

PERCEPTIONS OF TEENS CHOOSING A VIRTUAL HIGH SCHOOL AS A
SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL SAFE HAVEN

A Dissertation by

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Education with a major in Educational Leadership.

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DEDICATION

To my children, Zachariah and Laurel. You are the reason I continually strive to be better. To Manuel, you are always my biggest cheerleader and greatest support. I would not want to do this life without you. To my youngest brother Scott. There have been many times I felt this was just too little too late, but I want to emulate the compassion and generous spirit that I have heard about so often since you left us. To my mom, Barbara. I know you are celebrating with me as I conclude this process. I am grateful to have your thirst for reading and creative expression. I will forever work to make you proud as I attempt to care for others in the generous manner you exemplified. To my dad, my brothers Bill and Steve, and all of our family for putting up with my constant state of business over the past few years. To our grandkids Dalis, Haley, Eliseona, Harlee, Isabella, and Isaac. May you always follow our dreams and reach for your fullest potential. And last, but not least, to my amazing friends, in-laws, and extended family who have been encouraging and cheering me on even when I missed too many gatherings to count. I am blessed by having all of you in my life. Thank you.

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ABSTRACT

Suicide is a national crisis in the United States that claims more teenagers than cancer, heart disease, AIDs, birth defects, stroke, pneumonia, influenza, and chronic lung disease combined (Flatt, 2019). Many individual risk factors, as well as the social and environmental context in which they live impacts the decision to complete suicide. Some of the most noted factors in the lives of teens involve situations that take place in schools including bullying, peer pressure, and struggles with mental illness. Brick and mortar schools have long been attempting to train staff to assist students in their setting, but what about the students and families who turn to a virtual school as a safe haven? In this study, Bandura's theory of reciprocal causation serves as the lens through which student perceptions regarding the impact of moving from a brick and mortar high school to a virtual one in order to find a safe haven are explored. Student interviews, a review of relevant literature, and documents at the school and state levels revealed that there are relational and systemic happenings in the virtual school setting that students are finding effective in providing them with a social and emotional safe haven for high school. The need for continued research, discussion, and training is evident as this relatively new, and ever growing, landscape expands.

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CHAPTER 1

Teen suicide is a national crisis in the United States, where more teenagers die from suicide than from cancer, heart disease, AIDs, birth defects, stroke, pneumonia, influenza, and chronic lung disease combined (Flatt, 2019). Individual risk factors as well as the social and environmental context in which a person lives impact their decision to complete suicide. Teens are especially vulnerable due to the increased risk inherent to that stage of life, which includes ongoing brain development and pubertal changes that impact decision making abilities. These changes can also increase depression, stress, and impulsive behaviors. With teens spending a substantial portion of their time in school for nine months of the year, it falls to schools to take a leading role in suicide prevention (McGee, 2016; Nadeem et al., 2011; R. Young, Sweeting, & Ellaway, 2011).

Youth who contemplate suicide often give warning signs that place teachers in a key position to notice those signs and intervene. Twenty-seven states currently have policies in place mandating staff training in schools. These trainings are intended to assist educators in recognizing the signs of suicidal behaviors and knowing how to respond. Individual schools have also responded with a variety of staff trainings and programs (American Foundation of Suicide Prevention, 2018). While policies have mandated the development of training resources for the traditional brick and mortar school setting, teachers in virtual schools must also learn how to support their students. This new challenge is one that many school districts are likely to face as virtual schools are an emergent type of high school becoming more prevalent as an appealing alternative to the traditional brick and mortar high school setting. There were 429 full time

virtual schools enrolling 297,712 students in the 2017-18 school year and that number appears to be on the rise (Miron, Shank, & Davidson, 2018; Molnar et al., 2019).

While the reasons to enroll in virtual high school will vary for the individual student, there are some common themes for those who enroll their children in these schools. Some parents choose virtual high schools for greater flexibility to accommodate participation in sports, drama, work schedules, or to allow a student to receive medical treatment for physical or mental ailments without taking a leave from school. Other families find that a change from the local school system and having more involvement in their child's education is preferable. Still other parents choose the virtual school setting to get their children away from people or situations in the brick and mortar setting they found problematic (Edwards, 2018; Littlefield, 2020).

Research Problem

As enrollment in virtual schools continues to rise, there are many factors to consider for staff who are working to meet the social, emotional, and mental health needs of their high school students. An efficacy report based on Pearson Online Blended Learning Community, a provider of virtual education in partnership with public and charter schools, found that 35% of parents chose an online school to provide a safe learning environment for their children (Edwards, 2018). While remaining in the home may be safer physically, it remains unclear as to whether this may be socially isolating for those students, and if so, what impact this may have on these students' social and emotional well-being.

Teacher and peer relationships are important to high school students. Higher levels of social connectedness are associated with better mental and physical health and social support is a protective factor against suicidal ideation as there is a central human need to establish and develop mutual connections (Bonanno & Hymel, 2010; Dias, Geard, Campbell, Warr, &

McVernon, 2018). In the brick and mortar school setting these connections between students and both their peers and teachers are formed during the in-person contact time provided throughout a school day. Interactions take place within the classroom, during passing periods, at lunch, and before and after school. Establishing relationships in the virtual school setting can be more challenging, since these physical contacts are not a part of the equation (Barbour & Plough, 2009). Contacts in online schools are frequently asynchronous, not happening in real time, and facilitated using various online tools. Message boards are sites that the teachers use to hold announcements, recordings of their classes, study guides, and other helpful information that a student can access at any time. Written communication between teachers and students can take place within the curriculum through feedback written within submitted work. Teachers and students can also communicate through webmail or instant messaging that is internal to the learning platform, by text message, and by email. Synchronous contacts, where there is give and take in real time, occur in a variety of ways as well. Conversations may take place on the phone or by using the microphone in an online classroom. Chats may take place within text boxes within online classrooms, or through an instant message feature. Students may attend online classes where they can communicate with the teacher and their peers by writing in chat boxes, participating in polls, sharing documents or personal work with screen sharing, or by talking on the microphone. Some students attend individual tutoring sessions where they often use a camera and microphone in addition to other tools to communicate. There are also in-person events such as field trips and proctored exams where teachers, students, and peers meet face-to-face. The frequency and duration of these encounters varies, with some students having synchronous contact for up to several hours a day, and others having the minimum contact required by their school, which may be as little as once per semester. Studies indicate that there

is a great deal of complexity surrounding the relationship between the perception of social connectedness and recorded daily encounters and the variance between people is significant (Dias et al., 2018). Limited teacher-student interaction can be a great concern to some families, with some students reporting that the lack of contact and feedback can leave them feeling ignored, lost, and/or lonely (Weiner, 2003).

School-based suicide prevention programs, which were developed in response to concerns about the growing incidence of teen suicide, often identify teachers as having the most consistent contact with students. For this reason, teachers are considered the gatekeepers of suicide-prevention programs (Hawton, Saunders, & O'Connor, 2012; Nadeem et al., 2011). The gatekeeper model prioritizes educating school staff to better detect students at elevated risk for suicide. It also improves staff awareness of suicidal warning signs and addresses their ability to intervene with resources and referrals (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018b; Gould, Greenberg, Velting, & Shaffer, 2003). Teachers in brick and mortar high schools report that direct observation serves as the primary means used to identify students at risk. Teachers who utilize direct observational techniques rely heavily on discerning changes in student behavior as well as observations of peer interactions during class (Nadeem et al., 2011). There is currently a paucity of information about online teachers' perceptions of their ability to identify and assist when students exhibit high-risk behaviors as well as what that looks like in the virtual high school setting.

One of the more significant protective factors shown to be a buffer against the risk of suicide is a sense of connectedness in schools (United States Office of the Surgeon General, 2012). Researchers have suggested that suicidality is fundamentally a relational phenomenon (Jobes et al., 2004) and the interpersonal theory of suicide, developed by Joiner in 2009, posits

that a lack of reciprocal caring relationships increase the risk for suicidal ideation. According to this theory, those with a lower level of connectedness would be more likely to experience suicidal ideations, evidencing that their basic psychological need for social belonging is not being met (Haslam, 2004; Joiner, 2009). For youth who have reported suicidal ideation and/or suicide attempts there are significant associations to a lack of social connectedness when compared to those not in those categories (Arango, Opperman, Gipson, & King, 2016). Building relationships with their students may be especially challenging for teachers in the virtual setting.

In educational technology research it has been established that the information to be learned may be presented either online or in person, with neither presentation having a negative impact on student learning (Fishman et al., 2013). What is lacking is an understanding of the impact that the environment in which the information is presented has regarding students' ability to form relationships (Ahn & McEachin, 2017). Conversations taking place remotely, less face-to-face contact, and students having the agency to choose whether or not to show up to optional classes, may allow some students to feel safer or more connected to their teachers due to the perception of having more control over the interactions. Some students may also feel that phone conversations are more comfortable or more intimate than face-to-face conversations. For other students these same circumstances may make it more challenging to develop and maintain caring and reciprocal connections with their teachers in the virtual setting. Given the critical role of teachers as gatekeepers in suicide identification and prevention (Hawton et al., 2012; Nadeem et al., 2011), and the unique dynamics of the virtual school setting, it is important to understand how students are perceiving the impact of the change in environment when they transfer to virtual high schools. Because virtual schools are a relatively new phenomenon, little is known

about the perspectives of students who are at risk for suicidal thoughts and behaviors and choose to transfer to a virtual high school. Students may choose to leave undesirable situations without fully understanding the impact the change in environment will have on their ability to solve or mitigate social, emotional, and mental health challenges.

Theoretical Framework

Transferring from a traditional brick and mortar high school to a virtual high school results in a notable change in environment for students. This study employed the theory of reciprocal causation (Bandura, 1986) to frame the research questions and better understand the perceptions of students who enroll in virtual high school. More specifically, this study focused on students and/or their parents who reported behaviors or situations that are associated with suicidal ideation or behavior as a reason for changing from a brick and mortar to virtual high school. This lens allowed a focus on the change in the educational environment and the subsequent changes to the person and behavior that the student perceives because of this move.

Reciprocal Causation

Bandura's theory of reciprocal causation states that the person, behavior, and environment are a triad of factors that interact with one another to shape a person's circumstances. When one of the factors change, the impact extends into the other areas of the triad (Wood & Bandura, 1989). The model of triadic reciprocity, shown in Figure 1, illustrates the many ways various influences may affect the triad. It is important to note there is not a specific pattern of movement and the strength of the influences will vary within the process of reciprocal causation. There is no symmetry in the strength of the bi-directional influences. In most cases, each interacting factor develops interdependently, mutually affected by the other bi-directional influences. The mutual influences and their reciprocal effects do not happen all at

once. Since the triadic factors do not operate at the same time, it is easier to gain some understanding of how segments of the two-way causation operate without having to attempt to study all of the possible interactions at the same time (Bandura, 1986). This allows for a focus on the effect of the change of school environment in this study.

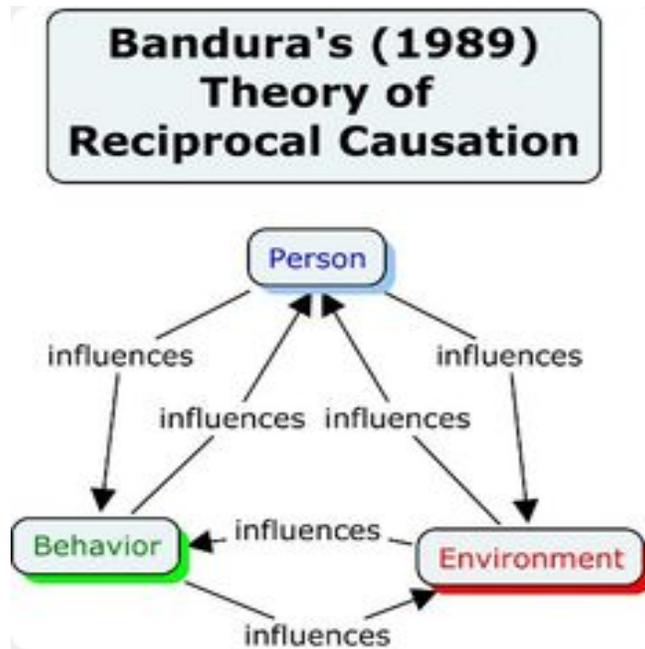


Figure 1 Relationship Between the Three Classes of Determinants in Triadic Reciprocal Causation

For this study, I examined the relationship between students, suicidal behaviors, and the high school environment through the lens of Bandura's theory of reciprocal causation. The person in the triad is the high school student who first attended high school in the brick and mortar school setting and transferred to a virtual high school. The behavior in the triad is the behavior of the student participants in relation to social/emotional and mental health concerns. These students or their parents had reported that determining factors in choosing to go from a brick and mortar school to a virtual high school included some combination of events, feelings, and social/emotional concerns that were related to suicidal behaviors and ideations. The primary

focus of this study was on the students' perceptions of the impact of the change in environment from the brick and mortar high school to the setting of the virtual high school in relation to previously identified social/emotional and mental health concerns commonly associated with suicidal behaviors. Researchers have found that changing social and environmental contexts has the potential to promote the kinds of healthy behavior that can be useful in addressing suicidal tendencies in students (Westers & Culyba, 2018). This may explain why some parents withdraw their children from brick and mortar schools and enroll them instead in online schools. In addition, the virtual school environment provides teachers with unique challenges for interacting with their students in both frequency and setting. This in turn impacts their ability to engage with their students, affecting the behaviors of students.

It makes sense that an environment is only operative when it is engaged. In the traditional brick and mortar school setting, this means the classroom is only an influence if the student attends class. In the virtual school setting, this means that online classes are only effective if the students choose to attend, and the impact will vary depending on whether they attend live or watch a recording. It also means that teachers' relationships with their students in the virtual school setting is dependent on the type of contact (synchronous or asynchronous) and frequency. Students typically prefer synchronous contacts, which allow them to interact directly with their teacher(s), peers, and the lessons, with the opportunity to ask questions, give presentations, and engage in discussions (Barbara & William, 1996). While interactions in the brick and mortar setting tend to be face-to-face, these interactions may take other forms in the online school setting and can occur outside of typical school hours. There are similarities in both settings in that some students choose to actively and frequently engage, while some prefer to fly under the radar as much as possible. In the brick and mortar setting students typically show up

to class although they may choose not to engage once there or may choose to skip altogether. Students in the virtual school may choose to attend synchronous lessons daily, or more than once per day, and interact often through open office times and phone calls, more closely resembling the frequency of interactions between teachers and students in the brick and mortar high school setting. High school students in a virtual school may also choose to avoid most contact opportunities by meeting the minimum phone contacts required and only attending required synchronous contact two to three times per year for proctored final exams or state testing. Students in a typical online school have less synchronous instructional time in a week than students in a brick and mortar setting have in a day (Gill et al., 2015). These factors, choices, and circumstances are influences moving between the students, behaviors, and environments in the triad.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to understand the factors influencing students' choice to attend a virtual school when that choice is grounded in social and/or emotional concerns. Also explored is how that choice might be related to students' mental health and overall well-being specifically related to suicidal behaviors. Through the lens of Bandura's theory of reciprocity, I examined the students' perceptions of the impact of the changed environment. Findings from the analysis of student interviews will potentially inform future virtual school efforts in supporting students who enroll with them with and/or exhibit risk factors for suicidal behaviors.

To achieve these purposes, the study posed the following research questions:

1. Why do students who have social/emotional concerns that are commonly linked to suicidal behaviors choose to transfer from a brick and mortar to virtual high school setting?

2. What are the perceived differences in social/emotional challenges, experiences, and supports when comparing experiences in brick and mortar high school to experiences in virtual high schools?
3. In what ways has the change in environment to a virtual high school had an impact on behavior and sense of self for the participants?

The significance of this study stems from the increase in virtual schools as a public-school option in the United States, in conjunction with the increasingly complex task of keeping our students safe in all settings. By gathering student perspectives, this study provided insights into the feelings and thoughts of these individuals that may lead to a better understanding of the challenges and needs that students in a virtual high school face. In addition to contributing to the conversations around virtual education and teen suicide, the findings may help inform the teen suicide prevention efforts in virtual schools for educators, advocates, parents, and policy makers. With a better understanding of the challenges that students face and the varied paths to student success, those in power can better contribute to awareness and resource options and improve their ability to help students identify and overcome obstacles.

CHAPTER 2

Review of Literature

Teen suicide rates are rising, and schools are scrambling to deal with the trauma when it happens to one of their own, as well as to find ways to decrease the overall impact and incidence. At the same time, online schooling is increasing in popularity in the United States. Due to a paucity of information directly addressing the identification of, and intervention for, suicidal behavior in the virtual school setting, this review synthesizes a foundational understanding about teen suicide and interventions in brick and mortar school settings with the available information about virtual high schools. First, there is a look at suicide prevalence among teens in the United States, with attention paid to several types of suicidal behaviors and identifiable risk factors and warning signs. Next, the ways that brick and mortar high schools are responding to the suicide crisis is explored. Finally, there is information on the key differences of environment in the virtual high school setting in relation to suicide prevention in brick and mortar schools and how virtual schools may also respond to this crisis.

