their grade level.

Self-discipline. Sloan said that taking an online course would be pointless for a student who was not self-disciplined. Christy said, “Self-discipline and self-motivation are what you have got to have.”

Maturity. Will agreed with Christy that grade level did not matter as much as maturity in determining whether or not an online course was the right choice for a student.

Attitudes affecting course grades. Christy, Will, and Darius commented that they had negative attitudes toward their online classes. Christy was frustrated with her teacher; however, she did not feel it affected her grade. Darius said, “I dread coming to my online class everyday, and I can tell it in my grade.”

Fear of Failing

Will and Darius both had a fear of failing their courses. However, none of the other students had any fears concerning taking their courses online.

Problems

Problems with assignments. The students mentioned problems they had with their assignments. Sometimes the online courseware would take a long time to load, so they could not

complete their assignments. Tests were also not open at the time they were supposed take them sometimes. They also mentioned glitches in the speaking and listening assignments. The links within the assignments might be blocked by their local school filter, as well as some of the graphics they needed for their assignments.

Problems with teachers. Christy also had a really hard time dealing with her teacher.

She said,

I just find it really difficult to deal with the teacher. She is just a pain. A lot of it seems to skip around. It is not cohesive. It doesn't seem to make sense to go together. Like, we may have an assignment that's not for what we are going over. It's for like what we did three chapters back. So, it doesn't really quite jive. It would help if we had a teacher to explain what goes together.

Cross-Case Analysis: Introduction

This qualitative case study analysis involved two major phases. First, a within-case analysis was performed, in which each case was analyzed in depth. Next, a cross-case analysis was performed, in which the different cases were compared. Through this, similarities and differences were expanded upon and themes originated. This section discusses the cross-case analysis.

Themes

The major themes that developed throughout the cross-case analysis of the qualitative data from all four high schools were very similar and included the following: convenience, interaction, approaches to assignments, success in online courses, blended courses, benefits, fears, and problems. Within each major theme, different subthemes emerged for the different schools.

Convenience

Reasons for taking online courses varied at the schools, but many were related to how convenient it was to take the online courses. These reasons included flexibility, schedule conflicts, course availability, and meeting graduation requirements.

Scheduling conflicts. The predominant reason at all four high schools for taking online courses was scheduling conflicts. The courses that the students were taking allowed some of them to go home early for work. If they had taken the courses at their local school, they would not be able to take the course until the afternoon hours. Therefore, leaving school early would not have been an option. Also, if they had not chosen to take the class online, some of the students would not be able to take the other courses they needed at their local school. Sam, from Spencer High School, said, “I took it because of a scheduling conflict. I couldn’t take two of the same classes that I wanted to. So, they had to put me in the online course because of the schedule I wanted.” Caleb, from Ashton High School, said,

It was all due to scheduling constraints, and it was the only class I could take without having to take another class that I didn’t want to take. So, it was a choice of mine, but it wasn’t out of desire. It was out of necessity.

Flexibility. A subtheme that developed as a reason for taking online courses at Berry, Spencer, and Jackson High schools was flexibility. The students at these high schools participated in other activities outside of their regular school day such as sports, leaving school for work, and attending technical school. They were able to be flexible in choosing when to complete their assignments for their online courses, and this allowed them the opportunity to participate in other activities outside of the regular school day.

Course availability. Another subtheme that developed at Berry and Jackson High schools as a reason for taking online courses was the ability to take courses that the students desired online that were not options for them otherwise. Will from Jackson High School said, “I know they don’t offer German here. They offer French and Spanish, and I wasn’t interested in those.”

Graduation requirement. Jackson High School students were the only students who mentioned that the only reason for taking the online courses was to meet a graduation requirement. Sloan and Matt from Jackson High School both said they were told they had to take an online class to graduate.

Interaction

Interaction with students. Another prevalent subtheme that emerged in the cross-case analysis across all high schools is that most students at each high school had very little interaction with students in their online courses that were not at their local schools. Erica and Jessica, students at Spencer High School, agreed that the interaction did not seem to be necessary because their courses were independent. Erica said, “It’s a pretty independent class, so I don’t know if that is an important issue.” Some of the students stated that they had some interaction through e-mail, but it was usually not course related and meaningless.

