

CHURCH INVOLVEMENT OF MORMON STUDENTS  
AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS

By

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Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate College of the  
Oklahoma State University  
in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for  
the Degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
July, 2007

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All of the faculty of Oklahoma State University have been indirectly supportive and encouraging. I would especially like to thank the members of my committee, Dr. Pat Jordan, Dr. Pam Brown, Dr. Jean Van Delinder and Dr. Sue Parsons, for all of their help and encouragement. A special thanks goes to Dr. Parsons for keeping me sane throughout this process and guiding me with a gentle hand. In addition, I would like to thank Dr. Gretchen Schwarz for her continuing support.

Thanks also go out to Katie, Maren, Jennifer, Crystal, and Stefanie; without these marvelous girls, this study could not have happened.

Finally, I am grateful to Dr. Carol Fillman, my stepmother. Without her constant guidance and feedback, I would not have been able to follow in her footsteps. Finally, without the support of my family, including my husband, Dean, my daughters Kayleigh and Caitlin, my mother and stepfather, Sandy and Charles, and my father, Bill, I would never have thought this journey possible.

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July, 2007

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*On September 16, 2003, at 7:00 p.m., I made my way into the parking lot of the Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints Church (LDS). The church sits off a busy street in Rothrock, a quiet suburb of a Midwestern city. Two other churches sit across the street, and restaurants, small businesses and a Home Depot are to the north of the church. The church building, constructed of tan brick, had no decoration adorning the outside. "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints," printed in relatively small letters on the north side of the building, can be easily overlooked since the colors of the letters blend in with the color of the building. The only readily visible marker indicating that this building is a church is the white steeple erected on the top of the building. There is no sign of deterioration on the facade, the lawn is well manicured, the flowerbeds are weeded, and the small shrubs and trees are neatly pruned. As I searched for a parking space, I noticed several youth (around the ages of 13-15) talking in a small group at the front of the church. The boys were dressed in khaki pants, white button-down shirts and dark ties. Some of the boys' shirts and pants were wrinkled. The girls were dressed in long skirts or dresses that were neatly pressed. Pulling into one of the few remaining parking spaces, I noticed several other vehicles hurriedly pulling into the lot. I could just hear bits and pieces of the teenagers' conversations as I walked toward the building-- typical youth talk about the events of school that day, homework still not complete, and*



*the anticipation of getting driving permits. As I walked closer, the kids looked at me, stopped talking and, with one exception, went inside. The exception was a young man who held the door open for me. When I told him “thank you,” he replied with a warm, “You’re welcome,” and entered after me. I could feel my hands shake, and I felt very nervous about being here. I did not know what to expect or if there were any “hidden rules.”*

*Upon entering the church, I found several adults, mostly women, scurrying around placing items on tables, asking children to find things, consulting with one another and directing older girls where to place larger items. The entrance was very drab with dark paneling on the walls, dark brown carpet on the floor, and what seemed to be limited lighting. There was little furniture in the oblong-shaped entryway. One table and an armchair were visible. Neatly placed on the table was a book where guests were asked to sign. There was a long hallway that ran to the left and right of the entrance hall. The hallway to the left was dark while the one on the right was narrow but lit. Straight ahead was the room where all the scurrying seemed to be taking place. It took me four normal sized steps to get there. Inside, I found the mothers of five of my former students hanging dresses on the walls, laying quilts on tables, setting up photo albums and arranging roses of five different colors into bouquets. Other people, adults and youth, were milling about the room admiring the tables and wall-hangings and talking softly to one another. As I walked further into the room, I could feel several sets of eyes on me. One mother, Rene’s, approached me and asked in a shaky voice if I was okay. I told her I was just a little lost and wasn’t sure what I needed to do or where I needed to go. She smiled, placed her hand on my arm, and told me how happy she was*

*that I had been able to make it to this celebration. She asked me to help her finish hanging the green dress on the wall and she would find me someone to sit with. Once the dress was displayed, she told me she left to find Rene and the girls, inviting me to, “look around at all the accomplishments the girls had achieved,” until she returned..*

*As I moved from table to table, I noticed that more and more people were coming into the room. What started out as 10 or 15 became 30 or 40 within a matter of minutes. Voices rose in order to be heard above the growing sounds of conversation. There were too many conversations going on around me for me to make any of them out. At the first table, Rene’s, I noticed her quilt which seemed to be made for a twin bed. It was a patchwork quilt, but unlike any patchwork I had seen before. Instead of having the ends sewn together then turned upside down with the seams hidden, the squares were sewn together on the topside with about a half inch of fabric raised up. I was so intent on the uniqueness of the quilt that I did not have time to look at the rest of Rene’s table before her mom approached me again. She had found Rene who greeted me in a hurried manner. Through her rough hug and the strain in her voice, I could tell she was stressed. Soon, Tabitha’s mom came up to us and greeted me with a warm hug. She told me how happy Tabitha would be that I had come. She asked me if I would like to sit with her and her husband and sons. Rene’s mom said that would probably be best for me, as her whole extended family had come for this occasion and I might find their pews crowded. I accepted Tabitha’s mom’s invitation, and she led me through the crowd to the sanctuary.*

*The sanctuary was on the lighted side of the entrance. There were two doors, both on the same hallway, leading into the sanctuary. We entered through the first one and walked down the closest aisle to the third pew from the front. I got the feeling there*

*was assigned seating in this church. Watching people enter, it just seemed like they had their own place to sit. Seeing me, a stranger, seated with a regular family did not seem to catch anyone off guard. I caught several warm smiles from two people, one older woman and a man who was about 45 years old, who came up to introduce themselves. The older woman smiled and her eyes sparkled when she learned that I was the girls' tenth grade English teacher. She said that she was happy that a teacher who had no ties to the LDS Church took time to attend the celebration of former students. The man, also with a sparkle in his bluish-green eyes, shook my hand and held it for almost a full minute. Tabitha's mother interrupted and told the two that Tabitha had been the cake server at my wedding. The sparkle in the man's eyes quickly faded, his cheeks became pink and he quickly loosened his grip on my hand.*

*When the man left, I could clearly see the rest of the church. There were two aisles leading to the pulpit with pews in three distinct sections. There were maybe 15 pews in each section that told me, even if full, there were probably about 450 members in the congregation. I found out later that this building served two wards or congregations of the LDS church. The pews were wooden with no cushions. They seemed to be old and worn, however, because I could make out some faint imprints of people's bottoms. The carpet in the sanctuary was a country blue color and was much more plush than the all-purpose carpet that covered the floor in the other places of the church.*

*Each aisle led to an opening in the "fence" that served as a boundary between the congregation and the bishop and choir. The "fence" was made of the same darkly stained wood as the pews. In the center of the pulpit area was a wooded stationary pulpit equipped with a microphone. Behind this were two sections of padded pews (the padding*

*was covered in the same country blue color as the carpet) that probably held the choir during a normal meeting. The piano set off to my right (facing the pulpit) and the organ, though not seen, could be heard coming from the left. As 7:20 approached, a lady came forward and asked the parents of the five girls who were to be honored to come forward. This woman was dressed as most of the other women in the church were dressed: a long dark skirt and a bland blouse. She seemed not to wear any makeup. Her hair was neatly combed and pulled back away from her face. When she was not talking, her teeth seemed to be clinched and I could see the joints of her jaw pulsate. I later learned that she was in charge of the young women's program here.*

*As the parents found their way to the front, those who were still outside the sanctuary came in and quickly found their seats. A silence fell over the church that seemed to be about three-fourths full. As the parents found their seats behind the minister, the lady in charge returned to the microphone to speak. Her voice wavered a little, and it seemed as if she maintained eye contact with only one person. I never saw her eyes move from the middle section. Her voice, besides wavering, seemed fairly low for a woman. As she explained the reason for this celebration, I could see the parents of the girls move closer to their daughters. One father placed his arm around his daughter and leaned down to kiss the top of her head. The girls had a hard time sitting still. Tabitha made eye contact with me and waved at me. Her smile was warm, and I could see the reflection of tears pooling in her eyes. Of all the girls, she was the only one dressed in bright colors. She wore a bright yellow skirt that had small, multi-colored flowers on it. Tabitha's blouse was a paler yellow. The other girls were dressed in the same darker colors worn by most of the adult women.*

*After the speech by the woman in charge, Rene's mother played a tune on the organ. It reminded me of church music before contemporary services became popular. When the song was finished, everyone clapped. The woman in charge then returned to the microphone and introduced the bishop. His voice was very low and calm. He didn't smile while speaking. He made eye contact with what seemed like a variety of people. When he spoke, he used his arms to convey the meaning of this subdued celebration. His arms were outstretched, not unlike many pictures depicting Jesus inviting his disciples to eat. He talked about this moment and that it meant that these young women had reached adulthood in the eyes of the church. He talked about how, in the past, he had made the presentations but he felt that the parents, especially the fathers, should be the ones to bestow this honor on the girls. When he said this, Rene's father patted Rene on the shoulder and she scooted closer to him in the pew. At this point, the bishop turned the microphone back to the woman in charge. In order to get up, she leaned over, rested her hands on her knees, and pushed herself up with her arms.*

*She introduced the first father/mother/daughter. All of the introductions were the same with the exception of the names. She would introduce the parents and the daughter; they would rise, come to the front left side of the pulpit area where another lady handed the father a necklace to place around the daughter's neck. It was not clear what the charm was on the necklace. The lady would hand the mother a document to sign and the father would approach the microphone. Most of the fathers spoke of the same thing: raising these girls was a pleasure and they were saddened that the girls were all grown up. The fathers, all solidly built and of about the same age (early to mid-40s), were dressed in dark pants, white button-down shirts and ties of varying colors. The fathers*

*had tears streaming down their faces as they spoke. Looking at the mothers and daughters, it was clear that they were crying as well. Several members of the congregation seated in front of me were also dabbing their eyes. After each father spoke, he approached the daughter and hugged her. The mothers then presented the daughters with roses of five different colors. The mother and father then returned to the congregational pews while the daughters remained seated behind the pulpit.*

*When all the necklaces had been placed, several former seminary teachers of the girls spoke on the elements of the young women's program that the girls had completed. Most of the teachers had tears in their eyes and their voices wavered. After this, each girl "witnessed" to the congregation. This was the most interesting part of the program as I knew little about Mormon beliefs and traditions. Most of the girls spoke in a quick, monotone voice and focused their eyes on the ceiling while they spoke. Tabitha was the exception. Her words came slowly, in comparison, and the tone of her voice was varied. While speaking, she cried. Her talk contained more than just the "I believe in Jesus Christ and his prophet..." that the other girls presented.*

*After this was done, a little after 8:00 p.m., the congregation was invited into the room with the displays. There we were invited to view the girls' accomplishments (projects they completed in order to be recognized) and a slide show featuring the girls' maturation. Because I was in the front of the sanctuary, I was one of the last to make it to the other room. The narrow hallway was crowded with people talking to each other, hugging the girls, and talking with the girls' mothers. People were laughing and snapping pictures. Two cakes were cut and served to the guests, along with punch. everyone else was talking to other people or groups of people. The girls and I hugged,*

*snapped pictures, and said our goodbyes. My first glimpse into the Mormon Church ended, but left me curious.*

### Background and Purpose of the Study

Student success is an oft-studied phenomenon. The literature on academic success details the positive effects parental involvement, creative teachers, association with a stable and positive peer base, and participation in school activities have on students. As a high school English teacher, and with No Child Left Behind dictating that all students should achieve at similar levels, academic success is important to understand. I have noticed that students who are actively involved in church excel more consistently than those who are not. Because there is not much literature on church involvement and school success among non-minority students, I began to wonder whether church activity was a factor in student success. Because the community I studied is home to a Mormon Church, and because Mormon students seemed to be successful, I began to look for attributes of the Mormon Church that contributed to student success. The purpose of this study, then, is to study the relationship between church involvement of Mormon students and their academic success.

Over the course of several years, I have taught many Mormon students. Most were successful in all their advanced classes, but there were three who were not. I found that, compared to the other, more successful Mormon students, these three were not as active in their church. In fact, one young woman was contemplating a conversion to the Catholic Church, while the other young woman's family had become inactive. The other student, a young man, said he was too involved in other things, such as band, to participate in church as actively as some of the other students. To me, this indicated a

relationship. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine if there is a relationship between church participation of Mormon students and success in a public high school located in a bedroom community.

### *Description of the Community*

The community, Rothrock, where my research is centered is approximately eight miles north of a metropolitan area in the northeastern part of a mid-western state. The community is one of the top three fastest growing communities in the state. Home to 26,000 residents, the community is served by three major highways, which makes it a convenient place to shop for people living in the several small outlying communities. With the construction of several strip malls and two hospitals complete, this community has seen its share of visitors. This has also contributed to one of the best housing markets in the state, and is one of the many reasons that major industries have chosen this community as their headquarters.

Rothrock is considered a bedroom community since many of its residents travel to a nearby metropolitan area to work. With eight elementary schools, a sixth grade center, a seventh grade center, an eighth grade center, a middle high school (serving grades 9 and 10), a high school and an alternative school, the school district is the sixth largest in the state, covering 75 square miles, and is classified as 6A for sports participation purposes. Over 8500 students attend. In addition, most residents attend one of the more than 40 churches located there. Of the 40, 12 are Baptist, eight are non-denominational or other, three are Assembly of God, two are Christian and two are Pentecostal. There is also a Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints Church (LDS) and a Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (RLDS) Church, a Catholic church, a Russian Orthodox



Church, a Seventh Day Adventist, A Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witness, and a Hmong Alliance Fellowship.

Dubbed a "City of Character, the community is home to five active civic clubs. A character council made up of representatives from the schools, churches, businesses, media, and youth social agencies runs this "City of Character" program, launched in 2002. Each month, the character council features a new trait in the community. The council places banners with the trait in visible places around town. In addition, bank signs and schools often advertise the trait of the month. The local newspaper reports "Businesses have reduced worker compensation claims and costs, reduced absence rates and raised morale and profits by instituting character programs" (Rothrock [Owasso] Hometown Guide, 2006, 7).

#### *History of the Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS) Church in the Community*

The Mormon faith is one of the world's fastest growing religions with about 12 million members worldwide. Salt Lake City houses Temple Square, the faith's headquarters, which draws between three and five million visitors a year, a number similar to what Utah's five national parks draw combined (Graham, 2006). According to an article written for the local LDS church by one of its former bishops, Nathan Sams (2002), the LDS church has a history in the state that pre-dates statehood. The first Mormon missionaries sent to the state were Oliver Cowdery and Parley Pratt (an ancestor of Mitt Romney). Sent by Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon faith, Cowdery and Pratt arrived in 1830. Other missionaries followed, but none was successful due to missionary illness, hostilities with the Five Civilized Tribes, migration of members and the Civil War. However, that did not stop the Mormons from coming. In 1883, President

John Taylor again sent missionaries, and the Indian Territory Mission slowly began to grow. The Mormons built the first meetinghouse in the state in Manard, seven miles east of Ft. Gibson, in Cherokee County, in 1892. Because there were not enough priesthood members for a branch, members organized a Sunday school instead. From this small start, other meetinghouses grew and branches were established.

In 1933, the first official branch in Greenwood was established. By 1960, membership at this branch became so large that the branch divided into two: the Greenwood Branch and the North Greenwood Branch. Later that same year, the North Greenwood Branch reorganized itself as the Greenwood Third Ward; there were officially 1850 members in the stake, and it continued to grow exponentially.

By the early 1980s, the Greenwood Third Ward began experiencing difficulties. Because the meetinghouse was located in an area that was deteriorating, members' cars were often broken into and vandalism of the building was a frequent occurrence. Soon, members had enough, and in November of 1982, the Rothrock Branch, in a division of the Greenwood Third Ward, Greenwood Stake, was organized. A year later, members began meeting in the Rothrock Community Center. Within a year, however, there were so many members that the branch became a ward. Because the members were outgrowing the community center, they began construction on a new building in July 1985, and completed construction in April 1986. Ten years later, due to growth, the ward divided into the Elm Creek Ward and the Ranch Creek Ward. By December, 2000, membership in the Elm Creek Ward had reached 522, and Ranch Creek Ward membership had reached 484.

Recently, the building underwent additional construction that made room for a third bishop and a third ward. Some members estimate that current total church membership is over 1200 (Sams, 2002). While this number pales in comparison to the membership numbers of other local churches, the LDS Church does have an impact in the community, especially on school curriculum.

*A Review of Youth Literature Published by the Mormon Church*

Because of my initial interest in the relationship between Mormon student success and church involvement, and because I knew relatively nothing of the Mormon Church, one of the first things I did was review the literature published and distributed by the Mormon Church directed toward its youth. Thus, this became a study within a study. This review of youth literature published by the Mormon Church is important to the overall study because it illuminates the roles males and females are to play in their church and in their lives. Often, pre-established roles dictate the level of success one might achieve; therefore, it is important to understand the expectations placed upon Mormon students.

Founded in the late 1820's, most people consider the Mormon Church to be relatively new. Since its beginning, however, there has been a place for young men within the church. "In December 1832 and January 1833, the Prophet Joseph received the revelation that became section 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Among other things, this revelation directed that a 'school of prophets' (D&C 88:127) be formed to instruct *brethren* [my emphasis] in gospel doctrine and principles, the affairs of the Church, and other matters" (*Our Heritage*, 1996, p. 25). The term "brethren" indicated that women were not included. Twenty years later, Joseph Smith, prophet and founder of

the Mormon Church, organized the Relief Society that allowed women to assess the needs of the poor and minister to those needs. While the constitution and by-laws for this society were written by Eliza Snow, and while Joseph Smith “declared it was the best constitution he had seen,” he “felt impressed to enlarge the vision of the women concerning what they could accomplish. He asked the women to attend another meeting where he organized them into the Nauvoo Female Relief Society. Emma Smith, the Prophet’s wife, became the society’s first president” (*Our Heritage*, 1996, p. 61). In recent years, however, women’s contributions to the Relief Society have diminished as the church hierarchy has, to an extent, taken over so that women would have more family time (Beaman, 2001, p.11). As a result, Bushman and Bushman argue that women have lost leadership positions, power and visibility within the church (Beaman, 2001, p.11).

In 1869, Brigham Young, the second president of the Mormon Church, began teaching his daughters the way of moral living. The following year, he included other young women in the community, and shortly thereafter, the Young Women organization was formed (*Our Heritage*, 1996, p.90). Almost one hundred years later, most Mormon churches established early morning seminary classes for all students before school. “Every school day of every year in high school, in virtually every city that is home to a Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, church volunteers lead something called Seminary. It’s plain and simple Bible study with the LDS approach woven into stories that can be easily adapted into everyday life” (Patterson, 2004). While the classes are made up of both boys and girls, each gender has its own program, complete with recognition ceremony upon completion. The young men are recommended to complete the priesthood program, a program which, when completed, gives worthy males the

authority to act in God's name. For young men, the Aaronic priesthood is available. This consists of three steps: deacon, teacher, and priest. Men strive for the Melchizedek priesthood that allows them to preside over their families and provides them with power and authority to lead the church (Riess & Bigelow, 2005, p. 69). The young women complete the personal progress program that is meant to

[H]elp you understand more fully who you are, why you are here on Earth, and what you should be doing as a daughter of God to prepare for the day you go to the temple to make sacred covenants. It will help you prepare for your future roles as a faithful woman, wife, mother, and leader in God's kingdom. (*Young Women Personal Progress*, 2001, p. 7)

Both the priesthood program and young women's program are formal programs. Examination of the language in the literature from these programs provides an interesting study on gender roles within the culture of the Mormon Church.

Upon first looking at the pamphlets published for the two programs, one can clearly see which pamphlet is meant for young women. Adorned with a pink rose—the same rose that appears atop every page of the pamphlet—at the top center and bordered in periwinkle, the *Young Women Personal Progress: Standing as a Witness of God* (2001) pamphlet is clearly designed for women. Placed in the center of the cream-colored background is a gold medallion. A swag consisting of a flower and leaves and colored in varying degrees of gold borders the bottom of the medallion. Within the center of the medallion is a drawing of a church's three steeples. Because it is a drawing, details are very unclear; however, on the tallest steeple, a statue of the Angel Moroni, a prophet in the Book of Mormon who buried golden tablets that became the Book of

Mormon, is blowing some sort of horn. Moroni is facing the reader's right. In all, the medallion is only two and one-half inches tall and two inches wide. The font used in the title of the pamphlet looks to be italicized Palatino linotype in all capitals. "Young Women" and "Standing as a Witness of God" are half the size of "Personal Progress" which looks to be in boldface. This pamphlet contains 68 pages.

In contrast, the *Aaronic Priesthood Priest: Fulfilling Our Duty to God* (2001) pamphlet, which is the last in a series of three, is clearly masculine. The brown border on the cover frames the title of the pamphlet and a true picture of the church steeples featured in the drawing on the young women's pamphlet. The picture, however, is a reversal of the drawing mentioned before. The picture, complete with color, shadowing and details, covers five and one-half inches by three and one-half inches of the space within the border. Behind the church steeples, one can clearly see a blue sky and white, puffy clouds. Clearly seen in the picture is the Angel Moroni standing atop the highest steeple. He is facing the left. The font used in the title of the pamphlet is Times New Roman in all capitals. There is no softening of the font with italics; instead, the title is boldfaced. "Aaronic" is centered at the top of the cover while "Priesthood" is centered beneath "Aaronic." Both of these words are double the size of the other words in the title. This pamphlet contains only 33 pages. The two pamphlets young men must work through before this one each contain 33 pages also and are set up in the exact same way as this one, the only difference being the color of the border. The first one is maroon while the second is green.

The inside covers of the two pamphlets provide another interesting contrast. In the young women's pamphlet, a copy of "The Living Christ: The Testimony of the

Apostles” appears and is signed by the First Presidency and The Quorum of the Twelve. This document is a summary of Jesus’ life, a description of His appearance to Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormon Church, the testimony of Joseph Smith and a declaration and testament that Jesus is the Living Christ. One of the value projects that young women may choose to do under the value of faith is to “memorize ‘The Living Christ.’ As you do, consider the Savior’s influence in your life” (*Young Women Personal Progress*, 2001, p. 16). This document does not appear in any of the young men’s literature.

A translucent page with a full view of the church from the front cover sketched onto it softens the first real page in the young women’s pamphlet. The first page contains a painting of Jesus standing in his brown sandals and clothed in a white robe with a light blue belt around his waist. Jesus looks to be summoning someone to him based on how his right index finger is placed. The background of this painting contains hues of yellow and orange with the area around Jesus’ head brighter than the rest of the space. The painting is five inches tall by three inches wide on the seven by five sized page. The quote, “Come unto Christ and be perfected in Him (Moroni 10:32),” appears at the bottom of the painting.

The young men’s pamphlets contain no translucent page softening the first page. Instead, the first page contains a four inch tall by two and one-half inch wide painting of Jesus, again clothed in his white robe and light blue belt, baptizing a man in a river. Trees and the sky appear in the background. A quote from the *Book of Mormon* appears in the upper right hand corner of the page and is separated from the painting by the same thin-lined border one and one-half inches from the outside edge of the page that appears

on every page. The quote reads, “Behold, I am a disciple of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (3 Nephi 5:13).”

Each page in the young men’s pamphlet contains a real, albeit sometimes small, picture of a young man engaged in some activity applicable to the topic being covered at that point. In addition, a quote from one of the three main books of knowledge in the Mormon Church: *The Book of Mormon*, *The Bible*, and *Doctrines and Covenants*, appears within the margin. Quotes and/or pictures appear on all 33 pages in the pamphlet. In contrast, the young women’s pamphlet contains only six paintings of Jesus and one picture of the program’s logo. In addition, the young women’s pamphlet is single spaced with type running from margin to margin, top to bottom. The young men’s pamphlets are more than single-spaced, although not quite double-spaced, with type beginning or ending (depending on whether it is the right or left page) with the thin-lined border mentioned previously. The young women appear to have more to learn than the young men.

The last page before the table of contents in the young women’s pamphlet contains a document entitled “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.” This document speaks to the belief that God ordains marriage between a man and woman. The document also reiterates the Biblical command to “Go forth and multiply” but only within wedlock. The second to last paragraph of this proclamation is especially interesting. It reads:

We warn that individuals who violate covenants of chastity, who abuse spouse or offspring, or who fail to fulfill family responsibilities will one day stand accountable before God. Further, we warn that the disintegration of the family



will bring upon individuals, communities, and nations the calamities foretold by ancient and modern people. (*Young Women Personal Progress*, 2001, p. ii )

At the bottom of the page, in very small, italicized letters, the reader is told, “This proclamation was read by President Gordon B. Hinckley as part of his message at the General Relief Society Meeting held September 23, 1995, in Salt Lake City, Utah” (*Young Women Personal Progress*, 2001, p. ii). Because the Relief Society is primarily intended for women, it would be interesting to know how many men heard this decree and warning. Again, this proclamation is absent from the young men’s pamphlet.

After the table of contents, both pamphlets contain a “Message From the Presidency.” Because both messages are geared toward youth, I did not expect to find the differences I found. In the four paragraphs to the young men, there are four adjectives: great, wonderful, important and exciting, used to describe challenges, force, mission, and challenges (again), respectively. The young women’s message contains 15 adjectives in three paragraphs; three of those adjectives describe Heavenly Father. “Young” is used three times to describe the women and men; “divine” is used twice to describe a young woman’s mission and potential. “Faithful” is used twice, both in reference to motherhood. “Sacred” is also used twice, once to describe the Heavenly Father’s purpose and once to describe the ordinances of the temple.

Besides the differences in adjectives, there is a difference in commands. The young men are told, “You have been called to make a difference in the world” (*Aaronic Priesthood Priest*, 2001, p. 4) while young women are told, “You have the noble calling to use your strength and influence for good” (*Young Women Personal Progress*, 2001, p. 1). Men seem, even at this stage, to have more power than women.

Further, young men are told:

You can provide service, giving of your time, talents, and energies without thought of reward. You can fulfill priesthood duties, such as blessing the sacrament and serving as home teacher. You can lift others by your example.

You can strengthen yourself, building faith and testimony, living the gospel while you learn it and share it. (*Aaronic Priesthood Priest*, 2001, p. 4)

Clearly, even though the young men are still learning their roles within the church and community, their roles are defined. They are to give of themselves without expecting anything in return. They are to fulfill certain roles in church and family while being a role model to others. Young women, however, are told, “Your loving Heavenly Father has blessed you with talents and abilities that will help you fulfill your divine mission. Through personal prayer, scripture study, obedience to the commandments, and service to others, you can develop these gifts” (*Young Women Personal Progress*, 2001, p. 1). In the next paragraph, young women are told to “Use your influence to lift and bless your family, other young women, and the young men with whom you associate. Honor womanhood, support the priesthood, and treasure faithful motherhood and fatherhood” (*Young Women Personal Progress*, 2001, p.1). While young women are told of their role, that role seems to be secondary to that of the young men. The talents the young women possess are to be developed in order to fulfill their “divine mission.” Service to others seems to be only important if it helps develop the young woman’s gifts. There seems to be a “reward” implied that was negated in the young men’s equivalent statement, as if women need an ulterior motive and are, thus, weaker than men. This idea can be further supported through the differences in fonts, colors, pictures and paintings

used throughout the pamphlets. The last three statements help reinforce the idea that women have a lesser place within the church culture. Foster believes that LDS women are encouraged to be the perfect wives and mothers in “an almost neo-Victorian sense” (as cited in Beaman 2001, p. 4).

In addition, young men are simply told to “provide service” while the young women are told to serve others, which closer mirrors the Bible’s call to all people. These two statements, while seemingly similar, reinforce the idea of women’s roles being subordinate within this church culture.

Moreover, young men are told in the last paragraph, “The Lord believes in you and has an important mission for you to do” (*Aaronic Priesthood Priest*, 2001, p. 6). The young women are told only, “You join with thousands of other young women who are striving to come unto Christ and ‘stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places’ (Mosiah 18:9)” (*Young Women Personal Progress*, 2001, p.1). The church is confident the young men will succeed; the women are aiming for success. One will achieve; the other might.

Finally, the goals from the Presidency’s message to the two genders are quite different. As expected after an initial analysis of the message to young women, the goals set for the young women are “preparing to receive the sacred ordinances of the temple, to be a faithful wife and mother, and to strengthen the home and family” (*Young Women Personal Progress*, 2001, p.1). Young men, on the other hand, are told to

Listen for the promptings of the Spirit. Obey the commandments. Make and keep covenants that will prepare you for the temple. Work with your parents and leaders as you set goals and strive to achieve them. You will feel a great sense of

accomplishment as you fulfill your duty and prepare for the exciting challenges of the future. (*Aaronic Priesthood Priest*, 2001, p.6)

These simple sentences offer only vague hints about goals for the young men possibly implying they are free to set their own. In this particular comparison, there seems to be a contribution. I have noticed that throughout the young men's pamphlets, simple sentences are consistently used while compound and compound-complex sentences are used in the young women's pamphlet. The young women's goals are spelled out for them while the young men's goals are not. This could be because the young woman's role within the church is already defined and the personal progress program merely channels them into that role; the young man's role, on the other hand, is not as narrowly defined. Both genders, however, are encouraged to continue service within the church.