Suicide Prevalence Among Teens in the United States

The act of ending one's own life is an increasing public health concern that has far-reaching and lasting effects on communities, families, and individuals. In the United States, monitoring of suicides and intentional self-inflicted injuries occurs through the Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS), a database kept by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. For middle and high school students in the United States, suicide is the second most frequent cause of death. In youth age 10-14, there has been an alarming increase of more than 150% in suicides since 1981 (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018b).

Suicidal Behaviors

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) oversees the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS), a survey administered every two years by local health departments to 9th – 12th graders in public and private high schools in the United States. The survey gathers information about priority health risk behaviors that have a significant impact on the leading causes of death, disability, and social problems. Unlike statistical data that tracks events, deaths, and reports from hospitals and mental health professionals, this data is from student input. This student data, combined with other sources, assists in furthering educators' awareness (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2019).

The CDC also advocates the use of common definitions for three types of suicidal behaviors. Having the definitions for ideation, attempt, and suicide completion used consistently across a variety of agencies helps mental health professionals be consistent in assessing suicidal behaviors, identifying high-risk groups, and monitoring the effectiveness of prevention programs (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018a).

The first suicidal behavior is ideation, which includes considering or planning to die by suicide. Suicidal ideation is statistically significant in association with past suicide attempts. The YRBSS found that 17.2% of the students surveyed had seriously considered suicide, and 14.6% had made a detailed plan to carry out their suicide in the previous 12 months (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018a; Smith, Stanley, Joiner, Sachs-Ericsson, & Van Orden, 2016; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2019). Rates of hospital encounters and admissions for suicide attempts and ideation more than doubled from 2008 to 2015, and suicide ideation is a strong indicator of students being at risk of dying by their own hand (Nierengarten, 2018).

The second suicidal behavior is a suicide attempt. This is when a person tries to kill him or herself but does not complete the act, surviving the incident. Attempts are strong indicators that a student is at risk of dying by suicide (Nierengarten, 2018). There is an average of 3,040 suicide attempts annually by high school students in the United States (Flatt, 2019) and the YRBSS found that 7.4% of the students screened had attempted suicide in the prior 12 months (Kann et al., 2018). There is an attempt to death rate of 25:1 among adolescents, and in a study at a school in the Midwest, 78% of teachers reported they knew an adolescent who had attempted or completed suicide (Gunn, Goldstein, & Gager, 2018).

The third suicidal behavior is suicide completion, when a person dies by intentionally hurting themselves with the plan to die as a result (Goldsmith, 2017). The suicide rate for adolescent males alone increased 31% from 2007 to 2015 (Brent, 2019). Suicide is the second most prevalent cause of death among teens (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018a), and according to the American Association of Suicidology (2019), an average of one young person dies by suicide every hour and 32 minutes.

Identifiable Risk Factors

While a direct cause and effect relationship has not been determined, there are risk factors and recognizable warning signs for suicidal behaviors. However, even in the brick and mortar high school setting, risk factors are not always obvious. Teachers spend more time with students than any other staff in school, and for this reason they receive training on recognizing warning signs, what resources are available, and how to refer students for help. Direct observation by teachers is considered the primary means by which teachers identify students who may be at risk (Nadeem et al., 2011). While some conditions may be observable, educators also rely on reviewing student records, parents who share relevant information, or knowledge gained

through relationships with the students. According to the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention (2018), the most common and significant factors fall into the categories of health, environment, and historical events. While these factors are not exclusive to teens, they are contributing factors for them.

Physical and mental health factors can play a part in the increased likelihood that a person may be suicidal. Serious or chronic physical conditions and traumatic brain injury, often related to sports or motor vehicle accidents for teens, may be a factor. Mental health conditions such as impulsivity, conduct and anxiety disorders, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, depression, and substance abuse problems often play a role in teen suicidal behaviors (Berman, Jobes, & Silverman, 2006). A history of depression, violence victimization, and violence perpetration are additional factors for increased risk (Stone et al., 2017).

Environmental factors in the home, school, neighborhood, or other places a student frequently spends time such as a church or club, may impact suicidal behaviors. Stressful life events such as the death of a friend or family member, parents' divorce, or relationship problems may lead teens to exhibit suicidal behaviors. Research indicates that bullying in the adolescent population creates an increased suicide risk for both the bully and the victim, whether the bullying takes place in person or online (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). In 2017, 19% of high school students surveyed reported that they were bullied on school property, 14.9% were electronically bullied, and 6.7% indicated that they did not go to school at least one out of the past 30 days due to concerns for their personal safety (Kann et al., 2018). Other identified environmental factors include stigma associated with asking for help, sensationalized media accounts of suicide, and access to firearms and drugs (Stone et al., 2017).

Historical factors including a family history of suicide, previous personal attempts, and childhood neglect, abuse, or trauma can all be factors in a person's decision to attempt suicide (Berman et al., 2006). Of these, the factors that tend to be more youth-specific include family history of suicidal behavior, parental separation, death, divorce, and social contagion, also known as copycat suicide (Hawton et al., 2012).

Warning Signs

In addition to knowing factors that put a student at risk, it is important for educators to recognize warning signs, as they are the foundation for activities and interventions aimed at education and prevention. Some believe that as many as three out of four teens who die by suicide exhibited clear warning signs prior to their death. Suicide often happens when stressors and/or health issues create feelings of despair and hopelessness, with depression being the most common condition linked to suicide. As with the risk factors listed above, warning signs can be organized into three groups: Change in behavior, talk, and mood (American Foundation of Suicide Prevention, 2018; Flatt, 2019).

A primary sign that educators watch for is a change in behavior, especially when related to a painful or traumatic event. Students may signal risk by isolating themselves from peers and withdrawing from activities, giving away prized possessions, or telling people goodbye. Sleeping too much or too little and searching online for materials or ways to carry out the act of suicide can also be indications. If these behaviors combine with a painful event or loss, they are even more likely to be a warning sign for suicide (American Foundation of Suicide Prevention, 2018; Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018b). Teachers in brick and mortar schools report watching for interactions among students as well as watching for students who make social shifts to subgroups they feel are more at risk for suicidal behaviors. These subgroups include students

who are cutting or otherwise hurting themselves, students who exhibit disciplinary problems, students without friends, and LGBTQ students (Nadeem et al., 2011).

Staff and students may not be aware that it is a serious matter that deserves immediate action when a student talks about killing themselves. This is a case of “better safe than sorry” and each episode deserves prompt attention. In addition to directly talking about killing themselves, a student may report feeling hopeless with no reason to live, feeling trapped, feeling like a burden to others, or feeling unbearable physical or psychological pain. The risk increases when a student feels they are not being listened to (Lindgaard et al., 2016; Westefeld, Kettmann, Lovmo, & Hey, 2007).

Moods may become agitated when a student is contemplating suicide. These moods can manifest as a loss of interest as well as humiliation, anxiety, irritability, agitation, or rage. In addition, depressive symptoms that are positively associated with suicidal behaviors may also be evident. A sudden switch to a mood of relief or sense of improvement may also be a sign that the student has settled on a plan for their suicide and is in imminent danger (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2018).

Identifying the risk factors and warning signs of suicidal behaviors is key in prevention and intervention. With youth who attend brick and mortar schools spending an average of over 30 hours per week in school, teachers are in a unique position to have a positive impact in the identification and prevention of suicidal behaviors in students.

Brick and Mortar High Schools Respond to the Suicide Crisis

The problem of identification and prevention of suicidal behaviors is a major concern in typical brick and mortar high schools. Recommendations from the YRBSS include a call for schools to play a vital role in identifying and treating students in need of mental health care

(Eaton et al., 2012). A nationwide survey of high school staff found that teachers feel they should be able to detect students at risk for suicide. They reported being willing to take on this responsibility, but also stated they lacked the skills needed to do this successfully (Roth, Leavey, & Best, 2008).

Confronting suicide in a high school can be a traumatic and confusing task imposed upon administrators who may have no experience and little, if any, training. A Palo Alto, California superintendent learned this the hard way, with suicide clusters in 2009 and 2014 in his district. This led him to join with experts at Columbia, Stanford, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the CDC to investigate factors such as mental health in teens, the teenage brain, the effects of sleep on teens, and the role each may have had in the deaths (McGee, 2016). The team conducted parent and student focus groups to compile a list of factors that play a role in the identification, prevention, and postvention of suicide in teens. The mitigating factors found in prevention centered on the importance of sleep, the prevalence of depression, the role of students in identifying signs in each other, and the role of a “hotspot,” which in their case was a local train crossing. This information aligns with research showing the need to address suicidal trends, teen mental health, and limiting the access to lethal means (Westefeld et al., 2007).

There are websites and programs that offer tools and support to schools attempting to address this crisis. A high school health class in Cincinnati implemented one such program, Surviving the Teens: Depression Awareness and Suicide Prevention Program®, with students grades nine through twelve. They conducted pre- and post-surveys. A key outcome of the study was students knowing suicide indicators, myths, facts, and in the perceived importance of knowing what to do if friends appear to be in danger (Strunk, King, Vidourek, & Sorter, 2014). Despite the many programs, training opportunities, publications, and news stories

available, there continues to be a disconnect between knowing that teen suicide is a problem and knowing what to do about it. One reason for this is that there are many signs to look for as risk factors for suicide (Berman et al., 2006).

Recognizing this difficulty, many schools are also turning to programs that train students to help students. Effective high school programs should involve students from the start, setting an agenda that allows students' ideas and opinions to drive the program. It is important in these programs to get representation of all student groups, not just the "good kids" (Leder, 2018). One such program is Sources of Strength®, which was the first suicide prevention program to involve peer leaders in efforts to reduce suicide at the school population level. Sources of Strength® works with a school to choose a diverse group of peer leaders to impact a wide range of cliques. Students work with adult leaders in training and take on increased leadership and ownership of the program over time. Training and activities are positive and upbeat, recognizing that suicide prevention is a significant part of the training while keeping it fun, interesting, and empowering (LoMurray, 2018). Sources of Strength®, like Surviving the Teens®, has shown that using peer leaders as the liaisons between students and adults is an effective method of prevention and intervention. Sources of Strength® started in North Dakota in 1998 and is currently in use in thirty states. It was the subject of one of the nation's largest studies on peer leaders and their impact in suicide prevention efforts with results showing an increase in peer leaders' school engagement and connectedness to adults. Peer leaders in larger schools were four times more likely to refer a suicidal friend to an adult, and positive perceptions of adult support increased in most students with a history of suicidal thoughts (Wyman et al., 2010).

In addition to schools creating, purchasing, and implementing interventions and programs, states are also getting involved. The Jason Flatt Foundation is a foundation for the

prevention of teen suicide created by the father of Jason Flatt in honor of his son, a sixteen-year-old who died by suicide in 1997. In 2007, a young legislator introduced the Jason Flatt Act as a piece of legislation that mandated training for educators. The Act passed in Tennessee, making it the first state with a mandatory suicide prevention training program for educators. The legislation was part of the efforts of the Jason Flatt Foundation to raise awareness and increase prevention of teen suicide. The training for teachers and school staff is an inclusive youth suicide awareness and prevention training completed online, and it is the most prevalent training program adopted at the state level. The program has expanded over the years to include twenty states, and legislation in these states mandate all educators to complete two hours of training each year to be licensed to teach in those states (Flatt, 2019).

Schools are also responding by using screening tools and following up in partnership with local mental health service providers. Increasing easier access to mental health services is a critical component of suicide prevention (McGee, 2016). Since it is believed that up to 90% of young people who die by suicide have a treatable mental illness, which may be undiagnosed or untreated (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2017), screening may be one of the most effective actions schools can take. One study evaluated a program implemented with ninth graders in a moderately sized midwestern high school and found a multi-stage suicide-screening program followed up with case management for ninety days or at least three appointments with a mental health professional was an effective model. This study showed promising results with a significant decrease in the number of students who seriously contemplated or attempted suicide from the year of the pilot program to the third year of implementation (Torcasso, Hilt, & 2017).

Virtual Schools in the United States

Virtual schools tend to be more alike than different when compared to their brick and mortar counterparts. Both have administrative offices and staff, teachers, school improvement plans, course standards, daily attendance, collaboration with families, learning support for special populations, organized outings, governing bodies, and state reporting. Public virtual schools have the same course and graduation requirements, attendance and truancy laws, and teachers who must meet state licensure guidelines (Education, 2018). Some full-time virtual schools are independent and often created within a district. These account for about 67% of the full-time virtual schools currently operating in the United States. These schools may contract with an educational organization for curriculum and materials or may develop those on their own. The majority of the rest of the full-time virtual schools in the United States are aligned with Educational Management Organizations (EMOs). These schools are often aligned with a public-school district or a charter school system and account for about 27% of the full-time virtual schools. These schools rely on the EMO to provide the curriculum and learning system, as well as to hire and pay administrators and teachers within the school (Molnar et al., 2019).

Teachers in the virtual setting believe it is important to connect with their students and build relationships to let students know they are not alone and that they have a “real” teacher. In addition to the synchronous contacts they have, virtual schools have a unique reliance on effective written communication. They learn to consciously monitor their message board postings and student feedback for language and emotional tone in efforts to reduce potential misunderstandings (Dipietro, 2010). Overcoming the perceived sense of social isolation for their students is a challenge that online teachers face (Barbour & Plough, 2009).

Unlike blended, charter, or home-schools, virtual high schools deliver all curriculum via electronic communications and the internet. Students are typically in their homes and teachers are at a remote location that may be an office setting or in their homes. In differing states these may be referred to as e-schools, virtual schools, or cyber schools (Greenway & Vanourek, 2006). In this study the terms used interchangeably are virtual and online school. Recent studies suggest that self-paced instruction is the norm in virtual schools with limited teacher-student interaction (Gill et al., 2015). Synchronous instruction takes place in real time within online classrooms. Communication in these classrooms takes place with cameras, microphones, poll pods, or chat pods. Poll pods are dialogue boxes on screen within the online classroom with predetermined questions and choices for participants to answer questions, or give their opinions, which the teacher can then display to the group in percentage or graph visuals. Chat pods are dialogue boxes within the online classroom in which participants communicate via text with the group, or privately with the teacher in an instant message format. Time spent in an online classroom may be instructional or social and can be in a large group, small group, or one-on-one. Collaboration and instruction also take place amongst teachers, as well as between teachers and parents, or teachers and students, most often on the phone. Much of the instruction is asynchronous, with the students accessing their curriculum, related activities, and recordings of the synchronous gatherings on their own schedule (Greenway & Vanourek, 2006).

While virtual schools are not trying to replace the more traditional brick and mortar setting, they do offer solutions to many educational challenges relating to financial or geographical constraints such as a shortage of teachers or advanced courses. They also meet the needs for increased quality and flexibility for a growing student population (Weiner, 2003). Key student population factors such as race, socio-economic status, and female to male ratios are

different from one setting to the other. Just under 65% of the population attending full-time virtual schools identify as White-Non-Hispanic, with a national mean of White-Non-Hispanic students in the brick and mortar school setting of just under 50%. Students in full time virtual schools operated by educational management organizations, like the school chosen for this study, have just over 36% of their population qualify for free and reduced lunches, compared with 51% in brick and mortar schools. English language learners account for about 4% of the population in full time virtual schools, which is well below the national average of 9%. Nationally boys and girls are about 50:50 in brick and mortar school enrollment, while in virtual schools a little over 53% are girls. One subgroup that is currently higher in the full-time virtual setting is the special education population, which at 15.5%, is a bit higher than the national average of 13% (Molnar et al., 2019). With suicide attempts and completions at a higher rate for whites than non-whites, and the attempt rate higher for girls but with a higher completion rate for boys, the potential for increased risk of suicidal behaviors may not be identical across settings. This data may have an impact on how virtual schools choose to address suicide prevention and identification (McKeown et al., 1998; Molnar et al., 2019).

Virtual High Schools Respond to the Suicide Crisis

The environment of virtual high schools is one area that is markedly different from the typical brick and mortar high school. Beyond the physical building, and the time structure that students follow within that building, students in the brick and mortar high school setting see their teachers in person with access to them during class time, in the hallways, and before and after school. They attend school for about seven hours per day, five days per week, with a set schedule. Students in the virtual school setting have their instruction delivered via the internet, most typically asynchronously, with the teachers in one setting and the student in their own

home. Most virtual schools have set hours when teachers are available, although these may vary and may include evening hours. Students may work any days or hours they choose, and they communicate with their teachers by attending online presentations in real time, through electronic communications, and on the telephone (Miron et al., 2018).

The key components of the difference in setting between brick and mortar and virtual high schools that I have identified for the purpose of this study are student-to-teacher ratios, socialization, bullying, and training for staff on suicide prevention.

School research tends to use a student-to-teacher ratio which is different from class size. Student-teacher ratios address the number of teachers in a setting but not their utilization. The only available data that is consistent over time reflect student-teacher ratios (Hanushek, 2010), so with an understanding that actual class sizes may vary greatly within both brick and mortar and virtual high schools, the comparison of student-teacher ratios shows an almost three times higher ratio in virtual schools. While the average public school has approximately 15 students per teacher, virtual schools have about 45. This represents an increase from the 32:1 ratio reported in the previous year, with the recategorization of schools and a change in those tracked being a factor in this change (Miron et al., 2018). It seems reasonable to assume that teachers in the virtual setting, who may work with two to three times the number of students as their brick and mortar counterparts, may find it more challenging to build the relationships needed to aid in identification and prevention of suicidal behaviors.