Limited to students at local school. A subtheme that developed from Ashton, Spencer, and Jackson High schools was that the interaction with students in their online courses was

limited to students at their local schools. These students mentioned that they did interact with the students at their local schools that were enrolled in the same online courses. Christy, from Jackson High School said, “I have someone in my class that takes the same course, and that’s the only person I really get help from at all because she’s in the same room.”

Interaction depends on course. A subtheme that transpired at Berry High School was that the amount of interaction in online courses may depend on the content of the online course. Courtney mentioned that in some courses interaction with other students might lead to copying another student’s ideas.

Isolation. Isolation was a subtheme that emerged from both Berry and Jackson High schools. Students at these schools felt that online learning made them more isolated. Therefore, they did not have as much interaction with other students as they did in their traditional courses.

Discussions. Another subtheme that developed across all four cases in the cross-case analysis was discussions. The majority of the students at all four high schools agreed that they only go to the discussion board to get a grade for assignments. Will from Jackson High School stated, “I would like to participate in it more, if it was actually more of a discussion, more than just a writing assignment.” Sam from Spencer High School pointed out that he depends on each course as to how much time you have to spend in the discussion board for assignments. He also said, “We have to do them for a grade, but I don’t think it helps improve our knowledge of the class that much.”

Interaction with teachers. Interaction with teachers was another subtheme that emerged across all four high schools in the cross-case analysis. The majority of the students said that they e-mailed their teachers when they had questions or concerns, but there was not much interaction otherwise. Darius from Jackson High School felt that a podcast set up within the online courseware would allow for more interaction with teachers. According to Darius, the set-up for him was, “Here’s the material; hope you pass.” Shelby, from Ashton High School, was thankful that her teacher was willing to meet her on occasion to offer help.

Feedback. Feedback was also a subtheme that developed among all four cases. All of the students at Berry High School agreed that receiving feedback on their assignments from their online course instructors did seem to help with their grades. The majority of the students at all four schools agreed that receiving feedback on specific assignments did help them. Several students mentioned that their instructors would allow them to correct their assignments and resubmit them for full or partial credit. Some of the students also mentioned that they even appreciated the small comments from their teachers like, “Good job on this assignment.” Nia, from Ashton High School, said, “I need someone to tell me stuff that I’m doing wrong, stuff that I can improve on to make my grade even better.”

Approaches to Assignments

Another theme that transpired across all four high schools was approaches to assignments. Most of the students at all four schools agreed that they approach their assignments differently in their online courses than in their traditional courses. They said the material for the courses was presented more holistically in their online courses than in the traditional classroom

setting where classroom assignments were usually given on a daily basis rather than for the whole week or whole semester. The students also worked on their assignments at home more than in traditional courses.

Individual pace. Individual pace was a subtheme that also developed among all four cases in regard to how the students were able to approach their assignments in their online courses. They were able to set their own pace in most courses when it came to turning in their assignments. Maria, from Berry High School, said, “My teacher sets it up where she gives all of our assignments for the whole week. So, I kind of break it down to my own pace.”

Self-discipline. A subtheme that developed at Berry and Jackson schools was self-discipline. These students liked that they were able to work at their own pace. However, they mentioned that with this freedom, you also had to remain self-disciplined or it would be easy to get behind in courses.

Procrastination. Procrastination was a subtheme that emerged at Spencer and Jackson High schools. Some of the students at these two schools mentioned that it was easy to get behind in their online courses if they procrastinated and that this could cause problems. Will, from Jackson High School, said he was spending time to get caught back up in his online course because he had been able to put things off, and he was behind.

Motivation. Another subtheme that developed across all four high schools was motivation. All of the students who mentioned motivation from Jackson and Spencer High

schools said they were less motivated in their online courses. Some of them said they were not as motivated because the teacher was not there with them, and they could not see any disappointment on their teachers' faces. They also said they were less motivated because it was easier to put things off in their online courses.

