

**Choosing the trades: An exploratory analysis of young men's
decision to pursue a post-secondary trade education¹**

A thesis submitted by

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Abstract

The pursuit of a college education is the societal expectation for most American students; however, this pursuit is not always the logical next step for youth with constrained financial means. The purpose of this study was to explore how the experiences of young men from low-income backgrounds influenced their paths toward attending a post-secondary institution that specializes in trade education. This study uses qualitative data obtained from seven first-year students at a competitive, post-secondary trade school in order to understand their pathways to the trades. Data were deductively and inductively coded using a modified thematic analysis approach in order to better understand these young men's paths towards this particular institution and their motivations for pursuing a career in the trades. Implications that are discussed involve policy and education research with young men from low-SES backgrounds, and how educators may bolster alternative educational options in order to maintain the engagement of these youth in their education while teaching desirable vocational skills.

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The current economic environment in the United States is bleak for many. Even college graduates are having a hard time finding suitable jobs that provide stability and financial security, not to mention satisfaction (Stone, van Horn, & Zukin, 2012). However, as difficult as it is for those with the education and qualifications to push to the top of a hierarchy of candidates, those without the resources to pursue such education are at an even further disadvantage. The U.S. government and the U.S. educational system alike continue to promote the importance of advancing education beyond high school because graduating with a high school diploma, for the most part, is no longer enough to secure a stable and financially rewarding career in the U.S. economy (Crissey & Bauman, 2010).

The benefits of attaining a four-year degree are well documented. The U.S. Census Bureau (2011) reports that the median earnings of a college graduate are over \$20,000 more than those of a high school graduate. College graduates are also less likely to be considered as being in poverty than high school graduates. In addition to the economic benefits of attending college, studies also show that graduates tend to enjoy a more fulfilling work environment, better health, and lower probability of unemployment (Baum & Payea, 2010; Kahn, 2010).

Despite the long list of benefits that are correlated with going to college, pursuing a bachelor's degree is not a real possibility for many young people in the U.S. The high cost of a college education precludes many youth in the U.S., who may desire a college education, from furthering their education post-high school (Karen, 2002). For example, in-state tuition at a four-year state school in the United States averages \$8,893 a year without including any additional expenses such as housing or textbooks (College Board, 2013). Even with resources

such as financial aid and scholarships, the expected family contributions, in addition to day-to-day expenses, make it difficult for students from low-income backgrounds to enroll. Therefore, these students have a lower likelihood of choosing to attend a four-year college, and are more likely to choose other alternatives, such as entering the workforce, going to school part time, or attending community college (Aughinbaugh, 2008). As a result, students from economically poorer backgrounds attend college at a much lower rate than their more wealthy counterparts (Cabrera, & La Nasa, 2001).

Apart from the direct costs of attending college, many students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds have a more difficult time even reaching the college application process due to their primary and secondary education experiences. A large proportion of students from low SES backgrounds in the U.S. attend high schools that do not adequately prepare them to make the transition to college due to lack of resources in the schools available to them (Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009). Students that attend these schools are at a considerable disadvantage due to problems involving the lack of appropriate materials, such as updated textbooks and teaching materials, high rates of teacher turnover, and constant threats of violence (Jacob, 2007). For example, a study conducted by the Department of Education discovered that 40% of schools in low-income neighborhoods did not receive an equitable share of state and local funding, compared to schools that serve students in higher SES communities (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

Despite these challenges facing students from low-SES communities, students from these backgrounds who pursue higher education, or plan to, have been found to have many positive outcomes. Cowan (2011) observed that younger high school students who thought that college was attainable were less likely to engage in risky behaviors, such as smoking cigarettes, and

continued to engage in school. Neighborhood SES has also been associated with academic outcomes (Harding, 2003), and a growing body of research has documented that youth living in low-income neighborhoods have less favorable academic outcomes compared to their counterparts from more privileged neighborhoods (e.g., Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Students from low-SES groups are not only less likely to attend college, but they are also more likely to be academically underprepared to even reach the point of applying to colleges, let alone navigate the complicated application and financial aid processes (Crosnoe, 2009).

These findings about the educational opportunities for students from lower SES backgrounds is disconcerting, as the data show that an adequate education can have the most significant and positive impact on students with these demographic characteristics (Brand & Xie, 2010). Breaking the cycle of poverty begins with individuals becoming self-sufficient, and education provides the opportunity for people to enter well-paying, stable careers (Connell, 1994). An example where this effect is particularly evident are the WWII veterans who took advantage of the G.I. Bill to attend college and pursue careers (Bound & Turner, 2003).

Job opportunities that are available to those with lower levels of education tend to be low paying, provide fewer chances for advancement, and tend to have limited job security, and these factors help perpetuate a cycle of poverty for young people who are born into financially disadvantaged environments (Autor & Dorn, 2009). Unfortunately, the high costs of college, insufficient academic preparation, and poor guidance can make it difficult for youth from these backgrounds to aspire to further their education after high school. This lack of motivation can also lead students to become disengaged from school altogether, and/or lead students to drop out of high school before completing their educations (Yeskel, 2008). A variety of factors contribute

to dropping out of school, but most of these factors lead towards students to become disengaged from their educations (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

Even though educators and policy makers are increasingly committed to lowering the high school drop out rates and low achievement outcomes for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds in the U.S., there is a staggering achievement gap between students from low-SES backgrounds and their more affluent counterparts who stay in school through high school (America's Promise Alliance, 2013). Leveling the educational playing field so that all youth in the U.S. can graduate from high school and be prepared for college requires systemic and time consuming changes in our system of education and in the U.S. economy (Carpenter, 2000; Tucker, 2011). For this reason, it is important for researchers and educators to investigate post-secondary options that present a practical alternative to the costly, and at times, implausible four-year education route. One such option, that has only received limited attention in research in higher education in the U.S., is technical or trade education.