This contradiction continues. The young men are told in the message to consult *For the Strength of Youth*, the overarching handbook of guidelines Mormon youth are expected to live by. The young women, however, actually have the standards listed and defined in their pamphlet (*Young Women Personal Progress*, 2001, p. 2-4).

After reminding the young women of the standards they are to live by, the pamphlet outlines the Young Women theme and describes the Young Woman Motto and Logo (*Young Women Personal Progress*, 2001, p. 5-6). The young men have no theme, nor do they have a motto or logo.

Finally, after all of this, we get to the overviews of both programs. Because of the spacing and margins in the young men's pamphlet, both overviews begin on page seven. The language used in these two different pamphlets further implies that there are definite boundaries between the genders. The young women are told:

The Personal Progress Program uses the seven Young Women values (faith, divine nature, individual worth, knowledge, choice and accountability, good works, integrity) *to help* [my emphasis] you understand more fully who you are, why you are here on Earth, and what you *should be doing* [my emphasis] as a daughter of God *to prepare* [my emphasis] for the day you go to the temple to make sacred covenants. (*Young Women Personal Progress*, 2001, p. 7)

The use of the italicized verbs indicates several things. First, young women need help and guidance in order to understand their purpose in life. Second, one cannot assume that young women will do what they should be doing. Finally, young women are not able to go to the temple and cannot make sacred covenants without prior preparations. The young men, on the other hand, are told what they will do, as if it is a safe assumption that young men will lead moral lives. “You will receive the Melchizedek Priesthood. *You will go to the temple and make sacred covenants* [my emphasis]. You will serve as a missionary, teaching the gospel and blessing the lives of others” (*Aaronic Priesthood Priest*, 2001, p.7).

In this overview, also, young men are told to “obtain as much education as possible (*Aaronic Priesthood Priest*, 2001, p. 7).” Nowhere is this same statement made to the young women. Instead, young women are told that, in order to complete the Personal Progress program, they will *want* to do the following:

- Live the standards in *For the Strength of Youth*. (This will be verified through an interview conducted by the bishop or branch president of the young woman’s stake.)

- Complete six of the value experiences and one value project for each of the seven values.
- Keep a personal journal.
- Record their testimony of Jesus Christ.

Completion of these requirements, however, does not automatically mean the young woman will receive the Young Womanhood Recognition; it simply means she is eligible. An interesting thing to note is that the young woman must complete an interview with the bishop or branch president; only one is mentioned (*Young Women Personal Progress*, 2001, p.7). In the young men's pamphlet, under the section "Your Duty to God" (*Aaronic Priesthood Priest*, 2001, p. 8-9), young men are told that the "annual interview" with the bishop, which focuses on the young man's goals, how he is progressing towards those goals, and reinforces the role young men fulfill in the church, is a good time to review goals the young man has met. A young man's place within the church is evidenced by this annual interview and the lack of an annual interview with young women.

The young men are told that, in order to receive the Duty to God Award, which seems to be the goal of the young men's program, they must complete certain goals. These are the same goals that appear in the two pamphlets the young men completed prior to this one:

- Priesthood duties and standards
- Family activities
- Quorum activities
- Personal goals in each of four categories:

- Spiritual development
- Physical development
- Education, personal, and career development
- Citizenship and social development
- Duty to God service project
- Personal journal (*Aaronic Priesthood Priest*, 2001, p. 8)

These goals are more concrete than the seven values the young women must complete. In addition to the goal, the pamphlet lists the page number where the goal is discussed. No page numbers are given in the young women's pamphlet. This again illustrates the contradiction between the power of the sexes. Young women are given more vague goals and are left to find out on their own where in the pamphlet the information is located, while the young men's goals are concrete and a map is given to help them find information. While some of this contradiction could be due to the difference in authors, both pamphlets are edited and published by the same people.

In addition to these goals, young men are also told to complete their Eagle Scout Award in Boy Scouts (*Aaronic Priesthood Priest*, 2001, p. 10). According to the BSA website, the purpose of the Boy Scouts is to “provide an educational program for boys and young adults to build character, to train in the responsibilities of participating citizenship, and to develop personal fitness” (<http://www.scouting.org/factsheets/02-501.html>). Mormon young men account for 12% of total Boy Scout memberships, second only to Methodist young men (Nielsen, 2000). In fact, the LDS church adopted the BSA program as its “official ministry program for LDS boys” (Nielsen, 2000). According to the BSA “Fact Sheet: Eagle Scouts” article found on the website

referenced above, the Eagle Scout Award is “a performance-based achievement whose standards have been well-maintained over the years. Not every boy who joins a Boy Scout troop earns the Eagle Scout rank; only about 4% of all Boy Scouts do so. This represents more than one million Boy Scouts who have earned the rank since 1911.” Earning an Eagle Scout award, then, is a major accomplishment. Even more amazing is the estimate that, of the 4% of all Boy Scouts who achieve the Eagle Scout rank, about half are Mormons (B.R. Jensen, personal communication, August 24, 2006). Because the goals of the Boy Scouts closely mirror those of the Aaronic Priesthood, young men are able to accomplish two goals with the effort of only one, even though that one required hard work.

Young women are not afforded similar opportunities. While it is not stated in the literature, two of the young women I interviewed indicated that young women are encouraged to avoid scouting. Girl Scouts could be counter to the pre-destined role that women are supposed to fulfill in their lives, and the activities scouting encourages are not closely aligned with the personal progress program.

After a “how to begin” section in each book (*Young Women Personal Progress*, 2001, p. 9-10; *Aaronic Priesthood Priest*, 2001, p.11), “experiences and projects” for the young women and “activities” for young men are detailed. Again, the sentence structures used in describing the young men’s activities are simple and the sentences describing the young women’s experiences and projects are more complex. Indeed, the simplicity and complexity also describe the activities and experiences, respectively. Young women are asked to do things like:



Increase your understanding of and appreciation for womanhood. Read Proverbs 31:10-31 and two talks on womanhood from a conference issue of the Church magazines. Review what ‘The Family: A Proclamation to the World’ (see page ii) says about being wife and mother. Then ask your mother or another mother you admire what she thinks are important attributes for being a mother. List the attributes in your journal. Then choose one of those attributes and strive to develop it. After two weeks, report your success to a parent or Young Women leader. (*Young Women Personal Progress*, 2001, p.20).

The experiences and projects are time-consuming and centered on the role of the woman within the Mormon Church. In contrast, examples of the activities young men complete include “Obtain a driver’s license with your parents’ approval” (*Aaronic Priesthood Priest*, 2001, p. 21); “Learn good personal hygiene and grooming habits. Discuss why these skills are important to your success now and as a potential full-time missionary” (*Aaronic Priesthood Priest*, 2001, p. 23). Their project description is to:

Choose a project that gives significant service to your family, ward, stake or community. The project should be at least 30 hours, and it needs to be approved by your parents and quorum adviser. If you earn the Eagle Scout Award while you are a priest, the Eagle service project may count for both the Eagle Scout Award and the priest service project. You are encouraged to involve other members of your quorum in completing the project. (*Aaronic Priesthood Priest* 2001, p. 26).

Young women are told, “You may include others in your Value Projects, but each project must take a minimum of ten hours of your own time” (*Young Women Personal*

*Progress*, 2001, p. 9). The young women have seven projects to complete, and six experiences per value. The time for young women to complete their projects is significantly longer than the time allotted to young men.

Who wrote these pamphlets is not clear, and, while this initial analysis of the language included in the literature the Mormon Church recommends its youth read is in no way meant to be a thorough analysis, it is a fairly accurate account of the boundaries that exist between men and women in the Mormon culture. Like other religious groups, to Mormons, gender's importance is based in theology. Gender defines roles and responsibilities within the church and its hierarchy (Beaman, 2001, p. 3); however, the messages sent by the church are often contradictory as indicated by the fact that young women are encouraged to receive as much formal education as possible and yet, when married, to stay home and be a good wife and mother. (Beaman, 2001, p. 4). There seems to be a disconnect; young women are channeled into domestic roles while in actuality, many enroll in honors classes in high school and college and set high goals for their careers that may not be realized.

All of this raises the question: If young women are simply meant to stay home, why do they excel in advanced classes? An understanding of this concept might have educational implications for young women in general.

#### Focus of Inquiry and Research Questions

The main focus of this study then becomes to study the relationship between church involvement of Mormon students and their core-course success among public high school students in schools located in one 'bedroom' community. As an educator, this question is important. All teachers should encourage their students to be successful;

to do that, teachers should understand all factors contributing to success. Church involvement is one of those factors that has not been explored as widely as others like parent involvement, peer groups, and school related activities.

Before conducting this study, I had several questions. Knowing little about Mormons, I was curious about their beliefs. In addition, because of the three Mormon students who were not as successful as the others, I wondered if the amount of participation mattered. I had overheard many students, Mormons and non-Mormons, talk about their youth leaders; I wondered if contact with those youth leaders encouraged success. Based on the review of Mormon youth literature, I was curious whether there would be a difference in academic achievement between males and females.

Finally, an important focus of this study is to identify gaps in the literature. Filling this gap has aided the focus of this study and potentially can identify the need for further research; therefore, there would be a significance for theory. Many studies cite the advantages of parental support and modeling (i.e. Catsambis, 1998; Field et al., 2002; Sanders, 1998; Zimiles & Lee, 1991) and how those variables affect students' success, but few discuss church involvement. Those that do (i.e. Sanders, 1998; Steward & Jo, 1998) only discuss the role church involvement plays in the academic lives of African American children. While these insights are important to note, these studies do not address the role of church involvement in academic success of other populations. None of the studies cited in this study discussed specific denominations. Of the studies that used non-minority student populations, only one (Regenerus, 2003) discussed students who attended public schools in a metropolitan area. None of these studies detailed the significance of their findings for teachers, and no studies were done in bedroom

communities. One of the aims of this study is to give teachers practical insight to help their students be more successful.

### Definition of Terms

Many of the terms used in this study are exclusive of the Mormon Church and require definitions. Others, such as academic success and bedroom communities, are non-exclusive and discussed first.

#### *Academic Success*

By nature, the term “academic success” is subjective. Because of the differences in teachers, grades are not a good indicator of success. An “A” in Mrs. Smith’s Advanced Placement (AP) American History class may not be as difficult to earn as an “A” in Mrs. Huggins’ careers class. If grades are not a good indicator, then neither is grade point average (GPA). Therefore, when defining academic success for this study, several characteristics were compiled and included: enrollment in AP classes, student perception of success in those classes, and participation in extra-curricular activities. Because student perception was key, a section in Chapter 4 of this study focuses on student definition of success which is different from this one. To Mormon students, academic success is learning material rather than earning a grade.

#### *Bedroom Community*

For this study, a bedroom community is a small community located close to a large, suburban area. The majority of residents in a bedroom community works outside the community, and often choose to live there to escape the crowding of the larger city. Often, people who live in bedroom communities are middle to upper class.

### *Mormon*

“Mormon” is a nickname for a member of the Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) Church. Church officials, and some church members, prefer to be called “Latter-Day Saints” or “LDS” as the term “Mormon” was originally used as a derogatory name by church detractors. However, most of the students interviewed for this study used the terms interchangeably, as does this study.

### *Ward, Branch and Stake*

A ward is one LDS congregation that usually consists of 300 to 350 members. They meet each Sunday for three hours. These hours are broken up into a sacrament meeting, Sunday school classes, and gender and age segregated classes (Riess and Bigelow, 2005, p. 92). There can be multiple branches, smaller congregations, in a ward, and many wards within a stake.

### *Seminary*

Each weekday morning during the school year, Mormon high school students are encouraged to attend seminary before (or during if they live in a heavily populated Mormon area) school. Seminary is a four-year program which teaches students about the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants, “a spiritual history of Mormons living in modern times from about 1830 onward” (Riess and Bigelow, 2005, p. 171). Each of these works is covered in a year, so when a student graduates high school, he or she will have studied all four works. Many students believe seminary is a great way to start the morning.

## *Prophet*

Currently, the prophet for the LDS Church is Gordon B. Hinckley. The prophet's job is to lead the church, increase membership, and prepare members for heaven.

According to Mormons, today's prophet received his prophetic authority through a chain of prophets leading back to founding prophet Joseph Smith, who received it at the hands of resurrected prophets from biblical times. The person chosen to receive this ultimate authority is the apostle with the most seniority in the quorum. The last man that Mormons believe carried the prophetic mantle before Joseph Smith was the New Testament apostle Peter, who led the early Christian church after Christ's resurrection, with James and John as his counselors (Riess and Bigelow, 2005, p. 135).

## Delimitations of the Study

This study was conducted in one bedroom community and deals with a relatively small sample of Mormon students, many of whom are related to other participants. While all participants were not from Rothrock originally, all but one participant graduated from, or was attending, Rothrock Mid-High and High Schools. No other denominations were included. Because of the small convenience sample, the findings may not be credible in or transferable to other populations. The research design, built upon a constructionist framework, is strictly qualitative in nature; the findings cannot be generalized. However, as Erickson (1986) notes, this type of qualitative research has been an accepted standard in the social sciences for over seventy years. This type of research "involves being unusually thorough and reflective in noticing and describing everyday events" and "in attempting to identify the significance of actions in the events

from the various points of view of the actors themselves” (Erickson, 1986, p. 121).

Because I am strictly interested in this specific population, the points of view of these specific students (actors) are important.

### Summary

The initial snapshot illustrates my first entrance into the world of Mormonism. This experience sparked curiosity and led to this study. The curiosity led me to read the Mormon youth literature published by the church which indicated that the church expects males and females to act in traditional roles. I wondered if these expectations would influence academic success.

Chapter II reviews pertinent literature relating to academic success, and important themes will be carried throughout the rest of the study.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

#### Background

Academic achievement, measured by the grades students receive from teachers, is an often-studied phenomenon. A number of studies that look at the various factors contributing to academic success. These include, but are not limited to teacher quality, family involvement, participation in school activities and part-time jobs, and community support.

#### Quality of Teachers Is Important For Student Success

Newmann (1998) believes that one of the most powerful influences on student achievement is the quality of a teacher. In a study conducted by Lightbody and Siann (1996), the 1068 secondary students who participated said that academic success resulted from hard work, good teaching, family influence and a liking for the subject. These students reported that liking a teacher directly motivated them in that subject, and the quality of teaching is what caused them to like a teacher. In fact, Sanders (1998) found that teacher support is a positive and significant predictor of school behavior and achievement ideology.



## Collective Responsibility and Organizational Citizenship As Factors For Success

Lee and Smith (1996) agree that teachers play a major role in academic success of students. They researched collective responsibility that is characterized by the faculty, staff and administration of a school maintaining consistent positive attitudes about their students, their jobs, and their goals. Lee and Smith found that, in environments where most teachers take responsibility for student learning and cooperate with each other, students learned more in all subjects, and the environment was more effective and equitable. Their research is supported by Bryand Driscoll (1988) and Bryk et al. (1993). DiPaola (2005) called this collective responsibility “organizational citizenship.” DiPaola uses Bateman and Organ’s (1983) definition that describes organizational citizenship as behavior that was not mandated, but that occurred in order to help others achieve beneficial goals. DiPaola further cites Smith, Organ and Near (1983) when he says that organizational citizenship is both altruistic and compliance is generalized. DiPaola’s own study found that there was a significant positive correlation between schools where organizational citizenship is present and student achievement in reading and math. Further, he found that the the greater the organizational citizenship behavior of the faculty, the greater the gains in student achievement even when controlled for socioeconomic status. Newmann (1988) agrees and cites a further body of research that has identified school instructional quality, the quality of school leadership and support from peers and parents as contributing to a student’s success.

## The 4 C’s of Success and the Virtuous Circle Add to Success

Burke (2004) believes in the 4 C’s of success: commitment, content (knowing the material), competencies (which are improved through daily and focused practice), and

capacity. Commitment is what allows people to receive immediate satisfaction and the rewards that are achieved subsequently. Burke says that economists call this economic behaviorism: “We make decisions based on what rewards us, what pays off” (37). Burke also cites U.S. Senator Bill Bradley’s definition of the virtuous circle: “The harder you work, the sooner your skills improve. As your skills grow, you get a rush of self-confidence, which spurs you to continue working, and your skills increase faster” (37). Hrabowski, Maton and Grief (1998) apply this idea of the virtuous circle to parenting African American young men. They say that the more attention parents give their kids, the higher parental expectations become, the more consistent parents are in their parenting skills, the more devoted parents become to working with their children resulting in higher academic success rates. Capacity, Burke proposes, is not what most people think it is. He cites University of Pittsburgh researcher Lauren Resnick who believes that capacity is related to the amount of effort one exerts. She does not believe that people are born smart, rather she believes people get smart. Thus, Burke says, students who invest in the 4 C’s are more likely to be academically successful. Perhaps Burke’s 4 C’s can best be illustrated by R. L. Paschal High School, a public high school in Fort Worth’s inner city. Robert Francis (2006) reports that this school has produced 18 National Merit Semifinalists (more than any other school in the state), has Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) averages above the national average, and is named one of the top ten high schools in the nation by *Newsweek*. The school is 52% Hispanic, 32% White, 8% African American and 8% other. Francis reports that the students’ success is directly related to Mr. Hamilton, the academic coordinator. Mr. Hamilton says the students’

success comes from the support of the administration, teachers, who stress content and competencies, parents and students who are committed to and capable of succeeding.

#### After School Employment Can Contribute to Academic Success

Participation in after school employment might provide a glimpse at the 4 C's at work. Lillydahl (1990) cites the National Panel on High School and Adolescent Education (1976) and the National Committee on Youth (1980) studies that hypothesized that early work experience improved post-school transition to employment by preparing youth for work habits and values and by preparing youth to assume greater responsibility, authority and interdependence. Lillydahl tested these hypotheses and found that modest levels of employment (15-20 hours per week) might not compromise academic success, but higher levels of employment did. Hannah and Baum (2001) agreed, and found that students who were working to save money for college maintained their educational focus, while students who worked to have spending money allowed their grades to slip. In addition, Hannah and Baum found that students enrolled in honors classes worked an average of 1.4 hours per week fewer than students who were not enrolled in honors classes. While this may not seem significant, it is when the number of hours students spend studying per week is taken into account. Hannah and Baum found that high school students reported spending less than two hours per week studying, so 1.4 hours could have a significant effect. Mortimer and Johnson (1998) found that working did not affect students' grade point average (GPA) their sophomore or junior year, but it did affect seniors. Those seniors who limited their work hours to less than 20 hours per week maintained higher GPAs than those who worked more than 20 hours per week and those who did not work at all.

## Sports Participation Affects Student Success

Sports participation might affect GPA and academic success, and is another place where Burke's 4 C's can be witnessed. While there is much debate about whether sports participation affects academic success positively, Broh (2002) concludes it does. Broh's 2002 study cites Melnick (1992) and Marsh (1993). They found that participation in sports is generally unrelated to educational achievement. However, more recent studies (Fejgin, 1994; Hanson and Kraus 1998, 1999, as cited in Broh) found that participation in tenth grade sports had a positive effect on students' grades in the same year. Broh says this is true for several reasons. Sports participation socializes adolescents in ways that promote educational success, develops skills consistent with educational values, builds self-confidence and maturity, and connects student athletes to peers and adults. Broh's study supports the findings of Fejin and Hanson and Kraus, but Broh also found that participation in music programs was similar in its impact on student success. Student council, drama and yearbook/journalism had limited effects on student achievement while cheerleading had no effect. Broh does say that participation in these programs showed a boost in grades, not on test scores, and he admits that the boost in grades may not necessarily be due to student effort. He does say, however, that the structure of these programs, the adult supervision and parental involvement are characteristics that promote development. Brown and Theobald (1998) also found that students in sports have higher educational expectations than non-participants, especially among students who were least likely to pursue higher education. They believe the strength of extracurricular activities to be their ability to nurture citizenship, moral character, leadership, initiative and self-discipline. These are all aspects instilled in Mormon youth through its many programs.

Broh also found other extracurricular activities to be related to academic success. He cites Marsh (1992) and McNeil (1995) who studied sports clubs, fine arts, academic clubs and vocational clubs and found them associated with improved grade point average, higher educational aspirations, increased college attendance, reduced absenteeism, and reduced drop out rates.

### Parental Involvement's Role in Academic Success

Perhaps the most often-studied attribute of academic success is parental involvement. Parental involvement is especially relevant to this study as Mormons believe they can only reach the highest level of heaven as a family unit. In addition, Mormons believe they can do nothing greater than “building a strong, successful family that will continue through eternity” (Riess & Bigelow, 2005, p. 73). Catsambis (1998) admits there is a positive relationship between parental involvement and educational success in elementary grades but says there has been little research on parental involvement at the secondary level, which is the level I am studying. Catsambis cites Epstein's six categories of parental development: (a) parents' basic obligations for establishing positive home environment; (b) parent-school communications about school programs and school progress; (c) parent participation and volunteering; (d) parental efforts to enhance learning activities at home; (e) parent involvement in school decision making; and (f) parent community contacts that increase students' learning opportunities. These six categories have three major players: family, school, and community organizations. Academic achievement is of mutual interest to all three. Because the literature often leads to conflicting results, Catsambis investigated whether parental involvement on any of these levels influences students at the twelfth grade level. The

study found that parental practices affect students' behaviors and attitudes more than their achievement test scores and that parental expectations and encouragement were the most important family practices that affect all measures of achievement. Grissmer et al. (1994), however, cautions against the use of achievement tests, such as the SAT, to measure academic success. Such tests exclude non-college bound students and therefore do not provide a valid sample. In addition, Grissmer argues that the SAT was never designed to provide insight into national achievement or quality trends, therefore, it is not a viable predictor of success.

Field et al. (2002) agrees and furthers the parental support argument. Field's study examined the link between parental relationships and peer relationships and their effect on academic achievement. Students who reported a high quality relationship with their parents had better peer relationships and had higher grade point averages and higher academic expectations. In addition, students who had parents who had higher academic expectations of them were more successful than students whose parents showed little or no interest in academic achievement. Sanders (1998) found that, in fact, parental support was a positive and significant predictor of school behavior, academic self-concept, and achievement ideology among African American students. In 2006, the Union Pacific Foundation formed the Principal's Partnership, which offers leadership resources to principals in states that the Union Pacific serves. This partnership polled 350 principals in 21 states on the most important things a family could do to insure success in high school students. Not surprisingly, the partnership found that family communication, both with school faculty and with the high school student, topped the list. Establishing a time and a place for homework, maintaining a positive attitude about education (and having

high expectations for school), assuring attendance at school, and getting involved in students' school activities rounded out the list of suggestions (Principal's Partnership, n.d.). All of these are activities that are encouraged by the Mormon Church.

The Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey of the 2003 National Household Education Surveys Program supports these findings. In a survey completed by parents of over 12, 000 children in grades K-12 enrolled in regular school or home schooled, they found that maintaining communication with the school became more of a parental responsibility as their child progressed through the grades. The survey also found that 95% of children had parents who helped with homework. Of those 95%, 90% had a place and time established for completing homework. The study found that the higher the educational attainment of the parent, the more involvement the parent maintained in their child's school life. A study of African American students by Margaret Beale Spencer, cited in Hrabowski, Maton & Grief (1998), additionally found that the higher levels of education across generations, the higher the current student achievement levels were. Spencer also found a link between high educational levels of parents and fewer behavioral issues in students.

Family life can affect a student's academic achievement. Grissmer's (1994) study found that sustained conflict within a family, a low-quality relationship, can adversely affect a child's development and achievement results; therefore, bad parental relationships could affect academic achievement. In addition, Zimiles' & Lee's (1991) study on adolescent family structure and educational progress found that students from intact families scored highest on achievement tests than students from single or blended families. Their study also found that students from single parent and stepparent homes

are more likely to drop out of high school even when socioeconomic and ability variables have been taken into account. Interestingly, they also found that, if the single parent remarries and a step parent who is of opposite gender of the student comes into the family, chances that the student will drop out of school rise sharply; however, if the remarriage brings in a same gender step parent, students tend to stay in school. This is also stated in a Williams et al. (2002) study. They cited Zimilies' & Lee's study, among others, that found that having the biological father in the house led to greater graduation rates, and homes that had both biological parents had the most positive outcome on student achievement.

Overall, parental involvement is an important part of high school academic achievement. No one argues that. Parental involvement provides students with support, encouragement, and guidance. When navigating the path through high school, this support network is invaluable. If a student does not have this support, one might assume that academic success might be harder to attain; in fact, many studies, mostly focusing on African American youth and youth from poverty, support this notion.

One such study focuses on the Meyerhoff Scholars Program (cited in Hrabowski, Maton, Greif & Greene, 2002). This program was created in 1988 at the University of Maryland Baltimore County for black males interested in science and engineering research careers. The program was expanded to include women in 1990. By the late 1990's, the program had a steady enrollment of about 200 students from across the nation. These students were high achievers. Most also excelled in the arts, athletics and/or academic competitions. Researchers found that the most important and most often cited source of strength for young black youth was their mothers. In the case of the



females studied, it was found that black mothers tend to raise their daughters to be independent, self-confident and capable of handling family responsibility, encouraging a combination of self-sufficiency and traditional nurturing and childcare roles. The researchers cite a Signithia Fordham study that found that parents of high achieving African American girls encourage their daughters' involvement in religion, stress appropriate behavior, and model family values. Likewise, in the case of the males studied, Fordham (cited in Hrabowski, Maton & Grief, 1996; and Hrabowski, Maton, Grief & Greene, 2002) is cited as finding that families of high achieving black male students in urban schools tend to be stable, two parent/guardian homes with an emphasis on behavior and values. In both books, the authors found that if there were two parents at home, both parents played an important role in developing self-esteem and setting expectations. In short, both parents played an equal role in the success of their children, even though the students studied reported their mothers were the source of strength.

Both studies also found that socioeconomic status was linked to grades. The higher the socioeconomic status of the parents, the higher the grades were for the students. This may be because parents were more able to provide educational materials and opportunities for their children. Both groups of students, males and females, pointed to four distinct areas that helped them achieve academically. First was family, then church, then teachers and extra curricular activities, and finally, friends and neighbors. The parents of both genders cited six key parenting aspects for raising a successful student: (a) show love by being involved in student's education, being encouraging and supportive, and cultivating a belief in self; (b) create an environment with clear limits on behavior and discipline when needed; (c) consistently set high expectations for success;

(d) maintain open and strong lines of communication; (e) emphasize positive identification with culture; and, (f) use available community resources. Clearly, many of these recommendations are recommendations of the Principal's Partnership and the Parent and Family Educational survey. These are also recommendations renowned poverty researcher, Ruby Payne, makes in her book.

In her book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (2005), Ruby Payne cites Harold Hodgkinson's 1995 article, "What should we call people? Race, class and the census for 2000" that says, "Low achievement is closely correlated with lack of resources, and numerous studies have documented the correlation between low socioeconomic status and low achievement" (cited in Payne, page 87). In fact, most of Ruby Payne's work with children of poverty emphasizes that fact. Payne cites Einbinder (1993) who says that children who are more prone to poverty are more likely to be from single parent homes. Payne further cites the 2003 Census Bureau when she says that the percentage of children in poverty from most minority groups is larger than the percentage of Caucasian children who are in poverty. Poverty, as Payne defines, is "the extent to which an individual does without resources (7). These resources include financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, support systems (friends and family), relationships/role models, and knowledge of hidden, middle-class rules (7). If a student from poverty possesses access to some of these resources, his/her chances for success rise. They become resilient.

Resilience theory attempts to explain why students from negative environments achieve academic success. Reis, et al (2005) cite previous Reis (1998) and Reis and McCoach (2000) studies that point out four important issues relating to this resiliency

that tie into Ruby Payne's work and that might help inform my study. They found that students from poverty (using Payne's definition) who possess peer groups that support achievement, are involved in extracurricular activities and religious activities, are involved in after school employment and/or budget their study time, and who have a caring adult role model in their lives (all resources documented in Payne's work) tend to be more successful, more resilient, than those students who do not possess these resources. Reis, et al (2005) go on to cite a body of research that links gifted students with students who are resilient. Both groups are intelligent and curious (Neihart, 2001; Anthony & Cohler, 1987); Garmezy & Rutter, 1983; Renzulli, 1986—cited in Reis), possess self-efficacy, a sense of humor, and problem solving skills (Garmezy & Rutter, 1983; Masten & Garmezy, 1990; Hebert & Beardsley, 2001; Rutter, 1987—cited in Reis). In addition, both groups were involved in honors classes (Reis, 2005).

