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# Spanish Enrollment and Choice in a Rural Secondary Educational Context

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SPANISH ENROLLMENT AND CHOICE IN A RURAL

SECONDARY EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT


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The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to determine what motivates secondary students to enroll or not in rural high school Spanish classes. Mostly white American graduates from a rural Midwest high school, in the context of a largely white rural town were contacted to determine participation interest in this study. Graduates that chose to participate were asked to complete a reflective video journal and participate in a semi-structured interview. Attribute coding, *in vivo* coding, and holistic coding were conducted on the reflective journals and semi-structured interviews. Participants detailed numerous variables that were investigated and determined to be involved in their decision-making process (i.e. trusted adults, peers, systems, self-efficacy, perceived usefulness). These factors were combined into one complex system, with the ultimate outcome potentially seen as a regulator of enrollment choice.

KEYWORDS: LOTE, Phenomenology, Rural, Secondary Students, Spanish Enrollment, White

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INTRODUCTION

The American Councils for International Education (2017) details the scope and impact of the lack of world language study in the United States; just 20 percent of students study a world language at the K-12 level (p. 6). The number drops even lower at the college level, according to a 2016-2017 MLA report (Looney & Lusin, 2019), with only 7.5 percent of college students were enrolled in a world language course. Moreover, Looney and Lusin (2019) show that college world language enrollments dropped 9.2 percent from fall 2013 to fall 2016 (p. 1), which is the second largest drop since the MLA started tracking such information in 1958. In addition, they speculate that the declines reported in 2013 were "the beginning of a trend rather than a blip" (Looney & Lusin, 2019, pp. 3-4).

In these recent studies from the MLA and the American Councils for International Education, there is no reference to the American rural Spanish language classroom. Further, the 2016 *Routledge International Handbook of Rural Studies* (Shucksmith & Brown) does not devote a discussion or chapter to the American rural world language experience either. Even books dedicated to American rural education (e.g., McShane & Smarick, 2018; Tieken, 2014) do not mention American rural world language instruction or American rural Spanish language learning. Therefore, it appears that rural Spanish language experience has not received sufficient attention in the research literature to describe the disturbing phenomenon of decreasing enrollments.

With this existing research in mind, it is necessary to look at the most recent data on the rural educational environment. According to the National Center on Educational Statistics (2014), 18.4% of children in the United States attended rural public schools in the fall 2013

(Table A.1.a.-4). Given this number of children, schools, and districts, one might assume that scholars have produced research proportional to the number of students attending rural schools; however, little scholarship exists about rural children and their schools (McShane & Smarick, 2018; Tieken, 2014). Indeed, a review of educational research literature yields few studies of rural schools, districts, and their community contexts; yet rural settings are unique enough to consider the importance of "place," with some scholars documenting differences among various kinds of rural communities (Gonzales, 2003; Lichter & Brown, 2011; Malkus, 2018; Williams, 2018). Overall, the differences among these communities are part of a spatial focus on social geographies and ecologies because place matters; these ecologies are socially constructed, constituted and include identity-bestowing dynamics for people and the organizations in which they interact, such as schools (Tate, 2012).

Learning another language in the rural context presents an opportunity that differs in many respects from learning opportunities in other subject areas. Rural language learning provides students with the chance to investigate their own native language and culture, compare them with additional languages and cultures, acquire communication skills in another language, critically think about the world they live in, and potentially develop acceptance of others. Nevertheless, even with the known benefits of learning a second language, enrolling students in rural Spanish classes can be difficult.

## Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to examine former, mostly white, secondary rural students' motivation to enroll or not in Spanish language class in a largely white rural high school. The research questions guiding this study are as follows: What motivates these rural secondary

students to study Spanish? And what motivates these rural secondary students to not study

Spanish? The impetus for this research originated with the years of experience of the

teacher/researcher, who has observed year after year the relatively low number of white students

enrolling in his Spanish classes in a largely white rural high school.

CHAPTER I: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review that follows will focus on the influences that rural students experience, through either people or other forces, that impact their decision to take or not take Spanish. Previous research that has addressed several of these forces will be presented along with some specific topics on rural education and motivation. Therefore, the following topics will be addressed: research in the rural context, motivational theories, barriers that inhibit language enrollment, and learner attitudes and languages other than English.

**Research in the Rural Context**

Overall, research for rural schools and districts needs to be tailored to address the comprehensive community setting, defined as the "social geographies and ecologies of particular schools and districts" (Wilcox, Angelis, Baker & Lawson, 2014, p. 2). Therefore, it is vital that rural research be constructed in a way that allows investigations of intra-rural connections by concentrating on the interactions among instructional practices in classrooms, schools *as* associations (e.g., school boards, labor force, community context), and district-level guidelines instruments related to collection and monitoring of data (McShane & Smarick, 2018). Collectively, "these phenomena of interest—micro (classroom), meso (school), macro (district), and exo (state and national policy)—are part of a particular rural school's social ecology" (Wilcox et al., 2014, p. 2). This socioecological lens, along with considerations of local culture, enable the discovery and exploration of commonalties, similarities, and differences among rural schools and districts. Therefore, to study academic choices of rural students, it is necessary to investigate the qualities of classroom instruction and teachers, schools, and districts and their relationships to children and families in the communities they serve. This socioecological lens

could then allow investigation into the processes and practices in rural schools that are associated with enrollment in Spanish classes at the secondary level.

Simply put, rural context matters—and not automatically in desirable ways. Some studies (e.g. Demi, Coleman-Jensen, & Snyder, 2010; Hardré, Sullivan, & Crowson, 2009) have found that in rural high schools, school environment provided a greater influence on students' decisions to engage in school, earn good grades, and graduate than did family or peers. Demi et al. (2010) also posited that school climate influenced ambitions and decisions concerning postsecondary study. Still other studies (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Theobald & Wood, 2010) have documented how some rural youth develop special identities in their unique social geographies. These young people have come to internalize the "rural is inferior" message that surrounds them (Theobald & Wood, 2010). With that said, how do individuals absorb this rural identity? How do rural community members realize that if they want to the best of anything they must migrate to an urban setting to find it? These questions could be seen as similar to the kinds of identity issues that stem from racial, ethnic, and religious memberships. However, in the case of many rural residents, deficit identities are learned by those possessing the privilege of white skin (Atkin, 2003). Others, of course, must deal with the stigma of being nonwhite and rural. It should be noted that the individual construction of identity is a complex process. Many forces play a role in that process, and the circumstance of being rural is merely one. However, Theobald and Wood (2010) argue that it is a significant one and that *all* rural residents are recipients of the messages from the prevailing culture that to be rural is to be sub-par, that the fact of living in a rural setting creates various types of deficits.

Such an identity development progression serves to undermine their confidence in their

abilities to succeed and adds to educators' challenges to keep them engaged. In contrast, others have highlighted an alternative interpretation of the relationships of school climate and outmigration by citing the role of rural schools in fostering strong school identification and community attachment and related expectations to reconnect and return (Petrin, Schafft, & Meece, 2014).

Since rural environment and community are influential in student identity development, how do these rural social ecologies and geographies affect future plans for these students? Rural students' long-term plans are consequential for central outcomes, such as academic engagement and high school graduation. For example, Carr and Kefalas (2009) and Sherman and Sage (2011) have explored why some students stay, some leave, and some return. Also, Sherman and Sage (2011) argued that it is not just a rural family's economic status that influences whether a child pursues higher education. They argue that social factors, including educators' views of the family's income level and "moral" standing (e.g., drug or alcohol use/abuse, reliance on public aid), influence how educators perceive and treat the children of those families, independent of a child's individual characteristics.

**Profile of Rural Students**

In addition to external forces impacting a student's learning, practicality and usefulness of the content being studied influence the investment a rural learner makes in a subject (Wilcox et al., 2014). Furthermore, the more confidence that students felt in their ability to perform, the more likely it was that they would be interested in their courses and would intend to graduate (Hardré et al., 2009). Also, Palardy (2013) suggests the strong impact of school climate on rural students' decisions to attend, engage with, and stay in school until graduation, and whether to

pursue postsecondary studies.

The study of educational expectations may further clarify issues around rural students' educational attainment (EA). EA is the highest level of education that a person completes (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). It is not only a common indicator of life outcomes, but it also can contribute to rural students' ideas of what they reasonably expect to achieve in their academic pursuits (Schmitt-Wilson, Downey, & Beck, 2018). Previous studies have found that the stability of students' educational expectations is a key predictor of EA (Beal & Crockett, 2013; Khattab, 2015) and that educational expectations are shaped by a host of factors including socioeconomic and demographic variables, as well as school resources and family social capital (Tieken & San Antonio, 2016). For example, rural students' educational expectations may be influenced by occupational structures in their local communities. Further, some youth may desire to follow the line of work of their parents. For example, Bauer and Erdogan (2007) conclude that "early family experiences are important influences over the dominant values" (p. 99). Parents have a significant influence on motivations of students and others who hold pivotal relationships with students (Al-Dhamit & Kreishan, 2016; Guay, Vallerand, & Blanchard, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Others, especially rural youth living in geographically isolated areas, may lack exposure to diverse occupational opportunities (Petrin et al., 2014) leading to restricted vocational interests. Moreover, rural youth may be witnessing declining economies and widespread shifts in local employment opportunities that may lead to the adjustment of their career and educational expectations (Schmitt-Wilson et al., 2018).

Given the perceived practicality and usefulness of a course by a rural student and the potential impact of school climate on student attendance and engagement, what are some

motivational theories that may be helpful in evaluating enrollment choice in high school Spanish classes?

## Motivational Theories

It is vital not to overlook the role of motivation for rural students to enroll or not in Spanish classes. Considering a global perspective, Lanvers (2016) argued that fewer and fewer L1 English speakers are choosing to learn languages. Therefore, it seems necessary to investigate some theories of motivation and how they interact with the impetus to enroll or not in rural Spanish classes.

### Self-Determination Theory and Self-Efficacy Theory

According to the Center for Self-Determination Theory, self-determination theory (SDT) is "one of the leading theories of human motivation" (2021). SDT is a theory of motivation, personality, and development that proposes that intrinsic motivation, or motivation derived purely from the satisfaction inherent in the activity itself, is more conducive to learning than extrinsic motivation, or motivation to achieve an external reward or to avoid a punishment. According to proponents of SDT (e.g., Arvanitis, 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Ryan, Donald, & Bradshaw, 2021), there are three primary psychological needs that, when satisfied, foster intrinsic motivation: (a) autonomy, which occurs when students choose to become engaged in learning because the subject and activities are closely aligned with their interests and values; (b) competence, which is the need to test and challenge one's abilities; and (c) relatedness, which is the need to establish close, secure relationships with others. Although relatedness is posited to be a distinct need in itself, relationships often (but not always) provide the context in which the other two needs can be satisfied (Ryan & Deci, 2017). SDT postulates that motivation falls along

a continuum, with more external forms of motivation at one end and more internal forms of motivation at the other, and that need-satisfying experiences can help to shift motivation from the external to the internal end of the continuum (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Related to the three primary psychological needs of SDT that, when satisfied, foster intrinsic motivation is the theory of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is a construct arising from social cognitive theory, which represents a measurement of a student's belief that he or she could successfully organize and perform behaviors that will produce a specific desired outcome (Bandura, 2005). Bandura argues that greater self-efficacy enables people to sustain energy and effort towards goals and initiate actions more readily, and persist longer in the face of challenges, than they could with lower self-efficacy, other things being equal. The greater the expectation for success, the more motivational energy a person will exert in initiating and persisting toward success in the face of a learning challenge (Zimmerman 2000).

Numerous connections between SDT and self-efficacy theory have been studied and applied across several disciplines (e.g., Affuso, Bacchini, & Miranda, 2017; Garrin, 2014; Jeong & Lim, 2021; Khan et al., 2021; Sweet et al., 2012). One possible intersection between SDT and self-efficacy theory is related to the innate psychological need for competence from SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2017) and the avoidance of situations in which one does not feel capable of succeeding, associated with self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 2005). Therefore, if a student does not believe in his or her own ability to be successful in a Spanish class, would that lack of belief deter enrollment? Conversely, if a student perceives they have sufficient ability to succeed in a Spanish class and the need to test this ability, would that mindset encourage enrollment?

However, Pratt (2010) investigated the low college enrollments in Spanish courses of

students who studied Spanish in high school. From this study of 631 students and 19 teachers, she determined some influential factors in the decision of whether or not to study Spanish in college. According to Pratt (2010), the data indicated that the most influential factors were extrinsic and practical, including the possibility or not of earning good grades, being able to use Spanish in their daily life, and career benefits. These findings add an interesting influence to the motivation to study Spanish, considering the high extrinsic motivation of her findings.

**Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Motivation**

Motivation has often been underscored as one of the most important psychological factors that interacts with other affective, cognitive and circumstantial factors in the process of SLA (Takac & Berka, 2014). SLA is scholarly field of inquiry that investigates the human capacity to learn languages other than the first and once the first language or languages have been acquired. It studies a wide variety of complex influences and phenomena that contribute to the puzzling range of possible outcomes when learning an additional language in a variety of contexts. SLA motivational theories historically fall into the following categories: the social psychological period (1959-1990), the cognitive situated period (during 1990s), the process-oriented period (the turn of the century), and the most recent socio-dynamic period (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). L2 motivation has been an attractive research topic for several decades because it is perceived as a phenomenon that provides the preliminary stimulus for L2 learning.

The view that human beings are essentially emotional creatures whose intellectual actions are managed by emotions has generated a lot of interest in the exploration of the affective domain and its role in SLA. Some studies conducted over the last several years (Dörnyei, 2005; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014) have confirmed that success or failure in language learning

cannot be credited only to cognitive factors, but that affective factors—as the basics for cognitive learning—can contribute just as much, if not more. Among these affective factors, motivation is considered one of the most important factors in learning a second language because, as one of the most influential researchers on the subject put it, "all the other factors involved in SLA presuppose motivation to some extent" (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 65).

It is commonly agreed that motivation is quite challenging to define. In fact, Dörnyei (2001) called it "a real mystery" (p. 7) for which numerous studies could not provide a general definition. Although it seems that we all instinctively know what motivation is, its exact nature and definition evades any single theory. This can, first and foremost, be attributed to the essential complexity of human motives (e.g. humans' intentions, decisions and actions), which has required researchers to focus on select issues and has consequently resulted in them failing to capture the multilayered nature of motivation. However, all theories of motivation seek to answer the questions of why a person chooses to engage in an action and what makes them invest effort and persist (Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003). With that being said, what are some barriers in the rural secondary school that inhibit language learning?

## Barriers that Inhibit Language Enrollment

There are some known reasons in the literature why students in the rural context are not motivated to enroll in a Spanish class. These barriers to enrollment interact with ideological factors and intergroup anxiety and contact to form a mindset of opposition to L2 instruction in public schools. These attitudes may include social dominance orientation, which is defined as an attitudinal positioning marked by an inclination to view social groups in hierarchical terms with a strong preference that one's own social group(s) be superior to others (Pratto, Sidanius,

Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). According to Duckitt and Sibley's (2007) dual-process motivational model, the "competitively driven goal of establishing and maintaining in-group dominance, power, and superiority" (p. 115)—a goal that arises from a tough-minded personality organization, competitive world beliefs, and social contexts marked by strong intergroup competition—is the motivational core behind social dominance orientation. Given these characteristics, it is predictable that people high on social dominance orientation measures elevated levels of prejudice toward a variety of social out-groups (Duckitt and Sibley's (2007). Duckitt (2006) also suggested that persons scoring higher on social dominance orientation measures should be particularly likely to exhibit prejudice against groups that have historically been marginalized and viewed as inferior by white people, particularly those groups that are perceived to provide a competitive challenge to dominant groups. Further, he found that the effects of social dominance orientation on out-group prejudice was mediated through perceived out-group competitiveness, but only for those groups perceived to be of a lower social status.

Another barrier to L2 acquisition in the rural context might include intergroup anxiety. According to Riek, Mania, and Gaertner (2006), intergroup anxiety refers to "feelings of uneasiness and awkwardness in the presence of outgroup members because of uncertainty about how to behave toward them, which makes interactions with outgroups seem threatening" (p. 338). If intergroup anxiety has been shown to be a predictor of outgroup attitudes and bias (Voci & Hewstone, 2003), it is reasonable that white rural monolingual community members who experience heightened levels of anxiety at the thought of interacting with brown and Black people who speak a language other than English (LOTE) may be more likely to report greater prejudice towards them. Greater levels of prejudice, in turn, may contribute to greater opposition

to learning Spanish at the rural, secondary level. Therefore, these students appear to face limited motivation, complicated by barriers to enrolling in a world language classroom. However, as the next section will show, there is limited acquisition research on LOTE.

## Learner Attitudes and Languages Other Than English

As previously noted, obstacles to Spanish learning in the secondary rural context include both internal motivational aspects that hinder the desire to pursue their study and external pressures from a rural community that may not value Spanish study. Yet, what percentage of research has been conducted on the study of LOTE? Boo, Dörnyei, and Ryan's (2015) survey of L2 motivation research conducted between 2005 and 2014 found that during this period studies of motivations to learn English was dominated the literature. Over 70% of all empirical investigations of language learning motivation examined motivation related to English language learning, with the gap between English and LOTE steadily increasing. This finding is corroborated by Comanaru and Noels' (2009) observation regarding heritage language learning: namely, that very little work has been done to investigate the motivational and affective profiles of such learners. For example, Richards (2017) examined students' attitudes and motivation toward Chinese language learning in the International Baccalaureate Mandarin program at a high school in Brisbane Australia and sought to identify links between Chinese language learning and students' attitudes and motivations. Among other findings, it showed that the students' background and target language level have an impact on their attitudes towards the target language.

Therefore, LOTE educators cannot simply assume that increased interaction with other cultures will necessarily result in positive attitudes and improved language competence for all

student groups. Instead, LOTE educators need to be aware of the distinctive characteristics of students with more established attitudes (relatively well-informed and cemented) and less established attitudes (relatively unformed and impressionable).

With this variety of attitudes in mind, L2 motivation among high school students in the rural United States must be understood as a complex interaction of psychological, community, and political elements. This concept is well-suited with the meta-theory of complex dynamic systems (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011), which specifies that both internal (e.g., cognitive, psychological) and external (e.g., social setting, language policy) resources interact to influence success in language learning. As Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) stress, this approach allows researchers to integrate various aspects of the key factors in SLA, such as the learner, the learning task, and the learning environment, into a complex system. They argued that L2 motivation lends itself to the analysis from these perspectives because of its inherently changing nature. In line with a complex dynamic systems approach, motivation is a dynamic subsystem entering continuous and complex interactions with other subsystems (i.e. cognition and affect). Thus, they recommend that, instead of isolating discrete motives, researchers should try to identify "higher-order 'motivation conglomerates' that also include cognitive and affective factors and which act as 'wholes'" such as "interest, motivational flow, motivational task processing and future self-guides" (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, p. 92).

Since motivation has been studied as a dynamic subsystem with complex interactions with other subsystems, what are some examples of subsystems that have been shown to influence rural student motivation in studying an L2? First, the strength of parents' support and the way that they rationalize the purpose of the child's language study have been linked to parental

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language knowledge (Gayton, 2010). Gayton's (2010) study carried out in Scotland showed associations between socioeconomic background and student attitudes toward world languages. She found that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, with fewer prospects to travel, have more negative attitudes toward languages and envision fewer prospects to use language skills later in life. Her study provides a link between the motivational literature and the apparent views of language study as exclusive.

Those who work within the school environment, including teachers, administration, and peers, also influence L2 motivation. For example, teachers form student motivation in both their teaching quality and approach and their personal language learning belief (Cowie & Sakui, 2011). Teachers' views on the rationale of language learning may reinforce the social divide in the students' choice to take Spanish or not, in that teachers may suppose that students from lower socioeconomic background are less interested in languages (Gayton, 2018). Furthermore, L2 student motivation is also influenced by the attitude of the school leadership towards Spanish. Lanvers (2016) found that the school leadership, even more than language teachers, explain the purpose of language study with reference to socioeconomic standards. The more disadvantaged the socioeconomic mix of a school's population, the lesser the alleged value of Spanish for students in that school. Some studies have investigated peer influences on L2 motivation. For example, Bartram (2006) found that peer opinions of a subject can sway subject satisfaction and even the option to study or not a language, as students want to remain in the same class as peers. Nevertheless, Lanvers (2017) contends that relatively few studies have investigated the influence of parental attitudes and peers on L2 student motivation. Even so, the limited choice of languages at rural high schools may also be a discouraging factor (Bartram, 2006).

Overall, the previous literature review has demonstrated the need for research in the rural context as to why students take or don't take a Spanish class at the secondary level. Though the literature review covered several possible barriers, both in motivation to learn Spanish and attitudes toward Spanish and its speakers, it is still unclear why some rural secondary students enroll in Spanish language classes and others do not.

CHAPTER II: RESEARCH METHODS

**Overview**

The objective of this study was to foster a deeper understanding of how a particular population of individuals experienced a central phenomenon (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher chose to employ a qualitative approach in order to explore themes that could not otherwise be easily measured (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), such as the experiences of high school students to enroll or not in a Spanish language class. A qualitative method allowed the researcher to "learn about the views of individuals" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 12) through rich and detailed accounts of their lived experiences in terms of decision-making as it relates to internationalization and bring to light what may not otherwise be explicit. Therefore, a qualitative approach was selected in order to investigate the following research questions:

1. What motivates rural secondary students to study Spanish?

2. What motivates rural secondary students to not study Spanish?

The researcher chose qualitative inquiry as the best methodology for answering the research questions for a variety of reasons: First, the exploratory capabilities of a qualitative research design allowed the researcher to develop an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017). Second, a qualitative approach enabled the study to evolve and account for the possibility of new open-ended questions to emerge. Finally, this approach did not restrict the views of the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Therefore, the culmination of these characteristics was best suited to answer the research questions and provided the researcher with a model that allowed him to garner a deeper understanding.

**Research Design**

In order to investigate how high school students experienced the complex decision-making process to enroll in a Spanish class or not, the author selected a descriptive phenomenological approach for his study. Phenomenological research acknowledges that there is a need for understanding a phenomenon and, in an effort to understand and improve our own practice, Lindseth and Norberg (2004) assert that "we have to start with our lived experiences" (p. 148). Therefore, by uncovering the meaning within one's daily life, it is contended, that researchers will be able to discover and possibly implement improvements (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). Because complex decision-making is an abstract phenomenon, and cannot be explored directly, it is through open-ended questions and in-depth, one-on-one interviews with participants who have experienced making complicated decisions in terms of class enrollment that the researcher was able to induce meaning (Englander, 2012). Next, the following section will describe why descriptive phenomenology was best suited for this study.

**Rationale**

Descriptive phenomenology was the most appropriate research design for this study for a variety of reasons. Wojnar & Swanson (2007) suggested that descriptive phenomenology is more useful for "inquiry that aims to discover universal aspects of a phenomenon that were never conceptualized or incompletely conceptualized in prior research" (p. 177). By employing a descriptive phenomenological methodology to this study, the researcher had the necessary tools to explore how high school students describe the decision-making process to enroll or not in Spanish language class and explore the lived experiences of the participants as they navigated the multidimensional landscape of high school Spanish language choice.

Second, phenomenology can be utilized as an approach for understanding "complex issues that may not be immediately implicit in surface responses" (Goulding, 2005, p. 301). Given the breadth and scope of how high school students and their families make class enrollment decisions, it seems increasingly important to augment quantitative data by offering a qualitative approach to uncover how high school students make decisions in this complex environment.

Additionally, phenomenology lends itself to an understanding of the lived experiences among participants and provided the researcher with an opportunity to explore how this particular population experienced the phenomenon of decision-making in the context of Spanish language class enrollment. Moreover, phenomenological research provides a lens through which additional meaning and a deeper understanding of decision-making can be captured in order to better understand the considerations of these rural students.

Groenewald (2004) asserts that researchers are often overwhelmed by the numerous methodological options for conducting research. One of the characteristics of the phenomenological approach is its precise application, detail, and structure, thus allowing the researcher to follow a prescribed and formatted methodology. Drawing upon the work of Giorgi (1997; 2008; 2012), the following section will present a thorough and detailed description of the setting, who the participants were for this study, the strategies employed for recruiting the participants, the sample size, and how the researcher obtained access to his participant base.

**Setting**

This study was conducted with the participation of a subset of graduates from one rural-distant high school in the east-central United States in the years 2020 and 2021. Rural distant is a

"census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster" (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2006). This public school district includes one high school, one middle school, two elementary schools, and an alternative school. The high school is located in a county with a population of less than 22,000, with 98% of the population identifying as white (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). This high school was chosen for many reasons. First, the teacher-researcher of this proposal lives and teaches in this rural district and it, therefore, represents a convenient setting in which to do research. Another reason was the location, since it resembles several other rural high schools within a thirty-mile radius in qualities such as size (i.e. staff and student population), diversity, and budget. Next, the district was created by a local public school system and is not a for-profit organization. The final reason why it was chosen as the study site was the specific curriculum development. Curriculum and course requirements were developed by the base school system and align with state standards for standardized testing and graduation. The leadership within this school system is organized in the same fashion as many other rural systems, with a superintendent and three building principals. There are no specific requirements for a student to attend other than having residence within the given district.