Social connectedness, informally with friends and more formally with teachers and school staff, has been associated with improved health, including mental health. For students to feel comfortable and have a sense of belonging they must feel connected. Without that sense, students may struggle to develop relationships and may suffer from low self-esteem and feel

isolated (Dias et al., 2018; Lee & Robbins, 1995; McLouglin, Spears, & Taddeo, 2018). According to the Interpersonal Theory of Suicidal Behavior there is a link between low social connectedness and being at risk for suicidal ideation, with evidence that increasing social connectedness can provide a protective effect against suicide (Gunn et al., 2018; Joiner, 2009). When students are in an online school setting full time, they do not have the ability to interact with peers and teachers in classrooms, hallways, or before and after school in the way that they would in a brick and mortar school. Students with lower school engagement are more likely to report suicidal behaviors, making it a significant challenge for online schools to overcome the perceived sense of social isolation that comes with their setting (Barbour & Plough, 2009; Gunn et al., 2018; F. W. Young, 2001). The findings of a descriptive case study in a virtual high school confirmed that social interactions among peers are just as important in the virtual school classroom as they are in the brick and mortar setting. While students in the virtual school setting may choose to work alone, when they participate in the provided classes they work in a collaborative and social manner. Interactions between students and teachers, as well as amongst students are important components of successful online classes (Weiner, 2003). Recent research suggests that online social interactions may allow students to build a sense of connectedness online, with positive impacts on mental health like those expected with traditional social connectedness. Other research, however, suggests that those who have a high need for belonging will seek face-to-face personal interactions more than online interactions, leaving this an area in need of continued observation and research (Chaturvedi, Munshi, Singla, Shahri, & Chanchani, 2015; Grieve & Kemp, 2015; McLouglin et al., 2018).

Bullying is an important risk factor of suicide, with frequent bullying of others during the high school years increasing the later risk for suicide beyond other identified risk factors of

suicide (Klomek et al., 2013). This issue is becoming a hot topic in all schools as balancing education and student safety in this domain is a challenge that comes with little clarity, training, or policy for education (Martin, Wang, Petty, Wang, & Wilkins, 2018; Shariff & Hoff, 2007). In addition to low social connectedness, being a bully or the victim of a bully significantly increases the risk of suicidal behaviors (Arango et al., 2016; Gunn et al., 2018). In a study that included information on why students in kindergarten through twelfth grade are diversifying their learning opportunities by attending online schools, 35% of students reported wanting a safe learning environment with 10% specifically listing bullying as a concern (Edwards, 2018).

There are currently twenty states with legislation requiring teachers to receive annual training on identifying students at risk for suicidal behaviors and how to respond. The requirements of training range from one to two hours, with some training based on the completion of a predetermined number of modules rather than time. Some training is in person, while many are self-directed using online modules (Flatt, 2019; Stone et al., 2017). Some training is based on the concept that suicide is related to mental illness and is not a normal reaction to stress, concepts which are in line with the risks outlined by the Surgeon General in 1999 (Ciffone, 2007). Virtual public schools have the same requirements as brick and mortar schools since the bill addresses all school staff. However, there is no mandated training that is specific to the virtual school environment. In addition to state mandated training, some virtual schools are developing a personalized approach to learning with a focus on creating a supportive school community that involves the learning coach, who most often is a parent or guardian (Edwards, 2018).

There is a paucity of research specific to the identification and prevention of suicidal behaviors of students in the virtual school setting. While there are limited opportunities to

observe students in this setting, some findings from the brick and mortar setting can be extended to the virtual school setting. Direct observation for teachers who use cameras when working with students, or at proctored exam sites, can be like those in the brick and mortar setting. In these situations, it is possible to note changes in affect, personal care, and behavior. Teachers who establish relationships with the students may observe a change in personality or tone when meeting on the phone or on microphones in a classroom chat. Peer interactions in a classroom chat or class postings may alert teachers, as may the student's writing. Finally, record reviews, reports from parents, and self-reporting from students are found in the virtual setting as in the brick and mortar setting (Nadeem et al., 2011).

By speaking directly with students regarding their perceptions, and intentionally using Bandura's theory of reciprocal causation (1989) to guide my data analysis, I was able to maintain focus on gathering first-hand experiences as to how and why online school is chosen as a social/emotional safe haven for some students. This study hopes to make an important contribution to the field of social/emotional learning and suicide prevention in online schools and to further the conversation that will lead to more effective resources for students and staff in virtual schools.

CHAPTER 3

Research Design and Methodology

A qualitative study explores how people interpret and give meaning to their experiences and how they construct their worlds with the goal to discover and interpret meaning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As a qualitative researcher my general focus of inquiry guided the discovery of what is known about the social experience of the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morehouse & Maykut, 2002). Using qualitative inquiry allowed me to explore the meaning(s) behind the perceptions of the participants through collecting and interpreting data in their natural school setting. A rich description of the perceptions of students was critical in order to understand their choice to change school environments, as well as how this may have been related to their mental health and overall well-being (Creswell, 2015; Creswell & Clark, 2011; Marshall, 2016; Patton, 2015). This chapter reviews the research design, setting, data collection, analysis methods, research quality assurances, and ethical considerations of the study.

This study utilized an interpretive qualitative research design with the goal of understanding how students interpret their experiences in transferring from a brick and mortar high school to a virtual high school in relation to their self-reported struggles with social and/or emotional concerns associated with suicidal behaviors. Consistent with the Merriam and Tisdell (2016) definition of qualitative research, this study explored how students constructed their knowledge over time as they engaged in, and made meaning of, their unique experiences in the virtual high school. I respected the unique contextual conditions of these participants while attempting to access the meaning that the students had given their experiences (Creswell, 2015; Creswell & Clark, 2011; Marshall, 2016; Patton, 2015).

Purposeful sampling derives its logic and power through information rich cases. These cases focus on in-depth understanding of specific phenomena or situations, with the emphasis on in-depth understanding (Patton, 2015). I used purposeful sampling in order to select students who had reported mental health and/or situational challenges related to suicidal behaviors as a factor in their transfer to the virtual high school, while also employing opportunistic sampling if participants shared information that may lead to additional data collection opportunities (Creswell, 2015).

Research Setting

The setting for this study is referred to as the Virtual High School (VHS) and operates as a full time virtual public charter high school serving students throughout a southeastern state in the United States. As a stand-alone public charter school affiliated with an educational management organization (EMO), the school also has a governing local school board and full accreditation through AdvancEd, now known as Cognia™. The high school is part of a larger school that serves students in kindergarten through 12th grade. Graduates of the high school receive a high school diploma. The school was founded in 2008. In 2019 there were a little over 5,300 students enrolled, with about 2,500 students in grades 9-12. The school has about 90 certified educators, putting the basic staff to student ratio at 56:1. This is above the average ratio reported across virtual schools of about 45:1 (Miron et al., 2018). The website lists a superintendent, executive director, and directors of student accountability, special education, and counseling. There is a principal with several assistant principals, and ten counselors at the high school level. The website states that the core curriculum is geared towards preparing students for college and beyond, with a variety of course levels, including the option to dual enroll with postsecondary institutions to earn dual high school and college credits. The mission statement of

the school is to provide a personalized education for students so they may master the knowledge and problem-solving skills needed to achieve their college and career goals. The plans for the class of 2019 are listed as about 45% planning to attend a two or four-year college, about 40% indicating they will go straight into the workforce, about 10% planning to seek vocational training, and about 5% intending to enter a branch of the military.

The following table displays some basic demographic information that allows for a brief comparison of VHS to the averages for virtual schools in the U.S. as well as to brick and mortar schools in the U.S. (Molnar et al., 2019).

Table 1

Comparative School Demographics

	VHS	Average for virtual schools in the U.S.	Brick and Mortar
Poverty	52%	36%	51%
Disabilities	11%	15.5%	11%
White, not Hispanic	73%	65%	50%
Student to Teacher Ratio	56:1	45:1	15:1

When looking at the data above, there are clearly variances in the numbers, however, VHS is closer to brick and mortar schools in relation to poverty rates and students with disabilities. The higher rate of students in poverty as well as the higher number of students per teacher may provide some unique challenges that may tie into social/emotional needs of their students. The higher number of students who are white may be reflective of the trend among virtual schools as well as the nature of the geographic location of the school.

Attending VHS is free to families, who must provide their own computer, printer, and internet service to participate. All textbooks, which may be physical books or e-texts depending

on the grade level and subject, are provided by the school. The school's courses align with the state's curriculum standards. Families are expected to have a learning coach in the home who is responsible for overseeing the student's schoolwork, communicating with teachers, and providing age-appropriate support during the school day. The learning coach is not responsible for teaching, but for oversight to be sure the student is working with their teacher(s) and online materials to learn. According to the VHS webpage, "All students have unique talents and abilities, but with more individualized attention, they perform better in all that they do." VHS hires licensed teachers at each level, so students have access to accredited and knowledgeable staff. They stress the importance of relationships on their website stating. "Teachers often get to know their students on a more personal level, enabling them to do individualized coursework and lessons to offer each student the support and challenges they need to thrive. The bonds and relationships formed with both the students and their families can last a lifetime." The school takes steps to understand and meet the needs of their student population. A recent survey at the school found that of parents who responded, 22.1% reported that the reason they came to VHS was due to their student being bullied at a brick and mortar school, and 14.7% reported it was related to challenges with their child's mental health. At VHS there are licensed school counselors to assist in academic goals and scheduling, social and emotional development, and college and career planning. Their virtual school counseling program is built on relationships and that the counselors are accessible to students and families online, in person, and by phone.

Socialization opportunities for students include meeting online in classes, working cooperatively on school projects online, activity and social based clubs that are free and teacher directed, and special school events such as art, music, and photo contests. In addition, there are in-person events where peers can meet one another, students and staff can meet, and parents can

meet staff as well as other parents. These events are put together and supervised by teachers, community coordinators, and school counselors. Events include open houses at local teaching centers, field trips in a variety of sites across the state, and in person testing for high school finals and annual state testing exams, also in a variety of locations across the state.

Data Collection

The collection of data and the process through which it is collected provides the foundation of a qualitative study (Yin, 2016). This section reviews the data collection methods used in this study including purposeful sampling, qualitative interviews with students, and collecting and examining related documents.

Participant Sampling

This study employed purposeful sampling to develop an in-depth understanding of the perceptions of the participants. All but one of the participants was a high school student, in grades 11 or 12, and were 17-19 years of age. One participant was a graduate of the virtual high school and was 21 years of age. The students attended at least one year in a public high school, prior to transferring to the virtual school setting. They had also been a student in the virtual school for at least one semester.

Adolescence is a time when students are renegotiating their relationships with those close to them, including teachers and peers in school. This time of transition is when students are particularly vulnerable and has been associated with an increase in depression, anxiety, and loneliness, as well as a time of decreased connectedness, all of which are risk factors for suicide (Arango et al., 2016; Benner & Graham, 2009; Bridge, Goldstein, & Brent, 2006; Gunn et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2007). Requiring the students to have been in the virtual school setting for at least a full semester increased the likelihood that they have made the transition and have

enough firsthand knowledge of both settings to be able to provide rich information to the study. To be selected as a potential participant, the students or their caretaker(s) had to have identified that situations or behaviors such as bullying, depression, or suicidal behaviors were influential in the decision to move from the brick and mortar high school to a virtual one. These students were identified with the assistance of the manager of counseling at VHS. Using their in-house system of tracking students who have social/emotional concerns, as well as enrollment data that includes information provided by parents, she identified students who met the criteria of the study. She then sent out the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved invitations I had developed to the parents and students (Appendix A). Sent with the invitations were the consent and assent documents (Appendix B). The invitation asked the parent or student (if over 18) to email me if they were interested in participating. The procedure for selection, as well as participation, was outlined in the invitation, and contact information was included to encourage additional questions. Once potential participants reached out, I sent the assent and/or consent form(s) through DocuSign®, a secure e-sign system, for them to review and sign. Once the parent and/or student had returned signed consent/assent I made contact by phone. With some participants during this time there were email communications regarding how to access and use DocuSign®, the best email address to use, and other procedural information. In our first phone communication I took the time to discuss the purpose of the study as well as the methods I planned to employ. I stressed to the participant (and parent if applicable) that the student was welcome to stop participating at any time without any repercussions. I scheduled an interview with the students who met the criteria of the study and wanted to continue. Throughout the process I was clear that partaking in this study may be emotionally difficult for the student and the parent. We talked about the possibility of uncomfortable feelings coming to the surface, and

how those may manifest with the student or within the family. I shared resources for supports including the phone and text number for a suicide support hotline, local support information including emergency numbers and mental health support contact information with the invitation, consent, and assent document as well as during conversations prior to and during the interviews. I let the students know when we started talking that the school counselors are aware of the study and available to talk if needed. I shared that if the student had a private mental health support person it may be helpful to share what they are doing and that we can work to schedule their interview during a time that person is available if desired. A student was welcome to have an adult present with them during the interview if they wished, and one student did have his mother present. It was presented as a matter of convenience, as they were in the car at the time of the interview. All interviews were concluded with positive, upbeat conversations framed around the students' plans for their futures. Working within a detailed plan allowed me to select and engage the participants who are best able to provide rich descriptions with the greatest understanding of the phenomenon (Lapan, Quartaroli, & Riemer, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015).

Student voice is critical to this study, as students know best about their own lives, feelings, and perceptions. They have the right to participate in a study that is about them and to be an active part of the process that may lead to implications that could impact future decisions in their school setting (Mitra, 2004). As participants, the students' safety and comfort was my top priority. The students made the choice to participate, independently if they were over the age of 18, and made that choice with parental support and agreement if under 18. Details of what the study entailed was shared in the invitation and was further discussed in follow up conversations with the student and their parent/guardian(s). Included in that discussion was that students

needed to give their informed assent if not 18 years of age, in addition to their parent/guardian(s) giving consent. I also stated verbally, and in writing, and repeated at the time of the interviews, that the student was free to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequence (Soffer & Ben-Arieh, 2014).

Interviews

The integration of technology has become a part of qualitative work in the social sciences and applied fields. This includes conducting interviews and using dialogues and interactions online (Marshall, 2016). When interviews take place synchronously in an online chat room the internet is a tool. This is part of an emerging methodology for conducting qualitative ethnography referred to as internet ethnography (Markham & Baym, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Consistent with the environment of the phenomenon I am exploring with my participants, I invited the students to participate in the semi-structured interviews in an online classroom setting with a camera and microphone. I was on camera and the students had the option to be on camera or choose to only speak through their microphone. The interviews were audio recorded for later verbatim transcription. I framed the interviews as friendly conversations while slowly introducing new elements to assist the participants in responding as informants (Spradley, 1979). I used active listening to identify key words or phrases that led to more probing questions as well as to being receptive to body language (if on camera), speaking style, silences, and emotion (Lapan et al., 2012).

Document Analysis

I completed a document review of what the school made available to support students in their social/emotional learning, as well as training they provided staff for suicide prevention. I also reviewed student information data about why students chose to transfer to VHS for high

school. I collected and reviewed demographic documents and relevant marketing materials. In addition, the results of a recent survey conducted by the parent company of the school were reviewed. These documents provided additional data points as well as corroborating evidence as part of the process of triangulation (Creswell, 2015; Creswell & Clark, 2011; Lapan et al., 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By systematically reviewing and evaluating the documents I learned more about the context in which the students attend school and discovered information that suggested questions I asked. Furthermore, the information and insights that I gathered from school related documents added to my overall knowledge and understanding of the virtual high school setting (Bowen, 2009). I have listed, catalogued, and archived all documents, saving them in a password protected online file sharing site consistent with the Wichita State University IRB guidelines.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data analysis through a constant comparative process is a way to make comparisons to generate explanations. It is a way of making sense of the data collected to create meaning. To do that, the qualitative researcher moves between inductive and deductive reasoning, both describing and interpreting the data throughout the process. It is important to not only describe what one hears, reads, and observes, but to also understand, develop insights from, and make meaning of the data. Following this process with fidelity led to meaningful findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). I employed inductive data analysis starting with the first subset of data and continuing throughout the process to allow notable aspects to begin to emerge from the start. By doing this I was able to take note of some patterns in the answers given. These patterns gave me ideas to dive a bit deeper in subsequent interviews. This analysis was also the catalyst

for growing the study to include a young adult who had transferred to virtual in the middle of her high school career due to social/emotional concerns (Morehouse & Maykut, 2002).