A study on students of migrant farmworkers by McHatton et al. (2006) seems to echo the Reis, Payne and Meyerhoff studies. McHatton et al. found that a strong sense of determination, resilience, self-reliance and the strong role of families led to the success of some migrant students. McHatton's study cites studies by Gibson (2003), Duron (1995), and Reyes and Fletcher (2003) that found that migrant students need many things from the school environment to compensate for resources that might be missing in the home. Some of those things include high quality academic advising to insure students take the needed classes, after school tutoring and summer school to help students catch up academically, ongoing advocacy and mentoring from family, school, and community groups, personal motivation and beliefs about academic capabilities, and an environment that stresses high expectations. For these students, Horn and Chen (1998—cited in

McHatton) found that parental and peer influence is the strongest influence on school success. If parents had high educational goals and discussed these goals and other school matters with their student, and if friends valued studying and getting good grades, the chances for success in migrant students rose sharply.

### Community Support Contributes to Success

Closely related to parental participation is community support. Brown and Theobald (1998) cite the 1992 Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development report that found five outcomes of adolescent participation in community sponsored activities. These included socializing with friends and supportive adults, developing skills that are relevant in the present and applicable to the future, contributing to the community and its betterment, belonging to a group that is valued and feeling competent. However, most of the research done on community support and students' academic success has been done with African American urban youth. While this is a limiting factor, there are important aspects of these studies that can inform this study. Heath and McLaughlin (1994) studied the effectiveness of community based youth organizations and found that their goals are similar to the goals of schools in that learning is emphasized. They found, however, the community based youth organizations seem to be more effective for a number of reasons. The CBOs that Heath and McLaughlin studied respected the youth they served. In addition, participants reported these organizations were authentic and supportive of youth growth and development and cultivation of a positive future. The adults in charge were caring, personal, supportive and set clear rules. The work done at these organizations positively impacted the community in which they were located, thus providing valuable community links. Participants also reported being able to take risks and learn new roles

in a safe environment. Heath and McLaughlin found that participants often felt invisible in their school environment. Students reported not feeling cared for, especially when teachers left after the last bell, covered curriculum that seemed irrelevant, and were ignorant of their needs. Heath and McLaughlin argue that CBOs combat this feeling of invisibility and encourage students to be successful in school. Having a CBO can be one positive, vital resource to students from poverty-stricken neighborhoods. Williams et al. (2002) evaluated an entire ninth grade class from the same high school that lived in the same relative neighborhood. They found that neighborhood negativity can negatively impact academic achievement, thus lending Heath and McLaughlin's study more importance.

Perhaps one of the most important community based organization is the church. In fact, the Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey of the 2003 National Household Education Surveys Program (Vaden-Kiernan, et al., 2003) found that, out of all the activities, in school and out, in which students participated, religious groups were most often cited. Donahue and Benson (1995) cite a Gallup and Bezilla (1992) survey that found 76% of 14-17 year olds believe in a personal God. Of those surveyed, 29% believe they have experienced His presence, 74% say that they pray at least occasionally, and 48% reported church attendance in the previous seven days.

Sanders (1998) studied 827 eighth grade African American students and found that church involvement provided students with an opportunity to engage in activities that require school-related skills in a supportive and nurturing environment. Sanders, like Catsambis, cited Epstein's six types of parental involvement and draws comparisons between parental support and involvement to church support and involvement. Sanders

says that certain goals, like academic success, are of mutual concern to parents, schools and churches. His study found that church involvement is a significant and positive predictor of academic self-concept. Steward and Hanik (1998) studied 121 African American ninth graders and found that maintaining religious principles appears to be an effective way of coping. Those who maintained such principles were well adjusted and exhibited high levels of academic performance. Williams et al. (2002) cite Freeman (1986) who found that young black males who simply attended church made better use of their time and kept them from participating in deviant behaviors. They also cite Bahr (1998) who found that students who were religious tended to choose friends with similar morals and values.

Williams et al. (2002) further this research by finding that peer church attendance seems to be related to higher grade point averages, fewer numbers of suspensions, and greater intent to finish school. Interestingly, they found that personal religious commitment was not as significant as the religious commitment of students' friends. Jeynes (1999) studied very religious black and Hispanic students and found that these students outperformed students who were not as religious in academic achievement, even when controlled for gender and public versus religious school. Jeynes cites Koubeck (1984) who found a positive correlation between the degree of religious commitment of a student and academic success. Jeynes says this may be true because religious commitment may lead to other factors that might influence academic success. He cites a body of research that ties religious commitment to physical health, the ability to better handle stress, the ability to develop social competencies, a decrease in drug and alcohol abuse and sexual activity, and greater family stability (McIntosh & Spilka, 1990);

Pargament, 1990; Seligman, 1991; Thomas & Carver, 1990; McIntosh, Fitch, Wilson & Nyburg, 1981; Udry, 1988; Filsinger & Wilson, 1984; Shrum, 1980). However, Jeynes cites Zern's 1987 and 1989 studies that found religious commitment was closely related to college students' chances of living up to their abilities as indicated on the SAT and/or the Graduate Record Exam (GRE); however, Zern found that these students did not receive better grades.

More recently, Regenerus (2003) has found that church involvement has a positive influence on educational expectations and math and reading scores among tenth graders in metropolitan high schools. The more a student is involved, Regenerus finds, the stronger the family and community socialization and the higher level of social control and motivation toward education. Regenerus cites Bankston & Zhou, 1995; Brown & Gary, 1991; Elder & Conger, 2000; and Patillo-MCoy, 1998 who all found that religious institutions reinforce successful habits. Regenerus says that participation matters without respect to income level of the school neighborhood because churches help build relationships and reinforce acceptable means to achieve success. He also cites a 2001 Muller & Ellison study that analyzed the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) data and found that religious involvement often led to higher parental expectations, more open communication with parents about school, advanced math credits, more time spent on homework, successful degree completion and not cutting classes. He further cites Furstenberg (1999) who found that churches provide functional communities and establish social norms. Regenerus concludes that churches reinforce values that are conducive to educational achievement and goal setting. Both church attendance and doing well in school require commitment, diligence and routine, much

like sports participation and part-time employment. One difference, however according to Regenerus is that church attendance functions as a protective shield in high risk communities. This stimulates educational resilience.

### Summary

Because academic success is of mutual concern to parents, school, churches and students, the findings of this study could have major implications, especially when considering that relatively few studies have focused on students who are not minorities and/or are not living in poverty or attending church-sponsored schools. Therefore, this study fills a gap in the literature. This study focuses on high school, non-minority, students who attend public schools and are active in the Mormon Church, a population not covered by the literature. In addition, none of the literature explicitly outlines why or how the factors indicated influence success; that is one of the goals of this study.

When trying to determine what attributes successful students have, the research is clear: stable and supportive families and community groups, participation in activities that develop morals and values, and a good peer group are all important. While several institutions may encourage one or two of these, all of these qualities are reinforced in the Mormon Church.

*It is a cool fall day. The last school bell rang 20 minutes ago, and I am sitting at my desk waiting for my oldest daughter to get to my school so we can pick up my youngest. I am grading the first final draft of student essays. An easy-listening radio station is playing in the background.*

*In the middle of Erin's essay on The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien, one of my Mormon sophomore girls walks in.*



*“Mrs. Thompson? I hate to bother you, but can I ask you a question? It’s about your paper that you have to write to be a doctor...” Her voice is soft, and she does not make eye contact until she is finished speaking.*

*“Sure, sweetie. You can ask me anything.” I had gotten into the habit of calling all of my students sweetie, especially at the beginning of the year, because I am horrible with names. I tell my kids that, while I KNOW their name, often my brain won’t think of it for a while. I tell them not to get offended; eventually, they will all be old, too. They always laugh.*

*“I was wonder—“*

*“Hey, Mrs. Thompson! What IS up?” Two former students loudly enter the room with an air of ownership, as if to tell the student in front of me that this is not her territory yet. “What are you guys talking about?”*

*“Hi girls. Well, we are talking about my dissertation.”*

*“Oh, yeah. I forgot you are going to be a doctor or something. What’s your paper on?” Jasmine is the more forward of the two. Her personality matches her hair: wild. The other young lady with her, Shannon, is more reserved. She almost looks regretful or apologetic.*

*“It’s on church involvement and academic success in Mormon students.”*

*“Oh,” Jasmine says. “I always wanted to meet a Mormon.”*

## CHAPTER III

### RESEARCH DESIGN

#### Theoretical Perspective

Frederick Erickson, in his chapter “Qualitative Methods in Research on Teaching” (1986), states ethnographic, participant observational, case study, qualitative, phenomenological, constructivist, symbolic interactionist and interpretive research, while different, are closely related to each other. This relationship is so close, in fact, that Erickson uses the term “interpretive” to refer to all participant observational research. He does this for several reasons:

- (a) It is more inclusive than many of the others (e.g., ethnography, case study);
- (b) it avoids the connotation of defining these approaches as essentially non-quantitative (a connotation that is carried by the term *qualitative*), since quantification of particular sorts can often be employed in the work; and (c) it points to the key feature family resemblance among the various approaches—central research interest in human meaning in social life and in its elucidation and exposition by the researcher. (p. 119)

Erickson goes on to elaborate on his reasoning for using one term that includes the others, including in his discussion the importance of participant observational fieldwork.

Fieldwork, Erickson says, is best at addressing five key issues. These include the social

action taking place in the setting being studied, what meaning the actors attribute to those actions, how these meanings and happenings coexist with others' meanings and actions, how these actions are related to what is happening outside the setting, and how the organization of this setting compares with other settings (p. 121). These issues inform my study. Because of the topic "academic success and church involvement in Mormon students," it is important to understand what is taught within the church that encourages success. To understand the meaning the student participants place on their religious beliefs and academic success and how those meanings relate to other key players (e.g. parents) in the setting is also important. At the same time, it is important to realize how these meanings are related to the review of literature on academic success. Finally, while this study's scope is not broad enough to allow comparison with other churches, it would be important in future studies to compare what the Mormon Church emphasizes that other churches do not that allow their students to be so successful.

Based on the five key issues and Erickson's beliefs that these families of research perspectives are so closely related, the interpretivist framework was used for this study. This framework uses the constructionist paradigm that has a relativist ontology, meaning there are multiple realities, a subjectivist epistemology, meaning the knower and the respondent co-create understandings, and a naturalistic set of methodological procedures (Denizen & Lincoln, 2003). In a constructionist paradigm, terms such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability replace internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity, respectfully. These will be discussed later in this chapter.

According to Patton (2002), social constructionists and constructivists believe that human perception is not real in any absolute sense; instead, it is shaped by cultural and linguistic constructs. Crotty (1998) agrees, believing that all reality is socially constructed. However, while Patton suggests that constructionism and constructivism can be used interchangeably, Crotty disagrees, saying that constructivism should be reserved for “epistemological considerations focusing exclusively on ‘the meaning-making of the individual mind’ and to use constructionism where the focus includes ‘the collective generation (and transmission) of meaning’” (p. 58, 97). He goes on to delineate the two. Constructivism, Crotty says, points to the individual (unique) experience of each of us. Because we are each able to make sense of the world, then, each of our realities are valid and worthy of respect. Social constructionism on the other hand, emphasizes the teachings of our cultures. Culture shapes the way constructionists see things, and it gives us a definite view of the world. Based upon Crotty’s clarification, the constructionist approach will be utilized as the bulk of this study focuses on youth who have grown up with certain beliefs (realities) taught to them; they as individuals are not creating their own realities.

To gain further insight, however, into this methodology, and because several influential researchers believe constructionist is interchangeable with constructivist, it is important to understand aspects of each. Guba and Lincoln (1989) uses the five primary assumptions of constructivists:

- “Truth” is a matter of consensus.
- “Facts” have no meaning except within some value framework.
- “Causes” and effects do not exist except by imputation.

- Phenomena can only be understood within the context in which they are studied. Findings from one context cannot be generalized to another; neither can problems and solutions.
- Data have neither special status nor legitimation. They are simply another construction to be taken into account in the move toward consensus. (Guba & Lincoln, 1989)

Because of the language Guba and Lincoln use, it seems as though they are talking about constructionists, not constructivists. “Consensus” would mean more than just one individual is involved. This is important since this study deals with the religion and culture of a group of people. Their beliefs as a whole influence the beliefs of the individual.

Besides the five primary assumptions, there are specific criteria for social constructionists. First, researcher subjectivity must be acknowledged, discussed and all biases must be taken into account. Patton (2002) sees subjectivity as a pathway that allows researchers to understand human aspects of the world, as well as the phenomenon they are studying. This process is often referred to as *Verstehen*. Second, the study must be trustworthy, a parallel to rigor. Trustworthiness, in this sense means that measures are taken to ensure credibility and dependability. For this study, triangulation, member checking and acknowledgement of researcher biases all contribute to trustworthiness; these aspects will be discussed later in this chapter. Third, the research must be authentic. There must be a reflexive consciousness about one’s own perspective while depicting others’ perspectives fairly. In fact, researchers using the constructionist approach encourage dialogue among the perspectives. Fourth, multiple perspectives must

be captured and respected, a process known as triangulation. Reflexivity, praxis— understanding how one’s own experiences and backgrounds affect what one understands and how one acts—and particularity—doing justice to the integrity of unique cases— make up the fifth through the seventh criteria (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Central questions asked in this paradigm include: How have the people in this setting constructed reality? What are their reported perceptions, truths, explanations, beliefs, and worldview? What are the consequences of their constructions for their behaviors and for those with whom they interact? These questions, when viewed alongside the research questions detailed earlier and some of which are reiterated below, make this interpretive framework—a constructionist paradigm—appropriate for this study. The “reality” formed by the Mormon Church influences the belief system of the participants in this study. Their perceptions, then, of their own beliefs and truths are the focus of this study since it is their perception of success and how the church aids in achieving this success that are important. The consequences of the findings will help inform teachers so that they can help their students be more successful.

In addition to the constructionist framework, the idea of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) was utilized to help illuminate more clearly important aspects of the research. “Portraitists seek to record and interpret the perspectives and experience of the people they are studying, documenting their voices and their visions—their authority, knowledge, and wisdom” (p. xv). While Lawrence-Lightfoot’s portraits are rich, thick descriptions that give voice to the often un-heard, a different purpose was needed for this study. Vignettes were too research-oriented, and portraits too emancipatory, so a combination of vignette and portrait was created. These snapshots,

illuminated in italics, are not only meant to give insight into an outsider's view of what it means to be Mormon, they are also a representation of the journey upon which the researcher has embarked.

### Restatement of the Purpose

The main purpose, to study the relationship between church involvement of Mormon students and their core-course success among public high school students in schools located in a 'bedroom community,' leads to several relevant supporting questions. In order to understand the big question, one must first understand some of the basic tenets of Mormonism. Other related questions include:

- If a student is active in his or her church, does the amount of church activity have an influence on student success?
- How do the church leaders, specifically the youth leaders, influence students to be more successful in school?
- Does the community contribute to academic success?
- What role does family involvement play in the academic success of Mormon students?
- Finally, because of the different expectations of males and females in the Mormon Church, is there a difference in academic success between boys and girls?

### Sampling and Selection

This study used a convenience, snowball sample. Patton (2002) discusses this type of sampling as one that allows researchers to locate information-rich participants. Because of the study's relatively delicate nature—religion is a subject few people are open to discussing with relative strangers, especially strangers who do not share their

beliefs--a snowball sample was preferred. When potential participants were told that their name was given to me by a friend of theirs, those new contacts did not hesitate to participate. I began by contacting my former students (either by phone or via email) who were and are members of the Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) Church and asked them if they would be interested in participating in an interview. I told participants the nature of the study before I asked them to participate. Often, they would ask if I had talked to other people, thus I compiled a list of possible interview participants. If I added a student to the list of possible interview participants, I automatically added the student's parents to the list of possible survey participants. I contacted possible participants in person or through mail. As a result, 30 students, twelve of whom were my former or current students, nine of whom were friends of former students, and nine of whom are siblings of former or current students were contacted for interviews. Twenty-six students participated. Of those, 12 were female and ranged in age from 14-23 (grades nine through recent college graduate), and 11 were male, ranging in age from 14-24 (grades nine through senior year of college). Interviewees represent eight families; only six interviewees were not related by blood or marriage to any of the other interviewees. Two of the interviewees were married to each other, and one interviewee was married to the brother of another interviewee. Two interview locations were established: Provo, UT and the community in which I teach. I decided to fly to Provo to do interviews since the majority of the initial Mormon students whom I had in class were students at Brigham Young University. Of the four students who did not participate, two could not make it to one of the interview locations (Provo, UT) because of transportation issues (they lived in Rexburg, ID), one could not schedule because she was planning her upcoming wedding,



and one could not make an interview commitment due to the nature of her college course work and band activities. All four of the non-participants, all females, said that if I did not get enough information from the other interviews, they would be willing to conduct phone interviews with me. Five of the interviews conducted were pair interviews, either because of time constraints, which was the case with two interviews (in one case, the interviewees were close friends, and in the other case, they were siblings), or because of comfort level for the interviewees. One interviewee would agree only if I could interview another person, a friend of hers, at the same time. In two of those three cases, one student was a former student and one was relatively unknown to me. In the third case, both students were mine, but one was new to the district; thus, she was not familiar enough with me to be comfortable speaking to me alone about her faith. All of the interviewees were white. A brief profile of each participant appears below.

When I approached the students about the possibility of including them in the interview process, I asked if they thought their parents would be willing to fill out a survey. Because of that, I sent out 16 surveys (see Appendix E) to 16 different families. Two of the surveys were sent to families whose daughters did not end up participating; one survey was sent to a family whose children were not approached for interviews (The mother of the family works in my building. I did not know her daughters, nor did any of my contacts mention them.). Eleven families returned surveys. Four of those non-returned surveys were sent to students who were interviewed and one was sent to a student who was not. Three reminder notices were sent to each family; only one mother called to say that she had started working on it, but that life had gotten too hectic for her to finish.

### *Participants*

Tabitha is a former student of mine. Currently, she is a junior at Brigham Young University in Provo, UT majoring in elementary education. While she was in my sophomore English II pre-Advanced Placement (AP) class, she rarely voiced her opinions in front of others; however, when she came to my classroom for lunch, I found her to be a very congenial young lady. Toward the end of her sophomore year of high school, Tabitha became more outgoing; as a result, during her junior and senior years, she ran for club offices and even played the accordion at her senior talent show. Tabitha has three brothers, two of whom I interviewed for this study, and one older sister. I interviewed Tabitha on the campus of BYU the summer before her sophomore in college.

John is Tabitha's brother and the eldest son of the Jacobs family. Two years younger than Tabitha, John was not one of my students. In high school, most of John's teachers said that he was a shy, well-mannered young man who worked extremely hard. John was the drum major for the Rothrock High School band. I interviewed him in Rothrock a few weeks before his second semester at BYU started. Because he was not one of my former students, he did not feel comfortable doing an interview by himself; therefore, he was interviewed with his friend, Brian whom I did have in class.

Matt is the middle Jacobs son and is two years younger than John. At the time of the interview, he was a freshman at Rothrock Mid-High. Like John, Matt is actively involved in the high school band, and he even tried out for drum major at the end of his freshman year. Because I had previously interviewed Tabitha and John, and because they encouraged Matt to allow me to interview him, Matt was comfortable talking to me one-on-one. Both Matt and John earned their Eagle Scout Awards.

Rene, one of Tabitha's closest friends, is the eldest daughter of the Jenkins family. She has three brothers, two of whom are older than she. Rene is a junior at BYU in Provo and is majoring in broadcasting. Unlike Tabitha, Rene was not afraid in high school to voice her opinions; she was confident, especially during class discussions. As with Tabitha, I interviewed Rene on the campus of BYU the summer before her sophomore year. Rene, Tabitha, Leilani, Sarah and Sheridan (who was not interviewed due to her upcoming marriage; her parents did, however, return a survey) came to my classroom for lunch their sophomore year in high school.

Bobby is the second eldest Jenkins son. I interviewed him on the BYU campus the summer before his junior year. This was the first time I had met Bobby, and I found him to be a reflective young man. In high school, Bobby was active in soccer and band, and was his class's valedictorian. Bobby had recently returned from his mission trip, and had just proposed to his girlfriend.

Brian is the youngest of the Jenkins children, and is a former student of mine. Brian and John are close friends and were co-drum majors together. In fact, Brian received a band scholarship to BYU. In class, Brian reminded me of his sister: confident, intelligent, and friendly. Brian was the young man others turned to for strength and advice. Brian believed strongly in academic integrity.

Jordan is the same age as Tabitha and Rene and was also a student in my pre-AP class. She did not, however, eat in my room like the other girls; instead, she preferred to eat with her cheerleading squad. An outgoing and intelligent young woman, Jordan wanted to be involved in all school clubs and activities. In high school, Jordan wanted to

be a lawyer; currently, her ultimate goal is to be a stay-at-home mother. Jordan was interviewed with her brother, Justin, and his wife, Kallie, on the BYU campus.

Justin is Jordan's eldest brother, and Kallie is Justin's wife. Both were interviewed on the BYU campus the summer before their junior year. Kallie grew up in California and was a member of her school's dance team. During the interview, Kallie sat close to Justin and would place her hand on his shoulder when he discussed his mission. Justin, a soccer and football player in high school, graduated from Rothrock High School. Before he and Kallie married, he served a mission, and when he spoke about it, his voice was passionate.

Emma was interviewed at BYU the summer before her second year teaching middle school math. She is married, and is very soft-spoken. At Rothrock High School, Emma was active in choir and other school-sponsored clubs.

Nikki is Emma's sister and a former student of mine. She was interviewed during her senior year of high school. At the time, she wanted to go to design school in Dallas. Like her sister, Nikki is soft-spoken but very insightful. In high school, she was involved in choir, the school musicals and various school-sponsored clubs. Nikki and Emma's parents serve as youth leaders for their church, and the students interviewed cited them as two of the most influential youth leaders they had.

Dawn is the sister-in-law of Nikki and Emma. She was interviewed her sophomore year in high school, her first year in Rothrock. Her family moved from California because of her father's job, and she felt this move would provide her with a fresh start. She was enrolled in my regular English class, and I found her to be intelligent

and humorous. While she earned high grades at the beginning of the year, over the course of the year, her grades dropped.

Shawn and Billy are brothers. Shawn was interviewed during his senior year of high school. While he was not enrolled in my class, his teachers reported that he was an insightful and funny young man. Billy was interviewed his sophomore year of high school, and he was enrolled in my regular English class. Billy was active in band, and both brothers were active in choir and the school musicals. Neither brother earned their Eagle Scout Award, and neither was concerned about not earning it. Both brothers worked part-time jobs.

I interviewed Warren at the end of his sophomore year in high school. He earned his Eagle Scout Award as an eighth grader. During the interview, I found him to be a very confident young man, and by all his teachers' accounts, he is very intelligent. In high school, he was active in band and worked part-time.

Wayne, interviewed at the beginning of his senior year, is a former student of mine. During his ninth grade year, he completed his Eagle Scout project with Warren. In class, Wayne was very reserved and only participated in class discussions if he was confident in his responses. At the time of the interview, Wayne was working three part-time jobs to help pay for his mission. Wayne's sister, Kristine, was interviewed her sophomore year while she was enrolled in my class. Sweet natured and funny, Kristine was active in band and choir. Kristine was a very hard worker and would often ask for enrichment activities to supplement the regular class work.

Leilani and Marie are sisters. Leilani was interviewed in Rothrock the summer before her sophomore year in college. She was close friends with Tabitha and Rene and

was part of the lunch bunch. In high school, Leilani was active in several clubs, and held a state officer position for one of them. Leilani attends BYU-Hawaii. Her sister, Marie, was interviewed her ninth grade year of high school. Her teachers say she is laid back and thoughtful. She would like to attend Julliard to advance the musical career she dreams of.

Mitch and Allison are siblings and were interviewed at the same time on the BYU campus. Allison was interviewed the summer before she began her Master's program at BYU, and Mitch was interviewed the summer before his freshman year at BYU. Both were in the process of filing their mission paperwork and were excited about the possibilities. Mitch is close friends with John and Brian. Both siblings were active in sports in high school. Mitch and Allison have ten siblings.

Sarah, one of Leilani's, Rene's and Tabitha's friends and a member of the lunch bunch, was interviewed with Leilani in Rothrock the summer before her sophomore year of college. Sarah is a student at BYU-Idaho. At the time of the interview, Sarah had just received word that she would be serving her mission in Sacramento. In high school, Sarah was active in sports and school clubs.

Abby, active in Rothrock High School's student council and student mentor program, was interviewed in Provo, UT the summer she turned 21. She does not attend college; rather, she is working to save money so she can enroll in cosmetology school. Abby is close friends with Tabitha and Rene since they all live in Provo.

Lacy and Amy were the last two students interviewed. While they are not related, they are close friends, and both were interviewed during their ninth grade year. Lacy is active in band and sometimes plays soccer on a recreational team. Amy is involved in

choir. Whereas most people attend only one ward, Amy attends two. She participates in the all the programs her ward offers, and she attends the services for the other ward so she can help her grandparents. Her grandmother has Alzheimer's, and her grandfather cannot manage on his own.

### Data Collection Procedures

Because of the nature of my study, Institutional Review Board (IRB) policies required that I have all interview participants sign a consent form and/or assent form (see Appendices A, B, C). If the students were contacted through mail, a cover letter (see Appendix D) introducing myself, outlining the study, detailing participant requirements, and explaining confidentiality was sent, along with the consent and/or assent forms. If I contacted students personally, the information contained in the cover letter was verbally explained, questions were answered, and the consent and/or assent forms were given. If the student contacted personally was under 18, I sent the cover letter home to the parents via the student. After participants signed and returned all appropriate forms, a time and a place for the interview were agreed upon, and a pseudonym was assigned. I gave the compiled list to my dissertation chair to keep in a locked cabinet in her office.

Interview questions were crafted over the course of five research classes. Throughout three research classes, the professors and other colleagues provided advice for the types of questions I should ask, and gave feedback on the questions I designed. In later research classes, and in preparation for my IRB application, other professors and other colleagues were consulted about the kinds of questions I should ask in order to find out the information that would inform this study. I was able to test the initial set of questions by conducting three different interviews with students from other

denominations. I was able to tweak the questions based on how those interviews proceeded and professor feedback; thus, an interview protocol was established.

Patton (2002) says that the interview protocol, carefully worded and ordered, takes each participant through the same sequence. This allows participant responses to be compared and makes data analysis easier. Participants are still able to provide rich answers since the questions are open-ended. Even though I followed an interview protocol, new ideas brought up by participants were still explored.

Eight of the participants were interviewed in Provo, Utah on the campus of Brigham Young University since they were students there and represented the original intended sample or names mentioned by the original sample. The other 18 participants were interviewed in Rothrock, either at my school (10 of the participants) or at one of the local restaurants (eight of the participants). Of the interviews conducted at my school, three were conducted at lunch; because lunch is only 25 minutes long, these interviews were very brief. Because those interviewed at lunch had only experienced “high school” for two months, their interviews did not require longer than the 25 minutes we had for lunch. The others conducted at my school took place after school in my classroom.

An iPod or a mini-cassette recorder was used to record all interviews. Before each interview began, I reviewed the consent/assent forms with the participant and again outlined my study, the role of the participant, the extent of confidentiality, and the right to quit at any time. After all questions related to consent had been answered, the interview, using a list of prepared interview questions (approved by IRB; see Appendix G), began. Even though the interviews were all recorded, notes were taken. These notes related to ideas that might be “new,” information that seemed especially important to the



interviewee, and any observations made about the interviewee. During one interview, I pushed the wrong button on the tape recorder; therefore, for 40 minutes, nothing recorded mechanically. Written notes were relied upon, written up, and emailed, along with the questions that were not answered on tape, to the interviewees (brother and sister). I asked them to try to fill in the gaps on the transcript, but received nothing back, even after emailing them three other times. One reason for this might be that they were both in the middle of filing their missionary paperwork. Even though the gaps were not filled in, sufficient information was given and used.

During the interviews, if an interviewee said something that I had a question about, I asked clarifying questions to understand the underlying meaning of their comments. At the end of each interview, I asked the participant if there was anything else that would help me understand. In addition, I thanked him/her for his/her participation. While the majority of interviews lasted between 25-65 minutes, one pair interview took two sittings and lasted a total of four hours. I knew both of the girls well, and both of the girls love to talk, especially about things in which they believe, a reason the constructionist framework was chosen.