Some of the limited research on trade education experiences has found that youth who were involved in vocational programs during high school increased their school engagement while receiving training for useful and marketable skills (Elffers, 2012). Individuals who were trained in vocational skills have also been found to acquire jobs that require their specialized and unique training (Fredland & Little, 1980). In these instances, having trade education experiences has provided employees with job security and economic returns. Moreover, trade educations can have the benefit of reaching students that fall out of the traditional secondary educational systems, and provide them with skills that will allow them to enter stable, well-paying fields.

While we have an understanding of how students make decisions to pursue four-year colleges, little is known about how young people make the decision to pursue a trade career after high school. Given that a post-secondary trade education can yield many benefits, it is important to understand what experiences lead students toward this path. Moreover, understanding the educational path and the decision making of young men from low-SES backgrounds is particularly important as young men from this demographic group are more likely to end their education after high school (Crosnoe, Mistry, & Elders, 2002). In addition, it is the case that even when young men from low-SES backgrounds want to continue their education post-high school, the need to earn money makes it difficult to move into higher education, especially when compared to their female counterparts (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Purpose of the Present Study

In consideration of this educational context for young men from low-SES backgrounds in the U.S., this study explored the paths of students from low-SES backgrounds who have chosen to pursue an education and career in the trades post high school. This study was conducted within the context of a larger, mixed-method, longitudinal evaluation of the Williamson Free School of Mechanical Trades. The Williamson Free School for the Mechanical Trades is a trade school with an integrated character, civic, and skill-based curriculum in the greater Philadelphia area. This school describes itself as one that is charged with transforming young men from low-income backgrounds into men of high regard who will contribute to their communities. The Williamson School (WS) also takes great pride in a high rate of job placement (about 98%), and has evidence that a WS education does in some part lead these young men toward positive career paths (The Williamson School, 2013a; 2013b).

While the larger study focuses on the impact of this unique educational context on the students it serves, the study presented here explores what factors led the students at Williamson toward the trades, and toward making a decision to pursue the trades at Williamson. In the analyses undertaken in the present study, I specifically explored how young men made the decision to begin their journey towards a trade education at the WS. I also attempted to gain an understanding of the context in which these young men are situated, as well as the context in which they grew up. I specifically aimed to gain an understanding of how their experiences in adolescence could have influenced their decisions to pursue a post-secondary trade education upon graduating from high school. This understanding may help focus subsequent research questions in the larger study, and can potentially contribute to research and policy on educational opportunities for young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds in the U.S.

This contribution can be important as the process of pursuing vocational education in the U.S has not been widely studied over the last several decades. In the past, vocational instruction has been given a negative appraisal, considered a route reserved for students who do not possess the ability to attend college (Raspberry, 1991), or as a refuge for disengaged students until they are no longer required to attend school. The stigma of vocational training persists, even though many trade careers have remained resilient during tough economic times (Bosch & Charest, 2008; Robalino, Behrman, & Almeida, 2012). Moreover, most research on vocational education has been conducted in other parts of the globe, particularly in European countries, where more students are offered vocational instruction and attend at much higher rates (Kelley & Price, 2009). The present study can provide further data on the decision to pursue a vocational education in the United States, and may provide some insight into how these individuals perceive their experiences and their futures after choosing these paths.

In addition to these potential areas of impact, this study valued the voice of young men and wanted to present their stories to a broader audience. The men had the chance to educate the researchers about their experiences and to provide us with context information on a topic that has been largely understudied in developmental science and education. The knowledge the students provided could also influence opportunities provided to youth from similar backgrounds by WS, and other post-secondary educational institutions.

Research Questions

Armed with the knowledge that vocational and trade education seem to have positive effects on youth from low-income backgrounds, it is important to investigate why and how such youth make these decisions to attend these programs. Ultimately, one would hope to capitalize on this knowledge in order to help facilitate the choices of other young people from this demographic group. Perhaps, then, we could improve the future of students who do not want to pursue a traditional post-secondary educational path.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of young men from low-income backgrounds who have made the decision to pursue a post-secondary trade education at the Williamson School. An exploratory analysis of these young men's descriptions of their educational and career-oriented decision process was performed to determine what we may learn about how they perceived their educational opportunities and how they went about their educational decision making. This study describes the life experiences of these men and explores their descriptions of, and reflections about, particular life experiences that led them to Williamson. The research questions that guided this study were:

- Are there common life experiences narrated by these young men? If so, what are they?

- What are the events/aspects of their lives that these young men believe led them toward WS?
- What do these young men describe as their educational opportunities and how might these views be related to their choosing to attend WS?
- What motivated these men to pursue a trade education?