## Participants

Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2019) assert that identifying one's sample in qualitative research requires two central components: establish the boundaries to study a phenomenon and the frame by which to "uncover, confirm, or qualify the basic processes or constructs that undergird [the] study" (p. 26). First, the boundaries of this study related to the decision to select

participants who had graduated in the last three years. Secondly, a phenomenological framework was employed to focus on the lived experience in which the participants reflected on the experiences of their life (phenomenological reflection) (Creswell, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2017; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2016). Students who had graduated within the past three years were selected because of their ability to remember the experiences related to the phenomenon and had the capacity to relate that meaning to their experiences. Brain development is accelerated for high school students who are developing at an earlier age, but the lack of real-life experiences tends to hinder the development of working memory in adolescents and makes it difficult for them to make connections between what they are experiencing and what it means to their future (Evans & Fuller-Rowell, 2013; Singer, Rexhaj, & Baddeley, 2007; Thomason et al., 2008). The rationale for selecting participants who had graduated revolves around the life experiences that gave the participants a new perspective on their past. Students currently in high school have not had the experiences needed to develop their working memory and reasoning skills necessary for associating their experiences to the phenomenon they are demonstrating (Thomason et al., 2008). Once participants graduated and were forced to make real-world decisions, they had the potential to start developing meaning from their experiences and could possible then develop a control system to their thoughts and perceptions of their past experiences (Singer et al., 2007). Steinberg (2007) argues that "one of the reasons the cognitive-control system of adults is more effective than that of adolescents is that adults' brains distribute its regulatory responsibilities across a wider network of linked components" (p. 57). The experiences of life beyond high school allowed the participants to link their lived experiences to situations, which developed their working memories and brought meaning to what they have or

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have not accomplished in their recent past.

The determination to recruit graduates who had completed high school to participate in the study was made due to the fact that many of the individuals may not have reflected on their academic history until they were confronted with the aspects of life after high school. Life plans and goals may have changed their perspectives and resulted in fewer opportunities due to lack of academic achievement prior to graduation.

**Population as it Relates to Phenomenology**

The initial step in data collection began with the selection of participants (Englander, 2012). Because the data collection and data analysis needed to be congruent in order to yield effective results and achieve rigor (Englander, 2012), the researcher turned to the leading theorist of this study, Giorgi (1997; 2012), who suggests that the selection of participants within phenomenological study should be guided by a systematic, methodological, general, and critical approach (Giorgi, 1997; 2012). The selection process was of particular interest because it can help bring credibility to the findings (Englander, 2012). Lopez and Willis (2004) and Starks & Trinidad, (2007) assert that the researcher needs to identify the common lived experience of the participant base so that general descriptions can be categorized and essences revealed in order to represent the truest nature of the phenomenon. This shared familiarity foreshadows the possibility of having "qualified and nuanced discussions about the essential meaning" (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004, p. 147) of the phenomenon under study. According to Maxwell (2012), "selecting individuals who can provide you with the information that you need in order to answer your research questions is the most important consideration in qualitative decisions" (p. 88). Therefore, the question qualitative phenomenological researchers have to ask themselves when

identifying participants is: Do you have the experience that I am looking for? (Englander, 2012).

**Sampling Strategy**

In accordance with the phenomenological approach, this study utilized a purposeful sampling technique in order to answer the research questions and understand the central phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The phenomenon and research questions drove not only the research method, but also dictated the sampling strategy for selecting the most appropriate participants (Groenewald, 2004). Therefore, in order to identify rural high school students who had experience with deciding to enroll or not in a Spanish class, the researcher employed a critical sampling technique.

Critical sampling allowed the researcher to identify cases (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) of high school graduates who enrolled in Spanish language class and those who did not. By selecting graduates with this standing, the researcher had an opportunity to learn as much as possible about the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Under the guidelines of critical sampling and the purpose of this study, the researcher selected his sample based on the individual's decision to enroll or not in the high school Spanish language class as a means for dividing the population (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). More specifically, the level of analysis was at the individual level, whereby the criteria for selecting participants was rural high school graduates of this rural school setting who had graduated within three years of study; and then either participants who were enrolled in level 4 of rural Spanish language classes or participants who were not enrolled in any Spanish language classes.

**Sample Size**

The sample size in qualitative research continues to be a topic of debate (Englander,

2012). Kvale (1994) argues that researchers should interview as many participants as necessary until the researcher finds out what he or she needs to know. Alternatively, Polkinghorne (1989) quantifies the sample size, asserting that participants in phenomenological research range between 5 and 325 (p. 48). However, Englander (2012) argues that the question of "how many" participants one interviews becomes irrelevant by stressing that a phenomenological qualitative study is not a quantitative investigation. As such, if the goal of this phenomenological research was to achieve a level of understanding by extrapolating the essence of this phenomenon by interviewing participants and learning about their unique and individual experiences, then it is safe to assume that this was achieved from a small sampling. Giorgi (2008) argues that a smaller sample size makes it easier to discern the unique and individual experience from the more general understanding of the phenomenon. However, Giorgi (2008) asserts that the minimum number of participants should not be less than three. Because phenomenological research aims at uncovering the lived experiences of the participants (Miles et al., 2014; Giorgi, 2008, 2012), the researcher studied a small sampling consisting of seven participants.

**Recruitment and Participants**

In selecting the number of participants and the types of students to interview, it was relevant to know what the researcher wanted to learn from the study. As previously mention, phenomenology researchers tend to keep the number of participants low to allow them the opportunity to study the phenomena in depth and not to be overwhelmed with the amount of data collected (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Miles & Saldaña, 2014). In keeping the participant total at seven participants, the selection of individuals needed to be precise and meaningful. Focus was not on the sample size but instead on the selection process involving those individuals who had

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experienced the phenomenon and could inform the researcher of specifics as they related to the study (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

To ensure applicable ethical standards were included in the research design, an application was submitted to Illinois State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for review and approval. Once approved, the researcher followed the protocol that adhered to IRB requirements involving human subjects. Also, the school district from which participants graduated required all information requests to be approved by the Office of the Superintendent. After approval by the local district, the first step involved creating a selection committee made up of the high school counselor and high school secretary to collect the names of all of the students who had graduated in the past three years who had either been enrolled in Spanish 4 or had not been enrolled in Spanish classes at the high school.

After creating the selection committee in December 2020, 2019 and 2020 graduates were divided into two groups: those who had been enrolled in Spanish 4 and those who were not enrolled in any Spanish classes. Though this may seem like an unmanageable number, it is important to emphasize the context of this rural district. Table 1 states theses enrollments.

**Table 1**

**Local Enrollments for 2018-2019, 2019-2020, and 2020-2021 School Years**

| Student population | School Year | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 2018-2019 | 2019-2020 | 2020-2021 |
| | | Number of students | |
| Total graduating class | 67 | 63 | 46 |
| Spanish 4 enrollment | 5 | 7 | 10 |
| No Spanish class enrollment | 21 | 19 | 13 |

The process of selecting participants was done alphabetically by creating a master list of graduates from the 2019 and 2020 classes. Next, the committee provided contact information for each possible participant, and the researcher contacted 52 potential participants by phone, text, email, and/or an informative letter that described the study and what their responsibilities would be as a participant. The letter (Appendix C) asked for permission to obtain additional information through a reflective video journal entry and asked them to partake in a face-to-face or *Zoom* call interview. Alphabetically, the first ten participants who were enrolled in Spanish 4 during the 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 school years were selected. Then, after four responses from this initial group, the researcher contacted the final two potential participants. In total, twelve potential participants were contacted. Likewise, alphabetically, the first ten participants who were not enrolled in any Spanish class were selected. This process continued another three times for a total of 40 potential participants contacted by the researcher. When the graduates were unwilling or unavailable to participate in each grouping of ten, the committee moved alphabetically down the master list to select more possible participants. From this initial contact of 52 students, ten students signed and returned the consent form (Appendix D). This included five participants who were enrolled in Spanish 4 and five participants who were not enrolled in Spanish classes. Four of the former Spanish 4 students participated in the research study while only two of those not enrolled in Spanish participated.

Next, since participant numbers were inadequate for participants who were not enrolled in Spanish, the researcher copied the above selection process for the 2021 graduating class at the end of May, 2021. Thirteen potential participants who were not enrolled in Spanish were contacted, with two returning the consent form and one participating in the study. To help orient

the reader to this study, a short introduction to the study participants is included before the data collection and analysis.

Collectively, seven participants participated in this research study and shared their experiences related to enrolling or not in a Spanish class. All participants were graduates of the same public rural high school and between the ages of 18 and 20. Four of the seven participants identified as male and the other three as female. The composition of ethnicities for the participants was one African-American, and six Caucasians. To protect the anonymity of each participant, a pseudonym was assigned.

**Michael.** Michael is a 2020 graduate of the high school in this study and grew up in the community. He identifies as male and African American. He currently attends a private university in the Midwest. He did not enroll in Spanish classes in high school.

**Nolan.** Nolan is a 2020 graduate of the high school in this study. His family moved to this district after his sophomore year, and he identifies as male and white. After high school, he enlisted in the Army National Guard and currently attends a public university in the Midwest, majoring in engineering. During his high school career, he enrolled in two years of Spanish classes at his previous rural-fringe high school but was unable to enroll in Spanish classes when he moved to school in this study. For this research, Nolan was the unintentional hybrid student. The researcher only found out about his previous Spanish class experience after his reflective journal. After consultation with his thesis advisor, the researcher decided to include this participant in the study and schedule an interview.

**Adam.** Adam is a 2021 graduate of the high school in this study and grew up in the community. He identifies as male and white. Being the most recent graduate of this study, he

shared his career plans to join the heavy machinery operating union. He did not enroll in Spanish classes in high school.

**Helen.** Helen is a 2020 graduate of the high school in this study and grew up in the community. She identifies as female and white. She currently attends a major public university in the Midwest and majors in Business. During high school, she was enrolled in four years of Spanish and is the only participant to earn the Illinois State Seal of Biliteracy and be currently enrolled in a university Spanish class.

**Alice.** Alice is a 2020 graduate of the high school in this study. Her family moved to this school during her junior year, and she identifies as female and white. She currently attends a major public university in the Midwest, majoring in agriculture business. During high school she enrolled in two and half years of Spanish classes at her previous rural-distant high school and continued through Spanish 3 and 4 at the school in this study.

**Anna.** Anna is a 2020 graduate of the high school in this study and grew up in the community. She identifies as female and white. She currently attends a community college in the Midwest and will transfer in 2021 to a major public university in the Midwest. During high school, she was enrolled in four years of Spanish classes.

**Ned.** Ned is a 2019 graduate of the high school in this study and grew up in the community. He identifies as male and white. He currently attends a major public university in the Midwest, majoring in engineering. During high school, he was enrolled in four years of Spanish classes.

CHAPTER III: DATA COLLECTION

**Assuming the correct attitude**

Once the IRB protocol for participant recruitment began, data collection also began. During the data collection phase detailed below, the researcher began by assuming the correct attitude.

The first phase in the data collection process was for the researcher to assume an attitude that encompassed phenomenological reduction (Giorgi, 2012). Reduction is an instrumental component of phenomenology that allowed the researcher to investigate the phenomenon through "transcendental subjectivity, eidetic essences (universal truths), and the lived-world plane of interaction" (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007. p.174). In order for the researcher to maintain an open attitude, he bracketed himself from preconceived notions of the phenomenon during the data collection process (Norlyk & Harder, 2010). Descriptive phenomenology, according to Finlay (2009), is most interested in describing the phenomenon rather than explaining it. As such, phenomenologists "aim to reveal essential general meaning structures of a phenomenon [and] stay close to what is given to them in all its richness and complexity" (Finlay, 2009. p.10). Therefore, the role of the researcher in this descriptive phenomenological study was to describe the phenomenon as accurately as possible, detaching himself from any pre-given ideas (Groenewald, 2004), and to concentrate on "everything that is said about the phenomenon" (Giorgi, 2012, p. 5).

Also, to ensure credibility and integrity of the study, reflexivity (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) was incorporated during data collection and analysis. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) argue that reflexivity is "a process and a way of thinking that will actually lead to ethical research

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practice" (p. 273). Guillemin and Gillam (2004) drew upon the research of Jenkins (1992), who suggested the reflexive process comprises taking two steps back from the subject of the research. The first step back is the objective observation of the research subject; the next step back is the reflection of the observation itself.