I transcribed interviews verbatim and unitized that data, along with information from surveys and documents, continuing to look for patterns and emerging meaning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Then I made a copy of the transcribed interviews, while maintaining the originals in their raw form. Next, I divided the interviews into units of data that could each stand alone with meaning. I then organized these units of data by copying and pasting the transcribed units into a Google Spreadsheet. I chose to use a spreadsheet as I have experience using the method in prior studies. The spreadsheet was able to handle copious quantities of data and provided me with the tools I needed to make comparisons in a visually organized way I found helpful (Meyer & Avery, 2008). The first step was to organize the spreadsheet with the units of data in the first column, then the identification/pseudonym of the participant or origin of the data unit in the column immediately to the right. I used the next column for comments or questions I may have and want to come back to later, using the top row for headings and each code in a different column. From there I coded my data, looking to merge patterns and provide explanations and interpretations by assigning codes to segments of data and refining throughout the process. I used a constant comparative method of data analysis, comparing data with data, data with codes, and codes with codes (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Meyer & Avery, 2008). I then sorted the unitized data, creating thematic categories. I initially developed eight themes, which were then collapsed into six as I found overlapping information. By adjusting the number of themes during the analysis process I was able to have enough to build with, while keeping it manageable. I created tabs on my spreadsheet for each major theme, with the sub-themes within, while leaving the first tab to hold the original data units. These themes included

multiple perspectives and included contrary evidence as presented. Finally, I used sub-themes and related themes to one another to make sense of and organize the data (Creswell, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Concurrently with coding data from interviews I reviewed the documents that I collected, cataloged, and uploaded. Meaningful data from these documents was included in the unitizing process, while using other information to contribute to creating a rich and thick description of the setting and relevant resources, systems, or practices (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Patton, 2015).

Throughout the process I sought input and feedback from my advisor as well as a peer debriefer. My peer debriefer is a recent graduate of the doctoral program in educational leadership who also employed online data collection methods. I consulted with my advisor and peer debriefer about the meanings I assigned to the data and the consequent conclusions I drew to be sure they make sense, that I accurately followed protocol, and to aid me in minimizing the impact of my subjectivity on the study. I encouraged them to challenge my assumptions which made room to strengthen my arguments in the process (Shenton, 2004).

Research Quality

Well established methods of qualitative research that are mindful of intentional planning for both data collection and the processes used throughout the study are the basis for this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Using Lincoln and Guba (1985)'s well established guidelines for a quality study, I outline the processes of credibility, dependability, and transferability that I used below.

Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research refers to the trustworthiness and plausibility of the research findings (Tracy, 2010). To ensure credibility in this study I followed clearly outlined

methods for data collection, interpretation, and analysis (Creswell, 2015; Lapan et al., 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These methods included gathering data from multiple sources as part of the participant selection process, interviews, and document review. I used an interview protocol that I developed and reviewed with my advisor and conducted semi-structured interviews that allowed the participants to tell their story. I transcribed interviews verbatim and electronically scanned all documents. After transcribing interviews verbatim, I sent them back to the participants for member checking to ensure that what I had recorded was accurate and what they intended to share. The participants either alerted me to minor corrections that were grammatical in nature or replied that the transcript was accurate as sent. As I collected data, I read it in its whole form to better understand the big picture prior to finding units within the data (Creswell, 2015). When I had taken those steps, I then organized the data into units that are able to stand on their own with meaning. Then I developed codes and themes from the units. Throughout the process I used member checking, review of literature, comparison of the units of data to one another, and the raw data to triangulate all themes and findings of the study (Creswell, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Properly collecting data and remaining consistent with my methods in this way throughout the study allowed for the findings and implications to accurately represent the data gathered. Explicitly describing my methods, how I selected participants, the challenges I encountered and how I addressed them, and instilling trustworthiness into all steps taken to generate data added to the credibility of the study (Gibson & Brown, 2009; Yin, 2016).

Dependability

Dependability is the extent to which the same research findings can be replicated given the same methods, participants, and context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For qualitative studies such

as this, the researcher seeks to describe how people understand and interpret their individual experiences, making replication impossible. Rather, dependability is established by using constant and reliable analysis methods, and a thick description of the process. A thick description involves providing enough details to show, rather than tell, the story (Tracy, 2010). The use of an audit trail to compare findings back to the raw data allowed me to have a road map of sorts throughout my study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I believe I have tacit knowledge gained from working in brick and mortar schools for 18 years and in a virtual school for seven years. As I gained explicit knowledge in the course of my study, I was better able to uncover and reflect upon my tacit knowledge, affording me a more in-depth understanding of the perceptions shared by participants (Morehouse & Maykut, 2002). Throughout the data analysis I continuously included, applied, and revisited Bandura's theory of reciprocal causation, keeping in focus the lens of discovering the effect the change in environment may be having on the student and their behavior. I have acknowledged my bias in writing, processed it through journal notes, and discussed it with my advisor to minimize its impact on the study. I personally reviewed all documents and worked with my advisor to ensure I maintained fidelity to the qualitative process

Transferability

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016) transferability is the extent to which the findings of a qualitative study can be applied to other situations. By utilizing thick descriptions that are of high quality, a study can contribute to others, providing information that may be applicable to their settings. By establishing the context of the study and providing detailed descriptions of the procedures, other virtual high schools may find implications that lead to their own inquiries. Once credibility and dependability have been established, the reader may also

decide how to use the data to inform their own studies or practices related to students in virtual high schools (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Credibility, dependability, and transferability are ways to safeguard the research and ensure that the subsequent findings and implications are trustworthy and accurate in respect to the virtual high school student participants and their school environment (Creswell, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Having worked to include these safeguards in my research it was then time to reflect on my positionality as a researcher and the ethical considerations required in a study of this nature.

Ethical Considerations and Researcher Positionality

Ethical considerations as well as my positionality as a researcher were the foundation and umbrella for this study. Working with adolescents requires that, as a researcher, I remain cognizant of, and understand the implications regarding safety and ethics. While explicitly described in this section, ethics “thread[s] through every aspect of qualitative work” (p.693). As the researcher in qualitative research is the instrument, it is imperative that I remained transparent in my positionality and that ethical considerations are evident throughout every part of my study (Gordon & Patterson, 2013).

The practices employed in this study included those that would facilitate open and honest responses from participants. This included maintaining and repeating throughout the process the ability to opt out. I encouraged open and frank responses during interviews and was transparent in my personal work and family experiences while establishing rapport. I ensured confidentiality and the protection of my participants was top priority in this study (Shenton, 2004). I maintained confidentiality of the participants by coding their names and refraining from using identifiable information in all published writings or reports from this study. The school and state are masked

or deleted. Participants gave their assent and signed a document for this, and their guardians/parent(s) gave consent and signed a document for this as well if they were under the age of 18. Participants and their parent/guardian(s) had the option to opt out of the study at any time, for any reason, without consequence. All IRB guidelines were followed.

I became interested in what the move to a virtual high school may mean for a student who has suicidal behaviors as a culmination of issues that have long been of concern for me. As a special educator in the brick and mortar setting for 18 years, I observed suicidal behaviors in many students, and have been a part of teams who worked to identify and support students exhibiting these behaviors or having related mental health concerns. Then seven years ago when I became the special education director for an online school, I found myself wondering how this unfamiliar environment was able to serve students' social emotional needs. As I have worked in this setting, I have become aware of more students coming to the setting with suicidal behaviors and mental health concerns. I do not know if there are more students coming to the virtual school setting specifically with these concerns or if the same concerns are increasing in teens across all settings, but I see a need for further investigation. In addition to working in the virtual school setting, a little over three years ago I lost my brother to suicide. While he was well past high school, it brought the issue of suicide to the forefront of my concerns. Through subsequent volunteering activities I have met many parents who have lost teen children to suicide, as well as students who have attempted, or have lost siblings and friends to suicide. My experiences both professionally and personally have led me to believe that we need to hear more from the students regarding what motivates them to change school settings, and what happens in relation to their struggles with their social/emotional and mental health and overall well-being when they move from the brick and mortar to virtual school setting.

Having determined that suicide prevention in virtual schools was my primary area of interest, it became my jumping off point in beginning my dissertation research. I started the process by conducting an extensive review of the literature and by having conversations with counselors in the virtual school setting. What I found during these initial steps was that while there is some awareness and training for teachers to identify and deal with suicidal behaviors, it is typically developed for the brick and mortar setting. With the training that is provided in both the brick and mortar and virtual settings teachers tend to feel they still are not as well equipped to help as they would like to be. I found evidence that students are going to virtual schools to escape circumstances associated with suicide as well as for their own suicidal behaviors but was unable to find research regarding how virtual schools are dealing with this phenomenon. Based on my experiences in a virtual school and attendance at conferences where I talk with many school leaders, I know that practices are in place in many schools, but comprehensive research remains elusive.

I have deliberately chosen a virtual school site that is not the school I work in to avoid a conflict of interest or any sense of obligation or discomfort for the participants. I chose to use a school that is much larger than the one I work at with the hope that a larger population would give me a larger participant pool. I chose a location that is not near where I live or work so I would not know any of the students or families involved. I also expected this to allow me to examine the case without the sense of familiarity or preconceived notions that I would have had working within my own school system. I chose a school that is within the corporate school structure I work in, not only so I would be familiar with the foundational workings of the school, but because initial investigation showed that this school is actively working to improve their social/emotional services for students. In choosing the school site I have gone beyond ease of

access and included a school that will provide participants best able to inform the study (Miron et al., 2018).

I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the process, which I started by way of reflections I wrote for classes. I continued with these writings, combined into an online journal format. I used this journal to help explore my positionality before, during, and after the study (Audrey, 2000). I realized from the beginning that subjectivity was going to be a part of my research project, so my intention with the journal aligned with Peshkin's (1988) explanation that "By monitoring myself, I can create an illuminating, empowering, personal statement that attunes me to where self and subject are intertwined" (p. 20). These practices continued as I continued data collection and analysis, leading to the findings discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 4

Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study was to learn about the perceptions of students who have chosen to transfer from a brick and mortar high school to a virtual one in relation to their social/emotional health. I coded and analyzed the participant interviews in accordance with this interest. Students who met the criteria were invited to participate by the manager of counseling at their school. Of the 385 students who were sent an email invitation, fourteen students expressed interest in participating, and nine students completed interviews. A student who had already graduated was identified during the study as a potential participant. After an addendum to the study received institutional review board approval, she also completed an interview. This brought the total number of participants to ten. Table 2 provides a brief description of each participant (all names are pseudonyms) and their unique circumstances.

Table 2

Study Participants

Name	Age	Gender	Current Grade	Grade Started at VHS
Anna	21	Female	Graduated	Junior
Cara	19	Female	Senior	Junior
Erin	18	Female	Senior	Junior
Joseph	17	Male	Senior	Junior
Kim	17	Female	Senior	Sophomore
Leigh	18	Female	Senior	Sophomore
Mike	17	Male	Senior	Junior
Robert	18	Male	Senior	Junior
Susan	17	Female	Junior	Sophomore
Teresa	18	Female	Senior	Sophomore

As the table above shows, all but one of the students who completed interviews were in their senior year, with one junior and one graduate. The criteria for having been in a brick and mortar high school and having been at VHS for at least a semester appears to have had an impact on the participant pool. Four of the students had been at VHS since they were sophomores, and six transferred as juniors. There were no patterns in responses that emerged consistent with this differentiation. In order to better understand who participated, I have included vignettes below.

Participant Vignettes

Anna is a graduate of VHS who is currently working towards certification as an emergency first responder. She lost a brother to suicide when she was a teen and found it difficult to navigate the large public high school she was attending after that. She had a therapist who attempted to help by working with the staff at the brick and mortar school to provide relief from the anxiety and depression she was experiencing. Anna found that the intervention did not change anything for her in regard to how the teachers related to her or in how much the work expected of her was overwhelming, and she reached a point of wanting to drop out. Her mother had a friend who worked at VHS and after speaking with that person, Anna enrolled. This was during her Junior year of high school, and she went on to graduate from VHS.

Cara lives in the large, metropolitan area in which she was born and raised. She is a senior at VHS, and she transferred in as a sophomore. Cara has Attention Deficit Disorder and is hard of hearing. She found the challenges in her large, public, brick and mortar high school to be overwhelming and her parents proposed a transfer to a virtual school setting. When this was first suggested Cara did not think she would like it but wound up liking it a lot and wished she had made the change sooner.

Erin is an 18-year-old senior who came to VHS from a large public school in the metropolitan city where she lives. Due to struggles with mental illness, Erin first attended a virtual school when she was in middle school. For high school she returned to the brick and mortar setting, mainly for social reasons. Back in the brick and mortar setting Erin but found herself getting in trouble and continuing to have challenges with her mental health. Erin then returned to the virtual school setting, enrolling at VHS as a junior.

Joseph lives in a city and is a 17-year-old senior at VHS. Joseph talked about in-person events through VHS and that he enjoys getting to meet his peers and teachers face-to-face. His mother is a teacher at VHS, and his interview took place on camera in a car with his mother present. During the interview, his mother prompted him to give more details when he offered short answers to questions. She also spoke up and offered some additional information after he answered some questions. For example, she defined what in school suspension looked like in the brick and mortar setting. She also talked about the places and ways they hold in-person school events. Joseph shared that he transferred to VHS due to getting into trouble and failing grades at his brick and mortar school. He reported he had not thought that he would want to be at home with his mother as a teacher, but that he actually likes it and performs better. Joseph presented as quite social and spoke about missing peers from his brick and mortar school as well as making new friends at VHS.

Kim is another 17-year-old senior at VHS. She lives in a small town in the country and started at VHS as a sophomore. She was born and raised in the small town and described the local school as being a pretty big school, stating that there are “a lot of rednecks there.” Kim shared that she has major depression and anxiety and that having those challenges combined with the drama she found at her brick and mortar school led to the decision to transfer to VHS.

Leigh resides in the suburbs, which she described as “pretty country” because her neighbors have farm type animals. She is 17 years old and a senior at VHS, having transferred in as a sophomore. Prior to VHS she attended a large high school that she described as being a “football school” and “overflowing.” Leigh was in honors classes in her prior school and continues to earn good grades and to do well in her classes at VHS. She chose to transfer after family abuse that resulted in a parent being removed from the home was exposed and became the subject of gossip and ridicule in her local school community.

Mike is a baseball player who is currently a senior at VHS. He shared that he started attending a virtual school in fifth grade, went back to brick and mortar in sixth grade, then returned last year as a junior. While not at VHS Mike attended a public school, a private Christian school, and a military school.

Robert is a senior who started at VHS as a junior. Prior to VHS, he attended a brick and mortar charter school, a public school, and a special day school. He shared that the reason for attending so many schools was due to his propensity for getting into fights. Robert also stated that the final decision for him to attend VHS was made by his parents and that it was due to his having ADHD and being bullied in other school settings.

Susan is a preacher’s daughter who found VHS as a sophomore, after attending five different brick and mortar schools in her early school years. She is currently a junior and lives in a small town. The school she attended just prior to VHS was a private school that she had attended for three years. She shared that the private school was not a place she felt supported or comfortable, and that she has come into her own in the virtual setting. She followed an older sister to VHS. Her sister has mental health issues and found support and success at VHS, so Susan felt it was a good option for her as well.

Teresa is a senior at VHS who transferred as a sophomore. She lives in a rural area that she describes as a step up from the tiny town she used to live in, explaining that now she lives within a few minutes of a grocery store, whereas she used to have to drive quite a way to get to the nearest store. She also talked about a major benefit of living in her current home is that she can get internet service. Her prior school was a private Christian school that she found to be extremely challenging socially, as well as subpar academically. The final determinant for Teresa to transfer to VHS was being diagnosed with a condition that lowers her immunity and makes it difficult for her to be around groups of people.

Findings for Each Research Question

The research questions that were the backbone of this study and the answers that came from the data collection are summarized here, followed by an in-depth exploration of the data analysis through the lens of the theoretical framework that guided the study.

Why Students Transfer to Virtual High School: Mental and Physical Health; Suicidal Ideation; and Bullying

The first research question was “Why do students who have social/emotional concerns that are commonly linked to suicidal behaviors choose to transfer from a brick and mortar to virtual high school setting?” Participants were not asked directly about firsthand experiences with suicidal behaviors such as ideation, attempts, and completion. However, some of the students spoke directly about their experiences when answering other questions. Leigh shared that at her prior brick and mortar high school “There were really high suicide rates,” and Mike shared “I lost a friend to suicide.”

Those who did not directly address suicide, spoke to many of the identifiable risk factors defined in Chapter 2, and whether they felt these factors could be adequately addressed in the

virtual study. One such risk factor involves the roles that physical and mental health factors play in the likelihood that a student may be suicidal. A review of school documents showed that for the 2018-19 school year, 14.7% of incoming students had mental health concerns marked as a reason to transfer to the virtual school. Of the ten participants interviewed, six shared that they had physical or mental health concerns that contributed to the decision for them to move to a virtual school. These factors included depression, anxiety, prior hospitalizations, an immune disorder, and ADHD. For the students interviewed, it was not only the impact of these health concerns directly, but the time involved in handling them that impacted by their choice of school. As Robert explained, “I’ve got appointments in one city and appointments in another city. I’ve (also) gone to the emergency room.”

Environmental factors in the home, school, or community also impact suicidal behaviors. Several of the students shared that there were suicides at their local high schools and talked about the widespread impact. Leigh explained “They’d have all the counselors on duty there, and the students who knew the one that committed suicide would go and talk to them.” When talking about the family situations that led to her coming to VHS, Teresa shared, “My cousin has suicidal thoughts. He has them because of the abuse and stuff that he went through.” Several participants shared experiences that parallel those in the literature including the suicide of a friend, abuse by a parent, the incarceration of a parent, and the death of a parent. Leigh shared that “My father had to leave the house for a year,” and Erin shared how kind the teachers at VHS were when her father died last year.