The majority of the students from Ashton and Berry High schools said they were more motivated to do well in their online courses because they were less distracted, and some of their online courses were college courses. Therefore, they wanted to be sure they kept their college GPA up. Shelby, from Ashton High School, said she was more motivated to do well in her online course. She said,

There are fewer grades for online classes. So, you can't just count on . . . oh, if I do badly on this test, I have a lot of small class work grades, so I can bring it up. You really have to work hard and do well on every grade.

However, Lauren and Deidra, from Ashton High School, said they were still more motivated in their traditional courses.

Benefits

Benefits was a major theme that emerged in the cross-case analysis at all four high schools. One of the benefits the students at Ashton High School mentioned was that they felt their online courses had prepared them for college courses that they might have online. They were glad they had the experience. The students also mentioned that being able to avoid the scheduling conflicts previously mentioned was a benefit to them. They also had the benefit of having the opportunity to learn about something that was not offered at their local schools.

Learning styles. A subtheme that transpired from Ashton High School was learning styles. Nia thought her online course was a benefit to her because of her independent learning style. She said, “I learn better by teaching myself.”

Opportunity for a different teacher. Another subtheme that also developed at Ashton High School was the opportunity for a different teacher. Ayla said that she saw a benefit in having the opportunity to have a different teacher for the second level of her course than she had for the first level last year. She did not feel she had learned well from her previous teacher, and by taking the course online she was able to have a different teacher.

Blended courses. Blended courses emerged across all four cases as a major theme at some schools and a subtheme at others. The students at Spencer High School who were taking blended courses saw the benefit in being able to meet with their teacher once a week to get questions answered and to be able to take their quizzes and tests with her in the room with them. Deidra, from Ashton High School, said being able to meet her instructor and the students in her online course face to face made her more comfortable. None of the students at Berry High School were taking blended courses. However, Courtney said she could see how having her online course in a blended format would have been a benefit to her because it would have helped her with the pronunciation of words in her French course. The group of students at Jackson High School did not have students taking blended courses either. However, Will said he could see the benefit in getting to meet his teacher in person because he thought it would have limited some of the miscommunication that occurred through e-mail.

Preparation for college and employment. A subtheme that emerged across all four cases in the cross-case analysis was preparation for college and employment. The students at Spencer and Ashton high schools thought the online learning experience would prepare them for college and employment because it forced them to work independently. The students at Ashton High School also said the online learning experience would help to prepare them for college and employment by helping them to learn time management skills and to communicate professionally electronically. Students at Jackson, Berry, and Ashton High schools also mentioned that having high school courses online would prepare them for online courses in college.

Preparation for online courses. Another subtheme that developed across all four cases was preparation for online courses. Students at all four high schools mentioned what they thought students needed to have in order to be prepared to take online courses. Robert, from Spencer High School, said students who were planning to take AP courses online needed to have an AP course in the traditional classroom setting first. Eric, also from SHS, said he thought if a student was going to take a course online, the content of the course needed to be a subject that the student generally liked or did well in at school. Maria, from Berry High School, and Christy, from Jackson High School, both mentioned the need for basic computer skill knowledge and basic software skills. Blake and Maria, from Berry High School, also mentioned that students need basic Internet safety and skills knowledge in order to be prepared for an online course. Tyler, also from Berry High School, said students need to be self-disciplined. Natasha, from Jackson High School, and Deidra, from Ashton High School, both said they thought students

needed to be able to worked independently before taking an online course. Nia, from Ashton High School, felt that higher than average intelligence was required for taking online courses.

Success in Online Courses

Students at all four schools discussed factors they thought were important in determining success in online courses. These included students' grade levels, maturity, work ethic, course subject, responsibility, and attitude.

Grade level. Another subtheme that developed across all cases was grade level. The majority of students at Spencer and Ashton High schools thought 11th and 12th grades were the appropriate grade levels suitable for taking online courses. The majority of the students at Jackson and Berry High schools felt that the appropriate grade levels for online learning were 10th, 11th, and 12th.

Maturity. Maturity was a subtheme that transpired at Berry, Spencer, and Ashton high schools. Some of the students at these schools said that it required a certain maturity level in order to be able to be responsible enough and self-motivated enough to take a course online.