## Data Sources

### Timeline

The researcher began this data collection process during December of 2020 and ended during May of 2021. First, the researcher started memoing in December of 2020 and then continued throughout the research process. The reflective video journal served as the first tool for the researcher to gain insight of each participant's decision to study or not study a Spanish. Then, within a month of the completion of each journal, the interview occurred by *Zoom* or in-person to help provide clarification of the decision to enroll, or not, in a Spanish class. Also, the interview process provided a means of creating a relationship, or reestablishing one, between the researcher and participant to allow for meaningful interpretations of the participants' experiences (Maxwell, 2012).

### Memoing

In order to achieve the correct and open attitude, the researcher engaged in a journaling series, or the practice of memoing, whereby the researcher set aside as much bias and pre-conceived notions as possible. Memoing is a significant aspect of data in qualitative research study (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020). This bracketing technique was an ongoing step throughout this phenomenological study that allowed the researcher to preserve a balance between descriptive and reflective notes, such as hunches, ideas, and emotional states which

emerged throughout the data collection and analysis phases (Creswell, 2018; Groenewald, 2004). By documenting descriptive, reflective, and theoretical notes throughout the various phases of this study, the researcher tried to acknowledge and mitigate his own bias as much as possible. For example, this researcher began the memoing process prior to conducting interviews and gathering data so that he might accept his own predispositions towards complex decision-making and Spanish language enrollment and hold them at bay throughout the study. Therefore, this technique allowed the researcher to document his thoughts and feelings prior to and immediately following the interviews, as well as throughout the data analysis phases (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This practice was employed by the researcher in order to help provide credibility and ensure the trustworthiness of his study. Moreover, the process of reduction required him to refrain from assuming that complex decision-making, in terms of rural Spanish language choice, is actually the way it appears (Giorgi, 2012).

In addition to memoing, the data collection was comprised of two additional elements: reflective video journals and semi-structured face-to-face interviews. A central concern for a qualitative study is the adequacy of the data collection. For this phenomenological study, data collection was the researcher's attempt to gain understanding and experience through the subjects' reflection.

**Reflective Video Journals**

Participant data collection began in December of 2020 and continued through May of 2021, with reflective video journals submitted by each participant. Reflective video journals asked participants to give thought to all circumstances that motivated them to enroll or not in Spanish. Reflection of the experience was the backbone to the phenomenological research and,

as van Manen (2016) argues,

> The point of phenomenological research is to 'borrow' other people's experiences and
> their reflections on their experiences in order to be able to come to an understanding of
> the … significance of an aspect of human experience in the context of the whole of
> human experience. (p. 62)

Video journals with identical prompting questions were provided to each participant of the seven participants (Appendix A). As soon as the consent form was completed, the journal questions were provided to the participant. Each participant chose to receive the journal questions in electronic format via email. The participant then completed the reflective video journal and submitted it to the researcher electronically. Once the reflective journal was received, a review of the journal was conducted prior to the face-to-face and/or *Zoom* call in order to clarify questionable statements made during the video journals.

The researcher provided prompts for the reflective video journals. These prompts asked participants to reflect on personal situations that encouraged the decision for enrolling or not enrolling in a Spanish class (Appendix A). Prompts one, four, five, and six relate to the influence others and the environment have on one's motivating factors. Ryan and Deci (2000) emphasize that "self-determination theory [of motivation] is specifically framed in terms of social and environmental factors that facilitate versus undermine intrinsic motivation" (p. 58). Prompt one specifically relates to family situations and the influence on the participant (Bauer & Erdogan, 2007). Prompts two and three refer to the participant's perception of a Spanish class before enrolling and how this perception possibly influenced the motivating factors to enroll or not in a Spanish class.

Each video journal was digitally recorded in *FlipGrid* and then transcribed. First, the journal was transcribed using auto generated captions in *FlipGrid*. Then the researcher listened to the journal to edit and update the transcription. This extra step of computer transcription provided another layer of accuracy to the final transcription by providing another opportunity for the researcher to thoughtfully reflect on each interview for needed data analysis. Copies of the transcripts were supplied to each participant for review, correction, and signature verification.

**Interviews**

Once participants completed the reflective journal, a follow-up semi-structured face-to-face and/or *Zoom* interview was conducted to gain an understanding into each participant's experience, derive the true essence of the phenomenon, and obtain clarification of situations described in the reflective journals. The researched asked each participant the same questions; however, the interview was conducted as a conversational interview since, as van Manen (2016) points out, a "conversation lends itself especially well to the task of reflecting on the themes of the … phenomenon under study" (p. 98). The goal was to obtain a true reflection of the participants' lived experiences in order to generate an underlying theme for deciding to enroll, or not, in a Spanish class. Interview questions were open-ended to obtain unanticipated answers and a more honest description of the phenomenon (Fowler Jr., 2013).

One means that ensured consistent measurement in the interview process was to ask the same set of interview questions of each respondent (Fowler Jr., 2013). Understanding the participants' motivations required an examination of their individual needs (Bauer & Erdogan, 2007). The original set of main interview questions was broad, open-ended questions that encouraged the participants to elaborate on their personal experiences and needs. Rubin and

Rubin (2011) maintain that "these broad initiating questions encourage the ... [participant] ... to provide in an unfiltered way their own take on an issue and as such often evoke unexpected themes" (p. 161). Refer to Appendix A for the open-ended questions that were asked of each participant.

In order to keep the interviews productive, it was imperative to personally engage the participant "so that the interaction was focused on and tailored very individually to the respondent" (Fowler Jr., 2013, p. 128). When a participant's answers to the main interview questions did not adequately answer the main research questions or provide ample detail to develop a theme, probing questions were asked which were not determined prior to the interview. By using a semi-structured interview protocol to personalize the interview, it was necessary to interject probing questions because, as Rubin and Rubin (2011) argue, "probes help you ... clarify unclear sentences or phrases, filling missing steps, and keeping the conversation on topic" (p. 164).

The purpose of these questions was to gather information from the participants related to their goals, needs, desires, and influences that motivated their decision to enroll or not in a Spanish class in a rural public high school. Questions one through three were developed to determine social and environmental factors that contribute to the participant's motivation for enrolling or not in a Spanish class (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Each of these interview questions necessitates participants to reflect on situations and circumstances that encouraged direction, expended energy, and continual persistence to obtain the goal of enrolling or not enroll in a Spanish class. Questions one and two are specifically designed to obtain a picture of the experiences outside of a school environment that contributed to intrinsic motivation for making

life decisions.

The purpose of questions three through nine was to investigate factors related to self-efficacy and self-determination theory of motivation. Question three considered self-efficacy (Bandura, 2005). Therefore, question three was developed to identify possible situations in which the participant did not feel competent or unable to overcome a challenge (Szalma, 2014). Questions four through six were developed to identify any individual the participant perceives as influencing the decision to enroll or not in a Spanish class (Szalma, 2014). These questions aimed to measure how much another individual influences the decisions of a participant. Questions seven through nine relate specifically to the definition of Self-Determination Theory of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The participants' reflection on being enrolled or not in a Spanish class identified satisfaction that contributed to their intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

After each interview, the researcher made notations of key concepts, ideas, and short phrases that the researcher felt were important or defining to the participants' answers. All interviews were digitally recorded. Then, the interview was transcribed using *Microsoft Word*. Next, the researcher listened to the interview to edit and update this digital transcription. This extra step of computer transcription provided another layer of accuracy to the final transcription by providing another opportunity for the researcher to thoughtfully reflect on each interview for needed data analysis. Copies of the transcripts were supplied to each participant for review, correction, and signature verification. No changes to transcriptions were required following the member checking.

**Data Analysis**

The researcher completed coding on participants' reflective journals and interview transcriptions to identify common themes for providing answers to the research questions and determine the motivational factors for these participants for enrolling or not in a Spanish class. The researcher conducted attribute coding at the beginning of each data set for logging essential demographic data relating to all participants; as Saldaña (2015) argues, it is appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies to provide "essential participant information for future management, reference, and contexts for analysis and interpretation" (p. 291). Next, the researcher employed *In Vivo* coding (Saldaña 2015) by using the direct language of the participants, taken from the reflective video journal entries and interviews to create initial codes, rather than researcher-generated words and phrases.

Then, the researcher analyzed their statements by using horizontalization (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). First, the researcher gave equal value to all of the participants' statements. Second, the researcher removed all repetitive statements as well as those that did not relate to the research questions. This process of horizontalization produced significant quotes that provided "broad brush-stroke representations" of the motivating factors related to the participants' experiences (Saldaña, 2015, p. 23). Next, the researcher applied holistic coding by creating "a single code [for] each large unit of data in the corpus to capture a sense of the overall contents" (Saldaña, 2015, p. 165). From this process, the researched developed possible categories that allowed for developing a list of non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements. Grouping codes and themes allowed for the creation of meaningful themes to answer the research questions with constant comparison of the generated codes to find "commonalities in the data that reflect the underlying

meaning of, and relationships among, the coding categories" (Gall et al., 2010, p. 351). Textual, structural, and composite descriptions of the phenomenon were created from these statements to create the raw category definitions. Thus, the five category definitions emerged from the data to help define the essence of the phenomenon concerning the decision to enroll or not enroll in a Spanish class and contributed to a "composite description of the essence of the experience" (Creswell, 2017, p. 58). By creating these descriptions, the goal of answering the core of the research questions was reached.

**Theme Investigation**

Data collection to determine the emerging themes came from data collected in seven reflective journals and semi-structured interviews and notations made during the semi-structured interviews. From this process, direct quotations from in vivo coding of specific phrases and words were documented for each participant. Twenty-one words and phrases that reflected major themes and concepts were repeated three or more times throughout the combined reflective journals and interviews and selected by the researcher based on their relevance as related to the research questions. According to Saldaña (2015), "the final number of major themes or concepts should be held to a minimum to keep the analysis coherent" (p. 25). However, Saldaña (2015) is hesitant to give a minimum "number" but notes a suggestion from anthropologist Harry F. Wolcott to maintain a comprehensible analysis, "[Wolcott] generally advises throughout his writings that *three* of anything major seems an elegant quantity for reporting qualitative work" (p. 25).

Next, structural coding was completed on the reflective journals and interview transcripts (Saldaña, 2015). During the structural coding, a more in-depth review of participants' answers

and the completed context of each stated word or phrase was completed. Similarities in participants' answers were also analyzed during the structural coding. Specific codes were developed during the structural coding that were utilized in later development of categories and a coding frequency table was generated indicating how often an idea, thought, or term was stated. After completing in vivo coding and structural coding, five categories were formed by grouping the similar generated codes.

Once categories were created, themes were developed from the grouping of categories. Therefore, the participant's perspective was raised to an abstract level of conceptualization in order to determine the underlying meaning in the participants' words. From this process, implicit meaning or theme emerged. The purpose of theme "is to elicit the essence of the participant's experiences" (Vaismoradi et al., 2016, p. 102) and the development of themes provided a meaningful framework that allowed the researcher to determine the motivating factors for students enrolling or not in a Spanish class.

**Ethical Considerations**

Before any research began, the IRB application was submitted and approved as an exempt study. Participant involvement in this research was purely voluntary and no financial restitution was provided to any participant. Participants were not involved in any physical activity. The only emotional activity was that of being interviewed, which was no more stressful than interactions in daily life.

Participant confidentiality was maintained by following the IRB protocol. Participants were assigned pseudonyms, with their specific names not being published. All data was maintained in a secure location and kept confidential. Only data pertaining to data collection and

analysis used for sufficiently answering research questions was published in this study. There is no plan to reuse data for future study and all data related to researcher notes, audio recordings, video recordings, and digital transcripts will be destroyed within two years of the completion of the study. All *FlipGrid* accounts will be deactivated by the researcher, which according to *FlipGrid*, will permanently delete all videos. The researcher will also delete all digitally recorded dialogues from the recording devices and computer, where they will have been securely stored. Finally, the researcher will delete all digital files containing researcher notes and transcriptions from his computer and shred all paper notes.

**Summary**

This study's purpose was to explore what motivates high school students to enroll or not enroll in a Spanish language class. A descriptive phenomenological research design provided an optimum analytical framework to investigate the underlying reasons for this choice. The goal for this descriptive phenomenological research was to construct a narrative that describes common themes of the participants' lived actions, behaviors, and experiences in each individual's surroundings while staying true to the lived experience.

The following section outlines significant codes, categories, and themes that emerged from the reflective journals and semi-structured interviews. Participant answers and notes were reviewed numerous times in order to identify the significant themes that contributed to defining the substance of the phenomena.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

**Theme Development**

Themes emerged from the data collected from seven reflective journals and semi-structured interviews, as well as notations made during the semi-structured interviews. Throughout this process, direct quotations from in vivo coding of specific phrases and words were documented for each participant. The following words and phrases were repeated three or more times throughout the combined reflective journals and interviews (excluding prepositions, conjunctions, etc.) and selected by the researcher based on their relevance as related to the research questions: *Spanish, class(es), school(s), language(s), college(s)/university(ies), decision, English, parents, teachers, disadvantages, advantages, friends, family, counselor(s), requirement(s), opportunity(ies), fluent, bilingual, communicate, conversation(s), academic(ally)*. Table 2 shows the frequency of these repeated words and phrases.