Following the methodological advice of Cresswell (2013), these questions were developed iteratively through careful reading of interview transcripts and through discussions with my advisor.

Ideally, in this study of narratives, we will find that there are some common threads running throughout these young men's lives. Data gathered from these interviews might elucidate specific areas that appear to help push students toward a trade education. Some of these specific areas could include prior experience in vocational settings, mentorship and role models from a young age, or educational experiences. Given that we do not currently know much about the decision to pursue a post-secondary trade education, it may prove prudent to begin by investigating the links between past life experiences and current choices.

Method

Research context

The Williamson Free School of Mechanical Trades is a free, post-secondary school that gives deserving men from low-income backgrounds a vocational education. Students at the school major in one of six programs of study (carpentry, paint, machinery, horticulture, power plant, and masonry). The school's theory of change states that if 1. healthy, able-bodied young men; who are 2. intellectually and emotionally prepared, honest, frugal, entrepreneurial, temperate, and industrious; and who are given 3. a curriculum that educates them with the

knowledge and skills needed to pursue a good mechanical trade; in the context of a school setting that 4. provides Judeo-Christian ethics and values; then 5. they will succeed in life. This theory of change is manifested in the school's strict routine and strong emphasis on discipline and responsibility.

The researchers at the Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development (IARYD) were chosen to evaluate the school and to test this theory of change. Throughout the course of three years, the research involves a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods to rigorously test this theory of change and to track the development of the students as they proceed from their shops towards careers. We received approval by the IRB at Tufts University and began data collection in the summer of 2012. The qualitative portion of our evaluation involves interviewing 30 first year students at the school once a year, in addition to interviews with 60 alumni from the school. Ten students from each comparison school are also interviewed, in addition to 20 alumni from these other schools. All students were randomly selected to participate in interviews.

The interviews examined in the present study were conducted by one of six female researchers. Administrators informed us that students would respond differently to female interviewers than to male interviewers, so we elected to maintain a consistent gender for all of the interviews. Female interviewers were also chosen due to the gender distribution of the IARYD research staff; there were relatively few males available to conduct interviews. All interviews were performed on the school campus, following our IRB-approved protocol. We went through careful recruitment and informed consent procedures to protect the identity of the students from the school.

Life narrative and semi-structured interviews

During the interview, participants were prompted to write down between five and seven of the most important events in their lives. Participants were told to use these cards to help narrate their life story and were told that they had approximately 20 minutes before other questions were asked. The researchers were trained to make minimal comments during the life narrative so that the participant could narrate his life with as little interruption as possible.

After the life narrative, interviewers followed a semi-structured interview protocol with the young men. Questions in the semi-structured portion of the interview included questions regarding educational experiences, educational decision-making, and feelings about attending WS. Interviewers probed about these experiences and asked follow up questions as necessary. Interviews ranged in time from 30 to 60 minutes. Once the interview was completed, the participants were given a \$50 gift certificate as an honorarium. Interviewers then participated in reflexivity exercises after the interview, writing down their thoughts and observations from the interview. The taped interviews were then transcribed by a professional service and then double coded by three members of the research staff. The qualitative manager of the project performed the audit trail. Our codes were iteratively honed throughout the process and data were recoded until we received 100% reliability.

Participants

The participants come from a possible sample of about 90 first-year students at the Williamson School. Thirty students were chosen at random for interviews and I used seven of these interviews to conduct this research. I selected seven of the interviews after having read through all of the transcripts and listening to the audios from the interviews, as described below. These seven cases were selected because they provided rich information relevant to addressing

the research questions. As described in the school charter, students primarily come from low-SES backgrounds, and they are chosen because they are considered to be “deserving,” economically and morally, as they cannot have any form of criminal record to be admitted to the school. Table 1 presents the age and trade concentration distribution of the participants (using pseudonyms to protect their identities) and their trades departments.

Insert Table 1 here

Theory

As I conducted my research I drew on a Relational Developmental Systems Theories (RDST) framework to guide my research questions and my methods. RDST consider the mutually influential relationship between the individual and the context throughout development (Overton, 2013). RDST describe these mutually influential relationships through bidirectional arrows (\leftrightarrow). The development of these young men and their paths towards a trade can be described though exploring interactions between them and their environment, similar to how Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) describe the educational decision making process for choosing to pursue a college education. In addition, I look to the Positive Youth Development perspective, which is derived from RDST and which states that when youth strengths are aligned with resources in their environment that promote healthy growth, positive development will occur (J. Lerner et al., 2013). In this study, I focused on life experiences, as narrated by the young men at the Williamson School, and specifically on their experiences in their context to help gain insight into their decisions to pursue a trade education.

As I immersed myself in the narratives of these young men, I drew from constructivist

epistemologies in my approach to, and analysis of, the data. I was, for example, drawn to make meaning of the holistic experiences of the young men and to try to understand how their interactions within their environment helped define their experiences (Maxwell, 2013). Charmaz (2006) notes that using a constructivist approach “means learning how, when, and to what extent the studied experience is embedded in larger and often, hidden position, networks, situations, and relationships,” (pp. 130). Not only does this situation mean that is necessary to situate the experience in time and place, one must also be alert to the “hierarchies of power, communication, and opportunity that maintain and perpetuate” differences and distinctions among people (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 131).