Work ethic. A subtheme that emerged at Spencer High School was work ethic. Sam said that online courses were a good option for students at any grade level as long as they had a good work ethic. He said grade level did not matter as much as a good work ethic. Robert, also from Spencer High School, mentioned that he felt that work ethic is something that develops as you get older though, and that he thought his work ethic was better as a senior than as a freshman.

Course determines grade level. A theme that also developed at Spencer High School was that the course itself could determine what grade levels were appropriate. Eric said that AP courses would require higher grade levels than some of the other courses. He said that the appropriate grade level could be determined by how difficult the course was in general.

Depends on the individual. A theme that emerged at Ashton High School was that the appropriate grade level for online courses depends on the individual student. Shelby felt whether or not online courses were appropriate for a student depended on that individual and his or her learning style, work ethic, and attitude rather than grade level.

Responsibility. The theme of responsibility also transpired at Ashton High School. Ayla said she felt that the ability to be successful in an online course was related to how responsible a student was. She said that teaching this responsibility to freshmen might be a good idea.

Attitude affecting grades. A theme that developed across all four cases in the cross-case analysis was attitude affecting grades. Darius, from Jackson High School, said that he dreaded coming to his online course and that his attitude was reflected in his course grade. Blake and Maria, from Berry High School, agreed that their positive attitudes in their online courses affected their course grades positively.

Fears

A theme that emerged at Berry, Spencer, and Ashton High schools was fears. The fears that were mentioned at these schools included falling behind, that the course work would be

harder than traditional courses, that there would not be enough help or explanation, and the fear of how the content would be setup.

Falling behind. Falling behind was a subtheme that emerged at Spencer High School. Sam stated that it was easy to get behind in online courses.

Fear of failing. Two of the students at Jackson High School mentioned that they had a fear of failing their online courses. Will and Darius both said they had a fear that they would fail an online course.

Problems

Problems with teachers. The problems with teachers subtheme transpired at Berry and Jackson High schools. Blake, Jasmine, Nicole, and Sarah, from Berry High School, all mentioned having difficulties with their teachers. Christy, from Jackson High School, also mentioned the difficulties she had with her online course teacher.

Problems with assignments. Problems with assignments was a theme and subtheme that emerged across all four cases. Students at all four high schools mentioned specific problems they had with their assignments. The problems mentioned included tests not being open the day they were supposed to be taken, pictures being unclear for language courses, links for websites needed in assignments being blocked or broken, password malfunctions, and the online courseware program taking a long time to load.

Time constraints. Time constraints was a subtheme that developed at Ashton High School. Molly mentioned not having enough time to complete all of her online course assignments because she participated in after-school activities.

Summary

This chapter was designed to expand the understanding of the factors that influence high school students' satisfaction and experiences in online courses. Approaches suggested by Creswell (2007) were followed to complete the analysis.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS, RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH, AND CONCLUSIONS

Discussion

According to the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (2011), “thirty-eight states have virtual schools or state-led online programs” (Fast Facts About Online Learning section, p. 1). The International Association for K-12 Online Learning states that “many virtual schools show annual growth rates between 20 and 45 percent” (Fast Facts About Online Learning section, p. 1). Further, it is stated that “data suggest that in about six years, 10 percent of all courses will be computer-based, and by 2019 about 50 percent of courses will be delivered online” (Fast Facts About Online Learning section, p. 4). Due to this anticipated increase in online learning, it is imperative that K-12 organizations understand what factors influence students’ experiences and satisfaction in online courses.

The traditional classroom setting still encompassed the majority of the high school students’ school day at each of the four high schools in this study. However, due to the advances in distance education technologies and the fact that some states are now requiring students to have an online learning experience at some point during their high school careers in order to graduate, there has been an increase in the number of high school students who are enrolled in online courses. As evidenced in this study, more and more high schools are using online courseware programs to meet the needs of their students and the requirement set forth by the state department of education.

The purpose of this study was to examine factors influencing students' satisfaction and experiences in high school online courses. The cross-case analysis revealed several factors that influenced whether or not the students were satisfied or dissatisfied in their online courses and offered insights into problems, benefits, etc. of the online courses.