**Table 2**

**In vivo Coding Results: Frequency of Repeated Words and Phrases**

| Code | Frequency |
|---|---|
|  | Number of occurrences |
| Spanish | 295 |
| Class(es) | 196 |
| School(s) | 162 |
| Language(s) | 92 |
| College(s)/University(ies) | 66 |
| Teacher(s) | 47 |
| Parent(s) | 38 |
| Disadvantage(s) | 38 |
| Decision | 34 |
| English | 34 |
| Advantages | 24 |
| Friends | 21 |
| Family | 20 |
| Counselor(s) | 17 |
| Opportunity(ies) | 17 |
| Requirement(s) | 9 |
| Conversation(s) | 8 |
| Academic(ally) | 8 |
| Fluent | 7 |
| Bilingual | 5 |
| Communicate | 4 |

Next, the researcher completed structural coding on the reflective journals and interview transcripts using the in vivo coding results from Table 2. During the structural coding, the researcher completed a more in-depth review of participants' answers and the context of each stated word or phrase from Table 2. Then, the researcher compared participants' answers and grouped them according to similarities. During this process, the researcher generated specific codes based on these similarities and then counted the frequency of these common themes. Table 3 presents a count of how often an idea, thought, or term was cited by a participant throughout the reflective journals and interviews based on researcher generated codes.

**Table 3**

**Coding Frequency of Cited Ideas and Thoughts**

| Code | Frequency |
|---|---|
| | Motivation to enroll or not enroll |
| Extended Family | 4 |
| Parent/Guardian | 12 |
| Teacher/Mentor | 7 |
| Friend | 21 |
| University Requirement | 12 |
| High School Requirement | 12 |
| Counselor | 9 |
| Self-Efficacy | 14 |
| Perceived Difficulty | 15 |
| Lack of Perceived Difficulty | 10 |
| Perceived Usefulness | 34 |

After completing in vivo coding and structural coding, categories were formed by grouping the similar generated codes: *Extended family, Parent/Guardian,* and *Teacher/Mentor,* were grouped under the category *Trusted adult*. *Friend* codes were grouped under the category *Peers*. *University and high school requirements* and *Counselor* codes were grouped under the category *Systems. Self-efficacy, Perceived Difficulty, and Lack of Perceived Difficulty* codes were grouped under the category *Self-efficacy*. The code for *Perceived Usefulness* was transferred into its own category. Then, the researcher placed each category on a continuum of motivation to demotivation (Figures 1-5), allowing him to tally the frequency of the codes under the given category. For the category of "Trusted Adult", the motivation to not enroll was tallied on two separate occasions; the frequency of neutral occurrences was tallied nine times; and the motivation to enroll was tallied eight times. For the category of "Peers", the motivation to not enroll was tallied on three separate occasions; the frequency of neutral occurrences was tallied

ten times; and the motivation to enroll was tallied eight times. For the category of "Systems", the

motivation to not enroll was tallied on nine separate occasions; the frequency of neutral

occurrences was tallied five times; and the motivation to enroll was tallied nine times. For the

category of "Self-Efficacy", the motivation to not enroll was tallied on 13 separate occasions; the

were no neutral occurrences; and the motivation to enroll was tallied 21 times. For the category

of "Perceived Usefulness", the motivation to not enroll was tallied on 16 separate occasions; the

frequency of neutral occurrences was tallied three times; and the motivation to enroll was tallied

15 times. Table 4 shows the categories that were created by grouping similar codes.

**Table 4**

**Coding Frequency of Categories**

| Category | Frequency of Codes | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | Motivation to not enroll | Neutral | Motivation to enroll |
| Trusted Adult | 2 | 10 | 12 |
| Peers | 3 | 10 | 8 |
| Systems | 13 | 5 | 14 |
| Self-Efficacy | 14 | 0 | 24 |
| Perceived Usefulness | 16 | 3 | 15 |

Once categories were created, the researcher developed themes from the grouping of

categories. Therefore, the researcher placed the participant's motivations in a category in order to

determine the underlying meaning of the participant's words. From this process, implicit

meaning or themes emerged. The purpose of a theme "is to elicit the essence of the participant's

experiences" (Vaismoradi et al., 2016, p. 102). The development of themes provided a

meaningful framework that allowed the researcher to determine the motivating factors for

students enrolling in a Spanish class. Figures 1-5 identify the derived themes and the

corresponding categories related to motivational factors that influenced enrollment.

**Motivational Factors**

**Figure 1**

Category 1(Trusted Adults)
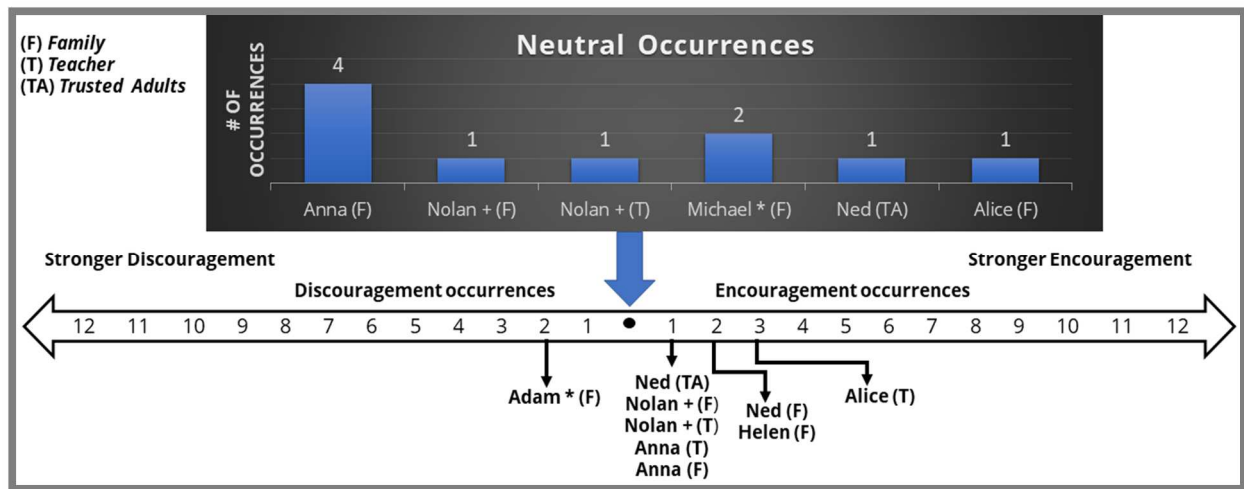


*Note.* (*) symbol notes participants never enrolled. (+) symbol notes participants enrolled two years. No symbol notes participants enrolled four years.

Figure 1 conveys the first derived theme, *Trusted Adults*. This category originated from the data when participants mentioned being motivated directly or indirectly by various family members, teachers, and trusted adults; hence, the researcher created the following codes to mark this category: *Family* (F), *Trusted Adults* (TA), and *Teacher* (T). Each manifestation of the code was tallied as an encouragement, a neutral, or a discouragement occurrence based on their decision to enroll or not and noted during the data analysis phase. Then, as shown in Figure 1, the codes were counted and plotted on the continuum. Anna mentioned four codes in the data related to the neutral influence of her family, while reporting one encouragement code each from her family and teacher. Nolan also reported one code of neutral influence from his family and another neutral mention related to his teacher. However, the researcher noted one encouragement

code from his family and teacher respectively. The researcher tallied two neutral codes from Michael pertaining to encouragement from his family. Further, the researcher tallied one neutral code of trusted adult influence by Ned, one encouragement from trusted adults, and two encouragement codes from family. Alice noted one neutral code from family and three encouragement codes related to her teacher. The researcher noted two family discouragement codes from Adam and two family encouragement codes from Helen. For example, in one discouragement code based on family influence, Adam wrote about the direct influence from his mom to not enroll in Spanish: "My mom said that since I was going to college, I wouldn't need a foreign language" (journal paragraph 4, May 19, 2021).

As shown above, participants noted both neutral and encouragement codes within this category. For example, Anna expressed four separate codes that all conveyed no influence from family members. For example, in a neutral code related to family she said, "So, no one in my family really was like, 'Oh yeah, you have to take, like take Spanish.' …" (interview 6:41, February 18, 2021). However, she also mentioned an encouragement code given by the positive reputation of the Spanish teacher at the school, "I always heard good things about him, how he's a really good teacher and was very good at helping other students. So, I was excited and ready to go forward and learn" (journal paragraph 2, February 15, 2021). Therefore, for some participants, these codes showed the neutral influence of trusted adults and, at the same time, encouragement or discouragement influence within this same category.

**Figure 2**

Category 2 (Peers)
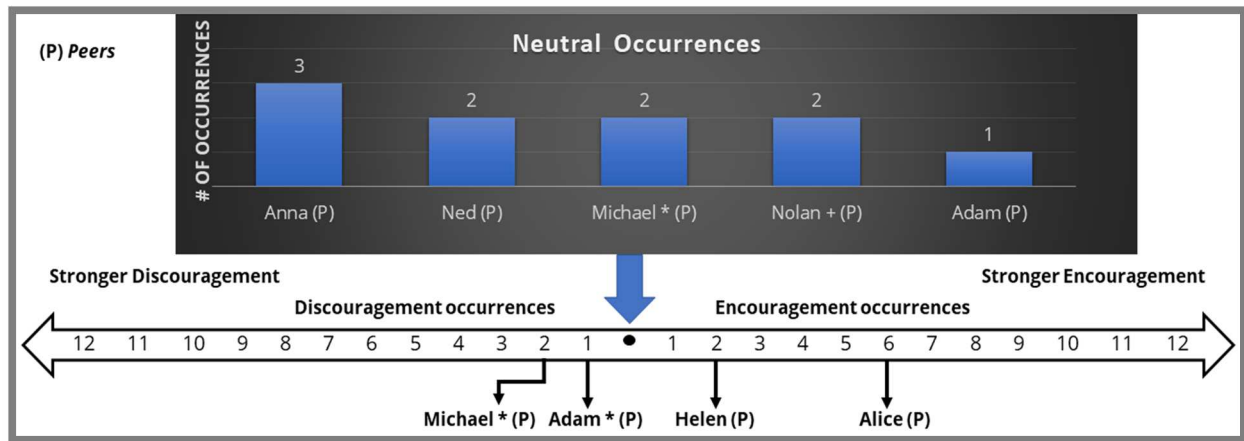


*Note.* (*) symbol notes participants never enrolled. (+) symbol notes participants enrolled two years. No symbol notes participants enrolled four years.

Figure 2 reports the second derived theme, *Peers*. This category stemmed from the data when participants mentioned being motivated directly or indirectly by friends and peers; therefore, the researcher created the following code to mark this category: *Peers* (P). Each occurrence of the code was tallied as an encouragement, a neutral, or a discouragement occurrence based on their decision to enroll or not and noted during the data analysis phase. Then, as shown in Figure 2, the occurrences of the codes were counted and plotted on the continuum. Anna mentioned three codes in the data related to the neutral influence of her peers. Nolan and Ned also had two codes of neutral influence from their peers. The researcher tallied one neutral code from Adam pertaining to encouragement from his peers while also noting one discouragement code from peers. The researcher tallied two neutral codes of peer influence by Michael and two discouragement codes. The researcher noted two peer encouragement codes from Helen and six from Alice. For example, Alice spoke about the direct influence from her peers to enroll in Spanish: "…it [*Spanish*] was something in the beginning [*of high school*] that

everyone was doing, so why not?" (journal paragraph 6, January 18, 2021).

As shown above, participants noted neutral, discouragement, and encouragement codes within this category. For example, Michael expressed two separate codes that all conveyed no influence from his peers, "No, I didn't know anyone enrolled (*in a Spanish class*) before I got into high school. So, it didn't really affect me at all." (paragraph 4, February 15, 2021). However, he also mentioned a discouragement code given by his peers:

> Well, I heard from my friends and stuff like what it was like hard as you went up each level and I just heard some really intimidating things so I just decided that I really didn't think it's for me to learn another language. It seems hard and people were always talking about how difficult the homework assignments were and so I didn't really think I wanted to do it. (journal paragraph 5, February 15, 2021)

Therefore, the data reported neutral codes of peer influence, and at the same time, encouragement or discouragement codes for some participants within this category.