I transcribed all interview recordings and sent copies of the transcripts to the interviewee for member checking. If the interviewees lived in Utah, I emailed their transcript to them with a note asking them to check the transcript for accuracy and to fill in any gaps that they saw. If the interviewees lived in the community, I hand-delivered the transcript to them, again with a note attached asking them to check the transcript for accuracy and to fill in gaps. Only six people returned member-checked transcripts. For the most part, these students deleted all the “uhs” and “ums” and turned their incomplete

sentences into complete ones. One did, however correct some questions I had about the spellings of Mormon historical figures, and one did clarify a few questions I asked in the interview. I did follow up with those who did not return a member-checked transcript; thirteen said that there were no corrections while seven did not respond after three attempts made to contact them. I made copies of transcripts, reduced to 70% of the original size so that responses could be cut and pasted onto index cards for coding, on different colors of paper for ease of respondent identification.

The survey instrument was constructed in much the same way that the interview questions were crafted; however, I used information found in my literature review to guide my questions. In addition, I also looked at the questions I would be asking the students, and asked parents their thoughts on similar topics. The survey mailing included a similar cover letter with the only difference in this letter and the interview cover letter being that participants were not asked to sit for an interview; they were asked to respond in writing to several questions relating to their family (see Appendix D), a survey (see Appendix E) and a self-addressed, stamped envelope. The survey cover letter told participants that they could remain anonymous, but all participants included their names and contact information. A list of the names was kept, and when surveys were returned, names were marked off. Responses from surveys were placed on index cards for coding in much the same way as the interview transcripts were.

### Data Analysis

After all bits of transcription and survey data were placed on index cards, sorting of the data began. Post-It note sticky index cards proved to be very useful for this process. Wolcott (2001) suggests that, when sorting, the researcher start with broad

categories so that all data may be sorted. Following this suggestion, all cards were posted in categories according to the main idea of each card. Initially, 36 categories were illuminated. To establish these categories, Emerson's, Fretz's and Shaw's (1995) advice to ethnographic researchers in selecting core themes was followed. They believe that there are two ways of selecting core themes: (a) give priority to topics with a lot of data, and (b) give priority to what is important to the members involved—if it is what they think is key, what looks to be important, or what takes up a lot of their time. Because this was not an ethnography, per se, the core themes were selected based not only on the respondents' information, but also on ideas that were discovered in the review of literature.

Following the identification of these broad themes and the posting of each card into one of those themes, I again followed Emerson, Fretz and Shaw's (1995) advice. Themes that were closely related were combined. At this point, four central themes were established: success, family characteristics, church involvement and community characteristics. I re-ordered cards into those categories and established subcategories in each. Under "success," the following sub-themes were created: the difference in experience in grades 9-12, student definition of success, student perception of parental definitions of academic success, parental definitions of academic success, student perception of parental goals for the student, parental goals for the student, student goals for themselves, academic integrity and extra- and co-curricular involvement. "Family characteristics" included such sub-themes as time spent as a family, how that time was spent, and characteristics of parents. The theme of "community characteristics" was the only theme that did not require sub-categories. "Church involvement" had sub-themes of

time spent on church activities, level of church involvement and reasons for church involvement. Several pieces of data could fit into more than one theme; thus, those data cards were flagged so that they could be included in all places where they belonged. From here, links to the literature review were easily seen and gaps in that literature review related to church involvement and student success were illuminated.

### *Credibility*

Quantitative research methods rely on validity that depends on the careful construction of research instruments that measure what they are supposed to measure. In qualitative research methods, Patton (2002) says the researcher is the instrument and validity is replaced with credibility. Patton indicates that there are three elements of credibility: rigorous methods, credibility of the researcher, and an appreciation of qualitative methods. One way to ensure rigor is to address researcher biases which is done in this study under the heading “Subjectivity.” Triangulation is another way to ensure rigor. As indicated above, triangulation was employed. Interviews, surveys, document analysis and member checking were completed in order to triangulate the findings. In addition, the interview protocol was critiqued by various professors and colleagues.

The final component of credible research is an appreciation of qualitative methods. Because this study depends on the richness of participant data, it lends itself well to qualitative methods. In addition, because church involvement is difficult to translate into numbers, and because of the subjective nature of academic success, qualitative methods were chosen.

### *Transferability*

Because of the limited and specific sample size, findings may not be transferable to other populations; however, some of the findings may be extrapolated to other churches and other students.

### *Dependability*

In a qualitative study, one should not expect the finding to be transferable; however, in order for a qualitative study to be dependable, the results should be consistent with the data collected (Merriam, 2002, p. 27). The same strategies used to ensure credibility were used to establish dependability: triangulation, acknowledgement of researcher biases and subjectivity, and notification of researcher role and qualifications.

### *Confirmability*

Because confirmability replaces objectivity in constructionist research, and because exact definitions of confirmability were not found, objectivity can be defined as arranging conditions so that personal elements do not enter into the research (Miller, 1986, p. 18). Because it is difficult, if not impossible, to keep all personal elements out of the research, steps should be taken to limit their effects. One way to do this is to acknowledge researcher biases. This is done in the next section.

### Subjectivity

As indicated above, the first specific criterion for social constructionists requires researcher subjectivity to be acknowledged, discussed and all biases taken into account. Only after this is complete can the curtains be opened and the “true,” based on one’s own evaluation of the material presented, world seen.

Because the students with whom I am working are close to me, and because I only want the best for them, it was extremely difficult for me to remain subjective. As indicated in Snapshot 1, in some cases, these students have become friends. Before moving to this community, I had heard only negative things about the Mormon Church: they practiced polygamy; the women were treated inequitably; their “church” was actually a cult; they make their young men go out in suits on bicycles to convert people. The media often perpetuates these “beliefs” by focusing attention to radical Mormons who are not Latter-Day Saint (LDS), but are Reorganized Latter-Day Saint (RLDS) and are not considered Mormon by members of the LDS church. These are people who usually live in unpopulated areas of the Western United States, usually in what are called communes, and who still believe that polygamy is acceptable and that modern day prophets are more than just spiritual leaders. This sect of Mormonism could be seen in the coverage of the abductors of Elizabeth Smart, by various episodes aired by 48 Hours and other news shows, and more recently by the HBO series *Big Love*. In all these cases it is stated within the coverage or within the show that these bigamist practices are not practices of the LDS church. However, many viewers believe a Mormon is a Mormon, and viewers see one man with multiple wives and too many children to count. In most cases, the women are not permitted to work outside the home, but are required to stay home to take care of the children, many of which are not their own. Often, jealousy among these sister-wives is made apparent, and in the case of the exposes, most of these families live in abject poverty and give the young women no choice as to whom they marry or when. Even though these are recent portrayals, bias and bigotry are not new experiences for Mormons. These recent portrayals, however, do keep bias and bigotry

against Mormons at the forefront of peoples' perceptions. In fact, in an editorial published in The Greenwood World (2007, July 7, A13), Cal Thomas cites an LA Times Bloomberg poll which found that conservative Christian voters are more likely to vote for a Protestant, Catholic or Jew whose views are not necessarily aligned with the conservative Christian agenda that promotes life marriages, same sex marriages, pro-life stances, and tax and government spending cuts, and promotes the stance that politicians' public and private lives must be consistent. These are the attributes that Mitt Romney, a former Massachusetts governor and Democratic candidate for President in 2008, possesses, but 37% of potential voters polled said they would not vote for him because he is Mormon and his ancestors believed in plural marriage (a few even moved to Mexico to avoid persecution after President Lincoln abolished polygamy).

Often, members of other churches will say that Mormonism is a cult. A cult, defined by Stark and Bainbridge (1979), is a "deviant religious body" that "does not have a prior tie with another established religious body in the society in question" (p. 125). People may believe this because they think that Mormons do not worship God, but worship Joseph Smith instead. In fact, one of my research professors asked me if the LDS church was a cult. The question was his way of making me dig deeper so that I might acknowledge my biases. Close inspection of the Mormon youth literature does reveal traditional gender biases that are also present in other denominations, and different readings of the history of the LDS church would fit the definition of a cult. However, if one considers Stark's and Bainbridge's (1979) full definition, it could be argued that Joseph Smith founded the LDS Church using some of the beliefs from many of the local churches. Therefore, the LDS Church would be a sect, defined by Stark and Bainbridge

(1979) as a “schismatic group (that) presents itself as part of something old. They left the parent body not to form a new faith, but to reestablish the old one, from which the parent body had ‘drifted’” (p. 125).

Other biases that should be acknowledged include the friendships formed with some of the participants and their families, and a desire to show the good qualities of a church that has been riddled with rumors. Because of these biases, attempts were made to limit the inclusion of too much information from participant-friends. In addition, outsider and ex-Mormon accounts of the LDS Church were read thoroughly and taken into consideration. Finally, because the study focuses on church involvement and academic success, only those attributes that contributed to that focus were researched.

#### Summary

This study’s design is based on a constructionist framework with a convenience, snowball sample. The population consisted of Mormons aged 14-23 who attended Rothrock Mid-High and High Schools and were active in their church.

*I was not raised in church. My younger brother and I would often attend Vacation Bible School with our neighbors who were members of a Baptist church, but I was young enough that I only saw it as fun. I do recall one instance, when I was about eight years old when the preacher at VBS talked to us about the importance of being saved. He said that if we weren’t saved, that we would go to Hell. In Jonathan Edwards’ style, he elaborated on what Hell might be like. Thinking back, I am sure it was not emotional abuse, but I was scared enough that, after the mini-sermon, I went to his office in tears and asked to be saved. He asked if I would accept Jesus Christ into my life and if I believed that He died for my sins; I wanted to be saved—of course I said yes! Years*



*later, in junior high, family friends became the youth leaders at the Presbyterian Church and invited me to attend. Because I loved Jim and Karla, I went, and I learned the Presbyterian view of Heaven and of God. I thought I found a place of acceptance and enjoyed going and participating in the hand-bell choir and youth activities. Soon, though, I learned that not everyone was accepted. There was dissension within the church about the music director and his age. He was fired or asked to leave one day, and several members left with him. Once the new music director came in, we had choir tryouts. I was told by the director not to sing. She would leave me in the choir, but I was to simply mouth the words. I was 13. After that, I stopped going.*

*In high school, several of my friends started attending a non-denominational church and invited me to go with them. At first, I went with them on Wednesday nights. We usually skipped and went across the street to the convenience store and talked to some of the other “church” kids. Eventually, the church hired a new youth minister and we started attending church on Wednesday nights and Sunday mornings. The youth group contained members who were popular in school and those who were considered “druggies.” The youth minister loved us all equally, and once more, I found a place to belong. Like before, however, there was conflict, this time between me and my group of friends who brought me into the church, and I stopped going.*

*Many, many years later, after the birth of my second daughter, I as a single parent at this point, took my girls to church, back to the non-denominational church. My youth minister was now an associate pastor. Being older and more mature, I learned their view on God and Heaven. God is accepting, so long as you repent of your sins and*

*make an effort to stay “clean.” Everyone could get to Heaven, but it took faith. Doing good things was nice, but faith would get you in.*

*Eventually, I remarried. My husband is the son of a Methodist youth minister, but he agreed to join my church. He felt the views of my church were just as liberal as his mother’s, but there were fewer “snobby” people at my church. When we married, we compromised with his mother: we married in her church with my minister. It was during this time that I met my first real Mormon.*

*A few years later, we moved to a different community. We searched for a church that was like our old one and found a Methodist church in a neighboring community. Their beliefs are similar to those of my old church: God is accepting; faith gets you to Heaven; good deeds help.*

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

*Sitting across from these two young women and listening to them talk makes me think back to conversations they had in my classroom at lunch five years ago. I can still remember the subject of every conversation initiated by Leilani: Boys. She read all the Mormon handbooks on dating and dating etiquette. We all thought she had gone crazy when she told us that the way you let a boy know you had a good time on a date was when he walked you to your door. Instead of giving him a goodnight kiss, the proper young lady would look at the boy and wink. When Leilani demonstrated for us, it was not just any wink. It resembled the wink that Betty Boop would give or that Mae West would give when she told her men, "Come up and see me sometime." Of course, she did not know that.*

*I remember Sarah, too. She was always the one who was adamant about her beliefs. I remember one of their friends from another denomination telling the girls that they were going to hell because they, as Mormons, did not believe the right things. While the other girls simply said they were sorry she felt that way, Sarah, patiently yet firmly, told the girl what she believed. I don't think the other girl ever changed her opinion, but Sarah was very adamant that she was not going to let someone bash her religion without letting that person know what she believed. Sarah was the one, too, who argued with me over whether my lasagna was homemade or out of a box. She told me that it looked too*

*gross to be homemade. Patiently yet firmly, I told her that her comment was not very nice. I don't think we talked for several weeks after that even though she still ate in my room. Eventually, though, the tension lessened.*

*And now, she is getting ready to leave on her mission. I feel so old! Sitting in Panera Bread and listening to her, and seeing that fire in her eyes when she talks about her beliefs, it is easy to see that she will make a great missionary.*

*As I am thinking all of this, I tune back in to hear what she is saying.*

*"We aren't taught what other people believe in our church, but we are told to go ask friends who are that religion or to visit their churches or whatever. That's how we find things out. There are wonderful people who aren't part of our church. We just need to understand where we are all coming from. And with the whole heaven and hell point of view, we have a lot of different views than other churches." I noticed how she maintained eye contact with me, and also how Leilani seemed to be listening intently to her friend even though she shared her belief already.*

*"What is your view?" I asked. I knew I could ask her and that she would not try to convert me. She would love for me to convert, but I knew she respected my beliefs in much the same way I respected hers.*

*She pulled my tablet in front of her and flipped to a blank page. She asked if she could borrow my pen. She pulled her long brown hair back and tucked it neatly behind her ears. Her posture straightened noticeably, and she took a drink of water.*

*"First of all, this is the plan of salvation, and we believe that we were before Earth was. We believe that we lived with Heavenly Father before we came to Earth in the primordial life; we were spirits. Sons and daughters of Heavenly Father and we lived*

*with him before.” She writes “Plan of Salvation” on the top of the paper that is turned sideways.*

*On the left hand side of the paper, she writes the words “Pre-mortal” and draws a vertical line to separate it from the rest of the paper. “This is the pre-mortal life. So that’s where it starts. And then we are born. We are born to receive a body and be tested, but this gets...” She turns to Leilani for something: encouragement, correctness, support? Leilani nods and pats Sarah on the back. Sarah looks up at me almost as if to say, “Here we go. Take a deep breath.” She looks back down at the paper for four long seconds. It was like she was praying.*

*When she looked back up, her eyes were moist. “...we believe that eventually we can become LIKE—“At the same time Sarah says like, Leilani says the same thing.*

*“—God. We can be LIKE Him. We believe that god has a body of flesh and bone. In order to progress any farther--because we believe we had agency in the pre-mortal life-- we are taught that in order to progress farther, we need a body. And that’s why Heavenly Father made the plan of coming to Earth and receiving a body.” As Sarah continues to speak, her voice strengthens.*

*“We believe there was a war in heaven about the plan for Jesus Christ to come to Earth and be our Savior and we would receive agency to follow God’s plan or not. And Lucifer presented his plan where he would take away our agency but everyone would return to God no matter what. So we wouldn’t have the choice; we would be forced to do it. And, like, I have heard a lot of theories on this, but one-third of the spirit children of God chose to go with Lucifer because they wanted to be assured that they would be back. And they felt that too much depended on Jesus Christ: he had to come to Earth and live a*

*perfect life which for mortals, is impossible. And then he had to go through the atonement. So one-third chose to go with Lucifer. And the others prepared for Earth. And the Earth was created by Jesus and those who were helping him through the direction of God. So we are born to the Earth and receive a body. We live our life, and some people die when they are two years old, and some people could live to be whatever. It's a time to be tested, but at the same time, there are a lot of people on Earth who never have the opportunity to hear about Christ. And that's where the afterlife comes in."*

*Leilani picks up on her friend's enthusiasm. "We believe there is a spirit world and it is divided but there is a paradise and a prison." As she is talking, Sarah draws a circle on the paper on the other side of the line she had drawn earlier. After this circle, she draws another vertical line and another circle. This one is a little larger and is centered on the page. She draws a line cutting the second circle in half. On the top part of the circle, she writes, "Par." On the bottom, she writes, "Pri." To the right of this circle, she draws two vertical lines. As Leilani continues to talk, Sarah examines her drawing and reinforces the lines.*

*"Paradise is more of like who you are and how you live in this life. Like, if you are a good person and are righteous, you go to paradise and you are happy and at peace, but if you did a lot of bad things, then you will still have all that guilt from previous. And we believe that those who didn't hear of Christ, they are not in a state of guilt, they just didn't know. They didn't have the knowledge of Christ. So, we believe that after Christ was crucified, the three days between the time he was crucified and resurrected, he set up a missionary program in the spirit world. And those who knew Christ teach the Gospel to those who didn't. And that's where baptism for the dead comes in. We believe it was*

*commanded that we had to be baptized like Jesus was baptized—by his example. And of course, that wouldn't be possible for those who didn't know him or have the chance to be baptized. We do it by proxy for that person. They have the choice to either accept that or deny it; they are not converted to our church by that baptism.”*

*As if sensing that Leilani was finished, Sarah put the pen down and looked up. She continued where Leilani left off.*

*“And that goes back to pre-mortal agency. They still have the ability to choose to not accept it.” Sarah opened her mouth to continue, but Leilani cut in. Sarah reverted her attention to her drawing. She placed her right hand under her chin and allowed her hair to come from behind her ears.*

*“Part of that will make more sense later. So that's where we believe we go right after death. And then, when Christ comes for the second time, we believe we will be here for a millennium with Christ who will reign and that those who have accepted the ordinances in the spirit world will have resurrected bodies. They will be resurrected. And so we will live through the millennium and we will do a lot of work for the dead during that time. Like, of course there are millions of people and we don't know who they are. Then, after the millennium, everyone will be resurrected: good, bad. And then—*

*“And during that time, Satan will be bound because the people on Earth will be so righteous that Satan won't even tempt them.” Sarah said this in a louder voice than she previously used. This caused the people at the table behind us to look over at us.*

*Sarah continued. “And so after everyone is resurrected, there's a judgment where we will all be judged for our actions and knowledge. So then, once we get judged,*

*we believe there are three main kingdoms of heaven.” As she says this, she adds three circles to the right of her two vertical lines. These circles are smaller than the one representing paradise and prison and are one on top of the other with a small space between. She labels the top one “cel,” the middle one “ter,” and the bottom one “tel.”*

*“There’s the celestial, terrestrial and telestial. There’s also outer darkness, but few people go there.” At this, Sarah draws and colors in a small black spot to the bottom right of the “tel” circle.*

*“So first,” Sarah says, “there’s celestial. There are also different degrees within. To get to the highest degree of celestial, you have to be sealed to your spouse and you can progress forever. That’s where you can become LIKE God. You’ll be able to--your prosperity will continue; you’ll be able to create a world eventually, and progress eternally. And you’ll dwell there with God. For those who aren’t sealed and don’t get sealed, in the afterlife you can still be sealed. Just like sacraments for the dead, there are endowments for the dead. We do this by proxy in the temple. Those and others will also go with God, but their prosperity will not continue. And what I mean by prosperity is like spirit children. So, that’s all here—“She points to the “cel” circle and resumes. “And then the terrestrial kingdom, those are good people, but they didn’t accept the Gospel in its fullness. And why this makes sense to me is these people haven’t, they have been taught that they are going to go to heaven and be with God and they are going to serve Him and do whatever they want, but they aren’t going to progress any farther. And that’s what they want, they want to be happy. That’s why they wouldn’t make that decision because for them, that’s what their expectations are. They’ve gotten what they want. It’s about being where you are most comfortable. And then in the telestial*



*kingdom, that's for the people who were bad in life. And, it's like knowingly bad. They were taught what was right but chose not to do it. They are there because they couldn't handle being with the Heavenly Father. They would feel too much guilt."*

*"They wouldn't be happy there. We are going to have a perfect knowledge of our 'guilt.' Wherever we are, we are going to know that is where we deserve or earned."*  
*Sarah, while Leilani was speaking, nodded her head in agreement.*

*"So those are the three main kingdoms. I actually have scriptures in my car that go with that. Outer darkness is for those who have received an undeniable witness of Jesus Christ, but because of greed or pride, they have turned against the church. Those are the people that will be cast out with Satan." With that, Sarah placed her hands in her lap and looked to Leilani.*

*"I heard it perfectly stated. Someone was asking why we believed in different degrees of glory. The response was that it makes sense. If you have between one and 500 sins, you are going to heaven, but if you have 501, you are out to hell. That wouldn't be fair, so this makes it more fair."*

## Overview

So what is the relationship between Mormon students' church involvement and academic success? Based on interviews, survey responses and reviewing related literature, four assertions can be made. First, participant definitions of success are slightly different from the definitions of success commonly held by Academe. This may be due to the Mormon belief that the only thing taken to heaven is knowledge. Second, involvement in the Mormon Church does seem to be a contributing factor to student success. Mormon youth leaders and the Mormon focus on family are aspects of church

involvement that the participants said aid in success. Third, although there were differences in roles and treatment of males and females in the programs provided by the Mormon Church, there is no difference in academic achievement between boys and girls. Finally, community characteristics such as a supportive and encouraging environment and a tolerance for religious differences seem to influence the success experienced by the participants of this study.

To understand how these assertions came to fruition, it is important to know some of the beliefs of the Mormon Church.

#### Latter-Day Saint (LDS) Beliefs

What exactly are the differences, as seen by the students, between the LDS church and others? Snapshot 4 illustrates one of the major differences. Heaven and hell are perceived differently than other denominations, salvation is always available, and parents have the opportunity to become spirit parents. Another major difference is the Book of Mormon, which is a continuation of the revelations of Jesus Christ in the Americas after He was resurrected, and before He ascended into heaven. According to the book, *Mormonism for Dummies* (Reiss & Bigelow, 2005). “The [Book of Mormon] stretches over more than 1,000 years of history (roughly 600 B.C. to A.D. 421) and mixes visions, religious symbolism, and prophecies about the Messiah with records of migrations, civil wars, and the difficulties of governing a remote New World society” (p. 156). Billy says that this is one of the aspects of his church that others have a hard time believing. The Book of Mormon is a guide to life for Mormons, and the bulk of its teachings are similar to those found in the Bible. Wade described the Book of Mormon as the whole truth.

We believe every church kind of has a piece of the truth...Kind of like, umm, during the Great Apostasy, it's kind of like there was a big mirror that was shattered and every church picked up some of the little pieces. And we believe Joseph Smith, he came with help of the Lord and put all the pieces back together.

Sarah puts it this way:

Something else really different is we believe there was apostasy after Jesus Christ and his apostles were killed that the priesthood that Christ brought to the Earth and gave to the apostles was taken away. The Catholic Church believes that it still has that down through the Christianity line, but we believe that it was taken away and that it needs to be restored.

This is why Joseph Smith initiated the priesthood program in the beginning of church history. One important task of the priests in the program is baptism of members. Sarah says the Mormon Church baptizes by immersion, just as Christ baptized his followers. Leilani goes on to explain that her church does not believe baptism is a one-time acquittal of all sins.

It's not just 'I've accepted Jesus into my heart once,' you know, and that's definitely a good thing; it's not bad at all, you know, but that's where you start. You know, like every week we, whenever we're baptized we make covenants, we umm...come into this two-way promise of course, and umm...that we'll take upon ourselves Christ's name and try and be the best that we can.

In short, Leilani says that baptism results in a continual evaluation of personal actions. She says that her friends from other religions believe that being saved is done once and is lasting. Sarah agrees, but also says that other religions only believe in being saved by

grace. She says that her church believes it takes grace and good works in order to be saved. Sarah continues:

And we have to always strive to do our best and always strive to be learning more about Christ and always strive to have faith. Whereas other religions, I think we kind of believe the same things, but we say it differently. They say that grace alone saves you or faith alone saves you and we're like, you can't just have faith alone.

Part of that is living the Word of Wisdom. According to Tabitha, "Another thing that is different is the Word of Wisdom which is like a commandment that we follow. It says not to drink coffee, tea, or anything containing alcohol, and also not to smoke or partake of any drugs—besides medicine, of course." Shawn said that most non-LDS people see this as a set of rules:

But if you talk to most LDS youth, they don't see them as rules, they see them as ways to help us become like Christ. So when we are asked to keep our virtue in check, or not to drink or smoke, it's not because the church has told us "Don't do this!" Jesus Christ and God gave us revelation through our prophet that if we do these things, we will be coming closer to Christ so that we may join with him in, hopefully, the highest form of glory.

Almost all of the interviewees made it clear that one is not kicked out of heaven for drinking Coca-Cola.

Striving to live within these "rules" encourages students to live moral lives and to be accountable to God. Marie said that she feels indebted to God for all the beautiful things He has created and all the things with which He has blessed her family. "If I can

do everything I can to please Him, I would love to feel His love and happiness and let it shine through me to others.” Wade elaborates a little more, saying:

We are baptized at the age of 8 which is the age of accountability because you know right from wrong, and, um...your choices are recorded in heaven and with every wrong choice, there’s always Christ’s process of repentance that he went through in the garden of Gethemene. He went through the atonement that led us to be able to repent for our sins, so we feel accountable for the things we do.

Emma agreed, but added:

A lot of people think that once you’re saved, that’s it. But we believe in enduring until the end and always striving to live the way our Savior did and we believe that when we are accountable to God, our actions, the things we say, our thoughts, everything like that—Christians call it judgment day or something like that—but, yeah, that’s when we can look up to Christ and say, “I’m clean.

Bobby took the term more personally. “I don’t think of it as being accountable to God because we think of God as our Heavenly Father... (gets choked up)...and if we really love Him... (his voice cracks)...then we’ll do what He wants us to, which is the right thing. So I don’t think of it as accountability. I think if I love my Heavenly Father, I will do what He wants me to do in this life.”

Wade explained this idea of God in the present tense. He also discussed the reason why the Mormon Church has no crosses in the baptismal or on the steeple.

We tend to focus on the Savior’s life and resurrection rather than the death. One of the analogies my father likes to use is if Jesus was killed by a gun, would all the churches have a gun in their buildings or on their steeples? We just tend to

focus on his life rather than his death. See, he's living and we believe he is living now up in heaven because he was resurrected.

The Holy Trinity is another difference. Almost all of the students interviewed mentioned their belief that God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are three distinct individuals. According to Sarah:

God is the Father of all our spirits and the father of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is His son and our brother, and he was the leader—he was the one who spoke for the good plan (there were two plans) in heaven and we followed him, so we don't believe they are the same. There are a lot of people who say that in the Bible, it says that they are one, and the way I interpret that is that they are one in purpose. And so what God wants to happen, Jesus will cause it to happen—it will happen through him and sometimes through the Holy Ghost, but Holy Ghost is more of a spirit who gives you a feeling of what you should do—more of the light of Jesus Christ is how we see him.

This may be the foundation for the importance of family. Tabitha elaborated by saying, “He is there to testify of Christ, and bring us his spirit of comfort and peace.” Kristine carries this belief a little further and applies it to how Mormons pray noting that their prayers begin with “Dear Heavenly Father” and end with “In Jesus' Name.” In addition, they often ask the Holy Spirit to guide them and help them.

Shawn mentioned the prophet and modern revelations as a difference. “We believe that Gordon B. Hinkley is a prophet of God and he receives revelation regularly from God and Jesus Christ to help run the church.” Justin agreed, and noted that other churches have similar figureheads, namely the Catholic Church.

In addition to the prophet who receives revelations, personal revelations are also a difference according to the interviewees. Nikki says personal revelation makes her feel closer to the Heavenly Father and helps her to know that her church is true. Sarah elucidates. “It’s more inspiration.” She goes on to say that there is a hierarchy to revelations. The prophet can receive revelation for the entire church, the bishop of each ward can receive revelations for his ward, and a father can receive revelation for his family. Leilani says that this revelation, in addition to being inspiration, is also the taking on of responsibility and the granting of authority to heal. Shawn indicates that many of his friends do not believe this is possible. “I get the feeling that they don’t believe that a prophet is going to come to Earth like they did in the olden days. And a lot of times, I feel that, like it says in the Bible, I think it says that God is always the same. ‘The same yesterday, today and tomorrow.’”

“The same yesterday, today and tomorrow” applies, too, to gender roles within the church. Perhaps more so than other denominations of the Christian faith, Mormons believe in traditional gender roles that were established long ago. Often, this means that mothers will not work outside the home while their children are in school, or if they do, they will strive to be home when the children are home. This idea of established gender roles was seen in the review of youth literature published by the Mormon Church and was brought up during the interviews. Jordan said she does not see much gender bias in her church, but she says that the man providing for and protecting the family and the woman nurturing the children are divine roles encouraged by her church, but, she is quick to note, “The church is very strong in ‘It is your choice.’” Justin elaborated further:

A lot of it was that we're very family values oriented. Thirty years ago, that was kind of the norm, and I think that we stayed with that norm, so that 30 years later, we seem kind of abnormal. But I think that our women—or women of the church—are never discouraged from being successful or taking all the opportunities that they want. In fact, if you look at some of the prominent women in our church, they are hugely successful personally and professionally. In fact, Deseret, the book publishing company, the CEO is a woman, Sherry Dew.