The students at the four high schools in this study provided several reasons for taking online courses. These reasons included flexibility, taking specific courses they desired, scheduling conflicts, and meeting a graduation requirement. According to the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (2011), Michigan was the first state to require online learning for high school graduation beginning in April of 2006, and in 2008 the state of Alabama began requiring the online learning experience as a requirement for graduation.

According to Roblyer and Wiencke (2003), the theory of distance learning and the research involved with it proclaims that interaction is a vital contributor in determining the success of distance learning courses. Students at all four schools in this study mentioned that the interaction they had with their teachers did have an impact on whether or not they were satisfied in their online courses. The majority of the students said that they e-mailed their teachers when they had questions or concerns, but there was not much interaction otherwise. However, Shelby, from Ashton High School, was very appreciative that her teacher was willing to meet her to help her out when she needed it. According to Davidson-Shivers (2009), the online experience for both students and teachers can become very personal when there is interaction within the course activities between the teacher and the student.

Students at all four schools also mentioned lack of motivation as something they had experienced in their online courses. Many students mentioned how procrastination came easier in online courses, and it was harder to stay motivated without face-to-face communication on a

daily basis with their teachers. Xie et al. (2006) found that students' attitudes about their courses were a factor in determining their motivation level. Students at all four high schools were concerned about how their attitudes about their online courses could negatively impact their course grades.

While investigating the characteristics of online interaction and collaboration, Nicholas and Ng (2009) found that two-thirds of the messages that were posted on the discussion forum were social messages and not related to the discussion topic. If students viewed the course to be an enjoyable learning experience, then they also showed the same view toward the online discussion assignments. The majority of the high school students in this study did not view the online discussion board as a valuable learning experience. Some of the students said if it were used more for actual open discussion, rather than just to post something for an assignment grade, they would have been more motivated to participate in it.

According to Xie et al., the students will show an increase in motivation and be more willing to contribute to the online discussion activity if they find value in it. The majority of the students in this study only interacted with students who were actually at their local schools and taking the same online course that they were. They did not interact with other students in their online courses otherwise. Students at Berry and Jackson High schools said they actually felt more isolated in their online courses. Brown and Slagter van Tryon (2010) state that is important that students engage in collaboration in order for good digital citizenship to be demonstrated.

Lemley (2007) found that students who received delayed feedback from their instructors had almost an entire grade lower on final exams than the students who received immediate feedback in English courses. Receiving feedback from online course instructors was found to be another factor in whether or not students were satisfied in their online courses at all four high

schools in this study. Most students from the four schools appreciated the feedback they received from their instructors, and some of them felt that helped improve their course grades. Some of the students said they even appreciated the small comments their teachers made to offer encouragement.

Chandra and Lloyd (2008) determined that students can benefit from e-learning courses based on their findings of increased test scores and a rise in the number of students participating in the course. The students in their study stated that the self-paced environment and the ability to control part of their own learning were what they favored the most.

Students at all four high schools mentioned several benefits of taking their online courses. Being able to work at their individual pace was something that students favored at all four schools. A few students at Ashton High school also discussed the benefit of having the opportunity for a different teacher, and a few students there also discussed that taking an online course met the needs of specific learning styles.

According to Hoskins and van Hooff (2005), age plays an important role in predicting students' use of online learning. The students at two high schools in this study identified 10th-12th grades as being the appropriate grade levels for online learning in high school, and the other two schools identified 11th-12th grades as being the appropriate grade levels. The students mentioned maturity, responsibility, work ethic, individual characteristics, and course content as factors in determining whether a high school student could be successful in an online course.

Donlevy (2003) claimed that one advantage for students is that they acquire vital technology skills that will increase their marketability as individuals. Students in the focus groups at all four high schools in the study mentioned reasons why they thought taking online courses would prepare them for college and employment. Some of them thought having the

experience of working independently would better prepare them for both college and employment. Others also claimed that having the experience of learning online would better prepare them for being able to learn differently both in college and on the job.