As I interpreted my findings, I considered the context of the narratives that the young men described and tried to understand how their situations were shaped by these interacting entities. One of the primary issues to be aware of was the socioeconomic status of the individuals and how growing up with relatively few resources impacted the development and outlook of the men. These exercises helped me gain a deeper understanding of the interviews and helped guide my questions and analyses.

Coding

I used Braun and Clarke’s (2006) framework for thematic analysis to code and analyze the data, after entering it into NVivo 10 software. I chose this framework because it is especially helpful when doing exploratory work. Using this method I could identify, analyze, and report patterns within the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) created a protocol that consists of six phases to conduct thematic analysis, and delineates the course of analysis. Presented below are each of the six phases and the steps that I took in my analysis using Braun and Clarke’s framework:

1. Familiarize myself with the data: I read the 30 interviews that were conducted by the

IARYD research team in order to familiarize myself with the data. I also studied the interview protocol and listened to portions of each interview to get a further sense of the context that the transcripts could not provide (e.g., tone, cadence). This experience allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the data, thus allowing me to begin developing research questions to guide the future steps. I then randomly chose seven interviews that were of similar length for this analysis.

2. Generating initial codes: Given my position on the team that coded the data, I was able to familiarize myself with the data that we used, and I identified initial themes that would come up that were not coded. I identified students that mentioned experiences and actions that we did not code for as part of the larger evaluation due to the focus of the evaluation that we were contracted to do. Example of codes that were created for this study that were not involved in the larger study are experiential learning and paying for college. I created memos responding to data that reflected these codes because I believed that these were important parts of these young men lives and could provide further insight into their experiences prior to WS. Through consultation with the coding team, I created other codes that were relevant to answering my research questions (e.g., relationship with mentors, adversity experiences). I also used codes that were part of the original codebook that I deemed to be pertinent to my research questions. I did a line-by-line coding of the data using this initial codebook across all seven cases and modified my codebook and recoded all of the interviews with the new codebook when interviews introduced new topics that I found to be relevant to the research questions.
3. Searching for themes: Themes are concepts derived from data that represent “impressionistic understanding of what is being described in the experiences, spoken

words, actions, interactions, problems, and issues expressed by the participants” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). After doing the initial round of coding, I ran a query on Nvivo 10 to see which codes were present across all seven cases; this step was taken to determine what data pertained to my research questions (Saldaña, 2010). Then, I took the relevant codes that came up frequently to develop initial ideas for themes. I then used tables to identify which codes came up most often and which codes also co-occurred (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I then created a list of initial ideas for themes that linked some of these more salient codes together, with the goal of explaining WS students’ paths to the trades. In addition, I combined codes which I found to be similar and deleted codes which were not used often or provided little information.

4. Reviewing themes: I performed a second round of coding while keeping the initial codes in mind. The second codebook, which I created after the first round of coding, contained more codes that pertained to themes, was used for this round of coding. I ended up deleting themes that I did not believe were useful in describing the data or for answering my research questions. I also expanded my themes to include more codes.
5. Defining and naming themes: I settled on certain codes and created overarching themes that connected two or more codes. I then considered variation of experiences within these themes. I refined what my themes consisted of, and I devised for names that explain the themes.
6. Producing the report: This step required gathering findings and producing a report that accurately represented the data and provided clear examples of themes using participants own words. This step was taken to better illustrate the relevance of the chosen themes. This paper is a product of the sixth step.

Validity

I used two methods to ensure the validity of my work (Morrow, 2005). First, I used the process of memo-writing. Charmaz (2004) describes memo-writing to an “integral intermediate step between data collection and writing drafts of papers” (pp. 73). I used analytical memos to reflect on my thoughts and feelings throughout the process of coding. In addition, analytic memos were used throughout coding in order to further explore the data. I created memos for each transcript, and I also created memos throughout coding that involved ideas for new codes or themes. This process was repeated whenever I sat down with the data in order to create an audit trail that would inform any potential auditor about the decisions that I made.

Another method to ensure validity is working with a theoretical framework (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spears, 2002). Morse and colleagues emphasize the need for using a guiding theory because it helps the researcher to “inch forward without making cognitive leaps” and creates a system where the researcher must work within certain limits. Working with a theoretical framework provides a base for me to yoke my findings to extant theory in developmental science. Using RDST, specifically, allowed me to consider the individual and the context that the individual lived in, and to focus on the interactions between these two levels of analysis. I worked within this frame to limit my findings and assumptions, and therefore prevent me from straying too far away from the contents of the data.

Reflexivity

I consider myself to come from a similar background as some of the students that were interviewed. My family lived in one of the poorer communities in the San Francisco Bay Area and the schools that I attended during elementary and middle school have been rated as some of the lowest performing schools. My family would have been considered working class and living

paycheck to paycheck. My father works in the trades as a landscape contractor and I worked with him for a number of years, performing similar tasks as some of the participants in this paper. I could not help but hear similarities between the stories of some of these youth and my own story.