Women are encouraged to get a college degree, not just because knowledge is the only thing they can take with them to heaven, but they need to be ready to provide for the family if something should happen to the husband. The idea of young women going to BYU to get their “Mrs.” Degree was discussed, and laughed at, by all participants. While they do not see the church changing, they do see society changing.

Sarah also discussed this idea of “The same yesterday, today and tomorrow” but in a different context. She said the LDS Church has specific manuals that the leaders teach from, “and one of our things is that if you go anywhere in the world and you go to Sunday school, it should be the same lesson they are giving in your hometown.” She admitted that outsiders take issue with this and believe the LDS Church is too controlling, but she says, “They don't understand that these are just guides to help you and you definitely can teach by the spirit.” Leilani agreed, saying, “It just keeps everyone on track.” Laurence Iannaccone (1994) believes this strictness is one of the reasons the LDS Church is so strong. He believes that strictness raises the level of member commitment, increases participation rates and enhances the benefits of membership. This strictness is



often what leads outsiders to question whether members are members by choice or by force. Allison brought this up in her interview.

Q: You mentioned that a lady asked you whether you were a member of the church by choice. Why do you think she asked you that question?

Allison: Um...she used to be a member, and she has hard feelings against the church. She said the reason she was no longer a member was because she thought the church taught that you couldn't have a personal relationship with the Savior. And I said, 'Hmmm...well, I believe you can and that is what I have been taught my whole life.' And she just thought our church was wrong and she just wanted to make sure I wasn't being forced into it. I told her I wasn't. I think the reason she asked is because she thought the church was kind of a farce—I don't know if that's the right word—she felt like the church was something that sucked people in.

Wayne agreed that he was a member by choice, saying, “When we are raised, we become 8 years old and we are given a choice to be baptized or not. That’s something a lot of people don’t realize: we are given a choice. Some people don’t do it and some may feel pressured, but it’s their choice.” While one could argue that eight-year olds are not old enough to make that choice, participants indicated that all along the way, they have the right to choose whether to be involved in the church. Marie describes this as being “born into the covenant, born into the church.” Justin said that being born into the covenant, though, was not why he was a member. He said that as he grew up, he saw how blessed his parents were because of the church and he felt that the church was true, was where he belonged.

Another aspect of the strictness mentioned by Iannaccone is the church's expectation of all high school students to attend early morning seminary during the school year. The seminary program lasts for four years, and each year, a new subject is studied. These subjects, the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants, rotate every four years. In areas where the Mormon population is great, seminary may be taken during the school day, but no graduation credits are given. Seminary will be discussed in more detail later.

### *Students' Perceptions of Other Churches*

Seven of the students interviewed said they had visited other churches with their non-Mormon friends. While they all commented on the fact that, in comparison, other churches were "loud," the main difference cited was closeness.

Justin: They were kind of loud to me. I usually went to the weekday activities, but it just seemed to be kind of loud to me. And there seemed to be some things that were kind of missing that we had in our church. They weren't a close-knit group. There were groups here who did this and groups there that did this and they kind of separated themselves out, but when we [Mormons] all got together, it was a close-knit group and we were all friends and talked to everyone. It was like we were a little family...Um...in some of their teachings, they would talk about other churches in a negative way, and in our church, we don't do that. Umm...the way we believe, if you want to know something about another church, you can go find it out. And, learn from the people who know it. I don't know if I can even describe the other missing pieces. There was just a little something missing. It

almost felt like there was just this empty space in me that wasn't filled that I was able to feel when I was at my church.

Abby, too, felt that empty space. She attributed it to the teens focusing more on the social aspect of church and less on the spiritual. She visited three churches of different denominations and noticed that everyone seemed to be focused on their own group. "But when I go to other churches, it was like they didn't know each other or the congregation was just so big, there was no way to distinguish who was new." Bobby also noticed the same things, but added, "Ours [church] is just more reverent and they had a lot of loud music and stuff going on and just didn't feel reverent. Ours is more thought-reflecting worship." Marie said she thought the youth at other churches were there, often, just to have a good time and not "to focus on God."

Another difference, according to Abby was the preacher.

I think, well, the way that we do it in sacrament meetings, what others would call Sunday worship, where people are assigned different topics and stuff and they speak, I think, I like that a lot more versus having a preacher up there preaching every single Sunday time after time—not that there's anything wrong with that...I think that, because a lot of different people have a lot of different experiences in their lives, and I think I like it better because you get to know other people's experiences and maybe someone has a similar experience to you and you'll get more out of it. Whereas if there is just one preacher, you only get their point of view, so it's more limited.

Amy agreed and said, “Well, when I go to church on Sunday and hear the talks, sometimes you feel the spirit very strongly because you know the things they talk about are true. And that takes faith, you know, to believe that.”

Jordan recounted a time she visited another church:

I did go to church one week and they were doing a religious diversity lesson in Sunday School. And the week I went, they were focusing on Mormons. And, uh, and, I felt a little—not necessarily attacked, but they wanted to debate beliefs rather than just ask me what I believed. And I felt that was a turn off to me, because I felt that if they believed in their faith, and that they are right, they should be right because they are right. Not right by default because you can prove everybody else is wrong. And that’s kind of how I feel. Whatever religion you want to be, that’s fine. I am very strong in my faith and I would love to share it with whoever [sic]. I feel that I have a correct faith in God because my faith is correct, not because everybody else is wrong so I must be right. So that’s kind of how I feel. I think there is a lot of contention for who was right and who was wrong, and I didn’t think that was quite necessary.

Several students felt this “contention.” Brian said that, ten years ago when the LDS church was being built, “a lot of people didn’t want our church to be built.” While he did not know exactly why, many others interviewed said they, like Jordan, experienced adversity for their beliefs. Sarah discussed seeing protesters in Salt Lake City at the LDS General Conference. Most of the contention, she believes comes from a lack of understanding. Most of the protest signs she saw said, “Christ is your Savior. He’s the

only way,” thinking that Mormons do not believe in Christ. Leilani had a different experience.

Like Jared, the guy I dated in high school; his parents were perfectly content with him dating a Mormon because I was a good girl, you know, but if his older sister, like when she started getting interested in it, they got really mad and didn't want them to have anything to do with it. They had their church and their religion, there was nothing different, there was nothing better, and there was nothing else. Nikki felt compelled to stand up for her beliefs the day before her interview.

Students in one of her classes began asking questions about her beliefs.

They weren't wanting, well, some were actually interested, but one in particular didn't want to know, he just wanted to be contentious and get us all flustered and doubt our own beliefs. Towards the end, because I tried to talk to him and help him understand what we believe and stuff, but towards the end, I just thought it wasn't worth it because he didn't want to know. He was just trying to put us down.

It was at this point that Shawn walked into the class.

Shawn: At the end is when I walked in and they were talking about being saved by grace or something like that and, like, they were questioning like how you can be baptized and that should be it. We were like, “Yes! There is the point of being baptized, and that saves you to a certain point, but if you get baptized and you sin, sin, sin, and you don't repent...”

Nikki: There's a scripture that we learned in seminary in the New Testament and it's John or James? But it's “Faith without works is dead.” And I said that to him

and he was like, “Well, yeah, but...” and they were trying to shake me...they were using another scripture...and it was like he was trying to make me say that Christ was just lying here.

Billy was also in that class and experienced the same thing. He said it started with the question, posed by a student, “How do you know your faith is true?” Billy explained his testimony and how he feels the spirit. He said, toward the end of the discussion, “And he kept going on trying to find something that the three of us would contradict each other with.” All three indicated they were frustrated, but that it only reaffirmed their beliefs because, as Nikki said, “I was able to find, there was a particular question about marriage and heaven and I was able to find an answer for that (through studying the scriptures) and it just made me feel at peace.”

Regardless of the contentiousness felt, all the interviewees said the same thing Emma did. “We just believe in some things that other churches don’t and I’m not saying that they are wrong. You could tell that some things were missing, but what was there was good.” Sarah said that she was taught in church not to argue about her beliefs. “All we can do is live an example and live righteously and maybe they will think that all we do is good, so why would we go to hell? And a lot of people might start out that way, but they end up with a lot of respect for the church.” In fact, almost all students interviewed said, when asked to tell in one word how non-Mormon people treated them, the participants said they were treated with respect.

#### Mormon Views of Success

When I first began this study, I defined academic success as maintaining high grades in all classes. Success was initially defined in this study as enrollment in AP

classes, student perception of success in those classes, and participation in extra-curricular activities. This definition grew out of the review of literature surrounding academic success and discussion with several college professors who are experts in that field. Determining student perception of success, then, was important to ensure that the participants and I were speaking about the same things. This is an important aspect of constructionism. In order to understand participant experience, we must understand their realities and their meanings.

*Difference in the Meaning of Success in Grades 9-12.*

In order to get an accurate idea of what success meant to the students interviewed, I asked their views on their high school experience and how that experience may have changed. Rothrock students change schools after the tenth grade. Obviously, the ninth graders were not asked that question. The tenth graders seemed to agree; they felt that tenth grade was harder than ninth, “Because teachers expect more from you since we have been here before. I mean, we should know how to do things and how to act and stuff” (Kristine). The students in Rothrock attend grades K-5 at local elementary schools. Sixth grade is housed at the Sixth Grade Center; seventh grade at the Seventh Grade Center; eighth grade at the Eighth Grade Center; ninth and tenth grades at the Mid-High; eleventh and twelfth grades at the High School. I was interested to learn that most students did not mention this change as one that affected them. In fact, Wayne, a high school senior, said, “Well, it’s just like moving from any school here in Rothrock. Kids move from school to school all the time, so it wasn’t too big.” Instead, he felt the greatest change was the requirement of all students to take all but one of their semester

exams. “It’s been an incentive for students to have lower absences because they don’t have to take semester tests and now the school board is going to remove that incentive.”

Wade, a tenth grader at the time of the interview, said that he has seen more slacking on behalf of the student body over the course of his ninth and tenth grade years. “It makes me wonder what they are going to be doing because you notice the majority of kids slack off and it makes me wonder what this world is going to be like in a couple of years.” Brian said something similar:

Q: Think over 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade. How did your experience change?

Brian: It changed senior year. I guess I was blind before, but I saw that a lot of people were making some big mistakes. More than I thought they would.

Cheating, drugs, drinking and stuff. I’m sure it happened my junior and sophomore years, but 12<sup>th</sup> grade was when it really changed for me.

Q: Why do you think you noticed it then?

Brian: Ummm...I guess I wasn’t paying attention before. I wasn’t like, I mean, I guess I just thought that they were good people and wouldn’t do stuff like that. I automatically assumed that people who were smart would be smart in their decisions, too. So when I saw them cheating and stuff, it kind of put a damper on my senior year.

Participants also mentioned cliques and maturation. According to Tabitha, who was interviewed the day before her junior year of college was to start, “Over the years, the atmosphere changed. I noticed the last two years that kids started to mature and the cliques seemed to dissolve to some extent.” Her brother, John, interviewed in August after graduating from high school, seemed to agree. He said that he suddenly realized



that he would soon be out on his own. Without mentioning the word “mature,” it seemed at the time that was what he meant. Along the lines of maturation, Tabitha talked of coming out of her shell. “I also changed from being very timid. I never would do anything out of the ordinary. I was too scared of what people would think and say. My senior year, I ran for the veep of the senior board—I lost, but I tried—and I also played the accordion in front of the whole school at the talent show.” Shawn, interviewed at the beginning of his senior year in high school, talked about a similar experience:

Umm...kind of like my 9<sup>th</sup> grade year, I was kind of like an underdog. I would sit in class and just kind of let everyone do their own thing and I would do mine. That was 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade and part of 11<sup>th</sup>. If they weren't my close friends, I would just stick to myself, but towards the end of last year, I was like, “You know, high school is not going to last forever, so I might as well let people know who I am. I might as well make them know what I stand for...” So in my classes, I've started talking more and let people know about issues that they are talking about. If I don't agree with what they are talking about, I let them know.

The importance of friends also became apparent. When asked how her experience changed, Leilani, interviewed a month before her junior year of college, responded this way:

Ummm....it really taught me the importance of your quality of friends. Like my sisters always said you are what your friends are and it's so true. I would not be the person I was/am if it weren't for my friends because they always kept me good, well, of course I made choices to be good, but I also had a good support group, too, which is really important. Because, there, you know, if I would have

hung out with kids who were sketchy in high school then I would have turned out sketchy, you know? But I think that's really choosing the people you hang out...And I think, you know, I always had great happy friends before, but high school really taught me the strength that I gain from the people I associate with. Nikki, interviewed at the beginning of her senior year in high school, also talked about friends. "I kind of had a hard freshman and sophomore year because I had two really close friends and they both kind of dumped me and went with each other and I'm really quiet at school, so I didn't have many friends at school. But, I made new friends and it was a learning experience..."

Sarah, interviewed two months before she left on her mission during her junior year of college, felt that the foundation she had with her church friends and her church made a difference in maintaining the consistency of her high school experience. "Usually, when kids enter high school, they are still trying to find themselves, you know. I feel like before I ever went to school, I had a sense of who I was, you know?" Because it was a pair interview, Leilani said she believed they had a strong sense of who they are, in part, from a song, "I Am a Child of God" which is sung to them from birth. "So I think we have a sense of who we are, so we don't try a lot of things. Like many kids, one day, one semester they are Goth and the next they are something different. They are trying to find out who they are" (Leilani).

#### *Student Definition of Academic Success*

Academics in general are important to the Mormon students in this study because they believe that knowledge gained on Earth is the only thing taken with them to heaven. Wade illuminates this idea: "Scripture actually states the principles of intelligence you

achieve in this life you take with you in the next. Because the same souls that possess our bodies now will possess our soul in the eternal world.” He goes on to say that if you do not gain knowledge on Earth, you will take nothing with you to heaven. Therefore, academic success for Mormons is not grade related.

Q: Back in high school, what was your definition of high school success?

Jordan: Academic success...I would say not only getting good grades—there were a lot of students who got straight A’s—but they, not getting recognition for it ALL the time, but being able to get some recognition to be recognized as a good student and getting that trust from the teachers who know that you are a good student. For the teachers to say, “I can leave this person here taking this test and they won’t cheat.” And having some integrity with that academic success—with those grades.

Justin: Umm...I would say, like in high school, my definition of academic success was: I knew I wanted to go to college, and I wanted to get in. I didn’t really know how to get in besides having good grades. So, my definition of academic success was having a good resume—a well-rounded and involved resume—because I knew I wanted to get into a good college and I had been told that I needed good grades and something to round me out.

This interview, conducted on the campus of BYU the day before classes were to start with brother and sister Jordan, a college junior, and Justin, also a college junior (he served a two year mission) exemplifies one component of the definition of academic success: it is founded in the goals students have, even though the criteria for reaching those goals are defined by outside entities. Completing high school, getting a scholarship

and getting into a good college were commonly mentioned when I asked for a definition of success. While getting good grades seemed to be important to all participants, Matt's response (he is a high school freshman) summed it up the responses of most of the participants nicely: "I don't think that academic success is defined by a letter grade. I think it's based on how hard you work. My parents tell me that if I'm working my hardest and I still get a D, as long as I am learning and doing all I can to get the grade, I feel okay." Billy and Dawn, in a pair interview conducted at the beginning of their sophomore year, elaborated on Matt's idea when asked what their definition of academic success was:

Dawn: It's not about getting good grades, well, for me, it's going to school and knowing you learned something.

Billy: My mom always said that learning and failing is better than cheating and passing. I mean, what do you learn if you cheat? You don't. You may learn what an A looks like or what a word looks like, but...

Q: So grades are not the only indicator of academic success?

Billy: A grade is just a number that they try and put on what you learn. It's not really what you know.

Wade emphasized the same point by saying, "You learn from everything you do. There is some form of scholarship in everything you learn and grow from. Even in your failures, you learn and grow from them." Bobby, interviewed at the beginning of his senior year in college (he served a two year mission), said, "I really feel that, to me, it was just doing the best I could. That was success for me."

Shawn believes academic success is based on how much information you retain or how you use the information you were taught. “Knowing stuff should be you wanting to teach people what you know and just you wanting to have the joy of someone else knowing what you know.” He also stated, “I don’t want to draw everything back to God, but how I see life is through God and Jesus Christ, so the way I see it, we can’t take our physical belongings to heaven with us, so through all the schooling—you want to get all the education you can on Earth. So the way I see it, did you better yourself, did you broaden your mind, better your mind and use that to help everyone that you can because that is the only thing you can take with you when you die.” Bobby explains:

I just think that the focus of our religion has is to learn about God and His plan. His plan does involve academics—not grades, but to gain knowledge. And that’s a big deal, to gain knowledge. As we gain this secular knowledge, we also learn a lot about Heavenly Father’s plan. We see academics as all the same. For instance, I am studying a lot of stuff about the Earth. But all the things I am studying about the Earth, it just proves to me that I do have a Heavenly Father. When I study science, it’s the same thing. It just can’t be an accident. It just can’t be. So, that’s the whole point. Of course, we study the scriptures and everything like that, but knowledge in itself is very important. That is what we are taking after this life—nothing else. So that is why it’s so important we gain as much knowledge as possible—it’s not a race, but it is important. And it makes life easier the more knowledge we have.

Jordan agrees, saying, “Now, my definition is not quite so grade oriented as much as it is what I have actually learned and how I can put it into practice.”

Most of the respondents who had completed high school agreed that success was not found in grades, but in learning. Most of the college students (or soon-to-be college students) I interviewed took the same level—Advanced Placement—classes. For those that were not math inclined, calculus was the turning point in their definition of academic success. Tabitha said, “For me, I think of academic success as getting good grades, but my senior year of high school, my perspective changed some. I think, now, even if your grade is not necessarily great but you are trying your hardest—in calculus, for example, then you are academically successful.” Her brother, John, said something similar. He made a C in calculus his senior year. “When I found out a C was what it was, I was excited.” He also said that he thought it was going to be worse. His parents were just as excited as he was because they saw him trying.

When asked how they thought they were succeeding (or did succeed) in high school, all students felt that they succeeded. Rene, interviewed the summer before her junior year in college, said that she did set some goals that she did not meet and that bothered her a little because she felt she could have worked harder, but she admits that she did the best she could at the time. That seemed to be reiterated in all the interviews.

While student definition of academic success seemed as if it was based on grades, after further discussion, it became clear that learning was the goal, not grades. This idea of success seems in line with the ideal goal of school; teachers, usually, want students to learn the material, not just cram for a test in order to get a grade. Because the church emphasizes learning, Mormon students seem to be successful. They are learning for a greater purpose: eternity.

### *Student Perception of Parental Definition of Academic Success*

Emma's response (she was the only college graduate and married female interviewed. She is a public school teacher in Provo.) was typical of all student respondents:

They would always tell me to do my best. They were never the type to ground me if I got anything lower than an A. They always said, "As long as you're doing your best, that's all we care about." Umm...they also emphasized that being a student was a full time job. You should put your studies first at this time in your life. So to them, academic success was doing your best and concentrating so you could make it later in life.

Abby (interviewed during her first year in cosmetology school) had a similar response. She went on to say, "My parents were like, 'You mess up sometimes and that's just the way life is. Sometimes you just don't do good and it's okay.'"

Most respondents admitted that their parents knew whether they were putting forth their best efforts. Sarah and Leilani's interview is representative:

Sarah: My parents always expected a lot from me because I always gave a lot. They expected A's because that's what I expected. But my sister, they know she struggles in some things, but they see that she worked hard, so a B is okay for her.

Leilani: Like my mom tried to put me in summer school because I got a B in math but it was because I didn't want to do better. So I did better.

Q: So when your parents know you can do better, do they push you to do better?

Leilani: No, they push me to be my best, not better.

When good grades did not appear on report cards, Justin said, “If they could see me putting in the effort, then they would probably do whatever they needed to do to help me and be as supportive as possible. The only real negative, I would say, is they showed sincere disappointment if there was a bad grade and it was my fault.” In the case of Lacy, interviewed at the beginning of her ninth grade year, Justin’s “whatever they needed to do” translates into “They would try and get me some help, like a tutor.”

Because students and parents share a religion, they have the same beliefs. Grades are not the important outcome of education; learning is.

#### *Parental Definition of Academic Success*

One of the questions on the parent survey mailed to Mormon families asked for their definition of academic success. Most respondents said that success in academics was more than just getting good grades. Kristine’s and Wayne’s parents said that success was “the ability for a person to learn and understand all that he can to become a better person. We all have different abilities to do well in different areas.” Tabitha’s, John’s and Matt’s parents agree:

It [academic success] is best measured by how much one has been stretched to a level harder than they thought they were capable of. This measurement varies with each of our children depending upon their natural abilities. When we see our children put forth a great deal of effort, time, and use of resources to help in their studies, even if they receive a lower grade, we still feel that they have been successful.

All parents indicated that academic success, to them, was doing the best possible job. Often, parents mentioned setting goals and working toward those goals as being an



aspect of success. Mitch and Allison's mom said academic success was, "to be focused on an academic goal, like completing college, then to go about that goal with integrity and a hope of serving your God and family with your education." Her response is representative of the others who discussed goals as an attribute to success; there is a higher purpose to gaining an education.

All parents indicated that, while their children may not make perfect grades, they are successful based on their definition of success: they try hard. Most of the reasons for this are grounded in the theological beliefs of the Mormon Church. This seems to be transferred to subsequent generations. When asked how successful they were as high school students, those parents who grew up in the church indicated they were successful while those who did not grow up in the church indicated that they could have been more successful.

In short, the parental definition of academic success is just as the students thought it would be: doing one's best to learn, not necessarily earning good grades.

#### *Student Perception of Parental Goals for the Student*

Most students indicated that their parents had the same goals for them as they had for themselves. All students said graduating high school, getting into a good college, if not one of the three BYU campuses, then a college with an Institute Program, graduating from college with a degree in something the student enjoyed, getting married and having a family were all goals that were common to both students and their parents. In addition, being as successful as possible was also common. Sarah and Leilani illustrate this point:

Sarah: It wasn't like, "Okay, you are going to be a doctor so you have to work hard..." It was, "Work hard now so you can do whatever you want." They were

like, “I’m going to help you now so that you are able to make the decision to do whatever you want to make you happy. That’s the goal we both had, I think.

Q: So you could have decided to be a rocket scientist, or...

Sarah: Anything...

Q: Or a janitor...

Leilani: If that was what made me happy.

Sarah: But they do have expectations to do our best.

Leilani: Like if my lifelong dream was to be a garbage collector, they would support that as long as it made me happy and helped me in other areas of my life. But if I wanted to go and be a neurosurgeon or whatever, they may not have been able to help me with school or anything, but they would help me in other areas, you know.

Sarah: And I think, like, your parents do have expectations for you...

Leilani: They wouldn’t want you to be a garbage collector because you thought it was easy...

Sarah: Yeah, if they thought I was doing it because I was scared of school or didn’t want to do something, they would definitely counsel me against it and ask if that was really what I wanted. And if it was, they would help. If it wasn’t, they would help me find what I did want. Parents have been really supportive in whatever we wanted to do, but I don’t think they would have been if we wanted to be porn stars (laughter).

Leilani: A lot of students in the art program have parents who want them to do something more academic, but my mom, there’s been times when she not really

downed it, but just made sure that was really what I wanted to do. And for me, what I have done with my art education, I can do it with a family, and I can do it without. I can gauge my work however I want; I'll do my own stuff. And I don't necessarily need a degree to be an artist; it depends a lot on your portfolio, but taking these classes and getting a degree will only help me be a better artist. And my parents have supported that.

Sarah: And I think, too, something that is pushed in the church and in my family is to be the best you can. Be the best janitor you can be. Be the best whoever you can be. Like she said, she doesn't have to go to school, but she is because she wants to be better. And that's why we do a lot of the things we do. Try to be the best we can.

Perhaps John sums it up, "That I would go to college, get an education and a good job and be a success on my own terms."

Beyond being successful on their own terms, it is interesting to note that the goals parents had for their students as perceived by the students were gender-specific. Most of the young men mentioned that they thought their parents wanted them to at least see, "...that serving a mission is something that I needed to do" (Brian). The other young men said that their parents had it as a goal for their sons. "Not just out of the sense of duty, but my father served a mission and he knew all of the blessings that came from it just in every aspect of his life" (Justin). Justin did serve a mission. "[It] has blessed my future and helped me in so many ways: spiritual, physical, practical ways. It has just blessed me incredibly." Justin and Jordan agree that their parents had three main goals for them both: to serve a mission, to get married to a good person so you can live a good

life, and get a college education. Justin and Jordan were the only brother/sister pair to say that their parents wanted both genders to serve a mission. The young women said that they felt their parents' goal for them was to get a good college education so that, when they got married, if the family needed them to work, they could earn a decent living. Marriage was assumed in all cases.

In addition to these goals, Brian said that he felt his parents wanted him and his siblings to, "...Gain a testimony," and "help others."

#### *Parental Goals for the Student*

Sheridan's parents (she was not able to be interviewed due to her upcoming marriage) response was typical of all parental responses. "To find a companion who will love and honor your children, who will love and honor their Father in heaven and the church who is educated and a hard worker and will raise a wonderful family like we have." Others illuminated this further by indicating that their goals for their children involved character. Bobby's, Brian's and Rene's parents:

Most of our goals for them involve character: be kind to others; choose good friends; work hard in school and in the workplace; be honest; try hard; have integrity, live according to the values you believe in. Our desire for each of them is to marry a good person who shares their beliefs in eternal marriage and family. We hope they will choose to serve God and worship Him through their obedience to His Gospel. We have these goals for them because we have lived long enough to see that the happiest, most successful person is one who follows the Savior Jesus Christ. Having a gospel-centered home has blessed our lives and instilled virtues in our children that have kept them on a path to happiness. We have had

our ups and downs, but for the most part, we have had a happy home life and have found joy in one another.

Besides these aspects, all of the parents indicated that they wanted their children to gain more than just a high school diploma, and to serve others in the same way that Jesus did. These aspects of parental goals are all taught within the church. All parents indicated that they felt their children agreed with these goals because they are taught at home and reinforced at church.

### *Student Personal Goals*

All but one of the students interviewed said that in high school, their goals were to go to BYU (either Provo, Idaho or Hawaii) or another school with a strong Institute Program which is a seminary-like program for young adult singles. All of them, regardless of gender, wanted to earn a degree. The level of degree ranged from a cosmetology license, from Abby who did not want to go to a college, to a Ph.D. While a few students did not know what they wanted to be, they did say a college degree was important. Those who did not know what they wanted to be also had a goal of figuring out what they wanted to do with their lives. All of them wanted to get decent jobs, not for the money, but so they could support their families. All indicated that they wanted to do something they would enjoy. All of the young men said they wanted to serve a mission when they were in high school, and four of the young women indicated that it was a strong goal. Two of the young women said they would serve if they were not married after they graduated from college. The other young women said they did not want to serve a mission until they were married and could serve with their husbands.

When asked how they formed those goals, all said their families and their church helped them. Most students said they were following an example set for them, either by their parents and/or by their older siblings. Two indicated that former teachers influenced their goals. Billy discussed both parents and teachers:

Billy: for me, my dad and my uncle both have Master's. Technically, my dad could teach accounting. He'd have to go back and get a little education stuff, and so I just, like, why not teach? People say that people who can't do anything teach, but that isn't true. People who do a lot are the teachers. There're a lot of people who I look up to that are teachers. Like on my CD thing. Most of the people I acknowledged are teachers. I just found out that my 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher became Oklahoma Teacher of the Year. And even though she is not in Rothrock anymore, I thought that was cool because she is responsible for changing my aspect on school. I want the Ph.D. so that if I become sick of the high school kids (he wants to be a high school music teacher of some sort; he is undecided as to what sort.), I can go up and teach people how to get to where I am. Show them that they can be up there with me in the next five years.

This idea of role models became an emergent theme in my research. When I asked Brian what kind of example he thought his parents set for him, he said they were the best he could get, along with his brothers and sisters. Jordan and Justin also talked about how their parents were their role models.