**Figure 3**

Category 3 (Systems)
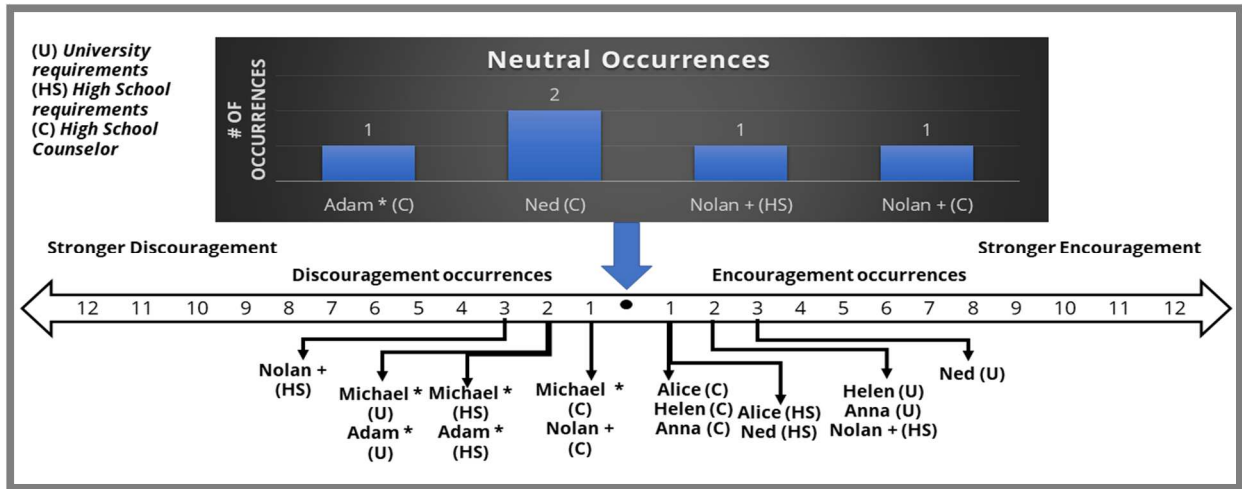


*Note.* (*) symbol notes participants never enrolled. (+) symbol notes participants enrolled two years. No symbol notes participants enrolled four years.

Figure 3 relates the third derived theme, *Systems*. This category was derived from the data when participants shared that they were motivated directly or indirectly by university and high school requirements and high school counselors; thus, the researcher organized them into the "Systems" category with the following codes: *University Requirements* (P), *High School Requirements* (HS), and *High School Counselor* (C). Each occurrence related to these systems within the data was tallied as an encouragement, a neutral, or a discouragement occurrence based on their decision to enroll or not and noted during the data analysis phase. As shown in Figure 3, the incidences of the codes were counted and plotted on the continuum. Adam reported one code in the data related to the neutral influence of his counselor, while also noting two discouragement codes pertaining to his high school and university requirements. Michael had a total of five discouragement codes, one related to the high school counselor and two each related to the university and high school requirements. For example, in one discouragement code based on

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high school requirements, he stated, "And so I kind of just got told that Spanish was not required for high school [*graduation*] and so I used it [*the open class period*] to take art classes" (interview 8:49, February 22, 2021).

Further, the researcher tallied two neutral codes from Ned pertaining to neutral influence of his high school counselor, and also noted two encouragement codes from high school requirements and three from university requirements. The researcher noted one counselor and high school encouragement code respectively from Alice, and one counselor encouragement code and two university encouragement codes from Helen. For example, in one encouragement code based on university requirements Helen stated, "I actually ended up looking into different requirements for universities, which is actually how I found out that I probably wanted to take four years of Spanish" (journal paragraph 1, January 18, 2021). The researcher noted one counselor code and two university encouragement codes from Anna. The researcher also tallied several codes from Nolan. First, Nolan noted one neutral code each pertaining to high school requirements and counselor influence. Also, he noted three discouragement codes related to high school requirements and one related to high school counselor influence. For example, in one discouragement code he stated, "You get all this stuff [*required classes for graduation*] taken care of first. So, I couldn't take a Spanish class [*after he transferred*]." (journal paragraph 3, March 24, 2021). Nolan also reported two encouragement codes related to high school requirements. For example, in one encouragement code he stated:

> I enrolled in Spanish 'cause that was [*a*] required course. They call it humanities, so, you take like two years of like say foreign language or some type of arts, like something like that, you take at least two years of it. (interview 2:49, March 25, 2021)

Therefore, some participants reported experiencing neutral codes related to systems and, at the same time, encouragement and discouragement codes as they expressed their experiences with systems and the influence on their decision to study or not study Spanish.

**Figure 4**

Category 4 (Self-efficacy)
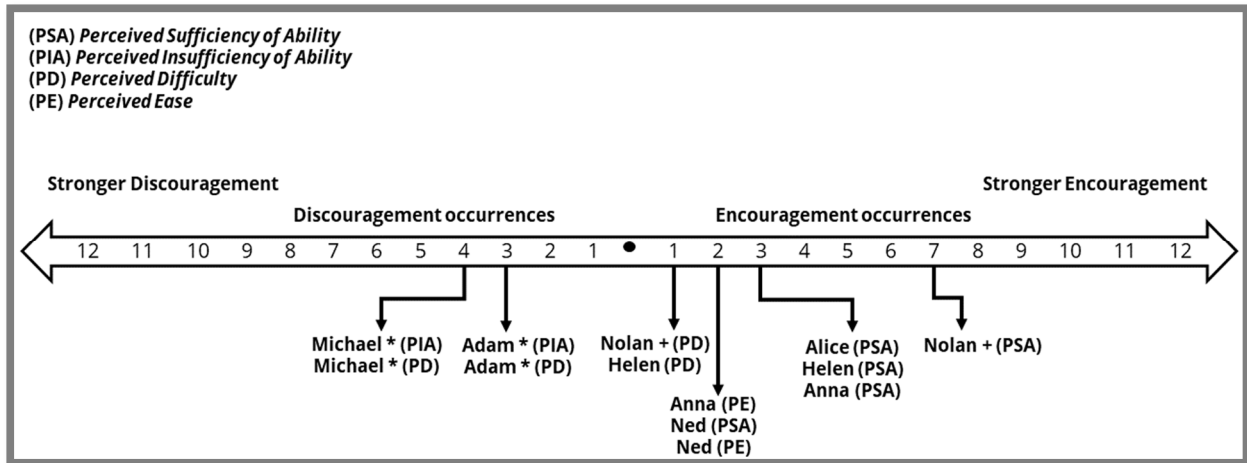


*Note.* (*) symbol notes participants never enrolled. (+) symbol notes participants enrolled two years. No symbol notes participants enrolled four years.

Figure 4 elucidates the fourth derived theme, *Self-Efficacy*. This category arose from the data wherein participants shared that they were motivated directly or indirectly by the lack of or increase in doubts, hesitations, and anxiety about the possibility of taking a Spanish class. The researcher based this category on participants' beliefs about their potential success in Spanish class and their own perceived abilities; accordingly, the researcher categorized them into the "Self-Efficacy" category with the following codes: *Perceived Sufficiency of Ability* (PSA), *Perceived Insufficiency of Ability* (PIA), *Perceived Difficulty* (PD), and *Perceived Ease* PE). Each manifestation of the code was tallied as an encouragement or a discouragement occurrence based on their decision to enroll or not and noted during the data analysis phase. Interestingly,

there were no neutral codes in this category. Then, as shown in Figure 4, the occurrences of the codes were counted and plotted on the continuum. Michael had a total of eight discouragement codes, with four linked to perceived difficulty of a Spanish class and four correlated to perceived insufficiency of ability. For example, in one perceived difficulty code he stated, "So, I wanted the easiest class as possible and I thought Spanish might be kind-of hard" (interview 7:53, February 22, 2021). Adam also mentioned three codes related to the perceived difficulty and three linked to perceived insufficiency of ability. The researcher tallied three encouragement codes from Helen related to perceived sufficiency of ability and curiously, one encouragement related to the perceived difficulty of a Spanish class. For example, in this code correlated to perceived difficulty, she stated, "One of my goals in high school was to take the hardest classes I could take and doing four years of Spanish was part of that track for me" (interview 20:38, January 22, 2021). Remarkably, the researcher also noted one encouragement code from Nolan related to perceived difficulty and seven related to perceived sufficiency of ability. Further, the researcher tallied two encouragement codes from Ned pertaining to perceived ease, and two encouragement codes related to perceived sufficiency of ability. Alice and Anna both had three encouragement codes associated to perceived sufficiency of ability. Also, Anna had two encouragement codes linked to perceived ease. For example, in one encouragement occurrence from Anna based on perceived ease, she stated "My opinions before enrolling in Spanish class. I was just like, oh, I wonder if it's hard, you know, stuff like that. I didn't really think anything about it" (journal paragraph 3, February 15, 2021).

Therefore, participants expressed either encouragement or discouragement codes throughout the self-efficacy category; this indicates no participants mentioned both

encouragement and discouragement codes nor did participants report any neutral codes.

Consequently, the self-efficacy data was unlike the other categories developed in this study.

**Figure 5**

Category 5 (Perceived usefulness of Spanish)
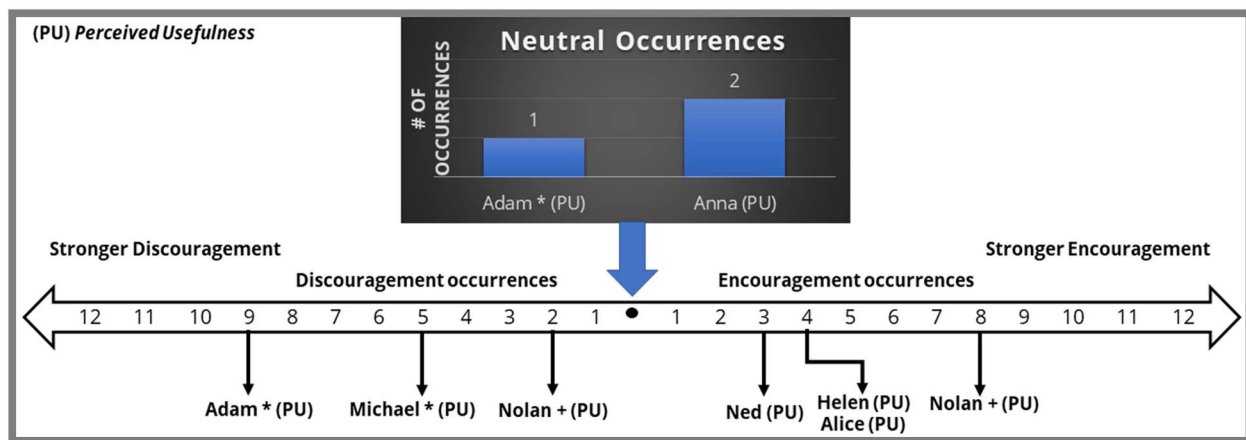


*Note.* (*) symbol notes participants never enrolled. (+) symbol notes participants enrolled two years. No symbol notes participants enrolled four years.

Figure 5 explains the fifth and final derived theme, *Perceived Usefulness*. This category emerged from the data when participants mentioned being motivated directly or indirectly by the perceived utility, practical worth, or applicability of enrolling in a Spanish class; thus, the researcher organized them into the "Perceived Usefulness" category with the following code, *Perceived Usefulness* (PU). Each occurrence of the code was tallied as an encouragement, a neutral, or a discouragement code based on their decision to enroll or not and noted during the data analysis phase. Then, as shown in Figure 5, the codes were counted and plotted on the continuum. Adam had a total of nine discouragement codes related to the perceived usefulness of a Spanish class and one neutral code. For example, in one discouragement code he stated, "It was basically, just, I found out that I didn't need the foreign language to do [*what*] I was going to do, so, I didn't take it" (journal paragraph 1, May 19, 2021). For Michael, the researcher tallied five

discouragement codes related to perceived usefulness. The researcher also tallied two

discouragement codes for Nolan related to perceived usefulness. For example, in one

discouragement code he stated, "I love agriculture more than anything [*e.g. Spanish*], so I had to

make sure I had Ag [*classes*] in each year" (interview 2:39, March 25, 2021). Nolan also had

eight encouragement codes related to perceived usefulness. For example, in one encouragement

code he stated:

> When I worked at [*a major agriculture company*], they hired migrant workers and they
>
> had conversations with them[*selves*] during lunch time. So, my coworkers, who didn't
>
> speak Spanish and didn't understand the culture or anything like that, I'd be the halfway
>
> point and create conversation between them and other people. (interview 5:12, March 25,
>
> 2021)

Further, the researcher tallied four encouragement codes related to perceived usefulness for

Helen and Alice, respectively. Ned mentioned three encouragement codes. For example, in one

encouragement code linked to perceived usefulness he stated, "I would say for the most part, it

was just sort of thinking about the marketability of it [*knowing Spanish*]" (interview 7:03, April

22, 2021). Finally, the researcher tallied two neutral codes from Anna related to the perceived

usefulness of Spanish. For example, in one encouragement code she stated, "Then going in as a

freshman, I can't think of anything, but like [*now*] as for my future, I could see it being

beneficial" (interview 11:25, February 18, 2021). Therefore, the data reported neutral codes of

perceived usefulness and, at the same time, encouragement and discouragement codes within this

category.