Bullying is also a known risk factor for both the victims and perpetrators, and school records show that for the 2018-19 school year, 22.1% of students new to VHS had “bullied” chosen during the enrollment process by their caretaker as a reason to transfer to virtual

school. This was consistent with the 23% reported across the school network VHS is a part of. Several of the participants shared that they had been involved in bullying in one role or the other. Robert talked about getting into physical fights with peers in prior schools as well as “Getting made fun of and shoved in lockers.” He went on to share that the move to VHS was a relief because “It’s really just the bullying. That’s the main thing I just don’t have to face anymore.”

Perceived Differences Across Settings: Improved Peer and Teacher Relationships and Improved Time Management

The second research question serving as a backbone to the study was “What are the perceived differences in social/emotional challenges, experiences, and supports when comparing experiences in brick and mortar and virtual high schools?” Participants talked about challenges in regard to peers, from the elimination of peer pressure to the challenge of finding and maintaining friendships. A survey across schools in the system VHS is a part of showed that 49% of high school students reported avoiding peer pressure as a benefit of attending virtual school. Teresa talked about peer pressure in her brick and mortar school, explaining, “there’s a lot of peer pressure to do what your other classmates are doing. Dress the way they are, the whole thing to fit in.” She went on to talk about how that changed when she came to VHS, “So I feel good not wearing any (makeup). I dress for me; I do my own things. It’s a lot better.”

The perceived difference across settings in teacher relationships was also discussed, with six students talking about the improved relationships they have with teachers in the virtual setting. Susan shared, “I think the main difference between the last school and this one is the teachers.” She went on to say, “They’re always there for you, you can always call.” Erin weighed in on both peer and teacher relationships stating, “Dealing with peers, you don’t have to do that as much, and you don’t have to deal with difficult teachers.”

Other challenges mentioned as having a noted difference across settings included the ability to schedule a day, increased self-motivation and advocacy, and the ability to work while attending school. Susan explained that “the flexibility is nice. I can work ahead and get ready for whatever I need to.” Anna went into depth about the benefit for her in regard to scheduling:

It let me focus more on myself as well as the schoolwork, I could actually take care of my emotional well-being, as well as work on school, whereas at (B&M) I could not do that. I was just exhausted all the time, which is why I stopped going. I would have to wake up super early to go to school (B&M), but with the (virtual school) I could sleep a little bit longer, make sure I get well rested, and stuff like that. I could actually focus on myself and take care of myself as well.

The difficulty of coursework was discussed with the participants and the responses were varied. While all students reported that their grades either remained high (1) or improved (9), when asked whether the course work was harder or easier was met with mixed responses. Teresa shared that the curriculum at VHS was tougher, and she found this to be a good thing as in her words her prior school “they started taking things out and putting in easier stuff. They dumbed down the education for us.” Joseph shared that his grades have come way up, and when asked about the difficulty of the curriculum he stated, “I think it’s about the same.”

All of the students when asked were able to list available resources and supports to assist them when they were struggling, stating they felt these were adequate, and in some cases superior, in the virtual setting. Kim explained “They are really supportive, like they’re better than the brick and mortar teachers in my opinion.” She went on to clarify, “Maybe not better, but they have more time for each student.” Several of the students mentioned their counselors at VHS and the support they provide. Teresa shared that her counselor “sends out things about

mental health and stuff, and she has live lessons you can go to.” Susan explained that a lot of students her age deal with certain things and that the school counselors “are extremely aware of many situations that go on in students’ lives, including anxiety and depression.” She went on to further share that they “have so many resources on our home page of places you can go to and find links that can help you.”

Impact on Behavior and Sense of Self: Improved Self-Identity and Academic Performance

The third and final research question investigated was “In what ways has the change in environment to a virtual high school had an impact on behavior and a sense of self for the participants?” Several of the students shared insights as to how their sense of self had changed since becoming a student at VHS. Kim summarized her experience:

I am happier. I think mainly I'm happier because I kind of found out who I was and who I am. Because at my other high school I wasn't acting like myself, I was kind of catering to other people. But whenever I did online school, I was able to not care about what other people think and I was able to find myself and discover who I am and what I want to do in my life. Whereas at the other school I was always worried about like “is my hair ok” or “I wonder what this person thinks about me,” like I wasn't really worried about school. I was kind of worried about what other people thought and what were other people's perceptions and everything.

In addition to the increased self-advocacy, participants talked about how the relationships with staff had impacted them as students as well as people. Participants who said they had dreaded talking to teachers in their prior schools shared they actively seek out their teachers in the virtual school. Teresa shared about her teachers at VHS, “If I have questions, I can ask them, and I don't feel judged or anything.” She went on to make the comparison stating: “I couldn't do that

in normal (brick and mortar) school, that's a big difference." Several went on to share about the importance of these relationships across areas of their lives, and the participant who was a graduate mentioned that she remains in contact with one of her teachers. When talking about future plans, several of those interviewed shared that they are more likely to go to college due to the relationships and the increased academic performance they have found in the virtual school setting. The one common negative phenomenon that several students talked about was that they are not as close to their peers in the virtual setting and/or that they missed their friends from their prior school. When asked if she had maintained some of the same friendships when changing schools, Erin shared, "Some, but not all of them. That would have happened even if I graduated and moved on."

The interviewees also shared at length about how the move has impacted their school performance. This included improved grades as well as the increased choices in how they complete their schoolwork and set up their day. Mike talked about having more control explaining, "Instead of making A's and B's I can try to make straight A's and I'm working my way there." The students also talked about the self-discipline they employed in order to stay on track in the setting that has less proximal oversight. Teresa summed it up in this way, "I'm a lot more independent having to do it on my own, because I know what I have to get done." She went on to explain, "In my old school you're told what to do all the time and when you can do it, but here I get to make my own schedule. You have to be self-disciplined, but it's a lot less stress." When asked about the difficulty of the curriculum Erin explained that the schoolwork is both a little easier and a little harder, but that "you just have to be really self-motivated." All of the students interviewed for this study reported that they either maintained high grades, or greatly improved their grades from what they were earning in their prior high school. Kim

shared a sentiment that several other participants talked about, “In this online school there's more opportunities for me to make up grades and bring up my grade and have one-on-one sessions with teachers so my grade doesn't suffer or get bad. I'm making better grades than I did at my old school.” While the student participants talked about doing much better with their grades, or maintaining previously high grades, a look at the State Report Card for VHS shows that the school as a whole scores similar to other public charter schools in their state, and below brick and mortar schools in their state. Table 3 shows the End of Course Assessments results. While this comparison is not apples-to-apples, I found it interesting that the school numbers do not quite add up to the student perceptions. In Table 3, the percentages indicate the students who scored a C or higher. The comparison is with students in the approximately thirty-five public charter schools that are in the same district as VHS, with about 95% of the schools set in traditional school buildings. The comparison also includes all high schools in the state.

Table 3

End-of-Course Assessment Comparison

Subject	VHS	Public Charter School District	State
English 1	53%	53%	54%
Algebra	45%	50%	60%
Biology	50%	52%	60%
US History	34%	43%	50%

The data in Table 3 does not show that VHS students are outperforming students in other school settings in their state, although it is apparent from the data in this study the participants are feeling successful in the virtual school setting. While this study does not take an in-depth look at academic performance in virtual schools, it is important to note that the participants feel

successful and that several shared great excitement over how much better they are doing now that they go to school at VHS.

Elaborated Findings Grounded in the Theory of Reciprocal Causation

In the remainder of this chapter I discuss the findings from individual interviews with participants as well as from a review of the school website and related documents, organized around the theoretical framework of Reciprocal Causation. This theory posits that the person, behavior, and environment are a triad of factors that interact with one another to shape a person's circumstance (Bandura, 1986). While "trying on" different theories earlier in the process, this theory seemed best suited for the questions I had. During data analysis and the process of identifying findings, there was an "aha" moment where it became clear exactly how well this theory has served my study. As I worked through the data and organized into themes, the framework provided by Bandura (1986) allowed me to take a deep dive into the impact on the students' behaviors and sense of self in relation to their change in school environment. I have organized my findings below according to this triadic theory. I looked first at the environment of the prior brick and mortar school setting, then explored the influences that made for the change in environment to the virtual high school. Finally, I explored the impact these changes in environment had on the students and their behaviors.

Students Change Their Environment

An influence that impacted all students in this study was a change in school environment from a brick and mortar high school to an online high school. Nine of the participants in this study were students at VHS, and the tenth participant had graduated three years prior. VHS is a full-time virtual school, so the learning environment is the home setting. Of all the students who enrolled at VHS for the school year 2018-19, about 20% reported having been bullied and about

15% reported that mental health concerns led to the choice of VHS. A survey shared on the state's report card site for the school shows that of 274 parents who participated, 85% reported that their child feels safe in school, and 70% agree/strongly agree that the teachers and staff at the school prevent or stop bullying at the school. In a recent survey of all schools in the network VHS is a part of, 51% of middle and high school students reported that they feel virtual school is a safe option. It further stated that 49% of high school students say avoiding peer pressure is a benefit, 36% of parents enroll for the purpose of providing a safe environment for their children, and 23% choose virtual school to avoid bullying.

One impact that resulted from the change in environment centers around the social/emotional supports available for students in their new school setting. These supports include the availability of their course teachers online, by webmail, or by phone and text. Live online sessions with teachers are scheduled daily, with additional times available by request. A homeroom teacher who tracks student engagement and progress and is there to support students, and weekly counseling lessons are available to all students. In addition, there are resources for the students that they can access in their home communities that are listed in the Community Resource Bank. This list includes information about different mental health and physical well-being services and resources, with contact information and links to access them. This Community Resource Bank is made available to students through a link on their school homepage, which they see each time they log in to work on school.

The state that VHS is located in requires all teachers to complete two hours of suicide prevention training as part of the renewal process for credentials, and the staff uses the Jason Foundation (Flatt, 2019) to complete this training on their own time. In addition to this, the school provides training for all staff in the Fall for how to recognize and respond to students in

distress. They also have tools available through the teacher homepage that they are expected to use throughout the school year. These tools include protocols for the death of a student or family member, when a student is in imminent danger, how to respond to students in distress, how to determine and create a plan when mental health and special education intersect, and what to do when a student is suicidal, or has completed suicide. The protocol for potential or completed suicides starts with a reminder of actions to take if the risk is imminent, including to call 911 in the city/county the student is in, then inform the parent/guardian that 911 has been called. It goes on to outline school specific steps to take in order to be sure that the stakeholders who need to be informed are, as well as how to protect the confidentiality of the student.

The participants in this study were students who started their high school careers in a brick and mortar high school. At some point, after completing at least a semester in that setting, the decision was made for them to transfer to a virtual high school. This decision was most often influenced by the combined input of the parent(s) and student, and in several cases, was based on a relationship with another party who had found success in the virtual setting. The participants had been in the virtual high school setting for at least one semester prior to our interview. The participants were from a mix of settings, with five living in an urban setting, three in the suburbs, and two in a rural setting. All of the participants reported coming to VHS from a brick and mortar high school, with seven having attended a public school, two coming from a private school, and one from a charter school. Three students shared having also experienced other school settings earlier in their education including a private military school, a private Christian academy, and a special day school.

Influences That Prompted the Move

There were a variety of influences cited by the participants as the reason for the move from a brick and mortar high school to VHS. Of the ten participants interviewed, two cited the lack of quality teachers in their brick and mortar high schools as a reason to transfer, with Teresa explaining, “They did not have the best teachers, I’m not gonna lie. It was private, but they couldn’t find teachers that were qualified to teach what needed to be taught.” For all who were interviewed there were stressors in the brick and mortar setting that brought them to seek a different environment, and for many, a safe haven. These stressors included mental and physical health concerns, the flexibility of a daily schedule, safety and bullying, and peer pressure. While there is a natural overlap in some of these areas, I have divided and explained the influences that led to the changes in environment below.

Mental and physical health. A common theme among many respondents was that when they were in the brick and mortar setting, they lived in a depressed state. They would frequently come home from school, do the bare necessities regarding homework and eating (or skipped even those), then go to bed. Leigh was one of several students who talked about this, sharing “I kind of wanted a place to hide. And so, we figured out about online school.” She continued, “When I was at the brick and mortar school I’d come home from school and go straight to sleep and sleep through dinner or sleep through the night, wake back up, and go to school.” Susan shared a similar experience, “Coming from school at the brick and mortar school, I would just come home, do my homework, then I’d just go straight to sleep because I was just not motivated to do anything.” Several students mentioned anxiety in the brick and mortar setting that was relieved with the change in setting. Kim explained, “I was having major depression and I had anxiety and just being at school and being around the drama and stuff was really taking a toll on

me.” Anna shared that the move is what enabled her to get a high school diploma, explaining, “Basically I just didn't want to be in (brick and mortar) school anymore like I almost just dropped out completely. It was just becoming emotionally too much for me to handle.”

This paragraph addresses students who shared about health impairments and other disabilities. Teresa shared that she has health concerns that lower her immunity and she was sick a great deal of the time when going to school in the brick and mortar setting, so online is a better option for her physical health. Cara explained that she is hard of hearing and has ADD and “It’s a lot of distraction whenever I’m in that (B&M) school too much.” Others shared that with ADHD and dyslexia they found that the home environment was better suited for them.

Flexibility. For some participants, the flexibility of an online school was helpful in reducing anxiety. As Anna explained, “It wasn't as rushed. I could take my time on things instead of having like 30 minutes to do one thing, then getting in trouble for not finishing it basically.” She continued, “So it was more of just like I could take my time on things, which put a lot less anxiety on me.” Susan discussed how she appreciates the ability to work around her schedule when there are other things going on in her life, and the ability to work ahead when she chooses, stating that “it’s just been such a great experience for me.” Some students shared that they were able to increase their income with their jobs due to the flexibility of their current school schedules. Erin talked about her experiences with her local high school when they would not work with her to earn credits while she was hospitalized, “They would not count my credit...so they tried to make me restart high school completely.” She then transferred to VHS where she was able to earn her credits in any setting.

Safety and bullying. Safety for students is important for both those students who tend to be victims and those who may be perpetrators. Joseph shared that he was often in trouble for

using computers inappropriately at school which led to some grave consequences. In his case he was able to transfer to VHS where a parent was home and able to closely monitor his activity. Robert shared that he was getting into fights frequently, explaining, “I kept getting into fights that I didn’t start. People just hated me. I don’t know why.” He stated that he had been moved from a charter brick and mortar school to a special day school prior to coming to VHS. Several participants reported what we typically think of as bullying, with Mike describing this as “Getting made fun of and shoved in lockers.” He went on to state, “There’s a lot of kids there who don’t like me and would jump me.”

Having a sense of safety and not feeling bullied are not exclusively peer-to-peer issues, as several participants shared. Erin talked about how the adults in her school do not like individuality and for students to have their own opinions, and how that led to her getting in trouble. She explained that there are “a lot of conservative views which shouldn’t be imposed in school. One instance was I wouldn’t stand for the Pledge of Allegiance, and I got kicked out of a classroom.” Mike shared that he came to VHS after he felt like he was being attacked by the teachers in his prior school. Leigh talked about significant family issues that she reported, leading to a family member being removed from her home, and how the staff at her school mishandled that situation. “It was supposed to be private. But apparently one of the guidance counselors at the high school let it slip and the whole school found out. I kind of wanted a place to hide.” She went on to further explain, “Apparently, one of these guidance counselors is married to one of the teachers and she accidentally let the whole sort of thing slip during a class and so the students are really gossipy and so the whole school knew.”

Issues with feeling safe in school came from participants across all prior school settings they represented. About her experience in a private school Teresa shared, “It’s how everyone

acts, there's a lot of mean kids at school. Everyone bullies people. You would think at a Christian school that's where you should get the most welcome. But no, I felt alone. Like a lot.” Out of the ten interviews, only two participants alluded to school safety in a more global way, with Teresa sharing, “I really think it's the future especially with all the school shootings and, really, it's gonna be our future.” Kim also shared that it was part of her parents' decision sharing that “They're kind of worried about school shootings and stuff.” A survey across schools in the network that VHS is a part of found that 36% of parents reported the reason for enrolling their children in a virtual school was to provide a safe environment. In this same survey, 51% of middle and high school students reported that they feel on-line school is a safe environment. During interviews, the only mention of virtual bullying came from Leigh, who didn't share any personal experience, but opined “I'd say it's a safer place because virtual bullying can be stopped pretty fast through this website. And you would have more one on one time with your teachers.”

Peer pressure. Half of the participants spoke about the impact of peer pressure in the brick and mortar setting, with Susan sharing, “It was the stigma, like you had to be a certain person, or have certain attributes, or have a certain amount of money to be able to succeed in the school.” She went on to describe the impact, saying, “That really can bring someone down emotionally when you have something to live up to in school.”

Teresa had similar experiences, explaining, “Being in (brick and mortar) high school there's a lot of peer pressure to do what your other classmates are doing. Dress the way they're doing; the whole thing is to try to fit in. That's the goal.” She went on to say that once she transferred to the virtual school, “By December I was loving it. I'm not gonna lie, I was ahead. I really liked it.” Robert framed it in the present, sharing that it was better in virtual school

because you “Can’t get made fun of unless you openly tell people in the chat in virtual live lessons everything about yourself.”