Even though I have insight into the experience of these young men, they have their own ways of making meaning of their experience. In order to be able to attend to their ways of making meaning, I engaged in reflexive writing to ensure my own understanding of our shared background experiences did not dominate my interpretation of their interviews in the analysis. One example where memo-writing proved useful was when I looked at instances where the participants spoke about familial relationships. One student mentioned how his father had been in and out of jail his whole life, but still described him as a good father and as a victim of circumstance. My initial reaction was that this student was in denial about his father's incarceration, but through memo-writing I realized that I did not have enough information to make any sort of assessment about the situation, and given the data, I had no right to make assumptions about this participant's relationship with his father. Reflecting on analytic decisions throughout the process did not make me an objective researcher, but it allowed me to make more informed decisions and for others to examine my thought process.

Findings

As I read and coded the data, I gave special attention to participants' descriptions of past educational experiences, their perceptions of their educational opportunities, and their explicitly stated reasons for attending a trade school. The codebook also contained codes related to their decisions to attend WS, and to describe other past experiences, such as family interactions and future goals. I identified shared life events across the students in this study, such as parental

separations, school achievements, and relationships, and these instances helped me develop my codebook further.

Once reviewing the main codes and the data to which they corresponded, I was able to begin connecting codes toward the development of higher order categories or themes that helped explain and answer the research questions (Maxwell, 2013). Through the thematic analysis process, I specifically created themes and sub-themes that helped identify some of the educational and life experiences of participants that led them on a path toward WS. I also identified some of the educational and life experiences that, according to participants' own words, led them to make the decision to attend WS.

The two overarching themes I identified looking within and across the seven participants' interviews were *role of finances in students' lives* and *educational orientations*. These themes were most salient across the seven cases and provide a clear view of some of the experiences that led the young men in this study on the path towards WS, and to decide to attend WS. Briefly, *role of finances* describes the many instances wherein the seven students in this study reflected on how finances and money played a part in their lives, as described in more detail below. *Educational orientations* refers to students' narratives about how they became oriented toward a trade education as opposed to another form of a post-secondary education.

In addition to these two main themes or categories, I identified several related sub-themes pertaining to each category. For example, under the theme or category of *role of finances in students' lives*, are the sub-themes of *responsibility toward family*, and *desiring financial security*. These sub-themes refer to nuances in students' discussions of finances in their lives. Specifically, *responsibility toward family* refers to students' discussions of finances as they relate to family responsibilities, or, for example, students' desires to not add to the family's financial

burdens. The sub-theme of *desiring financial security* points to students' references to finances in their lives as related to desires to have financially secure futures. These sub-themes, and the data categorized under these themes, help to explain *both* how students ended up on a path toward WS, and made the decision to attend WS, as illustrated with the data excerpts presented below.

Similarly, under the theme of *educational orientations* are subthemes of *educational perceptions* and *prior exposure to the trades*. The data identified under the theme of *educational perceptions* help to explain how students' perceptions of their high school educations and post-secondary educational opportunities influenced their orientations to the trades, across the WS sample. In addition, students' narratives about their vo-tech high school and work experiences, and their positive reflections on these experiences, as reflected in data categorized as "prior exposure to the trades," help explain why students chose to attend a trade school and continue on a path toward the trades that they may have started in adolescence.

In the next section I describe how these themes and sub-themes arose in the narratives provided by students in this study, looking across the seven participants' interviews. After providing the descriptions of *the role of finances* theme and corresponding sub-themes, I present select excerpts from the data corresponding to these themes. I then define the theme of *educational orientation* and its sub-themes and the range of responses to which these themes correspond, followed by select excerpts from the data.

Role of Finances

This over-arching theme refers to prominent references and descriptions students in this study provided in their narratives about finances and the role of finances in their lives. As presented below, finances were discussed in student interviews as part of their descriptions of

their family backgrounds and their motivations for attending Williamson. Every student in this sample mentioned, for example, that Williamson is free of charge and that this aspect of the WS greatly factored into their decision to attend the school. Students also described their financial resources where and shared stories from their childhood or about their high school experiences in interviews. Finally, students mentioned finances when reflecting on future goals, such as owning a business, or owning a home.

The salience of financial factors in these students' narratives is likely related to these students being from low-resource backgrounds, where finances or money is often a frequent part of family conversations. Research has found that young children from low-SES backgrounds are especially aware of the role of the money in their families' lives, when compared to their more affluent counterparts (Stuber, 2011). This awareness was evidenced in the young men's narratives analyzed here.

Responsibility toward family

The role of finances came up specifically as students described being motivated to attend Williamson out of a desire to avoid financially burdening the family any further with costs of a post-secondary education at a different institution. Four of the students mention how the last thing they want to do was cause undue stress on their families by choosing schools that would require assuming great amounts of debt. Upton said outright "I wanted to go to college, but then again, I didn't because I was scared of failing. I didn't want to waste my parents' money." It appeared that, in addition to being scared to fail, Upon was scared that pursuing further education could cause his parents added financial burdens. Upton was adamant about not wanting to take this risk.

In turn, Aaron described telling his mother that he did not want her to pay for college. Instead, he said to her, “when I turn 18, I don’t want anything from you guys any more, not because I don’t love you all or anything. I want to do this on my own.” Not only does Aaron fear the possibility of burdening his family with student loans, but he also desires independence. He in fact describes the desire to make a life for himself. Aaron and other students see the free education at Williamson as an opportunity to venture out on their own, with relatively little risk, an opportunity they may view as especially valuable given their financial backgrounds. For some students, Williamson seems to provide a place for them to declare independence from their parents and from their reliance on them financially, while at the same time providing the tools necessary for future success.