Gahungu et al. (2006) found that teachers believed their students would be better prepared for online courses if they had been provided with training in using online tools. Some of the teacher responses in Gahungu et al. indicated that they felt it should be mandatory for students to attend workshops, either online or face-to-face, that would train them on how to navigate through the course website, send an e-mail with an attached document, etc. Some of the teachers also provided responses that suggested some students were not prepared when it came to the computer knowledge needed to participate in an online course and that the students needed more computer literacy skills.

The participants in this study offered several suggestions as to what students would need to prepare them for taking an online course. The focus group students recommended that students planning to take online courses have a prior interest in the content of the course they are planning to take online. It was also recommended that students have higher than average intelligence before taking an online course and be self-disciplined. Dodd et al. (2009) suggested that students with prior experience in online courses may be able to be more self-determined and able to work as independent learners more easily than those who had not taken an online course before. Other recommendations from the students at the four high schools in this study included having knowledge of Internet safety, word processing programs, and how to use the Internet in general.

Implications for Educators

The findings of this study led to several suggestions for educators teaching online courses. First, based on the results, the majority of the students said that they e-mailed their teachers when they had questions or concerns, but there was not much interaction otherwise. Some of them said that they found what interaction they did have to be helpful in making them successful in the courses they were taking. This indicates that educators planning to teach online courses should interact with their students regularly when it comes to questions and concerns that their students may have. Teachers may need to have guidelines or professional development on how much and what kinds of interaction they are expected to offer students in the online courses. Teachers of online courses should also be sending regular feedback to their students in regard to their assignments and course grades. Several students in this study mentioned dissatisfaction with the delayed feedback they received from their online instructors.

In regard to the online discussion board in online courses, it is recommended that teachers carefully consider whether or not it is a vital component to the course. It should not be used simply for the sake of having it. Most of the students found it to be pointless, and said they only used it to get course grades rather than actually learning from ongoing discussions throughout the course.

According to Bruett (2006), in order for students to be successful and make meaningful contributions to society, they must be equipped with 21st century skills that include communication and collaboration. Therefore, it is recommended that online instructors make sure that students in online courses are getting these skills by making sure that students within the class are communicating and collaborating.

Many of the students in the study mentioned having problems with their specific assignments in their courses. Educators should work directly with the online courseware managers and the technology coordinators at local schools to make sure that the content and the assignments in the online courses are accessible. The courseware the students need should load easily for them and the links they need for their assignments should work. Educators need to make sure that the links in the assignments they give to students will work.

Another suggestion is that educators consider which online courses may be better suited for a blended environment. Students may be more successful in blended environments for particular courses rather than the course being completely online.

Recommendations for Further Research

There are several recommendations for future research based upon the results, conclusions, and limitations of this study. One recommendation is to include more school sites and more participants in order to increase validity.

This study was conducted as a qualitative case study involving students. Future researchers may wish to administer surveys to teachers or conduct case study interviews in an effort to determine opinions of teachers when it comes to student success in online courses.

Another suggestion would be to conduct a study to determine which courses may be more suitable for the online learning environment than other courses. A good starting point would be to look at course grades of students and the corresponding online courses. Also, the research could look further into the content set-up for courses. Content for all courses might need to be set up differently depending on the nature of the course instead of a one-size-fits-all approach to

setting up content for courses. Also, some courses may be better in the blended environment, rather than totally online due to content.

Future research may also include a study on the opinions of facilitators in online learning environments. A survey could be administered or a case study with interviews could be conducted to determine facilitator opinions of what makes students successful and satisfied in online learning environments.

Another suggestion for future research would be to study learning styles of students in relation to online learning. Specific learning styles may be more suited to the online learning environment than others.

Conclusions

It is evident that the number of students taking online courses at the high school level is increasing. Huett et al. (2008) maintained that efforts to expand K-12 distance education are increasing rapidly. The online course or experience being required by some states also increases the number of online courses being taken at the high school level.

Due to the increase in the number of jobs that are carried out online in the corporate world and in higher education, Donlevy (2003) suggested that the students who are graduates from virtual high schools will be at a great advantage when it comes to the use and understanding of this technology. Therefore, it is important that high schools that are offering online courses to students, by choice or requirement, understand the factors that influence student success and satisfaction in the online learning environment. This study was conducted in response to the need for high schools to gain insight into these factors.