Impact on the Student

Many of the participants spoke about how the change in environment has impacted them personally. For some it has been a change in motivation, as Susan explained, “Now I’m motivated to get ahead, I’m motivated to do things on time. And even though I’m not having someone on my back seven hours a day, you know, I still feel more motivated in a lot of ways.” Seven of the ten participants explicitly reported they are happier overall since making the transfer to virtual school, with many qualifying their statement with “definitely” and “much.” Kim elaborated on this saying, “I think mainly I’m happier because I kind of found out who I am. Whenever I did online school, I was able to not care about what other people think.” She went on to say, “I was able to find myself and discover who I am and what I want to do in my life.”

A common theme among the participants was the relationships they have with teachers and counselors is better in the virtual setting. Susan shared, “I think the main differences between the last school and this one is the teachers.” She further explained. “I know you can see a teacher in person at my old school, but I didn’t always feel I could come to them.” When asked, each participant noted they are able to easily access help from their online teacher(s), while their level of engagement varied from reaching out only when they needed help, to regular contact. Kim described how she felt about the difference between her teachers across settings, saying about her virtual schoolteachers “They are really supportive...they have more time for each student.” She contrasted this to her teachers in the brick and mortar setting, “It was like if

you weren't at the same pace as everyone else you were forgotten about." Kim also described her view regarding VHS school counselors.

It's about the same except that they are there for you more. Because I feel like the counselors in brick and mortar schools, they're ok, but they didn't really understand. But in online school, they're there for you more often. You can reach out to them and you feel more comfortable, or at least I feel more comfortable reaching out to them, or at least I do more than I did my counselors at my old school.

Some of the participants pointed to specific examples of the depth of relationship they develop with their teachers. Erin shared how touched she was by the cards her teachers sent to her when her father died. Susan enthusiastically described the "hours" she and her mother spent talking with her counselor when they finally got to meet her in person.

Since relationships with adults is a known preventative measure against teen suicide, one of the questions was whether the participants felt that the staff in a virtual school setting would be able to recognize if a student was in crisis. All participants answered in the affirmative, with Leigh explaining.

Yes, because, like in live lesson rooms, most of the students have a kind of pattern, in which they respond to questions, just respond to comments and stuff. And sometimes students will just not be interacting or participating. And sometimes the teacher will either, if they know it's okay to ask like the whole class, they'll ask "What's wrong?" And for me, sometimes I have bad days and they type in just a one on one chat box to see if I'm okay.

In addition to the difference in how they related to adults across high school settings, the participants talked about how the move impacted their peer relationships. All interviewed

reported that they maintain relationships with friends they had prior to transferring to VHS, but they were split on whether they had developed new friendships in the virtual setting. Robert shared that he has not made new friends, but it is much better because he does not get made fun of anymore. Kim simply stated that she is not focusing on making new friendships, but rather she is focusing on her future and does not really have time to make new friends. She went on to say that the virtual setting seemed to be more positive in the realm of friendships, sharing, “I would say the people are more friendly here.” She then went on to surmise why that might be, “I don't know if that's because a lot of the students experienced kind of the same thing I did where they used to go to school and that they understand that and are more emotionally mature.” Some students also talked about the opportunities they have to meet peers in person and how that is a positive way to build on the relationships they make online. They shared that they go to the same testing site for proctored exams and Susan explained it this way. “Even though it's testing and it's not a fun quote/unquote event, you still get to meet people that way.” Others also shared that there are study sessions and field trips they have attended where they have met classmates in person. Joseph shared that he mainly interacts with his friends online, but “When I go to the Fall Festival, I normally see them.”

Impact on Student Behaviors

Eight of the ten participants reported that their grades are better in the virtual high school setting than they were in brick and mortar. Many exhibited excitement as they shared they are significantly better leading to recovered credits and making the honor roll. Susan was one of those who excitedly explained that “My grades went up dramatically.” And Angela explained it this way, “My grades are better because I can have one on one time with my teachers.” The two who did not report improvements shared that they remained the same, with Anna explaining that

her grades have always been high. The students were split on whether the curriculum was easier or more difficult, with many explaining it depends on the course, and a couple confessing they simply are not sure if it is easier or if they just have better focus in the virtual setting. When talking about whether the curriculum is more difficult Kim said, “I think it’s about the same because I still have to do essays and stuff.”

A consistent message from participants about a changed behavior was that they were more likely to ask for help at VHS than they had been at their previous schools. They reported that the teachers at VHS were not only open to answering questions but also they genuinely wanted the students to reach out. Teresa shared she thought perhaps it was because “In normal school after a while the teachers get fed up with the kids in class, talking and stuff, because I mean it would get aggravating hearing kids talk all the time.” She went on to explain that at VHS she feels “They are a lot nicer and they’re more open to answering questions, they want you to reach out to them for help. They are a lot more eager to help you than normal teachers in brick and mortar school.” Several of the participants shared the opinion the teachers were similar in kindness and intent across settings, but the virtual environment allows for improved opportunities for help and communication. Anna summed it up this way, “Teachers at the virtual high school, they have more time to focus on like one individual person, like one-on-one time, even if it is over the phone.” She went on to explain, “Whereas in (brick and mortar) schools there’s so many students that they have to deal with that it’s hard to like actually be focused on one student that actually helped them the way they need it.”

Online teachers also seem to be at an advantage in regard to the psychological safety of the online classroom as explained by Teresa.

I know in brick and mortar school, if you had questions or anything, they asked you during class and pretty much every single person said no, there's no questions. And it's because a lot of the times they have questions, but they don't want to ask in front of all those other kids in the class. And if you're in a classroom, and you brought something up to your teacher before class they might yell out in front of everybody, "so and so, I need you to stay after class". Then you know everyone's looking at you and they want to know why. You don't want to ask questions, you don't want to ask for help, because you don't want other people thinking that you're failing or, you know, you don't want to be picked on."

Kim shared about having had similar feelings, "I think it makes it easier for me to talk to them (VHS teachers) because I can think about what I'm gonna say before I say it. I kind of have social anxiety. I would stutter and stuff and overthink everything." She went on to explain why it's easier at VHS. "There I can just type it out and then they explain it to me. Or if I get on the microphone then it's just easier to talk to them because you're not in a room full of people."

The flexibility in communication modes and scheduling is also seen as beneficial to the students. Teresa explains, "In this environment, you can contact your teachers over the phone. I even have some you can text, they are fine with that, and you can webmail them." Robert shared that he is able to text his success coach as well as his teachers when he is struggling so "I have someone to talk to." Kim shared that she also appreciated the flexibility. "They keep in mind that some of us work and stuff too and need to do school on our hours so they can reschedule the live lessons for us."

When asked if they felt more comfortable communicating with teachers by telephone and/or on the computer versus communicating face-to-face in the brick and mortar setting, all participants stated they felt either the same or more comfortable, with none reporting it was more difficult or uncomfortable. Teresa shared that it was a lot better talking with her teachers online, “I don't feel judged or anything, I can just ask them whatever and I couldn't do that in normal school, that's a big difference.”

Suicide

Participants were not asked directly about suicidal behaviors, but they were asked if they observed the increased prevalence of teen suicide in their communities that the researcher had noted in hers. Responses ranged from noting that there is more attention to the matter, as Joseph shared, “I've seen them informing us of what it is and all that stuff,” to shared experiences about friends and loved ones. Erin, who shared about her hospitalization for mental health concerns stated that she feels the virtual school does a better job than brick and mortar. She explained, “it's a lot easier when it comes to dealing with mental health issues. I feel they are a lot more willing to help in the school I'm in now rather than when I was in brick and mortar school.” Several of the participants believed there were high suicide rates at the brick and mortar high schools in their communities. When asked for her ideas on why this may be, Leigh shared, “I'd say because of how hard school is because in brick and mortar school, we had to go to school six hours a day and then have a ton of homework to do afterward.” Kim shared her experience, “At my old school we had a lot of suicides and stuff. The school didn't really address it which sounds bad because it is bad. I don't know why they didn't.” When asked if they felt the teachers in their virtual schools are aware or how they are feeling and/or can tell when a student is in crisis, all answered in the affirmative. Susan went on to explain,

A lot of the students my age deal with certain things and I think the counselors, especially mine, the ones I've had are extremely aware of many situations that go on in students' lives including things like anxiety and depression. Also, we have so many resources on our page of places you can go to and find links that can help you with that. Which I really love, I think it's awesome.

When Anna was asked, now that she has been out of high school for a few years, what advice she could offer staff in this regard she responded, "Just making sure that they know that there are people around them, to help them, whether it be the teachers, making sure that their family members are aware of what's going on and how they're doing."

Aspirations Affirmed

About half of the students interviewed had plans to go to college. Of the ones who did not intend to go to college, armed forces and firefighting were named as intended careers with on the job training. Two of the students plan to go into veterinary medicine, and other plans include studying psychology and education. Many of them had clear ideas on what they would like to do in their future careers. When asked if the virtual school had an impact on their plans, the consistent response was that they still want to do what they have always wanted to do, but now they feel better prepared to make it a reality. Teresa shared that she is the recipient of a scholarship for \$26,000 and said, "I really didn't think I'd get any kind of scholarship. And I got one, so that was like wow, but I wouldn't have that if I wasn't able to talk to my teachers online and discuss it with them."

Chapter 5

Suicide is a national epidemic in the United States, and our teens are at extreme risk. With the increased media attention to suicide over the past couple of years, it would be reasonable to hope that suicide rates are decreasing, but so far that is not the case (Dastagir, 2020). Virtual schools continue to increase in scope and availability with an increase in enrollment in virtual schools climbing by about 2,000 students from the 2016-17 to 2017-18 school year (Molnar et al., 2019). The implications at the intersection of these phenomena are significant for virtual school leaders, placing them in positions that are largely unexplored and requiring them to adapt information from the brick and mortar schools to their unique settings. This chapter opens with a discussion of the findings and concludes with recommendations for further study based on what has been learned.

Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to make sense of the perspectives of high school students who have transferred from a brick and mortar high school to a virtual high school in hopes of finding a social/emotional safe haven. The lens of Badura's (1986) theory of reciprocal causation was used to interpret the findings and draw conclusions. The change in school environment influenced the students' behaviors. They felt safer, had better relationships with their teachers, and were performing better academically. I have organized the discussion points in this section using the experiences of the participants, the literature review, and the theoretical framework. This section starts with a visual comparison based upon the findings that shows the influences that impact the reciprocal causation that manifested for the students when

their environment changed, then goes on to discuss the major themes that emerged from the findings.

Banduras' Theory of Reciprocal Causation

The first figure below is a remind of the theory that was used as a lens in this study. In Bandura's theory of reciprocal causation (Bandura, 1986), the person, behavior, and environment are a triad of actors that interact with one another to shape a person's circumstances. When one of the factors change, the impact extends to other areas of the triad (Wood & Bandura, 1989). It is important to note that despite the organization of the models used below, there is not a specific pattern of movement and the strength of the influences will vary within the process of reciprocal causation.

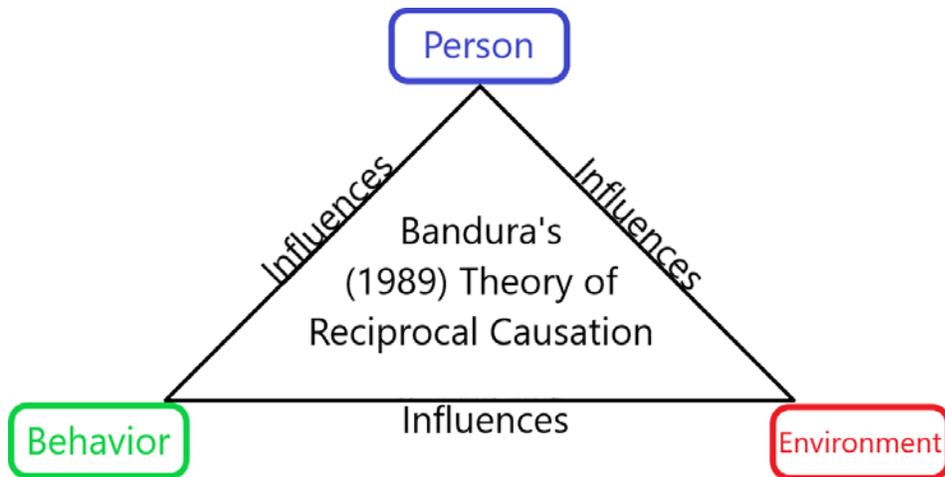


Figure 2 Relationship Between the Three Classes of Determinants in Triadic Reciprocal Causation

Next, I used this model to show how the influences of being in a brick and mortar high school impacted the students and led to them making the significant change of environment by moving to an online school setting. The figure below shows the influences that emerged from the findings regarding the students' experiences when they were still in a brick and mortar high school.

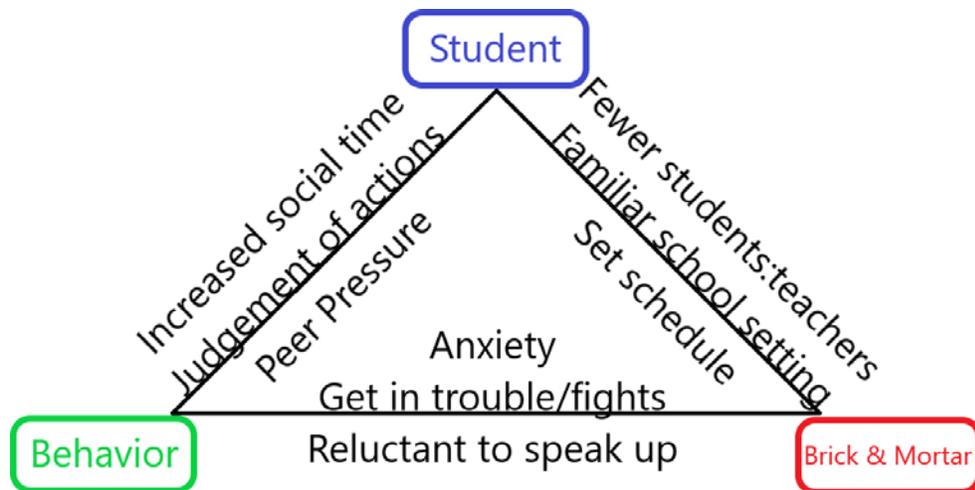


Figure 3 Relationship Between the Three Classes of Determinants in Triadic Reciprocal Causation When Students Were in a Brick and Mortar High School

In this model you can see the influences that impacted the students and families’ decision to change the environment from brick and mortar to online high school. In the brick and mortar school there were fewer students per teacher, the setting was familiar and what the students had experienced throughout their schooling to that point, and there was consistency within a set schedule. At the same time, some of the influences on the students that came from that setting included increased social time with their peers, the feelings of being judged for their actions, and peer pressure. Some of the behaviors that the participants reported as being influences that impacted change included anxiety, getting into trouble and even fights, and being reluctant to speak up for themselves, or for what they felt was right.

In the final model one can see the impact the move to a virtual high school had on the triad. The environment has now changed to VHS and the behaviors and students’ sense of self has been impacted by a variety of influences.

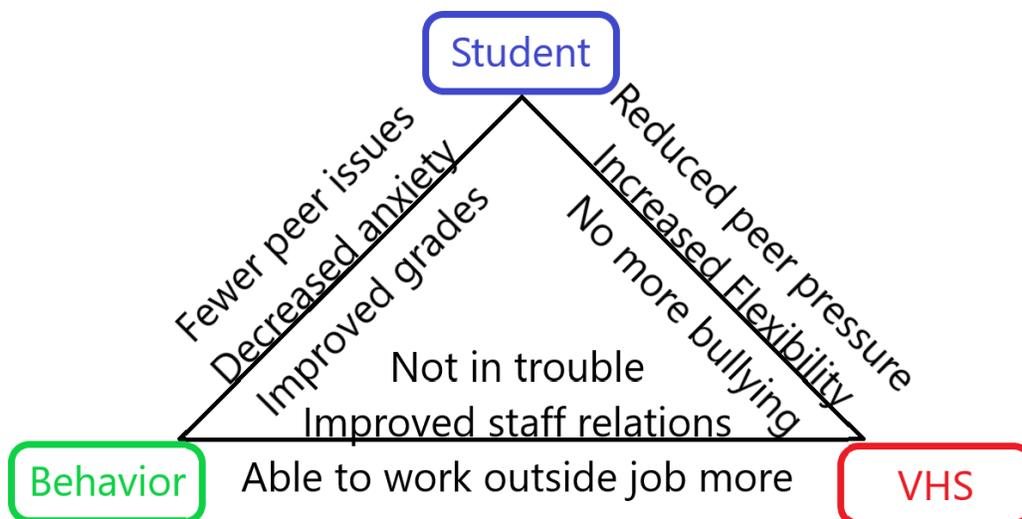


Figure 4 Relationship Between the Three Classes of Determinants in Triadic Reciprocal Causation When Students Were at VHS

In this model it is apparent that the students experienced significant changes to their sense of self as well as to their behaviors. They experienced fewer peer issues, had decreased anxiety, and reported improved grades. Other influences they reported included a reduction in peer pressure, having increased flexibility in their ability to schedule their day, and not having difficulties with bullying, getting into fights, or getting into trouble. As we examine the influences and impacts of the change in environment, we find that according to the participants, virtual school is a safe haven, that they experience improved relationships and increased trust with their teachers and counselors, and they gain confidence in their academic skills and plans for the future. They also discuss that there are fewer opportunities for peer interactions and how they compensate for this. These findings are discussed in further detail below.