Desiring financial security

Another prominent motivating factor that appeared to contribute to the decision to attend the WS was the students’ awareness of the financial security that a degree from Williamson could provide. Ignacio, who described himself as a good student during high school and had other opportunities open to him, including large packages of financial aid to four-year colleges, chose Williamson in part due to the potential income that he believed he could earn immediately upon graduating:

“I found out about Williamson and it being free and everything, and I found out about the Power Plant Technologies program, which I’m in now, and I found out that after three years of free school, most of the kids were getting out and the average they were making was between 55,000 and 90,000 a year starting out. And I was like I’m not going to pass up that opportunity if I can get in, so that was a huge draw for me, and that’s kind of what put me here.”

Ignacio told us that he actually hoped to “skate through” Williamson, get his bachelor’s in engineering, and then go to medical school. He recognized that this opportunity is too good to pass up and he is willing to commit the next three years of his life to ensure financial success for himself. Williamson, to him, was a sound investment of his time and one that will be likely to pay off in the short term. Ignacio’s eventual goal has nothing to do with a trade education, but he chose to go to Williamson because of the security that it would provide upon graduating. Importantly, Ignacio’s narrative stood out from the rest, as his educational ambitions far exceeded what he would be getting from his competitive three-year trade degree. The fact that Ignacio factored WS into his long-term educational plan, however, evidences the notion that a trade degree is a practical option for many young men from low-SES backgrounds, at least in the short-term and immediately upon graduating from high school. Moreover, according to Gestsdottir and Lerner (2007), Ignacio’s narrative reflected that he has positive developmental attributes, such as perspective thinking, that is, planning for the future is an indicator of PYD; thus, Ignacio’s decision to attend WS as part of a bigger plan evidences that he is on a path that is likely to lead him toward well-being.

Evan also discussed his family’s difficulties with money while growing up and how these experiences contributed to his desire for financial security in the future, and thus, his decision to attend Williamson. After his mother died, he and his stepfather were in a difficult financial situation, and he described that “every year it got worse.” He saw his stepfather struggle to get a steady job because of their lack of finances and he resolved to break that cycle. Evan said:

“And it’s a matter of I couldn’t get the loans [for school] because my dad had such bad credit. I couldn’t get him to cosign, couldn’t get anybody else to cosign. And [Williamson] enabled me to get a job so that I’ll be able to do these other things, buy

these houses, go to these places, start these businesses. It enables me to decide what I want to do with my life instead of just being a victim to the tides of the economy.”

Evan saw a career in the trades as an opportunity to be his own boss who controls his own fate. His stressful financial situation made him appreciate the choices and freedom that money can provide and also motivated him to take the opportunity provided by a free trade education at WS. Evan believed that the training he will receive at the WS would provide him with the capabilities to work through difficult situations that his step-father was unable to succeed in, and it would also allow him with some control over his future. Evan’s past family difficulties regarding finances influenced his desire to have a financially secure future, and, in turn, his decision to attend WS.

David also spoke to the security that WS can provide, but was reportedly more interested in the byproduct that increased financial potential could provide: responsibility. He talked almost disdainfully of people who did not have to struggle like him, saying “I know some kids got handed everything by mommy and daddy... They’ve had everything done for them.” David mentioned that he had to work for everything that he achieved and that he had “always been responsible for [him]self.” The education that he will receive at WS will provide him with the training to achieve a good, well paying job and most importantly teach him to become a “stand up guy” like other people that he admired. David wanted to become a “Williamson man” that is well respected and that can help others, and he talked at length about his commitment to achieve this goal.

From the analysis of the seven narratives conducted for this study, the free education and namely the financial security that jobs in the trade sector provided appeared to be what attracted the students to WS. Their decisions to pursue an education in trades, at this free institution, were

also influenced by hardship endured during their childhoods. Moreover, these youth wanted to make sure that they were not vulnerable in the future to the same economic challenges they experienced early on in life.

It is therefore likely that the WS, given its high success rate in job placement, was an adaptive choice for these young men. In addition, WS being free meant that these young men would not accrue debt during their educations, and this fact also appeared to motivate these students to pursue a trade education. This point does not suggest that students from more affluent backgrounds do not hold the same feelings about money; but it is possible that the lack of financial resources during the childhood of the young men at the WS have rendered the security provided by a Williamson education worth the decision to attend a vocational school over other possible options.

Educational Orientations

There were a variety of secondary educational experiences presented by the seven young men in this study. These experiences seemed to shape participants' attitudes and perceptions of their educational opportunities, and ultimately, their orientations towards post-secondary education. There was variation in students' experiences in high school in terms of academic achievement, involvement in school activities, and future scholastic orientation. This variation may explain, in part, students' varied goals upon graduating from WS. Several students in this study, for example, maintained the desire to attend a four-year institution upon graduating from the WS, while others mentioned wanting to use their trade skills which they began honing in their vocational high schools, to develop successful businesses. Students' orientations towards education were largely shaped by their past experiences in school, and they cite these as factors in their decision to attend Williamson.