But, at church, I know my mom is my role model and I look up to her for everything she has done in her life and for me in my life. And the fact that they have these things that they have come through—these trials or struggles—and I

know for me, my family goes way back in the church, back to the pioneers. And they came through so much—all those trials and hardships—and they stayed strong in their faith. And seeing that helps me to know that if you just trust in God, He will help you through, but you have to put your faith in Him. (Jordan)

Justin agreed that his mom—and his dad—were role models in his life, but he also included other LDS members. “And the reason I want to be like these people is because they are happy. It’s not necessarily that they are the greatest at something, and it’s not even necessarily that just exclusively they are LDS that I want to be like them, but it’s the fact that they are happy.” Other students indicated the same thing: role models helped them learn how to live their lives. They are “the people who influence me the most and help me get through stuff” (Kristine). Emma discusses this aspect of role models:

Um...my older brothers were role models. From them, I knew what to do. My parents were role models. Dad is a very, very smart man. He always encouraged me to learn. You know, he bought a telescope and we would look through it together and he would point things out. It was just things like that. Teachers were good role models for me; that’s why I became a teacher. Church leaders. I remember a time at camp. I was so tired and it had been raining all day long. We had gone on this long, muddy hike, and it was SO wet that my feet, when I took off my shoes, they were just prunes. They looked like old meat. It was disgusting! And I was just so sore. And it was bishop’s night where all the bishops came. And I am sitting there trying to rub my feet and one of the bishopric members just came up and he started rubbing my feet. He was just a good example and I will always remember that because my feet were so stinky. I

mean they were just nasty! (laughs) And he still rubbed them. I think that's just an example of service when you can have that kind of role model is awesome. I think it goes on to a much higher level to the Brethren. You hear their stories of sacrifice and service and yet they still have humor. And it's not all hell, brimstone and fire. There is happiness.

Emma implied something mentioned in other interviews: because people were role models to her, she strives to become a role model to others. According to Justin, this all goes back to the faith LDS members have.

...it goes back to our faith in Jesus Christ. We truly believe that if—salvation is not a cheap experience. You can't just say, "Okay, I believe," and that's it. We believe that Christ said, "Come and follow me." And we really believe in that and that we should really do all we can. Christ was the one that was loving to everybody and had open arms. He loved everybody—hated the sin but loved the sinner. Um...so we really take that personally because, and here's the key: it blesses so many people's lives. I know in high school there were so many people who would have made fun of me for the fact that I didn't drink or that I was a prude or whatever, but there would be quiet moments in the locker room where they would say, "You know, I know I have said mean things about you, but actually, I really respect you and I appreciate the fact that you do this." And that makes me feel like there is something good out there. And to me, that is so worth it to be that way—to be kind to everyone.

To be a role model is important to all participants. This idea goes back to the belief that one must do good works, in addition to maintaining faith, in order to get into heaven.



Emma said that, because the Prophet and Apostles have a love of learning—and they are a model to live by—parents in turn follow, and this influences the children. From Brian and John:

Q: How important is it to you to set an example?

Brian: I consider it a priority. Sometimes, I feel like if I don't, no one else will. Like, even if I just affect one person, that one person wouldn't get it without me doing the right thing. So I think it's really important.

John: All my life I have been taught that people are watching who know I am Mormon. And I may not know that they know that I am Mormon, but they are watching and, just going back to visit teachers from last year. I didn't know that some of them knew that I was Mormon until they asked when I was leaving for my mission. I was excited to tell them about it, and hopefully I was always setting a good example and paying attention to them.

The goals of parents and students are similar: live a good life, marry a good Mormon, and be a role model. These are actively taught in the church according to participants.

### *Academic Integrity*

Role models give students an example by which to live. Role modeling includes instilling in students honesty. Role models can be seen in the emergent theme of academic integrity. Wade mentioned that one of the things he noticed over the course of ninth and tenth grades was that more people slacked off, and Brian indicated that he realized his senior year that more students were cheating. Most of the students interviewed agreed with Billy's statement, "My mom always said that learning and

failing is better than cheating and passing.” This seems to support the idea that learning is the only thing a Mormon can take to heaven.

Bobby said that he had people wanting to copy his work all the time. He said he became a master at deciphering if a student really needed help or just wanted his paper. Those who needed help, he would help, but he would not loan out his paper to anyone. Having all advanced classes helped. Allison and Mitch, another brother/sister interview pair (Allison was interviewed the day before she was to start her senior year of college; Mitch was just beginning college.) agreed that cheating was widespread. Mitch said that it was extremely difficult not to let his friends borrow his paper, but eventually, they learned not to ask. Allison put it this way:

For me, I guess, it always came back to my mom and the things she taught me.

She would always say that integrity was doing what was right when it’s hard and no one is looking. And she is so right. I remember one time I lied to my mom once when I was a little kid, and I felt SO bad and it took me so long to be able to go back and tell her that what I said wasn’t true. I learned that it was best to tell the truth at first and not have to bear that pain...For me, dishonesty isn’t worth it.

Jordan and Justin faced the same problems. Jordan said when she refused to give her paper to people, often, “They would laugh at me a lot and call me a goody-goody...And sometimes they would get to the point where they would stop asking.” Justin also indicated that he was made fun of, but, “People really respected the fact that we really worked hard and that we could help them.”

Brian might disagree. He and John recounted two instances. The first deals with their calculus class.

Brian: I learned a lot from her (his teacher), too. I got to the point that, the people who were getting A's were the biggest cheaters of all time. I'd say, maybe four of us weren't cheating (he lists them; all but one are Mormon), and maybe a couple of others. The rest would just copy.

Q: Do you think (the teacher) knew?

Brian: Oh yeah. Like, when she got the AP test results back, she knew. But there was nothing she could do. Unless she could prove it. She could go down the list and determine who cheated. What did she say about cheating?

John: We were just talking about the results, and she said that if they made an A in the class, they should get better than a 1 or a 2 on the exam. But I got a C and a 1 and didn't cheat. And she knew it.

Brian: I would say that 15 kids got A's in all her classes all year. I'd say about six of those were cheaters and didn't deserve it...I found out about a lot of cheating my senior year. Especially with Sparknotes. Mrs. Arnold couldn't stand that. But people would use them and use big words that we all knew they didn't know, so we knew they were cheating. I respected this one kid; he was a good kid. So I told this one kid, "Man, I bet he used Sparknotes." And the other kid found out about it and told Mrs. Arnold that I was spreading rumors about him. And I was like, "Oh my gosh!" So she took me out into the hall one day before class, and it took like 15 minutes. She said something like she had heard that I was saying stuff—that's why (one of our friends) jokes with me all the time and calls me a rumor spreader. It's totally stupid. So she asked me about the situation and she asked if I could prove that he cheated. I told her I didn't have any

evidence in my pocket, but that there were words that he used that he couldn't really know otherwise. And so what I did was, I took one of the books that I knew frontward and backward, *1984*, and I was just going to see what Sparknotes said and compare it to what the kids said. And he pretty much quoted it. So she accused me of cheating. But I told her that I knew the book in depth. So she brought him out. She told me to tell him what I said. So I told him what I said, and I apologized and said that I felt that he had gained an unfair advantage. She asked me if I knew anyone else who was cheating. Of course I did. One of my better acquaintances from band had gotten the book out during class and had it out in front of his notebook during the discussion. This is one of the kids that ate lunch in your classroom. And I was like, "Put that away." I told him he didn't need that. And this is the day before she pulls me into the hallway. I wasn't going to say anything, but then she asked. And only one other person saw him. I didn't want to betray him. The class kind of knew what I was talking about. One day, we found his Sparknotes book with his name on it. We had it delivered to him during that class, but she was in the principal's office and all the other kids tried to hide the book from her. She just made me feel horrible. But he did get in trouble. I was just surprised how everyone took up for him. I didn't speak the rest of the time in her class. And she ended up telling him that I told. I thought that was shady. I didn't talk the rest of the year beyond my points. No one respected my opinion anymore. Telling the truth was the wrong thing for them.

### *Extra- and Co-Curricular Involvement*

Another aspect of academic success, according to the review of literature, was involvement in extra- and co-curricular activities. All of the students interviewed were involved in either sports, vocal, band, NHS, or some other school sponsored club. In addition, many of the students took lessons of some sort after school. Involvement in these activities did not cause many problems for Mormon students, although Sarah said, “My sister, though, doesn’t really get to do a lot of stuff when our church meets on Tuesday (two wards switch youth activity nights from year to year); she has volleyball and stuff like that which is sometimes more important than sewing pajama pants.”

Most students indicated that their coaches and their instructors for their music-related classes, sponsors for clubs, or teachers for lessons were role models and encouraged them to do their best. Most indicated that these people were flexible when important church activities came up.

Only three of the students indicated they held a job during the school year. Most of the others worked in the summer or worked on an as-needed basis for their parents. Those that did work, worked so that they could pay for school or their mission. They did not see a part-time job as funding for spending sprees. The three who worked on a regular basis indicated that they deposited most of their money into a savings account. They indicated they did not work more than 25 hours per week during the school year, but the average was 20.

In the interview, I did ask the boys about their involvement in Boy Scouts, another form of activity that requires time away from studies. All of the boys indicated that they do participate, but the levels of participation varied. Billy said that he was

involved, but, “Not very far, though. I’m not even a life. I’m a star. I twinkle (laughter).” His brother, Shawn, is farther along, but, at the time of the interview, only had one week to finish his Eagle Scout project. When asked what more he had to do, he said, “My service project! I haven’t done anything about it; I don’t even know what I am going to do!” He said his mom would be more disappointed if he didn’t get it because, “I would be the second one of her sons who hadn’t gotten it.” I asked Billy if Shawn finished, and the answer was a laughing, “No.” It would seem that, while encouraged, the Eagle Scout Award is not required.

In other households, however, the attitude toward the Eagle Scout is different. John and Matt are brothers. John received his Eagle Scout his sophomore year. He built a patio area for the special needs students at a local elementary school in honor of one of the students who passed away. Matt, a freshman, has a couple of ideas for his service project. All he has to do is carry one of them out. He has until he is 18. Brian and Bobby, also brothers, both earned their Eagle Scout Award, as did their older brother. All of the other males interviewed earned theirs. In fact, Wayne and Wade worked on their project together. When I asked Sarah and Leilani why the girls were not encouraged to do scouting, they said that many of the Boy Scout principles were similar to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They believe that the Girl Scout program may not have the same rigor as their Young Women’s program, although neither knew for sure. None of the males interviewed could answer that question.

The students in this study consciously define “success” through their Mormon beliefs. Despite the fact that they seem to be operating from a different compass, they are definitely meeting the criteria for school success: they enrolled in pre-AP or AP classes;

they believed they were successful in those classes; they participated in extra curricular activities. However, for them, success was more than just earning a grade. Success was learning something that they could take to heaven with them.

### Involvement in the Mormon Church

By far, the students interviewed for this study said that the greatest influence on their success in school came from their church. Families are important, but the church, students feel, influences the family unit; thus, the theme of church involvement covers many sub themes. Even though most of the students interviewed did not grow up in Rothrock, their church experiences were very similar because, as Tabitha said, “The church in Greenwood is exactly the same as the one in Rothrock. It’s just a different building and a different set of people. All the lessons, manuals, teachings, beliefs and organizations are exactly the same in every Mormon Church in the world.” This consistency, it could be argued, may be one reason for the church’s success.

All students interviewed indicated that they attended church for a three hour block of time each Sunday, attended seminary each weekday morning for an hour during the school year before school, and participated in Family Home Evenings once a week. One student, Amy, interviewed two months into her freshman year, reported going to church twice on Sundays. “I go to two wards on Sunday because my grandma is in the other ward and she has Alzheimer’s and they just moved here not too long ago and she’ll get lost and people don’t know her yet. And my uncle is mentally handicapped so I go and help them out. So I go six hours on Sunday.” In addition, students also mentioned Mutual, a once a week activity night, monthly dances hosted by the church, and other activities for youth that the church encouraged. On average, students spent 15 hours per

week on church related activities. Personal prayers and scripture were also important to students. While students indicated that their parents encouraged participation, none of the students felt forced to go. Marie, Leilani's younger sister who was interviewed two months into her freshman year of high school, said:

Well, except when we were, like, little, she's never forced us to, you know, not date until we are 16 or you don't have to come to church. She's let us make our own choices and figure out for ourselves why we like the church, why we want to go, and it makes me want to go. I think that's a lot of it, and whenever we do family home evenings, they always let us know why it's important to them, so that it'll be important to us, but I like how they never force us to do everything—that we figure it out by ourselves and I still make pretty good choices...

Most indicated that if they did not want to attend, they did not have to. Wade shared, "They [parents] provide the opportunity, but they also provide the encouragement for me to go." Several students reported times when they wished to stay home instead of participate in activity night or go to seminary. While they said that their parents might be disappointed, they would also understand. Lacy said, "It [church] makes me feel good when I go, and in seminary in the mornings, I always have a better day when I go and all my friends are there and I have fun." When Rene was posed with the hypothetical question, "What would happen if your parents forced you to go?" replied by saying that she would probably find a way to rebel, but she admits that even then, she would get some good out of it.



## *Seminary*

One of the key features, according to participants, of church involvement was their attendance at seminary each weekday morning during the school year. For most students in Rothrock, seminary began at 6:30 a.m. and lasted for almost an hour. However, for students involved in band in Rothrock, seminary began even earlier at 6:00 a.m. since band started at 7:00. For Bobby, this was not difficult. “I knew it was important. I think one thing that helped me was I had great friends, too. That’s always, I was really close to other members of the church who were my age. It was great to get to learn the Gospel AND be with your friends in the morning.”

Shawn defined seminary as “Daily guidance for the youth of the church.” He went on to explain the importance. “You can easily forget what you stand for in a lot of the trials you have during the day with people constantly questioning your religion. Every morning you can get a little snippet of why you live the way you do and what you believe and it just strengthens your testimony.”

This aspect of strengthening and building testimony is an important aspect of Mormon belief. These testimonies “give members a chance to express gratitude to the Lord for help in difficult times, bear witness to the Savior’s love, explain why they believe the gospel, thank family and ward members for their love and support, and talk about struggles they may be facing (Riess & Bigelow, 2005, p. 100). Marie says the building of a testimony is important because

We live a lot differently from everyone else and there is so much pressure 24/7 to be like everyone else, to be like the world, and if you are trying to be Christ-like and you don’t believe in what you have been taught, it just doesn’t make sense

and so you just want to know what you've been taught your whole life is true. To know that something this important—God, Heavenly Father—that you know as much as you can about them, it just helps you know who you are, too. Like, if I know for sure that I am cared about incredibly, like there's so many scriptures and these things that tell you how much worth you are, and if you believe that, it helps your attitude and your self-esteem and everything.

Parents share their testimonies with their children while the children are still very young. Brian says, though, "At some point, you have to form your own. It's done through prayer and studying the scriptures." Attendance at seminary helps students' understanding of their role in God's plan.

According to Tabitha, besides studying the scriptures and teachings of church leaders, "We talk about standards and principles in which we believe. It helps start off the day in a great way and helps us to remember to live the way we should every day and gain enough knowledge so that we can share our religion with others who might want to learn about it." Marie says that, by the end of each seminary class, "You always know He cares for you." Most students agree that this sets a positive tone for the school day. When asked if they ever felt like not going, all students said that, while they were not happy about getting up that early in the morning, they always looked forward to the lessons taught and being around their friends who shared their beliefs.

Participants also indicated that seminary influenced their academic success. Besides being awake and ready to start the day, Shawn said that seminary helped him learn how to search for the deeper meanings in other subjects, for instance,

Like in reading and studying the scriptures. I can remember in 10<sup>th</sup> grade we had to read Shakespeare. And most of the kids didn't understand that stuff and my teacher has to give bonus for kids to interpret this stuff and I'm sitting in the back and I know what's going on! It was because of the scriptures. I could look between the lines and see what was going on. It was a lot easier. It helps you comprehend.

Most students indicated that, because of the focus of seminary, their days ran smoother. Billy said they were "shielded from the drama of high school" to an extent, and it helped them make smarter decisions because they are reminded of how they are supposed to live their lives. Sarah and Leilani said it helped them learn how to study. Because students are responsible for "homework" and memory work in seminary, and because they did not want to let their church leaders down, they often had to work harder in seminary than in school.

In addition to these more tangible aspects of academic success, most students agree that seminary helped them develop self-worth and learn how to set goals. Marie says that, throughout the programs for children which include Primary and Seminary, "We are always told, 'You are a child of God' and how special we are. It seems like they tell us that ALL the time." Emma reinforced this by discussing how self worth was always emphasized. "You have a Father in heaven who loves you and you have a Savior who knows you personally." She said that this helped her like herself more and allowed her to make better decisions. She felt this was part of why she is successful. Abby agreed, and said, "Another thing that I think molded me into the person I am is that we did a lot of service and stuff. That was something that, especially our bishop pushed. If

there was anything in our town that needed doing, our bishop would always volunteer the youth group.” Perhaps Rene summed it up best: “Confidence. The church gave me this. I can do the right thing, and I can get through anything.”

Emma discussed the role of goal setting in seminary. She said that daily goals, often based on scripture mastery, were established. The young men’s and young women’s programs reinforced the idea of goal setting, too, so that students can see that they can succeed. She discussed how this helped contribute to her self-esteem. She could see herself accomplishing goals.

Primary, the children’s program for ages three-11, was where goal setting was introduced. Jordan discussed their formation and importance:

For me, you know, from the very beginning, your goal is to be baptized at age 8 and that’s really the first goal. Our parents were really big on setting goals and achieving them. Without goals, I think you are kind of lost because you have nothing to strive for. So, asking what you want to accomplish in life, you know, I wanted to go to college and go to a foreign country and study. And being able to accomplish those, when things get tough, I can look back and see what it is I have already accomplished and I have this goal that I am working toward. It’ll be alright.

Leilani and Sarah talked about the different awards children could earn in Primary if they achieved their goals:

Leilani: Yeah, because we had, oh, what was that award? The Gospel in Action Award? It was like a mini thing. You had to...

Sarah: Goals are always stressed because in Primary, you had the goal of memorizing the Articles of Faith—

Leilani: --and the goal to read your scriptures every day.

Sarah: Our church is really big on goals.

Leilani: Yeah, and they give you a little chart. “Mark every day you read your scriptures or everyday you say your prayers.”

Sarah: I would say that goals are a huge part of what we are taught.

Leilani: I think also, because a lot of, I don’t know if this is something all churches have or if this is just our term, but we have the term of eternal perspective which is kind of like seeing the big picture. That’s basically what it is. I think that we are taught that whenever we are setting goals to look at the eternal perspective. Is having a goal to stay with the latest fashions really going to help you with the rest of your life, you know, when you look at the eternal perspective? Will this goal help you? And certain goals like choosing to live the law of chastity, you know, living chaste and moral life, that goal will help us to, you know, for obvious reasons, you know.

Justin furthered this idea of goals and support from both church and family. “I like that the church does set goals for you—rather they say that this should be a goal because it will contribute to your success—and they present it in such a way that you can see the benefit so that you learn how to set your own goal.” Marie agreed, and connects goal setting to the idea of positive role models. When asked how the church contributed to goal setting, she replied, “I think by example, like you see people who are successful

through being faithful to the Lord and doing everything He says and that's how they achieve their goals.”

Besides encouraging goals in church and in the home, Brian discussed the reinforcement of goal setting in Cub and Boy Scouts. “So boys get it more.” However, the idea of goal setting was reinforced in the Young Men's and Young Women's programs, too, as well as in seminary.

The students in Rothrock felt that seminary, and primary before that, was a contributing factor to their success. They felt that the sacrifice of time, especially early in the morning, would prepare them for the sacrifices they would have to make later in life, like when serving a mission. The lessons learned also meant more to them. They did not take the lessons for granted. One of the most important lessons taught to them, outside of the scriptures, was how to set goals.

#### *Contact with Mormon Youth Leaders and Role Models*

Interestingly, only four studies mentioned in the review of the literature discussed the importance of community organization leaders, such as church leaders. Reiss (1998), Reis and McCoach (2000) and Payne (2005) all discuss the need for adult role models in a child's life, especially a child who lives in poverty. Heath and McLaughlin (1994) mention the need for community-based organization to have adults in charge who care for the children and are personable. However, all the literature reviewed on community organizations that contribute to success should have good leaders. If not for good leadership, surely the organization would fail.

Leaders were of great importance to the students interviewed for this study. Role models were discussed at length under “Student Personal Goals” and will only be

summarized here. Students felt that role models, especially parents as role models, were important guides on how to live their own lives. From their parents, students formed their testimonies and beliefs. Parents helped students form and achieve goals, and offered encouragement and support throughout the process. Church leaders make up the other group of role models mentioned by students.

Tabitha said that her leaders have always been fun and caring, and have taught her important skills. She goes on to say:

Youth leaders, I think kind of play the role of parent and friend. There are other kids at church who aren't as blessed as I am to have such supportive parents, and our leaders really step in for them and give them rides to church, help them with Young Women's projects and are really there for them. I know our leaders worry a lot about what we (the youth) will become when we get older. They have a responsibility to teach us to make the right choices when we are off on our own. I think that motivates them, and they expect us to stay true to what they have taught.

It is important to note that church leaders in the Mormon Church do not get paid for their time or their services, so the only true benefits that come from this for the adults is cultivating young people to become moral adults.

Abby said that the church leaders “encourage us by helping us to participate in the programs which our church has set up for youth. We have activities to help us learn many different talents and abilities. They also take great interest in what each of us is personally involved in whether it be through school—music, sports, classes—or work.” This interest and encouragement are the motivation that keeps most of the students going.

Kristine said that she expects her parents to keep encouraging her, but when she hears it from her youth leaders, it means more to her. Justin discussed the same thing. “I can also think of Bishop Prather. He was at every single football game my senior year. And then every Sunday, he would be like, ‘Hey! Great game on Friday!’ That was cool for me because here was someone that I loved and respected and looked up to, and he was interested in me. I think that was pretty typical of most youth leaders and bishops.”

Bobby talked about the different personalities the youth leaders possessed and how they were all different, but, “One thing I think they all had in common is they didn’t do everything. They would put the responsibility off on us like they were supposed to. They would guide us and help us, but we planned everything.” Emma said her leaders “helped strengthen my testimony. Ummm...it helped me grow spiritually,” by allowing the youth to think for themselves and giving them a time and a place to discuss their concerns and questions. Kristine elaborated, saying that they were always available for her to talk to. “I’ve gone to them before with some things that have been going on and they will just let me talk and cry. And they’ll just let me go. They’ll try to help me figure a way to fix it or to say something to someone if they hurt me.”

Church leaders, especially youth leaders, are kind, caring and compassionate. They take time out for the students and actually listen to their concerns. The leaders the participants discussed treat students as if they were members of the same family. In fact, several participants mentioned this idea. Wade’s response was representative. “Oftentimes, they’ll use something that happened in their past that really makes us see that this really works and um...it often gets to be a very emotional thing sometimes when



you are getting to know this person and you aren't just someone who goes to your church. You really know them. They are like a family member.”

When asked how her youth leaders encouraged her, Allison had this to say:

Well, again, through example. I had Sister Taylor (Emma and Nikki's mother).

You know Emma. Sister Taylor was my seminary teacher my freshman year, and

I looked up to her a lot. She was always so cheerful and bubbly and kind woman

I had ever met. I mean, every single kid who came into seminary, she was so

excited to see them. She had so many kind, genuine things to say to them, and I

was amazed that anyone could be like that always. And so, I want to be like her.

And even now, it has been so many years since I was a freshman in high school,

and still, I want to be like her. I still think to myself, ‘What would Sister Taylor

do today?’ or ‘How would she treat this person?’ I sometimes in my prayers will

ask to be more like Sister Taylor someone who is kind to each person.

Clearly, role modeling on behalf of church leaders is an important aspect to these students and to the goals they set for themselves.

### *The Mormon Family Focus*

Because all the students interviewed discussed the importance of having a supportive and encouraging family, I felt it important to explore the characteristics of the families of the students interviewed. All students interviewed came from two parent homes, and all interviewed had at least two siblings. All of the students were born into the church, but said they chose to become members. While some of the students' LDS histories dated back to Joseph Smith, most had parents who converted. Abby's dad

converted when she was still a baby, but it was not Abby's mom who had the greatest influence on his conversion.

Abby: Well, kinda, but it was mostly, what got my dad really thinking, because my mom would try to take us kids to church and stuff when we were little and stuff. And what mostly got my dad to thinking was the Relief Society...The Relief Society in the ward that we lived in went out on a limb to make sure that we had everything we needed. Like on Christmas I remember, the Relief Society...like we were really poor; we didn't have any money, and they gave us a Christmas. Like they did all this stuff for us. And my dad was like, 'They don't even know us. Why are they doing this?' And that's what really got him thinking.

Mitch and Allison told a similar story about their mother. Kay, their mother, had parents who believed they should go to church every Sunday. It did not matter to Kay's parents which church they attended, so long as they went. When she was ten, Kay was introduced to the LDS church. While she liked the church, her parents would not let her join until she was 18.

Mitch: They didn't have any hard feelings toward any church, they just wanted her to be old enough to choose for herself.

Q: So she was introduced to the church when she was ten, so how did she keep going?

Allison: Umm...the missionaries came to their house and my grandparents listened and my mom and all her sisters were interested and so they started going to church every Sunday. My grandparents would just drop them off; they

wouldn't go. So, my mom and her sisters went to church all eight years every Sunday.

The other interviewees with converted family members had similar stories: an interest in the church was shown, respect for that interest was exhibited, and a member was converted. Wade was the only one interviewed who had a family member question the choice of joining the church. His mother's parents divorced when she was young, and she went to live with her father, an atheist. While raised with an atheistic view, she talked to the missionaries and went to a few church dances. At a Halloween dance, she met Wade's father, became involved in the church and was baptized. When asked what her father thought about her conversion, he said that his grandfather "made her go see a psychiatrist to see if she was joining a cult or not. She was declared sane..."

Besides church membership, students noted other differences between their families and those of their friends.

Q: Tell me, if you can think back and compare the relationship that you have with your parents to the relationship that some of your other friends had with their parents.

Justin: Well, I really loved my parents for the fact that my friends always wanted to come over to my house. It was always clean, there was always food there, my parents were nice. But I wouldn't say that our parents were the "cool" parents; you couldn't do whatever you wanted—we had rules. It was never so strict or bad that our friends didn't want to come over. Honestly, my friends wanted to come over to my house because it was a good atmosphere, and I liked that.

Jordan: My friends liked to come over, too. My mom was like their mom, too. But I know that I had friends who didn't talk to their parents. The fact that I could freely talk to my parents about anything anytime I wanted; I was comfortable going to them with a problem and they would be supportive and help me through it. They wouldn't treat me like I was horrible or tell me to go away because they had their own problems; they would be like, "Okay, what can we do to fix it?" And, or, "Oh, good! Let's go celebrate!" Whatever the case may be. I had a great relationship with my parents whereas others didn't have a relationship at all.

Justin: I'd say the number one difference, because most kids in Rothrock had good families and stable homes, but I would say the number one difference is that my parents have stuck together. There wasn't this divorce we never had to choose whose house to go to. We had one home. A lot of my friends had parents who were divorced, and that was tough on them.

Justin's and Jordan's family is very similar to other LDS families. Abby agreed, and even said that the closeness of her family amazed her friends. All of the students reported that they saw at least one parent every morning before school, and after school, their mothers would ask about their day. All students said that their mothers wanted more than just one word answers and that their mothers seemed genuinely interested in even mundane things. While several of the students interviewed held part-time jobs or were involved in activities that kept them away from home at dinner time, all reported sitting down with their entire family on a regular basis for dinner (at least 3 times per

week) and having family prayers before bedtime. Most families also conducted a scripture study before this prayer.

All students interviewed said that both of their parents played active roles in their lives even though most of the fathers worked full time and fulfilled callings at their church that took time away from their family. Most of the mothers, on the other hand, were home when the kids were home and fulfilled the traditional female roles. Leilani said, "...my mom always taught me to work hard. She was very verbal about it and showed me how to do it and made sure that I did it. But my dad was a very good example of how to live my life." Mitch and Allison also discussed the idea of their parents being good examples. Their parents treated each other, and them, with respect and attentiveness. "But my dad, when he would get home from work, would give my mom a hug and tell her he loved her and ask how her day was. If she was making dinner or the kitchen was dirty, he would help. If she wasn't home when he got home, he would make dinner."

Rene said that her parents were always available, even though both her mom and dad were busy. She said that, no matter how minute the problem might have been, her parents would drop everything and attend to her needs. All of the students indicated that their parents, in addition to being active in their lives, were active in fulfilling callings at church. This example of hard work and faith set by the parents led to a desire on the part of the teens to perform their best in all areas, not just in school.

Another example set by the parents is that of being accepting and supportive. When I asked students what their parents' reaction would be if they (the student) came home with a bad grade, all students replied similarly to Emma. "With open arms. They

wouldn't judge. I've had failures in my life, but my family was always there to support me." Bobby and Rene, his sister, both said that their parents would have known about the bad grade before it came home on a report card because they maintained open lines of communication. Their parents asked them daily how and what they did in school. Bobby said that he and all his siblings had a desire to do well in school so as not to disappoint their parents. "We each have our strengths and weaknesses and our parents realized that. As long as we were doing our best, grades didn't matter, I don't think," Bobby said. In fact, none of the students interviewed could remember getting in trouble for bad grades.