Richardson and Newby (2006) recommended that teachers, as well as designers, of online courses need to consider the various characteristics of their class population when developing an online course. This study will contribute to effectively developing and delivering instruction for high school online courses by providing insight into individual opinions and experiences of high school students in online learning environments.

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APPENDIX A
IRB APPROVAL

Office for Research
Institutional Review Board for the
Protection of Human Subjects

THE UNIVERSITY OF
ALABAMA
R E S E A R C H

December 2, 2010

Amber Harbison
Instructional Technology/Academic Services
College of Education
Box 870302

Re: IRB#: 10-OR-381 "Factors Influencing Students' Satisfaction and Experiences
in High School Online Courses: A Multiple Case Study"

Dear Ms. Harbison:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your
proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46.
Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not
limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language,
communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research
employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human
factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies

Your application will expire on December 1, 2011. If your research will continue
beyond this date, complete the relevant portions of Continuing Review and Closure
Form. If you wish to modify the application, complete the Modification of an
Approved Protocol. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval,
except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants.
When the study closes, complete the appropriate portions of the Continuing Review
and Closure Form.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved stamped consent forms to obtain
consent from your participants.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal,
please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

[Redacted Signature]

Carpantato T. Myles, MSM, CIM
Director & Research Compliance Officer
Office of Research Compliance
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INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT (parent for under age 19 child)

Dear Parent/Guardian:

It is being requested for your child to participate in a research study conducted by Amber Nicole Harbison and Dr. Margaret Rice, from The University of Alabama, College of Education. We hope to examine factors influencing students' satisfaction and experiences in high school online courses. Your child was selected as a possible participant in this study because he or she is currently taking an online course.

Your child's anticipated participation time will be one hour. Your child's participation will involve participating in an informal focus group interview with other students where he or she will answer questions from an interview protocol. The focus group interview will occur immediately after normal school hours. The protocol will contain twenty three items. There also will be a short demographic survey given to your child before the interview begins that will include five items. The survey will be confidential. No names will be provided at any time throughout the study. Therefore, anonymity will be maintained. The interviews will be tape recorded, and your child's voice will only be identified by a number.

The researchers request, if your child participates in the study, that he or she maintain confidentiality and not discuss the focus group interview discussions or the identity of the participants with anyone outside of the focus group. However, the researchers cannot guarantee that persons will not discuss the focus group proceedings outside of the group.

Your child will also be observed while participating in the online course. He or she will be observed during a classroom setting, which should last approximately 45 minutes. The researcher will only be making observations and notes of the participants in the study. One observation should be sufficient.

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with your child's participation in this study. Society may benefit in that the information bank is being added to. This study may also help to improve online courses being offered at the high school level. However, I cannot guarantee that your child personally will receive any benefits from this research. Participation will not affect your child's grade in class.

All information provided by your child will be anonymous. No names will provided.

Your child's participation is completely voluntary. Your child may choose not to answer any questions that make him/her feel uncomfortable. Participation may be discontinued at any time. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which your child is otherwise entitled. Regardless of when your child signs the assent form to participate, he or she will again be reminded of his or her rights as a research participant prior to the focus group interview and classroom observation.

If you or your child have any questions about the study, you may contact me, Amber Harbison, at (256) 298-0495. You may also contact my advisor Dr. Margaret Rice at (205) 348-1165. If you or your child have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Ms. Tanta Myles, The University of Alabama Research Compliance Officer, by calling 205-348-8461 or toll free 1-877-820-3066.

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB
CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 12/2/10
EXPIRATION DATE: 12/1/2011

(continued on back) →

By signing this document, you give your consent for your child, _____, to participate in the study.

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____ Date: _____

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB
CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 12/2/10
EXPIRATION DATE: 12/1/2011

Participant Assent Form (under age 19)

Dear Potential Participant:

We are doing a study to examine factors influencing students' satisfaction and experiences in high school online courses. We are asking you to help because we do not know very much about what students your age feel about online learning environments.