**Summary**

This section outlined the participants' lived experiences before and after deciding to enroll or not in a Spanish class. Through reflective journals and semi-structured interviews, the seven participants shared perceptions of motivational factors, influential people, advantages and disadvantages of experiences from enrolling or not in a Spanish class. The analyzed data were reviewed in relation to the central research questions and participant responses from reflective journals and semi-structured interviews related to situations and experiences prior to enrolling or not in a Spanish class were analyzed for commonalities.

These findings showed the neutral influence of trusted adults and, at the same time, encouragement or discouragement influence within this same category. Also, the data reported neutral codes of peer influence, and at the same time, encouragement or discouragement codes for some participants within this category. Further, some participants reported experiencing neutral codes related to systems and, at the same time, encouragement and discouragement codes as they expressed their experiences with systems and the influence on their decision to study or not study Spanish. However, participants expressed either encouragement or discouragement codes throughout the self-efficacy category; this indicates no participants mentioned both encouragement and discouragement codes nor did participants report any neutral codes. Consequently, the self-efficacy data was unlike the other categories developed in this study. Finally, the data reported neutral codes of perceived usefulness and, at the same time, encouragement and discouragement codes within this category.

**Research Question Review**

Therefore, the purpose of this research was to examine former secondary rural students'

motivation to enroll or not in Spanish language class. The research questions that guided this study were as follows: First, what motivates rural secondary students to study Spanish and second, what motivates rural secondary students to not study Spanish? These central research questions were designed to more clearly understand a participant's perspective in choosing to enroll or not in a Spanish class. During analysis of the data and category development, it became apparent that participants experienced more than one factor or situation resulting in enrolling or not in a Spanish class. These situations arose from the data and identified as codes, then grouped into five categories. The five categories of which participants identified as an experience leading to enrolling or not in Spanish class were (a) Trusted Adults; (b) Peers; (c) Systems; (d) Self-Efficacy; (e) Perceived Usefulness, as illustrated in this section.

To sum up, the motivation to enroll or not in this rural setting could be seen as an interwoven, fluid, and complex system of motivations. Nevertheless, Table 4 presents evidence that self-efficacy was a decisive indicator, considering all participants noted their own perceived abilities and/or perception of the class as a clear indicator of enrollment. In short, no neutral occurrences were reported in the self-efficacy category by participants, demonstrating the impact of self-efficacy on the decision to enroll or not in a Spanish class.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this descriptive phenomenological study was to examine the motivational factors of rural secondary students to enroll or not enroll in a Spanish class. The study detailed participant perceptions of past benefits, influences, advantages, disadvantages, and situations that impacted their choice to enroll or not in a Spanish class. In other words, numerous variables given by participants were investigated and determined to be involved in their decision-making process (i.e. trusted adults, peers, systems, self-efficacy, perceived usefulness). With this variety of influences in mind, L2 enrollment motivation among high school students in this rural community could be understood as complex systems of interactions of not only motivations, but also thoughts and emotions. This recognition seems consistent with Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011), who argue that it makes sense to make three broad distinctions between the motivational process: "motivation, cognition, and affect" (p.92). This conglomerate of mental characteristics seems like an interwoven, fluid, and complex system, and with Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011), the researcher argues that the most important aspect of this complex dynamic systems approach is to find the "right level of abstraction for looking at motivation in *any* [emphasis added] given situation" (p.98). Therefore, this approach gave validity to integrating these various aspects of enrollment choice into a complex system for analysis in order to consider the inherently changing nature of motivation.

For the following discussion, the environmental factors will first be examined, including systems and perceived usefulness of Spanish, will be explored; then the influences of people in the participants' lives, such as trusted adults and peers, will be shared. Finally, the role of each individual's self-efficacy will be examined. The relationship between the current research study

and some existing literature will also be reviewed in this section. Additionally, implications of the study, its limitations, and recommendations for future research will be discussed.

**Systems as Related to the Rural Environment**

Within the context of rural learners, Palardy (2013) suggested a strong impact of school climate on rural students' decisions to attend, engage with, and stay in school until graduation, and whether to pursue postsecondary studies. The current study found that some systems associated with the rural environment encouraged enrollment, while others discouraged enrollment in Spanish classes. At the same time, these same systems were sometimes noted as having a neutral influence on some participants' motivation to enroll. For example, university and high school requirements played a stronger role in the decision to enroll or not than did advice offered by the high school counselor. Helen, Anna, and Ned expressed a direct link between enrolling in Spanish and their future college plans and careers. This finding aligns with previous studies that found that the stability of students' educational expectations is a key predictor of EA (Beal & Crockett, 2013; Khattab, 2015*). Conversely, Adam expressed a direct link between *not* enrolling in Spanish and his future career. These findings are consistent with Schmitt-Wilson et al. (2018) who found that rural students' "perceived education needed for occupation positively predicted bachelor's degree attainment" (p. 9).

That being said, Spanish was not a required course for high school graduation, and Michael and Adam both mentioned that lack of a requirement as part of their motivation for not enrolling. Therefore, discussions related to Spanish enrollment as an elective course is an important factor related to enrollment (Stewart-Strobelt & Chen, 2003). However, Nolan anticipated enrolling in Spanish after transferring to the school in this study, but was hindered by

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schedule conflicts with other classes required for graduation. These schedule conflicts are a particular problem with rural schools, given that some subjects are only offered one period during the school day, by one teacher. Considering the factors above, the current investigation aligns with Schmitt-Wilson et al.'s (2018) recommendation to examine the "contextual variables of occupational expectations and the level of education perceived to be required for those jobs" (p.9).

Another theme that emerged from the data was related to Spanish enrollment advice given by the high school counselor. Pratt (2010) asserted that it is important "to provide career counseling that informs students about the connection between Spanish and other career choices" (p. 681). Further, Pratt (2010) argued that "typical high school counselors" are not aware of these practical connections (p. 681). However, the counselor's interactions with participants in this study were noted as encouraging language enrollment, but ultimately favored student choice as related to class schedules. For example, Nolan noted the counselor's advice at his previous school and the school in this study as being "really helpful," but they were not a strong influence in his decision to enroll or not (interview 16:53, March 25, 2021). Helen and Anna both felt Spanish was strongly recommend by the counselor, while Ned only remembered learning about class offerings, with no recommendation from the counselor. This finding seems consistent with Stewart-Strobelt and Chen (2003), who found that the counselor's advice was the least important factor, out of a total of eight factors, that influenced world language choice in their study. Also, Michael mentioned that the counselor "only ever offered" Spanish class (interview 13:10). Michael's sentiments echo the findings of Tieken (2016), who found that rural high school counselors argued for the necessity of a practical degree for all students living in a struggling

rural economy. In that same vein, Lanvers (2016) found that the school leadership, even more than language teachers, explain the purpose of language study with reference to socioeconomic standards. The more disadvantaged the socioeconomic mix of a school's population, the lesser the alleged value of Spanish for students in that school.

**Trusted Adults and Peers**

Previous literature has proposed some reasons why students in the rural context are not motivated to enroll in a Spanish class, as related to trusted adults and peers. However, these barriers to enrollment, including potential intergroup anxiety (Riek, Mania, & Gaertner 2006) associated with social dominance orientation (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994), were not reported by participants. In particular, Voci and Hewstone (2003) established intergroup anxiety as a predictor of outgroup attitudes and bias. However, the rural monolingual participants in this study did not report heightened levels of anxiety at the thought of interacting with persons who speak a LOTE and did not report greater prejudice towards them and, consequently, not enroll in a Spanish class. Nevertheless, it should be noted that in many settings it's socially unacceptable to admit one's prejudices and participants may have simply kept any of those ideas to themselves and not told the researcher, their former teacher, about them.

Yet, Michael, the only African-American in this study, enjoyed the company of his friend and that friend's Latino family (interview 13:57, February 22, 2021). However, he reported that he was partly motivated to *not* enroll based on his own perceived insufficient ability to communicate in Spanish at a comprehensible level with his friend and his friend's family. He reported no biases, anxiety, or prejudice about interacting in a LOTE. His report seems consistent with Hartman, et al. (2020) suggesting that Black and Latino Americans might have

greater openness to interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds. Michael seemed to only see himself as being unable to communicate in Spanish, even if he did enroll in Spanish classes. Therefore, according to Michael, he did not enroll because of his monolingual background; he chose not to take Spanish because of his low self-efficacy. Therefore, findings seem to seem to inconsistent with Richards (2017), who suggested that students' background and target language level have a negative impact on their attitudes towards the target language. Therefore, considering this information from participants, the researcher cannot strongly assume that increased interaction with other cultures necessarily increased or decreased enrollment in Spanish classes for these participants.

Ned, Alice, Adam, and Nolan all expressed parental influence as part of their enrollment decision. Supporting the parental influences investigated in this study, Bauer and Erdogan (2007) conclude that "early family experiences are important influences over the dominant values" (p. 100). Parents have a significant influence on student motivations, as do others who have pivotal relationships with students (Al-Dhamit & Kreishan, 2016; Guay, Vallerand, & Blanchard, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). For example, Ned expressed the direct influence of a friend's parent who spoke three languages on his decision to enroll in Spanish. Further his mother supported Spanish study based on her work and experience in the southwest United States. These factors concur with Gayton (2010), who found that the strength of parents' support and the way that they rationalize the purpose of the child's language study are linked to parental language knowledge.

Related to her decision to enroll, Alice discussed extensively the peer influence of older, popular, athletic, and intelligent females, who "were both valedictorians and they told me they loved it [*Spanish*]" (Journal, paragraph 4). These student-athletes were enrolled in Spanish, loved

the teacher, and spoke highly of the class. According to Alice, she wanted to be like these upperclassmen peers. Further, the majority her peers enrolled in Spanish as freshman.

> The class looks like it would be something that if I didn't enjoy the content, I would enjoy the teacher and I just thought I would give it a shot, and all my friends would say good things about it, like the upperclassmen that I interacted with in sports. (Journal paragraph 3, January 18, 2021).

Her views seem consistent with Bartram (2006) who found that peer opinions of a subject can sway subject satisfaction and even the option to study or not a language, as students want to remain in the same class as peers. However, this position counters Demi et al. (2010) and Hardré et al. (2009), who found that in rural high schools, school environment provided a stronger impetus on students' decisions to engage in school (e.g. enroll in a Spanish class), earn good grades, and graduate than did family or peers. Further, Lanvers (2017) would contend that there are not enough studies investigating the influence of parental attitudes and peers on L2 student motivation to verify the limited findings presented here.

### Perceived Usefulness and Self-Efficacy as Related to Rural Students

Previous studies on the profile of rural students (Hardré et al., 2009; Schmitt-Wilson et al., 2018; Wilcox et al., 2014) argued that the practicality and usefulness of the content being studied influence the investment a rural learner makes in a subject. As seen in Figure 5, participants identified 38 occurrences related to the perceived usefulness of Spanish. These findings seem consistent with Wilcox's (2014) argument related to the usefulness of the subject; some participants perceived Spanish as useful and enrolled, while some saw Spanish as useless and did not enroll. In addition, Gayton (2010) found that English-speaking students in Scotland

were less motivated to learn French as an L2. However, data from France and Germany proposed that English as an L2 was "held in exceptionally high regard as a school subject, and a life skill" (Gayton, 2010, p. 20). Further, Gayton (2010) found that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, with fewer prospects to travel, had more negative attitudes toward an L2 and envisioned fewer prospects to use language skills later in life. Gayton's findings (2010), as related to the perceived benefits by students of English as the L2, appear consistent with Adam and Michael's numerous claims that Spanish, as a LOTE, was not needed for their future careers.

Yet, Anna, who enrolled in four years of Spanish classes, did not mention any enrollment decision influence as related to the perceived usefulness of Spanish. In fact, Anna as a college freshman could see the usefulness of Spanish but remembered as a high school freshman not considering the usefulness of an L2. This finding counters Hardré et al. (2009), who found that rural students who felt more competent and believed they could learn and develop skills in a school subject were more likely to demonstrate course-related interest. Nevertheless, Nolan enrolled for two years and gave the most encouragement occurrences; he mentioned several examples during his high school Spanish enrollment about the usefulness of Spanish, as related to his summer jobs and on-line gaming. Yet, as mentioned earlier, he was discouraged from enrolling in Spanish by high school graduation requirements and class scheduling conflicts. Though perceived usefulness may indicate a strong tendency to enroll or not, it does alone not seem to automatically spur enrollment for some participants.