This encouragement and support did not just extend to grades; it covered personal issues as well. Allison discussed her older brother who is not active in the church, has gotten into some trouble, and is still accepted in the family.

Allen has had a really tough life. He was into pornography when he was younger. And now he is really trying hard to stop because it's hurting his marriage, it's hurting his job, and everything. And we get together as often as we can as a family. I try to call Allen as often as I can because I know how hard it is for me to break habits, and I just think that has to be one of the hardest things for him. I also, just from the talks I have heard about pornography, I have heard how it makes the person who is addicted feel so low...My sister was talking to him the other day, and she said that it was amazing that he didn't know much about the church anymore. He isn't sure if it's true or not because if you don't keep it up everyday, it's true: you'll start to lose faith...I know he needs help and that's what families are for, and that's what the church emphasizes. That first, we go to

our families to pull us together and take care of us. And the family is eternal and that is how the Lord has set it up.

All students indicated that their families actively participated in family home evenings, usually on Monday nights. These evenings were devoted to talking about what was happening in each family member's life, what problems had arisen, playing together, studying scripture together, and praying together. In fact, four different families mentioned the father's blessing as being instrumental in their success. Allison and Mitch explain:

Allison: We always, before school starts, we have father's blessing. I don't know if anyone has told you about that, but I thought of it because one of my friends went home yesterday and got her father's blessing. Sunday night or whatever before school started, the whole family would gather in the living room with a chair in the middle and my dad would give us each a blessing before school started that we would do our best, that we would enjoy school, that we would make good friends, that our minds would be blessed, that we would study hard. And he would ask us if there was something specific that we were worried about. And I think those blessings also showed us that our parents expected us to do well and to turn to the Lord for help. Yes, they would be there, but so would the Lord. It gave me confidence when things were hard, I could remember that blessing and that I could pray.

Mitch: One thing about that is if we were ever having a hard time, we could ask. It was self-assurance. And the blessings didn't help you if you weren't prepared.

You still had to study and work, but the Lord would bring to memory the things you learned. He is not going to show you something if you haven't learned it. Kristine contrasted last year, when she did not ask for her father's blessing, to this and other years when she did. She reported feeling stressed and overwhelmed with homework last year. This year, she says that with prayer and her father's blessing, she has less homework even though the classes are a little harder.

All students interviewed said their families were close. Their parents are active in each child's life and are good role models. Open communication is key to the support and encouragement all participants discussed.

#### Lack of Gender Differences

Based on the review of youth literature published by the Mormon Church, I believed that there would be a difference between the levels of success achieved by male and female students. The youth literature clearly defined roles for each gender, and the programs developed for youth development further emphasized those roles. Females were expected to do traditional female work: sewing, cooking, etc., while males were guided into more leadership roles within the church and family. Ironically, however, the diction in the literature was not consistent with the expectations of the genders. The booklets published for males was written on a lower academic level, using simple sentences and familiar words; the booklet published for females was written at an elevated level, using compound and compound-complex sentences and more difficult words. Based on the grammar and diction of the booklets, I would expect young women to be more successful; based on the roles outlined for each gender, however, I would



expect the males to be more successful. However, based on participant self-report, there seems to be no difference in academic success among males and females.

### Community Characteristics

Most of the students interviewed grew up outside of Rothrock. Many moved to the area because of their father's job. All agree that Rothrock is a nurturing community with good schools, and many believe that Rothrock's characteristics contributed to their success in high school.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Rothrock is a "City of Character." Each month, the community focuses on a different character trait. This focus extends to most schools and businesses in the community, and banners in front of major businesses and on busy street corners, electronic signs in front of banks, newspaper and television ads and neighborhood newsletters publicize the trait. Compared to neighboring communities, most people, when asked, will say that Rothrock has a low crime rate. One of the reasons for the low crime rate could be due to the 40 or more churches that call Rothrock home.

When asked how Rothrock compared with the other communities students came from, the responses were similar. Abby, who moved to Rothrock from Wyoming, said that Rothrock has a nicer school system, and the people are nicer. Dawn and Billy reinforced this idea. At the time of the interview, Dawn had lived in Rothrock for only a few months. She moved from Moreno Valley, CA. Billy, originally from Salt Lake City, has lived in Rothrock for eight years.

Dawn: People are nicer here. The reason we moved is because we lived in a nice hoe in a nice neighborhood but my mom would never let us go outside because there were like gangs and all that stuff.

Billy: It was like that in Utah in our old neighborhood. We had like drive by shootings and stuff like that.

Q: In Salt Lake City?

Billy: Yeah, we had a gang leader across the street. A couple of our Tongan friends got into it. One of them is now back in jail.

Tabitha grew up in a suburban area just south of Rothrock. She said that Rothrock has more of a “home town feeling. There is definitely more of a sense of community and everyone strives to work together which makes everyone feel like they belong.” Dawn contrasted Moreno Valley, saying, “We were so far apart. Like, I didn’t even meet my neighbors until after we had lived in the house for about two years. Here, we didn’t even move in yet, we stepped onto the lot before we built and the neighbors came out and introduced themselves.”

This idea of community support extended beyond neighbors. John discussed his Eagle Project: “In Rothrock, though, people are so nice. Like for my Eagle Project, I had to go ask for donations. It’s a burden for someone to give a truckload of cement and stuff, but they were always really willing to help. I honestly don’t think I spent any of my own money.” For his project, he created a memorial park-like area at a local elementary school in honor of one of the special needs students who passed away. Most of the students attributed this to the moral foundation present in Rothrock.

Q: Thinking back to Rothrock and your time in high school, is there anything about the community that helped contribute to your success in school?

Justin: Yeah, I have a good answer to that. I liked the fact that there was a lot of just...whether it was LDS or whatever...there was just a good foundation of

morals there. There may have been little debates about points of doctrine as far as Christianity goes, but when something foundational, like prayers in our schools, the entire community came out, and even though they may have been different denominations, they all believed in God and they all wanted their right to worship Him freely and would work together to accomplish that. That was something I really respected about Rothrock.

Nikki summed it up best when she said, “It is such a relief to come home because people are nice; they smile and wave at you and I think that I because of religion. People are more inclined to be Christ-like when there are a lot of churches.”

This carries over into the schools. Dawn and Billy:

Dawn: When I first moved here, I had people tell me that I would do better here because it’s such a small town, personal and close together. You can see people you hang out with at school outside of school. And when you see the whole community show up at one football game and see all that support, it’s just amazing. In California, no one showed up at the football games. Fifty people would show up.

Billy: And like, in the classrooms especially, I remember in Utah how teachers had 40-50 kids in a classroom and they would have to worry about all of them. Here, there are a lot less students in the classes so teachers can be more personable. They can talk to you and teach you. Help you with what you aren’t understanding.

Emma agreed, commenting on how education-minded Rothrock is. Allison expounded on that idea discussing how her sister, a teacher in another community,

discovered the majority of her students cheating. “She approached the kids and their parents and she said they turned on her, and even some of the teachers. The teachers asked why she was worried about it because none of those kids was going anywhere anyway.” Allison contrasted this with her experience in Rothrock. “I never felt that any of my teachers thought we weren’t going anywhere. I felt like my teachers expected me to go somewhere.”

Kallie (wife of Justin) grew up in California and pointed out that, as members of the LDS church, they all grew up with the same standards, yet the community shapes faith differently. Leilani and Sarah discussed the term “Utah Mormon.”

Leilani: There’s this term “Utah Mormons” that, and it’s because they are so used to having church members around all the time, that they are like, “Well, so-and-so is doing this, and they’re a member of the church, so it must be okay.” You know? They have that rationalization whereas here, we know that we are looked up to because we are Mormon; and of course, we know we need to do what’s right but also, we need to represent our church and Jesus Christ the way He should be represented. Whereas in Utah, it’s like, they have a more flippant attitude toward keeping the standards...I think here, our standards are tried so often, a lot of activities are held here on Sundays so we are required to stand up for our beliefs. And in Utah, nothing is held on Sunday. They don’t really have to worry about that...We are strengthened more.

Brian said that in Utah, so many people are setting examples that others might be tempted not to. “In Rothrock,” he said, “things are different.” Shawn reinforced this idea.

When you have a lot of Mormons in one place, you are going to have a high percentage of Mormons who don't take it seriously. When I moved here, pretty much all the Mormons I was with paid attention to the church standards and followed them and did what they were supposed to do and lived their lives the way I wanted to live mine.

All of the participants felt they were role models. Each indicated a desire to prove to outsiders that Mormons are not bad people.

Going to school in a "City of Character" that is home to over 40 churches had an impact on the students' academic success. The multitude of denominations had an added benefit to many. Shawn said having that many churches, "made you think about what you believed and understand what you believe." Matt said that hearing what others believed allowed him to compare their beliefs to his own and helped him understand his faith more deeply. Wayne said, "They may believe we worship Joseph Smith or whatever..., but most of us believed in God and we can start building that trust on common ground and friendships and we could ignore all that other stuff because we would be able to relate." They felt that a caring, nurturing, and supportive community allowed them the opportunity to excel and to feel safe.

### Summary

Several characteristics from the review of the literature were found in participant interviews. All students felt that their families were stable and supportive of their endeavors, both educational and extra-curricular. Open communication was mentioned, as well, and contributed to students setting goals based partially on parental input. In addition to family characteristics, students felt that their church contributed to their

success. Because the church reinforced home values and morals, many students felt that their church was an extension of their family. Their leaders were role models who encouraged them to do their best. In addition, because Mormon students spend so much time at church and on church related activities (sometimes as much as 20 hours a week), they are often more grounded in their faith than students from other denominations. Because one of the main teachings of the Mormon Church is to gain as much knowledge on Earth as possible, students take this to heart and strive to learn the material teachers taught instead of trying to just earn a good grade. Finally, community characteristics such as having a moral foundation, being supportive of students and their efforts, and maintaining good schools contributed to student success regardless of student gender.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter is to draw conclusions from the data presented in Chapter IV, to offer recommendations regarding implications for educational, parental and religious practice, and to provide suggestions for further research on academic success and church involvement.

This study investigated the relationship of church involvement and academic success among Mormon students. Although previous studies on church involvement and academic success showed that students involved in church activities achieved greater success in school (Sanders, 1998; Regenerus, 2003), only minority students were represented. Other studies focusing on academic success focused on single aspects such as sports participation or family involvement. This study extends those results by studying Mormon students, who, largely due to the beliefs of their church, exemplify all aspects of academic success presented in the review of the literature.

The constructionist framework used for this study emphasizes how culture shapes individual perspectives and actions (Crotty, 1998). Since the purpose of this study is to study the relationship of the participants' culture—their religion—on academic success, the constructionist framework is the perfect lens. This framework uses ethnographic interpretive methodology, among other techniques, that helps illuminate the action taking place in the setting, the meanings actors attribute to those actions, how those meanings

and happenings coexist with others', how actions are related to what is happening outside the setting, and how the organization of the setting compares with other settings (Erickson, 1986). For this study, data was gathered through interviews and surveys then analyzed for implications, resulting in the following findings:

- The amount of church activity influenced academic success in the participants interviewed.
- Church leaders, specifically youth leaders, influenced the students in this study to be more successful.
- Family involvement played a key role in the academic success of the students interviewed.
- Even though the analysis of Mormon youth literature channeled young men and young women into traditional roles, there is no gender difference in levels of academic success.
- The community contributed to the academic success of the participants.
- The definition of academic success should be reconsidered.

The remainder of this chapter addresses the significance of these findings and implications for practice.

#### The Amount of Church Activity Influences Academic Success

From this study, it is evident that, for the participants, church was a main reason for academic success. Families were important, but family structure and interaction were inextricably tied to the church and the church values were actively and pointedly reinforced at home. Participants indicated that Mormon church programs--including primary, the program for young children, seminary (the before-school program for high



school students), and the young men's and young women's religious study programs--boosted self-esteem and a sense of belonging, encouraged students to set goals and work diligently to achieve those goals, and influenced young men and young women to develop into purposeful and aware moral beings. These programs reinforced church teachings on the importance of family, self-worth, and the importance of gaining knowledge.

Most students interviewed indicated that they spent between 15 and 20 hours per week in church or on church related activities, not including time spent on completing the requirements for the young men's and young women's programs. In comparison, students said that their friends from other denominations spent fewer hours, in some cases half as much time, in church or on church related activities. Students interviewed believed strongly that their church activities helped them to be more successful in school and felt that the amount of time spent on church activities correlated to their academic success. For these students, then, the amount of church activity has an influence on success.

Students in this study also felt that the time spent on church related activities increased their self-esteem and influenced their moral development. Students felt that church was a place for them to belong, especially since the values from church were reinforced at home and vice versa. Participants further explained that all lessons and activities presented by the church reinforced the importance of setting goals and working diligently toward those goals. Student participants expressed the importance of goal setting to their academic success. Because of the church's reinforcement of the importance of goals and hard work, all the student participants felt they had a better

foundation for success. The positive encouragement they received at church influenced the success they achieved at school and in life.

#### Church Leaders, Specifically Youth Leaders, Influence Students to Be More Successful

Perhaps one of the greatest church related factors from this study that contributed to success was youth and church leaders. Many students interviewed discussed how they felt the church and youth leaders were an extension of their family. Because the church does not pay most of their leaders, the youth and church leaders are often their parents, or parents of their friends. For many of the students interviewed, this reinforced their sense of belonging. Most said they respected how the leaders treated them: with respect, concern, and compassion. During Sunday school and seminary, participants mentioned that their questions and concerns were taken seriously, and they were treated as adults. In addition, most participants said that their youth and church leaders were role models whose lives they wanted to mirror. Many participants said that they did not want to let their leaders down by getting into trouble or by making bad grades. These role models gave students an example by which to live and instilled honesty and integrity in students.

This finding reinforces the importance role models have on students' lives. Almost all of the participants in this study indicated that they did not have perfect families; to these students, the role models and church leaders with whom they came in contact provided consistent encouragement and reinforcement.

#### Family Involvement Plays a Vital Role in the Academic Success of Mormon Students

All of the participants interviewed for this study shared several familial characteristics. All came from stable and supportive families that maintained open lines of communication. Participants indicated that their parents set high goals for them, but

those goals were general enough to allow the students to personalize them. For example, all parents surveyed indicated that they wanted their children to earn a college degree. Parents did not dictate in what area; that was left to the student. Leilani and Sarah discussed that, if they wanted to go to janitorial school, if they were truly passionate about it, their parents would support it. Without open lines of communication, participants thought it unlikely that parents would be so supportive and encouraging.

All students interviewed discussed the fact that their parents, especially, their mothers, were home when they came home to discuss the day. In addition, all participants indicated that their parents were willing to help with homework problems. If parents could not help, participants all agreed that their parents would find someone who could. While the mother being home may be representative of traditional gender roles, all participants said they saw their parents as a team. Allison and Mitch discussed how, while their dad was laid off, their mother worked to provide an income and their father took care of the house. Dawn mentioned a similar episode with her parents. While other participants did not face the same situation, all said they frequently saw their fathers help their mothers cook and clean. Most male participants said this taught them how to respect females.

Finally, all participants discussed how their parents were role models for them. Being kind, caring and compassionate parents, respectful of the spouse and children, and faithful especially in difficult times, gave participants a guide to follow. All of these family characteristics helped students become successful.

In survey responses, parents who were not raised in a church-going family expressed feeling that their own parents had not held high expectations for them or

adequately encourage them. Some parents felt that, if they had had the same encouragement and support they are providing for their children, they would have been more successful in school, academically and behaviorally. Student participants agree that they achieve because they do not want to disappoint their parents, and because their eternal future depends on the knowledge attained.

#### There Is No Difference Between Gender Success Rates

Based on the review of youth literature published by the Mormon Church, it seemed that there would be a difference between the levels of success achieved by male and female students. The literature published for Mormon youth clearly defined roles for each gender, and the programs created for youth development further emphasized those roles. Females were expected to do traditional female work--sewing, cooking, homemaking, etc.--while males were guided into leadership roles within the church and family. Ironically, however, the complexity and style of the language in the literature was not consistent with the expectations of the genders. The young women's book uses complex sentences, educated words, and many adjectives, while the young men's book uses simple sentences, few adjectives, and simple words. Based on the grammar and language of the booklets, young women might be expected to be more successful; based on the roles outlined for each gender, however, the males should be more successful. For these participants, though, there seems to be no difference in academic success between males and females. This finding is significant because the traditional role for young women, encouraged by the Mormon youth literature, does not inhibit learning for the participants of this study. Young women still enroll in advanced classes and still have

goals of individual careers. Second, while the language for the young men's booklets is simple, that language is not representative of the capacity the young men possess.

#### The Community Contributes to Academic Success

All students felt that the values of their community, Rothrock, encouraged educational success and attainment as well as moral and spiritual development. Students indicated that they did not need to hide the fact that they were Mormon, and that members of the political community of Rothrock did not ostracize them for their beliefs. While their beliefs were questioned on occasion, most felt that it was not done in a hateful manner. Because Rothrock is home to so many churches, participants felt that the community itself upheld moral beliefs. They felt this carried over into the schools. Most participants mentioned that they saw relatively few fights, little drug use, and no gang action; in short, they felt safe at school. In addition, they felt that their teachers cared for their future and for them personally. Most students came to Rothrock from different communities where they did not feel safe at school and where they were one student out of many. Finally, students mentioned that the people in Rothrock were friendly and helpful.

All participants in this study came from stable and supportive families that valued open communication and all students expressed a belief that the church was the foundation for their success: they would not be who or where they are without it. The community as a whole was accepting of these beliefs, and supported their efforts to attain educational success.

## Redefining Success

When I first began this study, I defined academic success as maintaining high grades in all classes. The review of the literature led me to broaden my definition to include enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) classes, student perception of success in those classes, and participation in extra-curricular activities. The participants themselves, however, caused me to question that definition and reflect significantly on what it means to be academically successful, and, more important, on how a learner's definition of success may shape his or her academic experience. All of the students interviewed considered themselves successful based on the initial definition of success for this study: they were all enrolled in at least one Advanced Placement (AP) or pre-AP class; all maintained good grades (A's and B's); all had a goal to further their education after high school either by earning a college degree or by obtaining a cosmetology license. However, all students also expressed beliefs that grades were not the epitome of success; rather, learning and gaining knowledge were. Their beliefs were firmly grounded in a particular teaching of the Mormon Church: the only aspect of this life that one can take to heaven is knowledge. Knowledge is eternal. Knowledge from this life will help guide individuals in their spirit lives.

Parents of students interviewed reinforced this idea at home. All parents surveyed believed that their children were successful, not because the students made good grades, but because the students tried hard. Both parents and students indicated that the harder students tried, the more successful they were, a stance reflective of Burke's (2004) concept of the Virtuous Circle: the harder one works, the more his or her skills improve, leading to higher levels of success and harder work. For Mormon students in this study,

rewards and punishments, in the form of test scores, grades, etc., had no influence on how well they performed in school.

### Final Reflection

So why is all of this important, and what does it all mean? While this study looks at a small group of students in a specific place in time, this research is important because, for perhaps the first time, all of the factors that contribute to academic success noted in the literature: collective responsibility and organizational citizenship, participation in outside organizations, and parental involvement can be seen working together effectively. While each of the articles reviewed in the literature review discussed one contributing factor of academic success such as sports participation, family involvement, community support, Mormon students' lives contain all of these aspects at once, and the relationship among factors is exemplified. Most participants discussed the interplay between their families and their church. Because of they shared the same values, students felt successful. In addition, this study has implications for parents and communities and for how we do school.

### *Importance of This Study to the Professional Dialogue*

There is no evidence in previous studies that the amount of church participation is directly tied to student success, so this study provides new information about the importance of church involvement. Koubeck (1984) found a positive correlation between the degree of religious commitment and student academic success, and Jeynes (1999) agrees. In addition, Regenerus (2003) found that the more a student is involved in church, the higher motivation he/she has toward education; however, degree of commitment and motivation could be very different from time spent in or on church. With the busy

schedules of today's high school students, it is often extremely difficult for students to find enough time to accomplish all they are committed or motivated to doing.

This study also supports findings from Regenerus (2003) who concluded that churches reinforce values that aid in goal setting, a concept mentioned by the participants of this study as important to their academic success. Regenerus (2003) also found that church involvement has a positive influence on family and community socialization. Broh (2002), Fejgin (1994), Hanson and Kraus (1998) and Brown and Theobald (1998) discuss the importance of sports and music programs on the socialization of high school students. Socialization is important to building self-esteem and to finding a place to belong. However, none of the studies mentioned clearly tie the importance of socialization to academic success. This study, however, does show such a connection. The participants in the current study felt strongly that their church gave them a place to belong, reinforced the importance of goal setting, and encouraged success.

In addition, student participants felt strongly that the role models within the church were critical to their success, an aspect of success mentioned by Heath and McLaughlin (1994). They found that successful community-based organizations had the same goals as the school, respected the youth they served, were authentic and supportive, and utilized adults who were caring, personal and set clear rules. Lee & Smith (1996) discussed such collective responsibility, which means, in a school setting, that the faculty, staff and administration maintain consistent, positive attitudes about their jobs and the students. Leaders in the participants' churches all maintain consistent, positive attitudes about the youth in their church. DiPaola (2005) calls this collective responsibility "organizational citizenship," and notes that higher levels of organizational citizenship



correlates to greater gains in student achievement. While student participants did not focus as much on teacher quality, they did discuss this concept in relation to their youth leaders; the effects were not only apparent in their spiritual lives, but also in their academic lives. These aspects of collective responsibility and organizational citizenship were not found in the literature reviewed for this study and could influence, to a greater degree, how schools and churches organize their programs.

All of the participants in the current study believe that having supportive families was a key to their success, an insight supported by several studies reviewed for this study. Catsambis (1998) notes that parental expectations and encouragement are the most important family characteristics that affect all measures of success. Sanders (1998) furthers this idea, stating that parental support is the best predictor of school behavior, academic self-concept and achievement ideology. Field (2002) found that students with high quality relationships with their parents had higher educational goals and success, which in turn raised parent expectations, supports this idea. The finding from this study supports and augments the current literature.

Finally, none of the studies in the literature review discussed the importance of the community as a whole to the academic success of high school students. Participant insights in this study, however, suggest that the values upheld by the citizens of Rothrock encouraged the development and academic success of the community's students. Because students are citizens of political communities, not just school and church communities, it is logical to believe that the community plays a role in the development of young people.

### *Implications for Parents and the Community*

In my personal experience, and in talking with my students, I have not found a church that values the family as much as the Mormon Church. While other denominations may not agree theologically with the Mormon Church, surely the positive effect the role of the family plays can be acknowledged for the sake of student success. Too many parents berate their children for poor grades even though the children have tried their best. Perhaps if the effort is recognized more than the outcome is belittled, those children may feel more successful, which, following the idea of the virtuous circle, could actually result in true success.

Based on the results of this study, parents should be encouraged to spend quality time with their children. Quality time means listening when the children speak, doing activities as a family, such as playing board games and working on homework, and including children when making decisions. Parents should be encouraged to act as positive role models for their children. This could entail teaching their children to set goals and work hard to achieve them.

Parenting classes focusing on effective parenting strategies and ways to cultivate successful students could be sponsored by the local community. The Meyerhoff Scholars Program (2002) and Fordham (1996) found six key aspects of parenting that are also found in Mormon families and reinforced in the church. These could be included in a parent education class:

- Be involved, supportive and encouraging.
- Have clear and consistent rules with clear and consistent consequences.
- Consistently maintains high expectations.

- Encourage and maintain open, two-way communication.
- Develop and maintain positive identification with the family culture.
- Utilize community resources.

Without referencing these concepts explicitly, all participants indicated that their families utilized these aspects in their homes. While these six concepts were developed based on research with African American families, all aspects are evident in the Mormon culture. Not only were these aspects evident within families, they were also evident within the church teachings.

If it is true that it takes a village to raise a child, then it is also true that it takes a village to help that child become successful. If a community does not support its schools and students, success is harder to obtain. Funding bond issues, attending sports events and other school activities, maintaining a welcoming environment, and ensuring safety are contributing factors of success. Residents of communities cannot be lazy inhabitants; their actions (or lack thereof) have a direct impact on the level of success of the students.

In addition, while students felt comfortable in the community of Rothrock, they still considered themselves to be outsiders to some extent because they were not members of a mainstream religion. This outsidership has a power; one can either ostracize him/herself or try harder to be accepted. For these students, a strong sense of insidership within the church and family pushed them to be better on the outside so that they were able to succeed in the school arena. Insidership is something that could be cultivated within churches and schools.

Most students who attend church attend on Wednesday nights and Sunday mornings. Most would probably say that they spend fewer than five hours per week at

church, and fewer than seven hours per week on church-related activities, such as studying the scriptures or praying. While many of these students are successful, all of the Mormon students in this study who spent more than fifteen hours per week on church related activities were successful. Perhaps a stronger emphasis on church activities would result in greater levels of success for all students. This could be due to more time spent on helping others through mission work, more time spent with positive role models that are not always found in the home, and more time spent with peers who share their same values and morals.

#### *Implications for How We Do School*

If students are not actively involved in church, and if they do not have a supportive family, having a place to belong at school becomes important. While not all students want to be active in sports or academic-based clubs, other organizations exist or could be created to ensure that most, if not all, students have a place to belong. This could promote self-confidence and could give students a positive outlet.

Because participants discussed the importance of goal setting, schools and school organizations could reinforce setting goals and working diligently to obtain those goals; however, these should not all be testing goals. Positive reinforcement in the form of school-wide recognition, mention in the school or local newspaper, awards, gift certificates or other forms of genuine reinforcement might encourage students to work towards their goals and might influence students who do not receive this reinforcement at home.

Schools could aid in establishing open lines of communication by involving parents more substantively in the school. Schools could sponsor more activities and

community engagements that involve parents and students alike. Wednesday night could be declared “no homework” night to allow parents and students to attend church activities together or to simply spend time together as a family unencumbered by massive amounts of homework. Finally, individual teachers could encourage parents to attend monthly get-together nights at the school where students would be encouraged to present their original poems, artwork, projects, or book discussions. This would allow parents and students to see teachers as more accessible. Seeing teachers as accessible could also motivate students to learn while in those teachers’ classes.

It is no secret that students who want to learn make good grades. Often, extrinsic motivations such as rewards and punishments are not enough; in fact, these rewards and punishments are often counterproductive. Perhaps the definition of academic success should be modified. If students try their hardest and actually learn the material, they should be considered successful. This change would require a major paradigm shift on the part of politicians and administrators. Changing the definition of success would require the traditional view of education where the student passively sits in his/her seat and the instructor lectures, hands out worksheets on the material, tests on the material and expects the students to regurgitate the material, after which the teacher moves on, to be modified. Beyond this, what else can be done to help everyone succeed? When I first began this study, I took it for granted that all students had a place to belong; however, that is not true. Many students feel left out of school activities, are not members of supportive families, and have no religious affiliation. Having a place to belong is important for the students in this study. For them, they belong not only to their church,

but also to their clubs and sports teams, their school, and their families. But for many students, this sense of belonging is absent.

To fill this void and encourage success, parents can spend more quality time with their students and maintain open lines of communication; schools can invite parents into their buildings more frequently and for activities other than just parent/teacher conferences, and teachers could create more respectful classrooms that encourage diversity and acceptance; churches could place a greater emphasis on the moral development of youth, and the importance of the family. In short, families, schools and churches could work together more effectively to ensure more students are successful.

#### Recommendations for Further Research

In the future, it would be interesting to conduct this research with students who are active in other denominations to see if there is a relationship between church involvement in general and academic success. Comparing what the Mormon Church emphasizes that other churches do not that allows their students to be more successful would be helpful. It would also be interesting to conduct this research in multiple communities so that transferability would be greater. Conducting this research as a mixed methods study could lend greater credibility. It would also be interesting to explore in greater depth the gender issues introduced here. Are Mormon women becoming more independent? Does the fact that more young women are serving missions aid in this independence? Could other community based organizations effect similar findings?

Finally, because I was an outsider conducting this research, and because I wanted to present this study in an inoffensive manner, it would be interesting to conduct this study with strangers as participants and with a Mormon co-researcher.