If you agree to be in our study, we are going to ask you some questions about online learning. For example, we will ask you to give a response to the following: "Do you feel that interaction with the teacher in your online course may help you to make a better grade?"

You will also be observed while participating in the online course. You will be observed during a classroom setting, which should last approximately 45 minutes. The researcher will only be making observations and notes of the participants in the study. One observation should be sufficient.

You can ask questions that you might have about this study at any time. Also, if you decide at any time not to finish, you may stop whenever you want. Remember, these questions are only about what you think. There are no right or wrong answers because this is not a test.

There are no foreseen risks or benefits to the participants. Therefore, participation will not help or hurt your course grades.

The researchers request, if you choose to participate in the study, that you maintain confidentiality and not discuss the focus group interview discussions or the identity of the participants with anyone outside of the focus group. However, the researchers cannot guarantee that persons will not discuss the focus group proceedings outside of the group.

If you sign this paper, it means that you have read this and that you want to be in the study. If you do not want to be in the study, do not sign the paper. Remember, it is your decision to choose whether or not you wish to participate in the study, and your school system will not be upset with you if you do not choose to sign this paper or even if you change your mind later. Regardless of when you sign this form, you will again be reminded of all your rights as a research participant prior to the focus group interview and classroom observation.

Signature of Participant _____ Date _____

Signature of Researcher _____ Date _____

UA IRB Approved Document
Approval date: 12/2/10
Expiration date: 12/1/2011

APPENDIX B
DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Online Learning Experience

Demographic Survey

Please circle your response to the five items listed below.

1. Gender: Male Female
2. Grade Level: 9 10 11 12
3. Do you have home internet access? Y N
4. Have test results determined that you are a gifted student? Y N
5. What is the final letter grade that you expect to receive in your current online course?
A B C D F

Please provide the number of online courses that you have previously taken along with the names of those courses and what grade you were in when they were taken in the blanks provided below:

Number of Courses: _____

Name of Course: _____ Grade: _____

APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Online Learning Experience

Interview Protocol

1. Do you feel that interaction with other students helped you to have a better grade in your online course?
2. Do you feel that interaction with the teacher in your online course may help you to make a better grade?
3. Do you feel motivated to do well in your online course?
4. Do you feel that students in grades 11-12 may have better grades in online courses than students in grades 9-10?
5. Do you feel that students in grades 11-12 are more likely to benefit from an online course than students in grades 9-10?
6. Do you feel that feedback from the teacher may help me to have a higher grade in the online course?
7. Do you feel that if you spent more time in the online discussion forum you might have a higher course grade?
8. Do you feel that your attitude about the online course may affect your course grade in the online course?
9. Did you enjoy the online learning experience?
10. Do you feel that having access to the Internet at home may affect how well a student does in an online course?
11. Did you have difficulty in the online course because you did not know how to use the software?
12. Do you feel that your participation in the online course better prepared you for employment (work)?
13. Do you feel that taking the online course better prepared you for college?
14. Do you feel that your participation in the online course helped you to work with other students?
15. Would you rather have a blended learning course (online with face to face communication) than a totally online course?
16. Do you feel that you want to participate in the online discussion board?
17. Are you comfortable submitting assignments through the online course management system that you are using?

18. Have you taken an online course prior to the one that you are currently taking?
19. Do you feel that you were prepared for the online course that you are currently taking?
20. Overall, do you feel that you were satisfied or dissatisfied with your online learning experience?

Gender:	Male	Female
Grade Level:	9 10	11 12

APPENDIX D
OBSERVATION CHECKLIST

Checklist Form

Observations

Amber Harbison

Student Number: _____

Gender: _____

Grade: _____

Check the blanks below if the student is doing the action:

Student is engaged _____

Student is interacting with his/her teacher _____

Student is checking course grades _____

Student is interacting with other students in the class _____

Student is posting to the discussion forum _____

Student appears to be motivated to participate in the course _____

Student appears to be frustrated _____

Student appears to navigate through the course software with ease _____

Student appears to struggle with navigating through the software _____

Student complains to the facilitator about difficulties _____

Student appears to be comfortable working in the online environment _____