Educational perceptions

Each participant specifically had his own ideas about the purpose of education, in high school and post-high school. Moreover, these students' views of education appeared to be shaped by their experiences in high school. Aaron saw graduating from high school as a great accomplishment due to the fact that he attended three different high schools. He described that it was "kind of hard with all the transitions..." to make a concerted effort towards his education. Although he talked about plans of completing his masonry training, he acknowledged that he needed to continue learning beyond Williamson in order to succeed. Two of his future goals were to learn carpentry to supplement his vocational skills, and to eventually go back to college "to give [him] more job opportunities, more doors open." He understood that school is important, but that continued education after high school is essential for success.

Similarly, Oscar saw graduating from high school as "a burden off [his] chest," mostly because of his mother's fears that he would not accomplish this goal. However, school was never too important to him, and his mother's happiness/approval was an external motivation for him to continue. In fact, he saw a college education as almost being a waste because he noticed other people have huge amounts of debt, even after college. His reasons for attending WS were that it provided him with good job outcomes and because he needed the strict structure of the school in order to succeed.

While the seven students in this study were happy to be attending the WS, many of them also shared regrets about not doing well enough during high school to at least have the four-year college option open to them. Oscar mentioned that if he had the chance to go back he would have taken "more advantage of the education and... taken [his] school work more serious." Evan shared similar feelings around his decision to choose Williamson. He reflected on his high

school educational performance and noted: “if I would have applied myself, I probably could have gone to any college free, but I didn’t.” While none of the participants said outright that an alternative post-secondary educational path was looked down upon, some seemed to imply that it would not have been their first choice.

Evan had very clear opinions about education and how schools handled their responsibilities to teach young people: “The school system that I was experiencing in the public school was just pass you along, pass you along...” After attending most of his childhood at a private school, Evan was shocked to experience his public high school as taking such an indifferent approach to educating him and his peers. He explained his own lack of buy-in to the school as a result of this apathetic attitude from teachers, noting “the way that the teachers treated us was as though we’re a joke. So I, in turn, treated it like it was a joke.” His evaluation of the teachers’ and administrators’ attitudes towards education and how this evaluation influenced his orientation to education, highlights the bidirectional nature of teacher-student and school-student interactions and how this relation impacts youth development, as well as the orientations of youth to their educational paths. Evan also shared, however, that recognizing his school’s lack of concern for his future pushed him to realize that he must be responsible for his own education and success. This sense of responsibility pushed him outside of the classroom in order to succeed. He mentioned throughout his interview searching out teachers that cared and studying subjects that were not taught in school, such as programming, in order to supplement his education.

Prior exposure to the trades

It seemed that most of the students in the sample had some sort of exposure to trade skills, either through attending a vocational high school, or by taking part-time jobs. Students

worked in the trades through either helping family members or helping family friends who worked in the trades and in turn, developed skills, training, and experience in these fields. Zack, for example, borrowed equipment and “threw [it] in the back of the truck and just did all [his] neighbors’ lawns, and they all give [him] money for it.” This experience showed Zack how easy it was to make money by doing work that he enjoyed and that allowed him to be outside while allowing him to work with his hands. Similarly, David obtained a job with the school district as a groundskeeper and was able to earn money while going to school. These types of work opportunities appeared to influence students’ decisions to seek trade education after high school.

For students that took vocational classes in school, the common thread appeared to be that they developed a good relationship with their instructors, which enabled them to be more invested in their learning experience. Aaron was introduced to WS by his boss, and his experience working with an alumnus also made him realize the many opportunities that WS could bring: entrepreneurship possibilities, higher wages, and doing something that you enjoy. Zack also had previous trade experiences, and actually had job offers through his vocational teacher due to his strong work ethic- “I graduated top of my class in vo-tech...my teacher only gave me the job offer.” Zack held a realistic view of the future, and rationalized that he could eventually lose the jobs and he would end up without credentials. Attending WS allowed him an extra layer of security, “coming out of here, you don’t really need the experience. This is the experience. They see that WS name on your Associate’s degree and I’ll be good to go.” These experiences that Aaron and Zack described helped them develop enthusiasm for the trades and exert genuine effort in their vocational classes. Their vocational classes served to give them positive work experiences, opened up networking experiences, as well as exposed them to the reality of what a life as a tradesman could potentially look like.

Discussion

In order to explore the decision making process behind pursuing a post-secondary vocational education, and how students from low-SES backgrounds ended up on a potentially adaptive path toward the trades, I analyzed semi-structured and life-narrative interviews with seven young men at the Williamson School. The interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun, & Clarke, 2006) wherein I developed and applied a codebook to participants' narratives in order to link codes together to identify themes that could help explain what factors could have contributed towards their decision to attend this school. The analysis also focused on developing a description of the participants in order to provide further insight into the population of students at Williamson and how they ended up on a path toward the trades.

From the analyses of interviews, I learned about motivations for attending WS, and the experiences that led the participants to the school. Some of the factors that lead them towards this point in their lives included past experiences in the trades and the pursuit of financial and job security. Each student mentioned a variety of reasons for going to WS, but these themes were most salient across the seven participants' interviews.

The finding that a large motivating factor for attending Williamson was described by students as receiving a college education free of charge was commensurate with the literature on factors influencing post-secondary educational choices. Field (2006) conducted a quasi-experimental study at New York University's School of Law where students were randomly assigned to two different financial aid packages, one with low amounts of incurred debt and one with high amounts of debt. Field discovered that students in the first condition were twice as likely to enroll in the program than those in the condition with higher amounts of debt. Another

finding from this study is that students who received the condition with lower debt were also 33% more likely to work in public sector jobs.