Virtual High School is a Safe Haven

A co-founder of Connections Education shared, “Online schools were launched to serve a niche group of students whose gifts and challenges made traditional education a bad fit.” She addresses the change by explaining, “The epidemic of anxiety and depression in today’s youth

means that there is a need for virtual schools to expand beyond that niche” (Revenaugh, 2020). As we have come to acknowledge this truth, the question has become, can virtual schools provide a social/emotional safe haven for students? With the student participants in this study reporting that virtual school has improved or eliminated the issues that troubled them in the brick and mortar setting, for this small sample the answer to this question is a resounding “yes.” A recently released case study from Stanford Online High School shows that when social/emotional learning (SEL) is infused into the education design for online students they are able to develop SEL skills and competencies at a stellar rate when compared to similar peers in a brick and mortar setting (Hoshi & Steele, 2020). When looking at what makes the virtual high school a safe haven, it becomes clear that while being physically removed from the brick and mortar school is significant, the change in environment is about much more than just a physical setting.

When a student moves from a brick and mortar school to attend school online full time, s/he most often then completes schooling from home. While the change in physical setting is dramatic from one to the other, there are multiple factors that change. Students go from being one of 20-30 or more students physically in a classroom to be the only student, or one of several siblings, in a home setting. There is no longer a passing period, lunch, recess, or other times when students gather more informally with less supervision. For some students this may alleviate many problem situations, including those related to peer pressure and bullying. For parents, virtual school is also seen as a safe haven, with concerns about bullying and school violence being among the top reasons they choose virtual school for their children (Edwards, 2018).

Improved Relationships and Increased Trust

Relationships are known to be a primary prevention strategy for suicide. As the people with the most direct contact with students, teachers in brick and mortar schools are considered the gatekeepers in this regard (Hawton et al., 2012; Nadeem et al., 2011). A reasonable assumption may be that it would be more challenging to form those relationships in the virtual school setting, where communication takes place primarily on the phone, or in computer-based classrooms. However, the shared experiences of the students interviewed for this study suggests otherwise. Teachers in the virtual school setting may actually be at an advantage when it comes to building relationships with students and having a meaningful impact on their education. For online teachers, the focus can remain on the content and the individual needs of the students. Having one-on-one conversations can help a student feel important and heard, while allowing teachers to learn and observe more about the student and their academic needs. It also allows for relationship building and trust, which are considered necessary components of effective learning (Gatens, 2020). As Dr. LaKimbre Brown (2014) explains, “Trust is safety. Trust is comfort. Trust is feeling that someone has your back. Trust is an environment where individuals can be their best selves (p. 1).” The students in this study shared a variety of reasons that they had increased trust with the teachers they had at VHS in comparison to the teachers they had in their brick and mortar setting. These reasons included the psychological safety of the online classroom, where it is possible for teachers to ask students questions privately, and for students to also ask for help without involving peers. Students also talked about the ability to think about what they were going to say prior to calling or meeting with a teacher and how that gave them confidence and reduced anxiety.

It is Not All About the Numbers

Current data shows that in the typical brick and mortar school there are about 15 students to every teacher. In virtual schools the average is about three times that with about 45 students per teacher (Miron et al., 2018), and at VHS the ratio is about 56:1. It has been expressed that the higher caseloads in virtual schools is of concern, with a report from the National Education Policy Center calling for the implementation of measures that require virtual schools to reduce their student-to-teacher ratios based on these numbers (Molnar et al., 2019). Despite these concerns, the participants in this study all reported improved relationships with their teachers. While teacher caseload was not directly discussed, participants talked at length about their appreciation for the ease with which they can contact their teachers at VHS. When discussing the differences across settings, they shared that teachers in the virtual setting were more available with flexible timing and the variety of communication modes making it easier to talk with their teachers when they wanted/needed to. The attention and caring the students reported receiving from their teachers and school counselors at VHS were consistent with the relationships that research says are needed to aide in suicide prevention in schools. This indicates that this cornerstone of suicide prevention is possible in this setting. Brick and mortar school leaders as well as virtual school leaders may benefit from examining these findings. Looking at ways to increase their teachers' ability to employ more varied methods of communicating with students, increased flexibility in scheduling, and increased individual interaction may lead to students feeling more connected and supported in their setting.

Students Gain Academic Confidence and Prepare for College

Findings of this study indicated the students all reported they were either doing better than they had in their prior brick and mortar school or were maintaining previous high grades.

For the students in this small sample that meant honor roll level grades for a few, improving from failing grades to C's and D's for a couple of others, and earning mainly A's and B's for the rest. The comparison of VHS to all schools in the state indicated that the charter school students in both brick and mortar and virtual school settings were doing worse than the other public schools in the state. While at first glance this may seem to contradict what the participants shared, it is also key to note that VHS is closely aligned with the other charter schools in the state, 95% of which are brick and mortar, in most academic areas. The participants in this study came from brick and mortar schools within the state, split evenly between public and private/charter, which would also be a factor. Throughout the state where VHS is located virtual charter schools scored about 4% lower than their brick and mortar charter counterparts. However, both online and brick and mortar charter schools scored an average of 8.5% below the public (non-charter) schools in the state, with a difference of 16% being the most extreme. The state grades are based on end of course assessments, which may or may not coincide with the grades the participants were sharing during our interviews. These statistics are in line with the belief that students attending online schools do not have the same level of rigor in their education as those who attend brick and mortar schools. The National Education Policy Center reports that virtual schools continue to underperform academically in comparison to blended schools, and even more so when compared to brick and mortar schools (Miron et al., 2018) in numbers that are similar to the comparisons for VHS. However there have been concerns expressed that when those comparisons are made there is no adjustment for the unique factors that differentiate one setting from the other. A study that adjusted for district-mean student mobility as well as school-mean student socio-economic status and other demographic factors found that online schools performed as well as brick and mortar schools on math and reading assessments (Gatti, 2018).

Virtual high schools are sometimes considered and/or used as vehicles for students to get a GED or simply complete minimal requirements for a high-school diploma. While some virtual schools are created for that purpose, VHS, and other public online schools like it are designed to provide a complete high school education with curriculum and standards equivalent to those of brick and mortar high schools. The participants of this study clearly see earning their diploma at VHS as a gateway to further education and training with two of the students planning to receive additional training to work in emergency services, and seven planning to ultimately receive a degree from a four-year college. Teresa spoke at length about the scholarship opportunities and how “I wouldn’t have that if I wasn’t able to talk to my teachers online and discuss it with them.”

Fewer Opportunities for Social Interactions

Some of the students interviewed shared that they miss having the face to face social time with their school peers on a daily basis. For those who do miss the social interactions, virtual schools may consider pursuing a more concentrated effort to find ways to connect their students to one another. This can be done through increased use of microphones and cameras during social times in live lesson rooms. Several of the students talked about field trips, testing, and other opportunities to see their peers in person, but several also expressed that the activities they would like to attend are too far for them to travel. Students traditionally have to rely on parents for rides to school activities, or high school students may drive themselves if they have the means. An implication for improvement may be to explore finding ways to provide transportation for students who would like to participate but live too far from where activities are held. Alternatively, the schools may want to spread activities out across the state, so students do

not have so far to travel. This may depend largely on the actual setting of the state and whether urban or rural and whether public transportation is an option.

Recommendations for Further Study

While research continues and virtual school leaders and staff learn from experiences over time, perhaps the best source of current and accurate information is directly from the students. When asked for advice, Anna shared that it comes down to school leaders and teachers “making sure students know they have the support that they need.” For students she advised, “Whether it be for depression, or even just getting help on homework, it’s okay to not understand something. So, ask for help if you need it.” I have organized this section to include the limitations of the study, followed by recommendations for further study based on the findings and subsequent discussion.

While some studies have been completed and data collected regarding the academic success of virtual schools, all related literature points out that the limitations of each study is that the findings are specific to the schools that are included and that not all schools are being studied. Further studies that cover the gamut of virtual schools regarding academic performance leading to improved practices that could be implemented widely would be beneficial for students and staff in these settings. It is apparent that some virtual schools are doing well, and exploration of what is making the difference is important. One area of focus in future studies may be specific to students who are mobile, as this seems to be a large part of the virtual school population. Frequent moves have been shown to be detrimental to students and if virtual schools are seeing high mobility rates, determining how to reduce the deficit for this population would be valuable.

When reviewing the findings of this study and reviewing recent results from the Stanford study (Hoshi & Steele, 2020), further investigation as to whether there is true need to improve the student/teacher ratios in the virtual setting is warranted. Evaluating the required number of times teachers are required to have synchronous contacts with students and the lapses between times that are allowed may be more beneficial than focusing purely on the ratios. In addition to looking at the frequency of contacts, further research to understand what it is about these unique relationships that lead the students to feel more supported would be of great benefit.

Since so many students are coming to virtual school and leaving the brick and mortar setting due to concerns that correlate to suicidal risk, further study is needed to determine if suicide rates for teens in virtual schools is consistent with, better, or worse, than those in the brick and mortar setting. This information can better inform whether the virtual school truly is a safe haven and if so, what makes it so. Increased knowledge on what causes and how to prevent teen suicide is imperative since suicide rates continue to rise.

Interviews in this study showed that making connections with students was possible whether on camera, in an online classroom, or by phone. My bias going into this study was that it would be “better” when both the researcher and participant were on camera. However, what I found is that good rapport was established with all participants regardless of whether we were on camera or on the phone. While I still prefer being able to see the person I am talking to, further research may aid in discovering whether this is a factor to learning, or just a personal preference.

Limitations of the Study

The scope of this study was limited and therefore it is recommended that additional qualitative studies be conducted across settings to continue to learn about teen perceptions of virtual school as a social/emotional safe haven. The study was conducted at a virtual high school

with about 2,500 students. The students who participated were volunteers who responded to a webmail asking for participants and if under 18, had a parent who also consented to the study. The criteria for participation were to be a junior or senior, have attended at least one semester at VHS, and have transferred in from a brick and mortar setting. Furthermore, the student or their caretaker had identified situations or behaviors such as bullying, depression, or suicidal behaviors, as being influential in the decision to enroll at VHS. Based on these criteria 385 students were invited, indicating there are many more voices to be heard, even within this one school community. Future research may include using survey type tools in addition to interviews, providing diverse ways for students to share including recording answers to written prompts, meeting in focus groups, or answering questions presented by their school counselors. Techniques that can increase the number of student voices being heard may be what is needed to continue the conversation.

The school in this study has been open for twelve years, is fully accredited, is geared for preparing students for college and beyond, is free for students to attend, and has a virtual counseling program that focuses on relationships. VHS may have more resources and put more focus on social emotional health than virtual schools with fewer resources. On the flip side, VHS also has a higher than average teacher to student ratio with about 56:1 vs the average 45:1. It is a large public charter school, and a review of literature shows that small district schools as well as blended schools that have some in person contact time tend to be more successful. All of these factors support the implication that additional studies are warranted to learn more about the specific factors that build student trust, safety, and success.

Expansion of Professional Development for Online Teachers

Further study would be beneficial in how to implement social/emotional supports in the online learning environment. As with mandated training on suicide prevention, states are able to choose whether to mandate social-emotional learning for students (Gabriel, 2019). Forty-five of the fifty united states currently incorporate it into their standards and curricula and also consistent with suicide prevention training, the resources are developed for brick and mortar schools and adapted by online schools for their unique setting. The study from Stanford High School released in February 2020 is a positive sign that this work is starting (Hoshi & Steele, 2020). The Digital Learning Annual Conference (DLAC), started in February 2019, is another sign that online learning is a unique setting that needs training, education, systems, and research that is specific to the setting and learners. The 2020 DLAC conference in Austin, TX featured topics such as: Meeting the Needs of Diverse Populations with Digital Learning, Providing Personalized Learning for Online Teachers, In the Age of Anxiety, Can Online School Be a Happy Place?, and A Look at Social Emotional Learning and Well-Being Among Students at Full-Time Virtual Schools. These titles suggest that work has begun and will be on-going. In addition to conference presentations, one can find a handful of college prep courses for teaching online at the K-12 level. While online teaching at the post-secondary level has been a part of the teacher education conversation for some time, training for K-12 educators to teach online is emerging, with a program started during the 2019-20 school year at Southern New Hampshire University being one of the pioneer programs.

Many references were made by the participants to relationships with school counselors and their teachers. While many of the skills around building and trust seem to be consistent across platforms, additional pedagogy for training teachers on developing skills that are most

effective in the online setting may be beneficial. There is on the job training for educators when they are hired at VHS in regard to how to support their students, build relationships, and facilitate suicide prevention. However, some of that training, such as the state mandated course for suicide prevention, was developed for the brick and mortar setting. It is intriguing to think of what benefit could come from those specific skills and strategies being developed specifically for the online learning setting and taught in college preparatory programs.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Telephone Script to Schedule Interviews

Hello,

This is Sharon Jaso calling is this (participant who has given consent/assent)?

If not, I will leave my contact information, if so, I will continue.

Thank you so much for agreeing to take part in my study. Before we talk about scheduling an interview time, do you have any questions? (I will answer consistent with information on consent/assent forms)

The interview will take place in my live lesson room, which is the same format as those your teachers use. I will send you a link in email. What days/times are convenient for you? (I will come up with mutually agreeable time) I will send a follow up email to confirm this day and time that contains the link to my live lesson room. When we meet I will be on camera and you will have the option to turn yours on or simply use the microphone.

Please remember that this is entirely voluntary, and you may change your mind about participating at any time without any negative reaction from me or anyone at school. Do you have any questions? (if so, I will answer consistent with consent/assent forms) If you think of any questions before we meet please feel free to reach out to me through email, phone, or text.

Thanks again and I look forward to seeing you (date/time)!

Appendix B

Invitation Letter to Participants and Parents



Hello,

My name is Sharon Jaso and I am writing to invite you to take part in a study I am conducting entitled *Perceptions of Teens Choosing a Virtual High School as a Social/Emotional Safe Haven*. This study is the topic of my dissertation, which I am completing as part of my studies as a doctoral candidate at Wichita State University. In addition to being a graduate student, I am also the director of special education at Kansas Connections Academy.

This message is coming to you from the Manager of Counseling Services at VHS, as I will have no access to any student identifying information unless or until you have sent in a signed consent and/or assent form.

Please take a look at the attached consent and/or assent forms to learn more specific details about the study. If you are a student who is or will be 18 years or older by August 1, 2019 then you will have the consent for students over 18 form. If you are a parent of a student who is not yet 18 then please find both the consent for parent, and assent for student forms attached. **If you would like to take part in this study, please send me your preferred email address (both parent and student if under 18) and I will send the forms to be signed electronically through DocuSign.**

Feel free to call me at 316-680-9848 or email me at sljaso@shockers.wichita.edu if you have any questions or would like to discuss the study prior to making a decision. You may also contact the principal investigator in this study, Dr. Marlene Schommer-Aikins, Professor of Educational Psychology at Wichita State University at marlene.schommer-aikins@wsu.edu or (316) 978-6386 with any questions or to discuss the study. I appreciate you taking the time to read this letter and for your consideration of participation in the study.

Sincerely,

Sharon Jaso, M.Ed
316-680-9848
sljaso@shockers.wichita.edu

Appendix C

Interview Script and Protocol Questions

Hello, my name is Sharon Jaso and I represent Wichita State University as a Doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program in the College of Applied Studies. I also work for Kansas Connections Academy. I appreciate your willingness to participate in my research. This study will examine your perceptions on the impact the change in environment from a brick and mortar to virtual high school has had on your behavior and your sense of self as a student and person.

You were selected for participation in this study based on enrollment information, your current academic grade level, and because you attended high school in a brick and mortar setting prior to coming to your virtual high school so you have experiences in both settings.

Before we begin, I would like to share a few procedures for our conversation.

- I am on camera; you may choose to be on or off camera for any or all of the interview.
- Regardless of whether you choose to be on or off camera, I will be audio recording the interview to assist me in transcribing verbatim later.
- I will send you the transcribed interview to review.
- I will not share details of what you tell me with anyone.
- If either of us has follow up questions we can communicate through email, phone, or text.
- Although we will be on a first name basis, no names or identifying comments will be used when I report the results of this session. You can be assured of complete confidentiality.

- Your interview or any part of it will not be shared with your parent(s) or school personnel. The only exception to this will be sharing the minimum information necessary to support you if I feel you are in imminent danger. This means if I feel that you are in danger of hurting yourself, I will need to alert your parent and/or counselor. I will be honest and openly talking to you at all stages, so there will be no surprises.
- You may choose not to answer any question(s) without penalty. You may simply say “pass.”
- You may choose to stop this interview at any time without penalty.
- I have posted in a pod that you can see on the screen the text and phone number for the crisis hotline. Would you like to take time to write those down?
- This Interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes.
- Have you read and signed the consent/assent form?
- Do you have any questions about it before we begin?
- Do I have your permission to audio record our interview?

Interview Questions

- Tell me a little bit about yourself.
- What grade are you in and when did you start at VHS?
- Where did you go to school prior to VHS?
 - Tell me about that (school).
- Tell me about the decision to transfer to VHS, what were the main reasons to change?