*As I walk into the hair salon, I notice, as always, how the stylists are dressed: dramatic haircuts and colors accentuate the black attire required by the salon. The women are mostly wearing short black skirts or dresses with black tops that either have thin straps or are strapless altogether. The only exceptions to this are the women who are considered to be plus-sized. These women are wearing longer black skirts and black blouses with sleeves. The male stylists would be considered “emo” by most high school students: clothed in black jeans that more than likely came from the girls’ section of the department store, their pants barely cover their rears and are held up by brightly colored belts. Their black t-shirts, considered vintage, display names of bands.*

*Seven stylists are working on customers’ hair as I approach the receptionist’s area at the center of the salon. Meg, the receptionist, recognizes me. She is perhaps the only “normal” looking employee in the salon. Her blond hair is neatly pulled back by a headband, and her black dress is stylish and in good taste.*

*“Hi, Tobi! Why don’t you go on back and get changed and I’ll tell Tatum that you’re here.”*

*“Thanks,” I replied as I bypassed the circular couch and made my way to the changing rooms. As I turned the corner, I ran into—almost literally—Tatum.*

*“TOBI! It is SO good to see you! How are you? I haven’t seen you in a while!” Tatum always greets me this way, even if I have seen her recently. Her smile does not stop at her mouth; her entire face lights up. Her smile is so beautiful; she could be a*

*toothpaste model, if there is such a thing. She is one of my former students with whom I have developed a friendship. She took learning seriously and applied what I tried to teach to her life. She took To Kill A Mockingbird and the lessons it illustrated to heart. When her father refused to allow her to have a black boy friend, she called me in the middle of the night to ask for advice. She truly believed in Atticus Finch's lesson: before you judge someone, take the time to climb into their skin and walk around. I admired that about her.*

*"I'm great, Tatum! How are you? How was your trip to Hawaii?"*

*"Oh my gosh! It was the most amazing place in the world. The beaches were so awesome and we had such a great time. Go change and we can get started. I'll talk while I work." She looks as though she has spent the last week on the beach. Dressed in a strapless black dress that comes to her mid-thigh, it is easy to see her tan. I always found it odd that she would dress in so revealing a manner. She was one of the students who was always concerned with her weight and how she looked. She quit color guard in high school because the outfits were too skin tight and revealed too much.*

*In the changing room, I donned the normal black smock. Afterwards, I came back out to the seat Tatum had picked for me. As she began mixing the color, she continued to talk about Hawaii and the fun she and her family had. I asked how her heart was doing as she and her mother had recently had defibrillators inserted due to congenital heart problems. After assuring me that she was fine, she continued applying color.*

*After the color and the most relaxing head wash I had yet to experience, Tatum began cutting. She never asks what I want; she knows me well enough to know that I trust what she does. I am always pleasantly surprised when I see the results.*



*While she finished the cut, she asked about my dissertation.*

*“What was your paper on?”*

*“Academic success and Mormon students,” I tell her for the millionth time it seems. She remembers bits of information that are important to her, but often filters out all the rest.*

*“Oh, yeah! That’s right. You know, we have a Mormon girl working here.”*

*“Really?! That kind of shocks me.” It really did. I wondered how she navigated the dress code and how she felt about some of the immoral discussion that Tatum told me occurred.*

*“Yeah. She even wears the Mormon undies and everything. I asked her if she could show them to me, but she said she couldn’t. Do you know why?”*

*“Well, yeah. They are considered pretty much sacred, for lack of a better word. They receive their undergarments before their first visit to the temple. The undergarments are a constant reminder of their faith and some believe the undergarments ward off evil.”*

*“Oh,” Tatum said. I could tell she wasn’t happy with the explanation. “Well, I asked her why she couldn’t show me. I figured she would because we are both girls and all...”*

*“Well, to Mormons, some secrets are important to keep from outsiders,” I tried to explain. “Does she dress like the rest of you?”*

*“No. I mean, she wears the all black stuff, but she dresses...not more prudish, but, yeah: prudish. I wish I could get away with that.” I found the part about Tatum wishing she could dress more prudish a little funny; whenever I come in, she is always*

*dressed in a strapless top and a short skirt. While her skirt may be longer than some of the others, it comes to her mid-thigh. She also has a nose ring, something else I would not consider to be the epitome of a prude.*

*“It’s not that she’s a prude,” I found myself defending this unknown person.*

*“Her church just believes that there are certain ways a woman should dress. Remember Leilani and Tabitha and Sheridan? Remember how they couldn’t wear short dresses or dresses without sleeves to the prom? And you never saw them in shorts that were shorter than their knees?”*

*“Yeah. Were they Mormon too?” Her voice was filled with disbelief.*

*“Yes, they ARE Mormon, too. Why do you sound so shocked?” I found myself getting more irritated with Tatum the longer this conversation continued. How naïve could she be?*

*“Well, I am kinda shocked. I mean, they were normal people.”*

*“Tatum, of course they were normal people. Just because Mormons believe a little differently from you and me doesn’t mean they themselves are different. I mean, what better people did you know in high school than them? Think about it...”*

*“I know...you’re right. I just, I don’t know. I guess all the stuff I’ve heard about Mormons—you know how they have a lot of wives and how they don’t believe in God and everything. I have a hard time believing that people can be truly good and still do that. You know?” At this point, she stops cutting my hair, hands me the hand mirror, and turns my chair so I can see.*

*“Tatum, none of that stuff is true. You should ask the Mormon girl who works here what she believes. I promise you’ll find that you two aren’t that far apart. You did a great job on my hair.” As I stand, I give Tatum a hug and tell her I’ll see her soon.*

*Walking out of the salon, I think about how far I have come through this dissertation process. At the beginning, I thought like Tatum, and now, here I am defending Mormons. While my journey has not come to an end, I have learned quite a bit, not only about Mormonism and how/why they are successful, but I have learned a lot about myself.*

*When I arrived home that evening, I called Tatum. I wanted her to know what Mormons had taught me. I wanted her to know that they DO believe in God and in Jesus. I wanted her to know how accepting they were of others and how they believed anyone could be redeemed—that no one was a lost soul. I wanted her to know that, as a result of getting to know these Mormon families, I had become a better teacher and a better mother. I became more conscious of different beliefs of students in my class which made me create a more accepting, respectful and diverse classroom. I began to spend more quality time with my own children. I listened attentively when they spoke and I responded to what they said. I encouraged them to do better in school instead of demanding that they excel. I helped more with their homework and played with them more. My interaction with Mormons has made me a better person, and I wanted Tatum to understand that.*

*The phone rang. “Hi, this is Tatum. I’m not here right now, but if you’ll leave your name and number, I’ll get back to you.”*

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## APPENDIX A

### ASSENT FOR A MINOR TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

You have been invited to participate in a dissertation research study conducted at Oklahoma State University. This form provides you with information about that research and your rights as a participant. You may grant your permission for participation in this study by signing the form. Please read all information carefully before signing.

**PROJECT TITLE:** The relationship between church involvement and core-course success among Mormon students in public schools located in “bedroom” communities.

**INVESTIGATOR:** Tobi Thompson, M.S., Doctoral Student (Dissertation Advisor: Sue Christian Parsons, Ph.D.)

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of this doctoral dissertation study is to gain insight into the following research problem or question: what is the relationship between church involvement and core-course success among Mormon students in public schools located in “bedroom” communities?

**PROCEDURES/PARTICIPANT INVOLVEMENT:** The researcher (Mrs. Thompson) will interview you concerning the research topic and will follow with a second interview if needed. The interview and follow-ups may last anywhere from 45 minutes to one and one-half hours. Families will also be asked to fill out a survey with questions about both church and school. Some questions deal with religion and family issues and may be considered sensitive in nature. You have the right to not answer any question with which you are uncomfortable. Interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed. You will also be given the opportunity to review the transcript from that interview to verify accuracy and to read the final paper to insure the nature of the interview and responses is true to your account.

**RISKS OF PARTICIPATION:** Participation in this study includes spoken reflection of your church and school activities and may include potentially sensitive areas like personal values and beliefs. Although interview questions are not designed to evoke strong emotional responses, it is possible that you may experience strong emotion through this process. If you begin to experience discomfort or stress in this project, you may end their participation at any time. There are no intended risks with this project, including stress, psychological, social, physical, or legal risks that are greater, considering probability and magnitude, than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.

**BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION:** Reflection involved in responding to interview questions may enhance your understanding of your own values, beliefs and practices. Furthermore, results may be enlightening as to ways to foster academic success.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** All information about you and other participants will be kept confidential. Interview audiotapes and transcripts will be labeled with identification numbers instead of names, and pseudonyms will replace names in transcripts and research reports. The

audiotapes will be kept in a locked cabinet in the advisor's office that is only accessible to the researcher. The OSU IRB has the authority to inspect consent records and data files to assure compliance with approved procedures. All information will be saved as long as it is useful to this inquiry (until the dissertation has been successfully defended), but no more than five years after publication of the results. Results of this study will be published as a dissertation and may be presented at professional meetings or in professional publications.

Confidentiality will be maintained except under specified conditions required by law. For example, current Oklahoma law requires that any ongoing child abuse (including sexual abuse, physical abuse, and neglect of a minor) must be reported to state officials. In addition, if an individual reports that he/she intends to harm him/herself or others, legal and professional standards require that the individual must be kept from harm, even if confidentiality must be broken. Finally, confidentiality could be broken if materials from this study were subpoenaed by a court of law.

COMPENSATION: There will be no compensation for participation in this study.

---

**INFORMED CONSENT:** To participate in this study, you should understand and will agree to the following:

**CONTACTS:**

I understand that I may contact any of the researchers at the following addresses and phone numbers should I desire to discuss my participation in this study and/or request information about the results of the study: Tobi Thompson, 11238 S. 275<sup>th</sup> E. Ave., Coweta, OK 74429, 918-279-9742, [thompson\\_t@owasso.k12.ok.us](mailto:thompson_t@owasso.k12.ok.us); Dr. Sue Christian Parsons, 253 Willard Hall, College of Education, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078, 405-744-8104, [sue.parsons@okstate.edu](mailto:sue.parsons@okstate.edu). I may also contact Dr. Sue Jacobs, Ph.D. Institutional Review Board, 415 Whitehurst Hall, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078, 405-744-1676 with any questions concerning participants' rights.

**PARTICIPANT RIGHTS:** I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary, that there is no penalty for refusing to participate, and that I am free to withdraw my consent and participation in this project at any time.

**CONSENT DOCUMENTATION:** I have been fully informed about the procedures listed here. I am aware of what I will be asked to do and the benefits of my participation. I have read and fully understand this consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. I hereby give my permission for me to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I certify that I have personally explained this document before requesting that the participant sign it.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX B

### PARENTAL CONSENT FOR A MINOR TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

Your son or daughter has been invited to participate in a dissertation research study conducted at Oklahoma State University. This form provides you with information about that research and your child's rights as a participant. You may grant your permission for their participation in this study by signing the form. Please read all information carefully before signing.

**PROJECT TITLE:** The relationship between church involvement and core-course success among Mormon students in public schools located in "bedroom" communities.

**INVESTIGATOR:** Tobi Thompson, M.S., Doctoral Student (Dissertation Advisor: Sue Christian Parsons, Ph.D.)

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of this doctoral dissertation study is to gain insight into the following research problem or question: what is the relationship between church involvement and core-course success among Mormon students in public schools located in "bedroom" communities?

**PROCEDURES/PARTICIPANT INVOLVEMENT:** The researcher will interview participants concerning the research topic and will follow with a second interview if needed. The interview and follow-ups may last anywhere from 45 minutes to one and one-half hours. Families will also be asked to fill out a survey with questions about both church and school. Some questions deal with religion and family issues and may be considered sensitive in nature. Participants have the right to not answer any question with which they are uncomfortable. Interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed. Participants will also be given the opportunity to review the transcript from that interview to verify accuracy and to read the final paper to insure the nature of the interview and responses is true to their account.

**RISKS OF PARTICIPATION:** Participation in this study includes spoken reflection of the participants' church and school activities and may include potentially sensitive areas like personal values and beliefs. Although interview questions are not designed to evoke strong emotional responses, it is possible that participants may experience strong emotion through this process. If participants begin to experience discomfort or stress in this project, participants may end their participation at any time. There are no intended risks with this project, including stress, psychological, social, physical, or legal risks that are greater, considering probability and magnitude, than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.

**BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION:** Reflection involved in responding to interview questions may enhance participants' understanding of their own values, beliefs and practices. Furthermore, results may be enlightening as to ways to foster academic success.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** All information about participants will be kept confidential. Interview audiotapes and transcripts will be labeled with identification numbers instead of names, and

pseudonyms will replace names in transcripts and research reports. The audiotapes will be kept in a locked cabinet in the advisor's office that is only accessible to the researcher. The OSU IRB has the authority to inspect consent records and data files to assure compliance with approved procedures. All information will be saved as long as it is useful to this inquiry (until the dissertation has been successfully defended), but no more than five years after publication of the results. Results of this study will be published as a dissertation and may be presented at professional meetings or in professional publications.

Confidentiality will be maintained except under specified conditions required by law. For example, current Oklahoma law requires that any ongoing child abuse (including sexual abuse, physical abuse, and neglect of a minor) must be reported to state officials. In addition, if an individual reports that he/she intends to harm him/herself or others, legal and professional standards require that the individual must be kept from harm, even if confidentiality must be broken. Finally, confidentiality could be broken if materials from this study were subpoenaed by a court of law.

COMPENSATION: There will be no compensation for participation in this study.

---

**INFORMED CONSENT:** To allow your son or daughter to participate in this study, you should understand and will agree to the following:

**CONTACTS:** I understand that I may contact any of the researchers at the following addresses and phone numbers should I desire to discuss my child's participation in this study and/or request information about the results of the study: Tobi Thompson, 11238 S. 275<sup>th</sup> E. Ave., Coweta, OK 74429, 918-279-9742, [thompson@owasso.k12.ok.us](mailto:thompson@owasso.k12.ok.us); Dr. Sue Christian Parsons, 253 Willard Hall, College of Education, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078, 405-744-8104, [sue.parsons@okstate.edu](mailto:sue.parsons@okstate.edu). I may also contact Dr. Sue Jacobs, Ph.D. Institutional Review Board, 415 Whitehurst Hall, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078, 405-744-1676 with any questions concerning participants' rights.

**PARTICIPANT RIGHTS:** I understand that my consent for my child's participation is entirely voluntary, that there is no penalty for refusing to participate, and that I am free to withdraw my consent and child's participation in this project at any time.

**CONSENT DOCUMENTATION:** I have been fully informed about the procedures listed here. I am aware of what I will be asked to do and the benefits of participation. I have read and fully understand this consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. I hereby give my permission to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Parent of Minor Child

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I certify that I have personally explained this document before requesting that the participant sign it.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX C

### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

You have been invited to participate in a dissertation research study conducted at Oklahoma State University. This form provides you with information about that research and your rights as a participant. You may grant your permission for participation in this study by signing the form. Please read all information carefully before signing.

**PROJECT TITLE:** The relationship between church involvement and core-course success among Mormon students in public schools located in “bedroom” communities.

**INVESTIGATOR:** Tobi Thompson, M.S., Doctoral Student (Dissertation Advisor: Sue Christian Parsons, Ph.D.)

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of this doctoral dissertation study is to gain insight into the following research problem or question: what is the relationship between church involvement and core-course success among Mormon students in public schools located in “bedroom” communities?

**PROCEDURES/PARTICIPANT INVOLVEMENT:** The researcher will interview participants concerning the research topic and will follow with a second interview if needed. The interview and follow-ups may last anywhere from 45 minutes to one and one-half hours. Families will also be asked to fill out a survey with questions about both church and school. Some questions deal with religion and family issues and may be considered sensitive in nature. Participants have the right to not answer any question with which they are uncomfortable. Interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed. Participants will also be given the opportunity to review the transcript from that interview to verify accuracy and to read the final paper to insure the nature of the interview and responses is true to their account.

**RISKS OF PARTICIPATION:** Participation in this study includes spoken reflection of the participants’ church and school activities and may include potentially sensitive areas like personal values and beliefs. Although interview questions are not designed to evoke strong emotional responses, it is possible that participants may experience strong emotion through this process. If participants begin to experience discomfort or stress in this project, participants may end their participation at any time. There are no intended risks with this project, including stress, psychological, social, physical, or legal risks that are greater, considering probability and magnitude, than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.

**BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION:** Reflection involved in responding to interview questions may enhance participants’ understanding of their own values, beliefs and practices. Furthermore, results may be enlightening as to ways to foster academic success.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** All information about participants will be kept confidential. Interview audiotapes and transcripts will be labeled with identification numbers instead of names, and



pseudonyms will replace names in transcripts and research reports. The audiotapes will be kept in a locked cabinet in the advisor's office that is only accessible to the researcher. The OSU IRB has the authority to inspect consent records and data files to assure compliance with approved procedures. All information will be saved as long as it is useful to this inquiry (until the dissertation has been successfully defended), but no more than five years after publication of the results. Results of this study will be published as a dissertation and may be presented at professional meetings or in professional publications.

Confidentiality will be maintained except under specified conditions required by law. For example, current Oklahoma law requires that any ongoing child abuse (including sexual abuse, physical abuse, and neglect of a minor) must be reported to state officials. In addition, if an individual reports that he/she intends to harm him/herself or others, legal and professional standards require that the individual must be kept from harm, even if confidentiality must be broken. Finally, confidentiality could be broken if materials from this study were subpoenaed by a court of law.

COMPENSATION: There will be no compensation for participation in this study.

---

**INFORMED CONSENT:** To allow your son or daughter to participate in this study, you should understand and will agree to the following:

**CONTACTS:** I understand that I may contact any of the researchers at the following addresses and phone numbers should I desire to discuss my child's participation in this study and/or request information about the results of the study: Tobi Thompson, 11238 S. 275<sup>th</sup> E. Ave., Coweta, OK 74429, 918-279-9742, [thompson@owasso.k12.ok.us](mailto:thompson@owasso.k12.ok.us); Dr. Sue Christian Parsons, 253 Willard Hall, College of Education, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078, 405-744-8104, [sue.parsons@okstate.edu](mailto:sue.parsons@okstate.edu). I may also contact Dr. Sue Jacobs, Ph.D. Institutional Review Board, 415 Whitehurst Hall, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078, 405-744-1676 with any questions concerning participants' rights.

**PARTICIPANT RIGHTS:** I understand that my consent for my child's participation is entirely voluntary, that there is no penalty for refusing to participate, and that I am free to withdraw my consent and child's participation in this project at any time.

**CONSENT DOCUMENTATION:** I have been fully informed about the procedures listed here. I am aware of what I will be asked to do and the benefits of participation. I have read and fully understand this consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. I hereby give my permission to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I certify that I have personally explained this document before requesting that the participant sign it.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX D

### *Parent Survey Cover Letter*

11238 S. 275<sup>th</sup> E. Ave.  
Coweta, OK 74429  
September 11, 2006

Parent Name  
Parent Address  
Parent Cit, State and Zip

Dear Parents:

My name is Tobi Thompson. I am a graduate student at Oklahoma State University and also an English teacher at Owasso Mid-High. I received your name from other participants in my study who said you might be willing to participate in a study about the relationship between Mormon students' church involvement and academic success.

I want to reiterate that your participation in this study is completely voluntary and that you may withdraw at any time without penalty to you or your student. Participation in this study includes written reflection of the participants' church and school activities and may include potentially sensitive areas like personal values and beliefs. Although survey questions are not designed to evoke strong emotional responses, it is possible that participants may experience strong emotion through this process. If participants begin to experience discomfort or stress in this project, participants may end their participation at any time. There are no intended risks with this project, including stress, psychological, social, physical, or legal risks that are greater, considering probability and magnitude, than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.

Reflection involved in responding to survey questions may enhance participants' understanding of their own values, beliefs and practices. Furthermore, results may be enlightening as to ways to foster academic success.

All information about participants will be kept confidential. Survey responses will be labeled with identification numbers instead of names, and pseudonyms will replace names in transcripts and research reports. The responses will be kept in a locked cabinet in the advisor's office that is only accessible to the researcher. The OSU IRB has the authority to inspect consent records and data files to assure compliance with approved procedures. All information will be saved as long as it is useful to this inquiry (until the dissertation has been successfully defended), but no more than five years after publication of the results. Results of this study will be published as a dissertation and may be presented at professional meetings or in professional publications.

Confidentiality will be maintained except under specified conditions required by law. For example, current Oklahoma law requires that any ongoing child abuse (including sexual abuse,

physical abuse, and neglect of a minor) must be reported to state officials. In addition, if an individual reports that he/she intends to harm him/herself or others, legal and professional standards require that the individual must be kept from harm, even if confidentiality must be broken. Finally, confidentiality could be broken if materials from this study were subpoenaed by a court of law.

You may contact any of the researchers at the following addresses and phone numbers should you desire to discuss participation in this study and/or request information about the results of the study: Tobi Thompson, 11238 S. 275<sup>th</sup> E. Ave., Coweta, OK 74429, 918-279-9742, [thompson@owasso.k12.ok.us](mailto:thompson@owasso.k12.ok.us); Dr. Sue Christian Parsons, 253 Willard Hall, College of Education, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078, 405-744-8104, [sue.parsons@okstate.edu](mailto:sue.parsons@okstate.edu). You may also contact Dr. Sue Jacobs, Ph.D. Institutional Review Board, 415 Whitehurst Hall, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078, 405-744-1676 with any questions concerning participants' rights.

Participation is entirely voluntary, that there is no penalty for refusing to participate; you are free to withdraw your consent and participation in this project at any time.

The attached survey should take no more than 30 minutes of your time. Information taken from the returned surveys will be used to inform my study. I am asking that, if you would allow me to contact you if any clarifications are necessary, please include your name and phone number on the top of the survey. If you wish not to continue to participate after the survey, please do not include your name and phone number. No one but me will have access to this information.

Should you have any questions about the survey or your participation in this study, please do not hesitate to contact me at home at (918) 279-9742 or via e-mail at [thompson@owasso.k12.ok.us](mailto:thompson@owasso.k12.ok.us).

Thank you so much for your time and consideration. If you choose to participate, please return the survey upon completion in the provided stamped envelope.

Sincerely,

Tobi Thompson

Encl.: survey and stamped, return envelope

## APPENDIX E

### *Family Survey*

Name and phone number (only if you wish to be contacted for any clarification):

How long have you been members of the Mormon Church?

How were you introduced to the church?

How active would you say your children are in the church's activities? Please explain their activities.

How much time per week do your children spend on church related activities and projects? Please explain.

What is your definition of academic success?

How successful do you think your children are academically?

What factors do you think contribute to their success?

How much time per week do you spend time as a family? Please explain.

How successful were you as a student?

What factors contributed to your success?

If you feel you were unsuccessful, what factors do you feel contributed to your lack of success?

What goals do you have for your children? Why?

In what ways do your children agree with these goals? Disagree?

Do your children attend seminary? If so, how often? Is their attendance voluntary?

## APPENDIX F

### *Interview Recruitment Script*

Hello, my name is Tobi Thompson and I am a graduate student at Oklahoma State University and also a teacher at Owasso Mid-High.

I was given your name from other Mormon students who thought you might be interested in participating in my dissertation study. The study focuses on church involvement of Mormon students and academic success.

I want you to know that your participation is totally voluntary and that you may withdraw at any time with no penalty. If you choose to participate, I would like for you to sign and assent form stating that I have gone over the purposes of the study, the fact that you can withdraw at any time, and that the information I collect will be used in a published dissertation, possible published journal articles and possible presentations. Your anonymity will be protected at all times and in all publications and presentations. If you choose to participate and are under 18 years of age, your parents must sign a consent form. The consent form details all the information I have just discussed with you.

The interview will take anywhere from 30 minutes to one and one-half hours. I'd also like to the opportunity to schedule a follow-up interview at some time to clarify anything that you say during the first interview or to get an update on how things are going with your church involvement and your school work. Each time I interview you, you will have the opportunity to choose if you wish to participate.

With your permission, I will audiotape the interview and transcribe it. I will change all names on the transcription—yours, your school's and anyone you may mention by name in the interview. In addition to you and me, no one will know your identity.

What questions do you have about the research study at this point?

May I schedule and interview with you? (Schedule at a location of the interviewee's choosing. Before interview, give interviewee a copy of the assent form in interviewee is under 18 and also a copy of consent form to be signed by interviewee's parent. If interviewee is not a minor, a consent form will be signed before the interview.)

## APPENDIX G

### *Interview Protocol*

1. Have you lived in any other towns besides Owasso?
  - a. How is Owasso different from that town?
  - b. How is Owasso like that town?
  - c. Where did you go to church in that town?
  - d. Were you as involved in church there as you are here?
  - e. Were you successful in school there?
  - f. Are there any inconsistencies between the two churches and the two schools as far as educational expectations go?
2. What do you think are some of the things your church believes that are different from other denominations?
3. What would your friends say are the best things about you?
4. What are your greatest talents?
5. What are some of the things you have accomplished in high school?
6. How has your school experience changed over the years?
7. What is your definition of “academic success?”
  - a. How does success look?
  - b. How are you succeeding?
  - c. Where do you look to improve?
  - d. What are your educational goals for the future?
    - i. How did you form those goals?
8. Describe your current church involvement to me.
9. How are your parents involved in your day-to-day life?
10. How do you think your parents have contributed to your success? To your church involvement?
  - a. How long has your family been involved with the Mormon Church?
11. Describe to me what your definition of seminary is.
  - a. Are you active in seminary?
  - b. What are some of the benefits?
  - c. In what ways has this church program contributed to your academic success?
12. Tell me about the youth leaders you have had.
  - a. How do they encourage you to do your best?
  - b. How does the connection to adults in your church help you be successful?
13. To you, what does the term, “accountable to God” mean?
  - a. In what ways do you feel you are accountable to God?
  - b. How do you fulfill this accountability in your everyday life?

(During the interview, ask for definitions or clarifications for key terms that the interviewee uses. At this point in the interview, ask the person to define any terms used during the interview that were unclear or that could have different meanings.)



**Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board**

Date: Wednesday, April 19, 2006  
IRB Application No: ED0684  
Proposal Title: Church Involvement of Mormon Students and Academic Success

Reviewed and Processed as: Expedited (Spec Pop)

Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): **Approved** Protocol Expires: **4/17/2007**

Principal Investigator(s)

Tob. Thompson 11236 S. 275th E. Ave. Coweta, OK 74428	Sue Christian Parsons 246 Willard Hall Stillwater, OK 74078
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The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46.

The final versions of any printed recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are attached to this letter. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be submitted with the appropriate signatures for IRB approval.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period of one calendar year. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any adverse events to the IRB Chair promptly. Adverse events are those which are unanticipated and impact the subjects during the course of this research; and
4. Notify the IRB office in writing when your research project is complete.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact Beth McTernan in 416 Whitehurst (phone: 405-744-6700; [beth.mcternan@okstate.edu](mailto:beth.mcternan@okstate.edu)).

Sincerely,



Sue C. Jacobs, Chair  
Institutional Review Board

## VITA

Tobi Shawn Thompson

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: CHURCH INVOLVEMENT OF MORMON STUDENTS AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Major Field: Education

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Muskogee, Oklahoma on February 25, 1972, the daughter of Bill and Sandy Fillman.

Education: Graduated Cum Laude from Muskogee High School, Muskogee, Oklahoma in May, 1990; received Bachelor of Arts degree in Education and a Master of Science degree in College Teaching from Northeastern State University in December, 1994 and May, 1999, respectively. Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Education at Oklahoma State University in July, 2007.

Experience: employed as a high school English teacher at Muskogee High School from 1995 to 2001; employed as a tenth grade English teacher at Owasso Mid-High School from 2001 to present; employed as instructor of EDUC 5483, Advanced Educational Measurements at Northeastern State University during the summer 2006 session; employed as the Curriculum Director for the Oklahoma Association of Student Councils from 2006 to present.

Professional Memberships: Kappa Kappa Iota, Phi Kappa Phi, Phi Delta Kappa, National Council for Teachers of English, Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development, International Reading Association

Name: Tobi Shawn Thompson

Date of Degree: July, 2007

Institution: Oklahoma State University

Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: CHURCH INVOLVEMENT OF MORMON STUDENTS AND  
ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Pages in Study: 185

Candidate for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major Field: Education

Scope and Method of Study: The purpose of this study is to study the relationship between church involvement and academic success among Mormon students who attend school in a small community. The participants are current students or graduates of a mid-western, suburban high school located approximately eight miles north of a metropolitan area. In order to be eligible for the study, participants had to be active in their church and consider themselves successful in their core classes in high school. Eligible participants were interviewed and their families were asked to complete surveys. This data was compiled and compared to the existing literature on academic success.

Findings and Conclusions: All of the literature reviewed prior to conducting the study indicated that successful students had several attributes in common: stable and supportive families, participation in activities that promoted morals and values, and a good peer base. In addition, characteristics of community groups, such as churches, that reinforce family values and academic success are contributing factors to student success. The strong family values of Mormonism are compatible with academic success. This is partly due to other findings of this study: the amount of church participation seems to have a positive affect on academic success, as does contact with positive youth leaders and role models. There seems to be no difference in academic achievement between boys and girls even though the church may guide each gender into different roles. Finally, this study found that the definition of academic success is different for Mormon students than for Academe, and there are some community characteristics that encourage academic success.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Sue Parsons