Not only are students more likely to enroll in school if they face less debt, but they also appear to be more willing to enter careers that give back to the community. Although Field's investigation studied a different population, the findings are of particular interest when taking into account the fact that part of the Williamson Schools' mission is to develop men of high moral character that contribute to their communities. The link between low debt and the high likelihood for contribution should be further explored to understand what are the exact factors that influence this relationship.

Although family finances was a prominent topic across cases, there was great variation in of family backgrounds, motivating factors, and in educational experiences, and how finances arose in students' narratives about these topics. Across the seven cases, for example, students provided an array of narratives reflecting different reasons about why money or finances played an important role in their lives. To some of these students, finances were mentioned in reference to family responsibilities, or for example, their desires to no longer contribute to their family's financial burdens. To others, finances came up in their narratives about why they did not want to accrue debt as part of their post-secondary education experiences. One student decided to give up on large financial aid packages to a four-year institution out of a desire to avoid future debt and potential job insecurities in his future. This student rationalized that he should attend Williamson because of the earning potential for the future trade careers, and the security of a debt-free education outweighed the challenges graduates of a trade education may face for not receiving the more traditional four-year college degrees. In addition, some students mentioned

being inclined to pursue further education to supplement the trade skills that they will receive at WS.

Despite these differences, there were many similarities across the group that begin to tell us possible influences on young men's decisions to attend a trade education after high school. Many mentioned teachers and activities that provided them with different perspectives towards school. Some students talked about participating in extra-curricular activities, which helped them develop character and initiative, possibly making the character model used by WS more palatable. Other students talked about feeling that they were not meant for school and instead preferred working with their hands.

Together, these narratives explained how a group of young men from low-SES backgrounds ended up on a seemingly adaptive path to trade school, and why they decided to attend the WS instead of other college or work options. If these young men do become men of high character through their education at WS, we will have important information to contribute to high school educators and policy makers about how to facilitate such adaptive life courses and decision-making in other youth.

Limitations

It is important to note that the themes that I arrived at are my own and that they are my interpretation of the data. I attempted to use the participants' own words whenever possible, whether to explain a phenomenon or to develop a theme, but these words were spoken in a specific context and under specific circumstances. In addition, the students in this study had just spent three or four days in orientation, having teachers and administrators tell them that what was expected of them and what type of men they would become, which likely influenced their interviews and their descriptions of future goals. The strict nature of the school also could have

had an undue influence upon responses, and participants could have been mistrustful of the research team.

Similarly, it must be stressed that this analysis is exploratory in nature, and only serves to begin describing the students in the analysis. While I sought to contribute knowledge to educational research about students from low-SES backgrounds, who choose to attend a trade institution, it is necessary to remember that the experiences of the seven participants are not necessarily generalizable to other students at WS or in the trades more generally. This analysis was performed in order to inform future research and practice regarding educational decision-making experiences of youth from low-SES backgrounds. In short, these findings are initial steps toward contributing to research on trade education and educational opportunities for young people in the US from low-income backgrounds.

An additional limitation is that this work is a secondary analysis of data that were collected as part of a larger project, limiting my ability make certain claims and assumptions about students' state of mind during the interview and their attitudes toward the study (Moriarity, Deatrick, Mahon, Feetham, Carroll, et al., 2009). Returning to the school with my own protocol and guided by a preliminary analysis of the data could provide better responses to my questions. Furthermore, additional methods of ensuring validity, such as checking findings through additional interviews or through focus groups, could be employed to enhance this study. It would also be interesting to ask the participants directly what the benefits and sacrifices are related to attending a free trade school as opposed to a four-year college. The questions I generated here will, nonetheless, change future waves of this study by influencing interview protocols.

Conclusions

This study explored the paths of seven young men that chose to attend a post-secondary vocational institution. The participants were interviewed about their past experiences, their thoughts about attending such a school, and their future goals. Factors that help describe students' backgrounds were examined and the question of what drove these men to this school was explored. Themes related to previous educational experiences and perceptions, and financial motivations were identified as representing possible factors that could have contributed towards their decision to attend this institution.

While the analysis performed in this study was designed to be exploratory in nature and for the purpose of helping to describe the students in the Williamson school, it provides useful information for next steps in the analysis of the data provided by the larger sample. The study also provides potential questions for future interview protocols, and begins to paint a picture of the population at the Williamson School.

Future attempts to explore decisions to pursue trade education should focus on the educational experiences of men and women prior to their trade educations to better understand how to cultivate enthusiasm and opportunities for the trade path. Moreover, students who do not anticipate attending a four-year institution should be better supported in choosing alternative and productive careers paths, such as those in the trades. Given the dire state of the U.S. economy, and the decreasing capital associated with costly four-year degrees, trade educations may prove to be an increasingly popular option for youth in the U.S. Such education may thus warrant further investigation in research on youth development and education.

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Table 1

Name, ages, and trade program of the participants.

Name	Age	Trade Course
Aaron	18	Masonry
David	19	Painting
Evan	18	Carpentry
Ignacio	19	Power Plant
Oscar	18	Horticulture
Upton	18	Masonry
Zack	18	Horticulture