A student's confidence in their own ability can influence their academic pursuit and accomplishments. Hardré et al., (2009) argued that the more confident that students felt in their ability to perform, the more likely it was that they would be interested in their courses and would

intend to graduate. This assertion is closely linked to not only SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2017) but also Bandura's (2005) theory of self-efficacy. The findings described in Figure 4 seem to verify and lend support to the aforementioned theories. Participants who identified their abilities as being sufficient to enroll did, in fact, enroll. On the other hand, Michael and Adam viewed their abilities as insufficient and did not enroll. Also, if a participant perceived the class as being easy to be competent in, they enrolled. Curiously, the perceived difficulty of Spanish encouraged two participants, Nolan and Helen, to enroll. However, this finding seems consistent with the psychological need of competence associated with SDT (Bandura, 2005). For a participant to feel confident in their abilities, they need to test and challenge their abilities by, in this case, enrolling in a Spanish class. Moreover, this finding also seems to verify Bandura's (2005) construct of self-efficacy, since these participants believed that they could successfully organize their efforts and complete a Spanish class to produce a desired outcome.

In summary, trusted adults, peers, systems, self-efficacy, and the perceived usefulness of Spanish were determined to be involved in participants' decision-making processes. With this variety of influences in mind, L2 enrollment motivation among high school students in this rural community could be understood as a complex interaction of not only motivation, but also thoughts and emotions. As previously mentioned, this concept was well-suited with the meta-theory of complex dynamic systems (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Therefore, this approach enabled the researcher to integrate these various aspects of enrollment choice into a complex system for analysis in order to consider the inherently changing nature of motivation.

## Implications for Local Instruction

As mentioned in the introduction, in the past, the researcher has not had a clear

understanding of why more students are not enrolling in Spanish classes. However, during and after this process, the researcher noted several applications to his teaching and community engagement. First, early advocacy for Spanish enrollment could help inform parents and students and allow them to make the best decision for their family. For example, the researcher could attend eighth grade orientation. This is an evening with the local guidance counselors which informs eighth grade parents and students on possible career and college paths related to high school classes. During this informative night, the researcher could develop a short presentation to help develop interest and encourage questions about Spanish enrollment.

Second, creating high school students who have the ability to advocate for enrolling in Spanish classes could also offer another way to educate the community about Spanish enrollment. For example, the high school Spanish club could visit local university Spanish classes. This type of high school-college engagement could further embolden these students, who are already interested in Spanish, by allowing them to see the larger language educational community. Ideally, by developing a *feel* for university language class, students might not only become more comfortable enrolling in college Spanish enrollment, but could also grow to be language ambassadors who promote Spanish enrollment in this rural district.

Third, the researcher could partner with a university Spanish department to develop a rural-to-university partnership that would benefit both the rural teacher/researcher and the university classroom teachers. University Spanish staff could provide both depth and breadth to the instruction and knowledge of a relatively isolated secondary Spanish teacher. At the same time, the researcher could become a social resource for university staff who are working with the many rural students that these Midwest universities attract. Considering the researcher has

almost 20 years of experience working in a rural context, it seems this partnership could be beneficial to the researcher, university teaching staff, and the rural students who attend these universities.

### Limitations, Future Research, and Conclusions

Limitations should be considered when examining these findings. First, the study only explored the perspectives of seven participants. The perspectives of parents, families, and school personnel, and current students could provide insight on enrollment decisions. Second, this study examined the former experiences of rural youths in one setting in Illinois. Although the sample was small by design, these data may not be representative of all rural students. Third, participants were discussing their enrollment decisions with the researcher who was also their former teacher and lives in the same communities as them and their families. Fourth, several data factors were not considered, including the effects of school size, school composition, and other school-specific factors. Future research could replicate this study in several rural communities around the United States. Likewise, a mixed methods approach could also be employed to include not only interviews, but also surveys related to enrollment choice. Future studies could also examine connections and associations of former rural youth students and their urban peers to develop a more complete view of L2 enrollment choice. Finally, other factors not captured in this study likely influence the achievement of these former secondary students. Future studies could examine additional school experience variables (such as student learning styles, teacher and school quality, well-being indicators, and so on) to gain a more comprehensive view of enrollment choice among rural secondary students.

To sum up, these former rural youth expressed several factors related to trusted adults,

peers, systems, self-efficacy, and perceived usefulness that influenced their decision to enroll or not in Spanish classes. To improve Spanish enrollment is this community and possibly others, it seems necessary for rural communities and related school systems to better understand the motivations related to Spanish enrollment. For example, rural counselors could be comprehensively trained on the known benefits of L2 enrollment to enable more informed discussions on Spanish secondary enrollment (Tieken, 2016). In doing so, rural schools could plan strategically to address discouragements to enrollment, while simultaneously increasing supports to enhance Spanish enrollment.

In addition, more and different enrollment indicators could be useful to further understand the role of rural secondary Spanish enrollment relative to motivational factors (e.g., socioeconomic factors, teacher attitudes and practices). These phenomenological findings are limited, but continuing research on rural students and schools is essential, especially on the motivational characteristics that underlie Spanish enrollment. Further, the researcher emphasizes that the continued rural research should not just aim for broad generalizability of findings, but also for locally sensitive design and methods related world-language choice at the secondary level. For example, Hardré and Hennessey (2013) posit that rural research needs to generate not only an understanding of how local differences influence teaching and learning but also include features that help to meaningfully explain elements of effective transfer to other contexts. Further, potential connections between L2 enrollment decisions in rural and urban communities should also be investigated.

The descriptive phenomenological methodology employed in this study allowed the researcher to investigate and then present a theoretical understanding representing the essential

factors used by a particular set of rural, mostly white, high school students in the decision-making process to enroll or not in Spanish language class. In other words, the researcher sought to describe and explore the lived experiences of the participants as they navigated the multidimensional landscape of rural high school Spanish language choice. Given the breadth and scope of how high school students and their families make class enrollment decisions, it seems increasingly important to augment quantitative data by offering a qualitative approach to uncover how high school students make decisions in this environment. Ideally, this phenomenological research provides a lens through which additional meaning and a deeper understanding of decision-making can be captured in order to better understand the considerations of these rural students.

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## APPENDIX A: REFLECTIVE VIDEO JOURNAL QUESTIONS

A1. Participants who were enrolled in Spanish Classes

1. The year before you decided to enroll in a Spanish class, what major events occurred in your life and the lives of your family members?

2. What did you like about enrolling in Spanish class?

3. What was your opinion or thoughts regarding a Spanish class before enrolling?

4. Did you know anyone enrolled in a Spanish class prior to your decision to enroll how are they related? How did these students describe their experiences in Spanish class?

5. How do you think this person influenced your decision to enroll in a Spanish class?

6. How did other people you know influence your decision to enroll in a Spanish class?

A2. Participants who did not enroll in a Spanish Class

1. The year before you decided to not enroll in a Spanish class, what major events occurred in your life and the lives of your family members?

2. What did you like about not enrolling in Spanish class?

3. What was your opinion or thoughts regarding a Spanish class before not enrolling?

4. Did you know anyone enrolled in a Spanish class prior to your decision to not enroll and how are they related?

5. How do you think this person influenced your decision to not enroll in a Spanish class?

6. How did people you know influence your decision to not enroll in a Spanish class?

APPENDIX B: STANDARIZED OPEN-ENDED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

B1. Participants who were enrolled in Spanish Classes

1. Please describe your life situations that contributed to enrolling in a Spanish class.

2. Please describe goals and desires not related to education or school that contributed to your enrolling in a Spanish class.

3. Please describe the challenges you faced while attending high school.

4. How did your parents influence or motivate your decision to enroll in a Spanish class?

5. How did guidance counselors assist in your decision to enroll in a Spanish class?

6. Did you know other people who spoke another language? Who were they? Did they influence your decision to enroll Spanish class?

7. Please describe how you think attending a Spanish class helped you obtain your goals in high school and after.

8. What do you consider to be the advantages you have experienced by enrolling in a Spanish class and did you expect to experience these advantages?

9. What do you consider to be the disadvantages you have experienced by enrolling in a Spanish class and did you expect to experience these disadvantages?

B2. Participants who did not enroll in a Spanish Class

1. Please describe your life situations that contributed to you not enrolling in a Spanish class.

2. Please describe goals and desires not related to education or school that contributed to you not enrolling in a Spanish class.

3. Please describe the challenges you faced while attending high school.

4. How did your parents influence or motivate your decision to not enroll in a Spanish class?

5. How did guidance counselors assist in your decision to not enroll in a Spanish class?

6. Did you know other people who spoke another language? Who were they? Did they influence your decision to not enroll in a Spanish class?

7. Please describe how you think not attending a Spanish class helped you obtain your goals in high school and after.

8. What do you consider to be the advantages you have experienced by not enrolling in a Spanish class and did you expect to experience these advantages?

9. What do you consider to be the disadvantages you have experienced by not enrolling in a Spanish class and did you expect to experience these disadvantages?

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT LETTER

September, 2020

Dear Potential Participant:

As a graduate student in the School of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at Illinois State University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Master of Arts degree and I am writing to invite you to participate in my study. Participation is voluntary.

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to create a reflective video journal entry and partake in a face-to-face interview. It should take approximately a total of two hours for you to complete the procedure listed. Your participation will be completely anonymous and no personal, identifying information will be required.

To participate, please contact me by email at pjlehm1@ilstu.edu. I will then forward you an informed consent document that contains additional information about my research.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Jess Lehman

APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Jess Lehman, Master of Arts Candidate of the Illinois State University (ISU) department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, under the direction of the Principal Investigator (PI), Dr. Susan Hildebrandt of the ISU College of Education and Acting Chair of the Department of Special Education. The purpose of this study is to examine secondary rural students' motivation to take or not take a Spanish class.

**Why are you being asked?**

You have been asked to participate because of your past enrollment in, and graduation from, Central A&M High School. You are ineligible to participate if you are currently located in the European Economic Area.  Your participation in this study is voluntary. You will not be penalized if you choose to skip parts of the study, not participate, or withdraw from the study at any time.

**What would you do?**

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: complete a reflective video journal regarding the decision to enroll or not in a Spanish class, participate in a personal interview that is recorded, and review transcripts and information for accuracy. In total, your involvement in this study will last approximately two hours. The reflective video journal will take approximately 20-30 minutes, the interview 30-45 minutes, and review of transcripts, 30-45 minutes.

**Are any risks expected?**

This study has minimal risk. The risks are not more than those encountered in everyday life. However, given the phenomenological nature of this study, psychological risks could include

reactions to past interactions related to a decision to enroll or not in a Spanish class that may induce emotional distress or anxiety. To reduce these risks, all protocols for questioning and interviews will be followed. However, throughout the approved procedures of interviewing and answering questions, if the emotional stress or anxiety exceeds those encountered by everyday life, the researcher will remind you that your participation is voluntary and therefore, at any time, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw from the study completely.

**Will your information be protected?**

We will use all reasonable efforts to keep any provided personal information confidential. The records of this study will be kept private. Any published report will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. Digital recordings and handwritten notes will be stored in a lock box, only accessible to the researcher, in his home office. Computer data will be stored in password protected files that only the researchers can access. Information that may identify you or potentially lead to reidentification will not be released to individuals that are not on the research team. However, when required by law or university policy, identifying information (including your signed consent form) may be seen or copied by authorized individuals.

The results from this study will be disseminated through the current research study as associated with the publication of the researcher's thesis and by presenting study results to local community groups and other local stakeholders

**Could your responses be used for other research?**

Your information will not be used or distributed for future use, even if identifiers are removed.

**Who will benefit from this study?**

The principal benefit of this study is to inform the teacher/researcher on the enrollment decision process of individuals and how he can better inform community members on the advantages of enrolling in a Spanish class. Also, this study, as part of a Master's Thesis, will serve to meet the requirements of graduation for the teacher/researcher at ISU.

**Whom do you contact if you have any questions?**

If you have any questions about the research or wish to withdraw from the study, contact Jess Lehman at pjlehm1@ilstu.edu or 217-259-3829. The Principal Investigator, Dr. Susan Hildebrandt, can also be contacted with any questions at shildeb@ilstu.edu.

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If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, contact the Illinois State University Research Ethics & Compliance Office at (309) 438-5527 or IRB@ilstu.edu.

**Documentation of Consent**

Sign below if you are 18 or older and willing to participate in this study.

Signature _____     Date _____

Your signature below indicates that you agree to be recorded.

Signature _____     Date _____

You will be given a copy of this form for your records.