- What would you say are the main differences between the brick and mortar high school and your current school?
- Tell me about the relationships you have with teachers and staff at VHS.
 - How are those similar to, or different from how you related to teachers/staff at your prior school?
- If you have a problem with school who do you talk to?
 - What if it's not directly school related?
- How has the move to a virtual high school impacted you as a student?
 - Do you find the work to be easier or harder? (why?)
 - Have your study habits changed? (how?)
 - Are your grades better or worse? (why do you think?)
- Overall are you happier or sadder (or same) since transferring to VHS?
 - Why do you think that is?
- Are there any groups, activities, or classes you participate in for the social opportunities?
- Do you feel like there are people and/or services available to help you if you were sad or upset, or something bad happened?
- What are your plans after high school?
- How have your plans post-graduation been impacted by the move to a virtual high school?

Thank you for your participation! I have enjoyed talking with you. Do you have any questions for me? I will send the transcript to you for member checking by (date). The email address I have for you is (xx), is this the one you would like me to use? Please reach out if you have any questions in the meantime.

Appendix D

Parent Consent Form

Purpose: Your child is invited to participate in a research study, **Perceptions of Teens Choosing a Virtual High School as a Social/Emotional Safe Haven**. The purpose of the study is to learn about the perceptions of students who have chosen to transfer from a brick and mortar high school to a virtual one in relation to social/emotional health.

Participant Selection: The participant selection is based on a purposeful sample involving approximately 60 students. Your child was selected as a possible participant in this study because s/he or a parent reported that the move to a virtual high school was based in part on a social/emotional concern such as bullying, anxiety, depression. More specifically, your child was selected based on their attendance at a brick and mortar high school prior to coming to a virtual high school, and that s/he will be a junior or senior during the 2019-20 school year at SCCA.

Explanation of Procedures: If you decide to allow your child to participate, your child will be asked to participate in an individual interview. Your child will be separately asked to consent/assent to participate in an individual interview. There will be about 10-15 participants interviewed for this study. The interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes and will be audio recorded for future transcription. Each interview will be scheduled at a mutually agreeable time in a live-lesson classroom online. The researcher will be on camera, and your child will have the option to also join on camera, or use audio only. Once the interview has been transcribed, your child will be provided with a copy for review. Questions to be used during the interview include: *What have you experienced as the main differences between the brick and mortar high school and your current school? How has the move to a virtual high school impacted you as a student? Are there any groups, activities, or classes that you participate in for social reasons?*

Discomfort/Risks: During this study, it is possible that your child may become uncomfortable, sad, or angry when talking about personal struggles or experiences. Participation is voluntary. If your child feels uncomfortable with any question, they can feel free to not answer it. You and your child also have the option to withdraw from the study at any time. No identifiable information will be used.

If at any point your child feels too distressed to continue the study, we ask that they inform the researcher and they may discontinue their participation without penalty. A school counselor will be alerted with your student's permission and will be available to meet. If your child has an outside mental health service provider it is recommended that you advise them about the study so they can be on call to support your child as needed. Your child is welcome to invite a parent or trusted adult to be in the room during the interview for support as well.

If the distress continues after your child discontinues or finishes participation, you may wish to contact a school counselor, contact the Teen Crisis Hotline by texting CONNECT to 741741, call the Teen Suicide Prevention Hotline at 1-800-273-8255, or visit their website to access further resources in your area:
<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/help-yourself/youth/>

Benefits: Your child will get an opportunity to share or voice any opinions related to social/emotional supports at their past and present schools. This may lead to an increased self awareness of the impact of their school choice on their feelings and behaviors. This study will add to the limited research about virtual high schools as a social/emotional safe haven.

Confidentiality: The WSU researcher will make every effort to keep participant's study-related information confidential. Participant names will be kept confidential by replacing names with initials or pseudonyms during transcription. Digital copies of transcriptions and recordings will be secured in password-protected locations available only to the WSU researcher.

To make sure the study is done properly and safely, there may be circumstances where this information must be released. By signing this form, you are giving the WSU study team permission to share information about your child with the following groups:

- Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;
- The Wichita State University Institutional Review Board;
- The Lead of Counseling at South Carolina Connections Academy

The researcher will complete a dissertation and may publish the results of the study. If so, no participant names, school name, or any personal identifying information will be used in any publication or presentation about the study.

Refusal/Withdrawal: Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to allow your student to participate will not affect your future relations with Wichita State University and/or South Carolina Connections Academy. If you agree to allow your student to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw them from the study at any time without penalty.

Contact: If you have any questions about this research, you can contact the principal investigator, Dr. Marlene Schommer-Aikins, Professor of Educational Psychology at Wichita State University at marlene.schommer-aikins@wichita.edu, (316) 978-6386. You may also contact the co-investigator, Sharon Jaso, Doctoral Candidate at Wichita State University, and Special Education Director at Kansas Connections Academy, at sljaso@shockers.wichita.edu or (316) 680-9848.

If you have questions pertaining to your rights as a research subject, or about research-related injury, you can contact the Office of Research and Technology Transfer at Wichita State University, 1845 Fairmount Street, Wichita, KS 67260-0007, telephone (316) 978-3285.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that:

- You have read (or someone has read to you) the information provided above,
- You are aware that this is a research study,
- You have had the opportunity to ask questions and they have been answered to your satisfaction, and
- You have voluntarily decided to allow your child to participate.

You are not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Printed Name (Child)

Printed Name (Parent/Guardian)

Parent/Guardian Signature Date

Printed Name of Witness

Witness Signature Date

Appendix E

Adult Student (18 and older) Interview Consent Form

Purpose: You are invited to participate in a research study, **Perceptions of Teens Choosing a Virtual High School as a Social/Emotional Safe Haven**. The purpose of the study is to learn about the perceptions of students who have chosen to transfer from a brick and mortar high school to a virtual one in relation to social/emotional health.

Participant Selection: The participant selection is based on a purposeful sample involving approximately 60 students. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you or your caretaker reported that the move to a virtual high school was based in part on a social/emotional concern such as bullying, anxiety, or depression. More specifically, you were selected based on your attendance at a brick and mortar high school prior to coming to a virtual high school, and you will be a junior or senior during the 2019-20 school year at SCCA.

Explanation of Procedures: If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in an individual interview. There will be about 10-15 participants interviewed individually for this study. The interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes and will be audio recorded for future transcription. Each interview will be scheduled at a mutually agreeable time in a live-lesson classroom online. The researcher will be on camera, and you will have the option to also join on camera, or use audio only. Once the interview has been transcribed, you will be provided with a copy for your review. Questions to be used during the interview include: *What have you experienced as the main differences between the brick and mortar high school and your current school? How has the move to a virtual high school impacted you as a student? Are there any groups, activities, or classes you participate in for social reasons?*

Discomfort/Risks: During this study, it is possible that you may become uncomfortable, sad, or angry when talking about personal struggles or experiences. Participation is voluntary. If you feel uncomfortable with any questions, you can feel free to not answer. You also have the option to withdraw from the study at any time. No identifiable information will be used.

If at any point you feel too distressed to continue the study, please inform the researcher and you may discontinue your participation without penalty. With your permission, your school counselor will be made aware that you are participating in the study and will be available to meet with you. If you have an outside mental health service provider it is recommended that you advise them about the study so they can be on call to support you as needed. You are welcome to invite a parent or trusted adult to be in the room during the interview for support as well.

If the distress continues after you discontinue or finish participation, you may wish to contact your school counselor, or contact the Teen Crisis Hotline by texting CONNECT to 741741, call the Teen Suicide Prevention Hotline at 1- 800-273-8255, or visit their website to access further resources in your area:
<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/help-yourself/youth/>

Benefits: Participants will get an opportunity to share or voice any opinions related to social/emotional supports at their past and present schools. This may lead to an increased self awareness of the impact of their school choice on their feelings and behaviors. This study will add to the limited research about virtual high schools as a social/emotional safe haven.

Confidentiality: The WSU study team will make every effort to keep participant's study-related information confidential. Participant names will be kept confidential by replacing names with initials or pseudonyms during transcription. Digital copies of transcriptions and recordings will be secured in password-protected locations available only to the WSU researcher.

To make sure the study is done properly and safely, there may be circumstances where this information must be released. By signing this form, you are giving the WSU study team permission to share information about you with the following groups:

- Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;
- The Wichita State University Institutional Review Board;
- The Lead of Counseling at South Carolina Connections Academy

The researcher will complete a dissertation and may publish the results of the study. If so, no participant names, school name, or any personal identifying information will be used in any publication or presentation about the study.

Refusal/Withdrawal: Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with Wichita State University and/or South Carolina Connections Academy. If you agree to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Contact: If you have any questions about this research, you can contact the principal investigator, Dr. Marlene Schommer-Aikins, Professor of Educational Psychology at Wichita State University at marlene.schommer-aikins@wichita.edu, (316) 978-6386. You may also contact the co-investigator, Sharon Jaso, Doctoral Candidate at Wichita State University, and Special Education Director at Kansas Connections Academy, at sljaso@shockers.wichita.edu or (316) 680-9848.

If you have questions pertaining to your rights as a research subject, or about research-related injury, you can contact the Office of Research and Technology Transfer at Wichita State University, 1845 Fairmount Street, Wichita, KS 67260-0007, telephone (316) 978-3285.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that:

- You have read (or someone has read to you) the information provided above,
- You are aware that this is a research study,
- You have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to your satisfaction, and
- You have voluntarily decided to participate.

You are not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Printed Name (Participant)

Participant Signature Date

Printed Name of Witness

Witness Signature Date

Appendix F

Student Under 18 Years Old Assent Form

Purpose: You are invited to participate in a research study, **Perceptions of Teens Choosing a Virtual High School as a Social/Emotional Safe Haven**. The purpose of the study is to learn about the perceptions of students who have chosen to transfer from a brick and mortar high school to a virtual one in relation to social/emotional health.

Participant Selection: The participant selection is based on a purposeful sample involving approximately 60 students. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you or your caretaker reported that the move to a virtual high school was based in part on a social/emotional concern such as bullying, anxiety, depression. More specifically, you were selected based on your attendance at a brick and mortar high school prior to coming to a virtual high school, and you will be a junior or senior during the 2019-20 school year at SCCA.

Explanation of Procedures: If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in an individual interview. There will be about 10-15 participants interviewed for this study. The interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes and will be audio recorded for future transcription. Each interview will be scheduled at a mutually agreeable time in a live-lesson classroom online. The researcher will be on camera, and you will have the option to also join on camera, or use audio only. Once the interview has been transcribed, you will be provided with a copy for your review. Questions to be used during the interview include: *What have you experienced as the main differences between the brick and mortar high school and your current school? How has the move to a virtual high school impacted you as a student? Are there any groups, activities, or classes you participate in for social reasons?*

Discomfort/Risks: During this study, it is possible that you may become uncomfortable, sad, or angry when talking about personal struggles or experiences. Participation is voluntary. If you feel uncomfortable with any questions, you can feel free to not answer. You also have the option to withdraw from the study at any time. No identifiable information will be used.

If at any point you feel too distressed to continue the study, please inform the researcher and you may discontinue your participation without penalty. With your permission, your school counselor will be made aware that you are participating in the study and will be available to meet with you. If you have an outside mental health service provider it is recommended that you advise them about the study so they can be on call to support you as needed. You are welcome to invite a parent or trusted adult to be in the room during the interview for support as well.

If the distress continues after you discontinue or finish participation, you may wish to contact your school counselor, or contact the Teen Crisis Hotline by texting CONNECT to 741741, call the Teen Suicide Prevention Hotline at 1- 800-273-8255, or visit their website to access further resources in your area:

<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/help-yourself/youth/>

Benefits: Participants will get an opportunity to share or voice any opinions related to social/emotional supports at their past and present schools. This may lead to an increased self awareness of the impact of their school choice on their feelings and behaviors. This study will add to the limited research about virtual high schools as a social/emotional safe haven.

Confidentiality: The WSU study team will make every effort to keep participant's study-related information confidential. Participant names will be kept confidential by replacing names with initials or pseudonyms during

transcription. Digital copies of transcriptions and recordings will be secured in password-protected locations available only to the WSU researcher.

To make sure the study is done properly and safely, there may be circumstances where this information must be released. By signing this form, you are giving the WSU study team permission to share information about you with the following groups:

- Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;
- The Wichita State University Institutional Review Board;
- The Lead of Counseling at South Carolina Connections Academy

The researcher will complete a dissertation and may publish the results of the study. If so, no participant names, school name, or any personal identifying information will be used in any publication or presentation about the study.

Refusal/Withdrawal: Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with Wichita State University and/or South Carolina Connections Academy. If you agree to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Contact: If you have any questions about this research, you can contact the principal investigator, Dr. Marlene Schommer-Aikins, Professor of Educational Psychology at Wichita State University at marlene.schommer-aikins@wichita.edu, (316) 978-6386. You may also contact the co-investigator, Sharon Jaso, Doctoral Candidate at Wichita State University, and Special Education Director at Kansas Connections Academy, at sljaso@shockers.wichita.edu or (316) 680-9848.

If you have questions pertaining to your rights as a research subject, or about research-related injury, you can contact the Office of Research and Technology Transfer at Wichita State University, 1845 Fairmount Street, Wichita, KS 67260-0007, telephone (316) 978-3285.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that:

- You have read (or someone has read to you) the information provided above,
- You are aware that this is a research study,
- You have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to your satisfaction, and
- You have voluntarily decided to participate.
- You are aware that your parent or guardian has signed a consent form for you to participate.

You are not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Printed Name (Participant)

Participant Signature Date

Appendix G

Graduated Student (through age 21) Interview Consent Form

Purpose: You are invited to participate in a research study, **Perceptions of Teens Choosing a Virtual High School as a Social/Emotional Safe Haven**. The purpose of the study is to learn about the perceptions of students who chose to transfer from a brick and mortar high school to a virtual one in relation to social/emotional health.

Participant Selection: The participant selection is based on a purposeful sample involving approximately 60 students. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you or your caretaker reported that the move to a virtual high school was based in part on a social/emotional concern such as bullying, anxiety, or depression. More specifically, you were selected based on your attendance at a brick and mortar high school prior to attending a virtual high school.

Explanation of Procedures: If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in an individual interview. The interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes and will be audio recorded for future transcription. Each interview will be scheduled at a mutually agreeable time in a live-lesson classroom online or by phone. If we meet online, the researcher will be on camera, and you will have the option to also join on camera, or use audio only. Once the interview has been transcribed, you will be provided with a copy for your review. Questions to be used during the interview include: *What did you experience as the main differences between the brick and mortar high school and virtual high school? How did the move to a virtual high school impact you as a student? Were there any groups, activities, or classes you participated in for social reasons?*

Discomfort/Risks: During this study, it is possible that you may become uncomfortable, sad, or angry when talking about personal struggles or experiences. Participation is voluntary. If you feel uncomfortable with any questions, you can feel free to not answer. You also have the option to withdraw from the study at any time. No identifiable information will be used.

If at any point you feel too distressed to continue the study, please inform the researcher and you may discontinue your participation without penalty. If you have an outside mental health service provider it is recommended that you advise them about the study so they can be on call to support you as needed. You are welcome to invite a parent or trusted adult to be in the room during the interview for support as well.

If the distress continues after you discontinue or finish participation, you may wish to contact the Teen Crisis Hotline by texting CONNECT to 741741, call the Suicide Prevention Hotline at 1-800-273-8255, or visit their website to access further resources in your area: <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/help-yourself/youth/>

Benefits: Participants will get an opportunity to share or voice any opinions related to social/emotional supports at their past schools. This may lead to an increased self-awareness of the impact of their school choice on their feelings and behaviors. This study will add to the limited research about virtual high schools as a social/emotional safe haven.

Confidentiality: The WSU study team will make every effort to keep participant’s study-related information confidential. Participant names will be kept confidential by replacing names with initials or pseudonyms during transcription. Digital copies of transcriptions and recordings will be secured in password-protected locations available only to the WSU researcher.

To make sure the study is done properly and safely, there may be circumstances where this information must be released. By signing this form, you are giving the WSU study team permission to share information about you with the following groups:

- Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;
- The Wichita State University Institutional Review Board;
- The Lead of Counseling at South Carolina Connections Academy

The researcher will complete a dissertation and may publish the results of the study. If so, no participant names, school name, or any personal identifying information will be used in any publication or presentation about the study.

Refusal/Withdrawal: Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with Wichita State University and/or Connections Academy. If you agree to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Contact: If you have any questions about this research, you can contact the principal investigator, Dr. Marlene Schommer-Aikins, Professor of Educational Psychology at Wichita State University at marlene.schommer-aikins@wichita.edu, (316) 978-6386. You may also contact the co-investigator, Sharon Jaso, Doctoral Candidate at Wichita State University, and Special Education Director at Kansas Connections Academy, at sljaso@shockers.wichita.edu or (316) 680-9848.

If you have questions pertaining to your rights as a research subject, or about research-related injury, you can contact the Office of Research and Technology Transfer at Wichita State University, 1845 Fairmount Street, Wichita, KS 67260-0007, and telephone (316) 978-3285.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that:

- You have read (or someone has read to you) the information provided above,
- You are aware that this is a research study,
- You have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to your satisfaction, and
- You have voluntarily decided to participate.

You are not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Printed Name (Participant)

Participant Signature Date

Printed Name of Witness

Witness Signature Date