THE EFFECT OF MESSAGES COMMUNICATED FROM A STUDENT’S LEGAL GUARDIAN REGARDING HIGHER EDUCATION

A Thesis
Presented to the Faculty in Communication and Leadership Studies
School of Professional Studies
Gonzaga University

Under the Supervision of Dr. Alexa Dare
Under the Mentorship of Dr. Karen Taback, East Los Angeles Community College.
Communications and Leadership Studies

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Communication and Leadership Studies

By
Mareesa Stevens
May 8, 2012
Abstract

This qualitative study sought to examine how the messages communicated by one’s parent(s) or legal guardian(s) surrounding higher education influence his or her educational journey. The philosophical structure of this study is derived from Gerry Philipsen’s Speech Codes theory (1992). The data acquired in this study were gathered from participants in both interviews and questionnaires. The results of this study indicate that there is a correlation between the messages communicated surrounding higher education and one’s decision to pursue higher education as a goal. Positive communication surrounding higher education results in the student deciding to pursue that goal. While on the other hand, negative or no communication regarding higher education results in the student not making higher education a priority. This study yielded results that support the hypothesis and demonstrate how Speech Codes (Philipsen, 1992) between the caretaker and youth and community and youth/care taker can impact the youth’s view of higher education. Thus, the findings herein support the need for further research on this topic.
We the undersigned, certify that we read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree Master of Arts.

Thesis or Project Director

Faculty Mentor

Faculty Reader

Gonzaga University
MA Program in Communication and Leadership Studies
### Table of Contents

**Gonzaga University**

**MA Program in Communication and Leadership Studies**

**Table of Contents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Importance of the Study</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Definitions of Terms Used</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Review of Literature</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Philosophical Assumptions</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theoretical Foundations</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Argument for Further Research</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Scope and Methodology</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Scope</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Validity</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The Study</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Results of the Study</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Summary and Conclusions</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Study of Limitations</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recommendations for Further Research</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>APPENDICES</td>
<td>37-40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter I: INTRODUCTION

The Problem

Statement of the Problem

America: the land of opportunity, and home to the fortunate and free. Though this may be true for many Americans there is evidence that suggests otherwise. There is a condemning cycle wherein one’s education is often predetermined by the socioeconomic status (SES) of the home he or she is raised in. Consequently, the level of education will play a role in what socioeconomic status one achieves and the kind of education the next generation will receive.

Multiple factors of one’s SES may serve as an advantage or disadvantage in children’s lives and the road of discourse they pursue. It is the intent of the current author, to analyze the effect of the communication between a legal guardian(s) and child regarding education. The author hypothesizes that there is a direct correlation between the support and communication surrounding education between the family and child.

Importance of the Study

Humans cannot not communicate. Whether communicating verbally or non-verbally people are continuous communicators. For the purpose of this study the author will focus on the communication from one’s parent(s) or guardian(s) surrounding higher education. The level of education one receives is one of the biggest indicators of financial success. Ironically, it seems as though one’s SES or the financial circumstances he or she was born into is one of the biggest predictors of the education that one will achieve. As such, it seems apparent that by studying the influences of low SES culture that lead to a lack of determination to pursue higher education is the key to breaking this cycle and allowing American’s to truly be free and to realize the
American dream. Information gathered from such a study essentially affords the parents the ability to give their child a better life than they had.

**Definition of Key Terms**

Communication: “…refers to close, supportive, flexible *speech*, which functions as the ‘work’ necessary to self-definition and interpersonal bonding” (Katriel & Philipsen, 1981, p.301).

Culture/Community: “Culture as it is used here, refers to a *socially constructed and historically transmitted pattern of symbols, meanings, premises, and rules*” (Geertz, p.89).

Higher Education: For the purpose of this study, Higher Education will refer to institutionalized education sought out beyond the high school graduate level.

Parent/Legal Guardian: Will be defined as the individual(s) most responsible for custodianship and rearing of the students.

Socio Economic Status (SES): “…is determined by the combination of income, education, and occupation” (Allen, p. 100).

Speech Codes: “A cultural code of speaking, then, consists of a socially constructed and historically transmitted system of symbols and meanings pertaining to communication…” (Philipsen, 1992, p.8).

Student/Individual: There will be two ways in which these terms may be referenced herein. First, as the subjects within the study. Second, referring to the greater populous of students.

**Organization of Remaining Chapters**
The remaining chapters in this study present an examination of the messages communicated by one’s parent(s) or legal guardian(s) surrounding higher education and how these messages influence the student’s decision to pursue higher education. The literature review is the next chapter in the current study and includes works from scholars such as Wagner (1972 & 2001), hooks (2000), Joseph Jr., and Archer, Hutchings and Ross, (2003). Chapter three identifies the qualitative methods employed in this study. Chapter four goes on to detail the results from research design as well as includes a discussion of the findings related to the messages communicated by one’s parent(s) or legal guardian(s) surrounding higher education and the student’s desire to take part in higher learning. Lastly, chapter five identifies the limitations of the study and suggestions for further research.
Chapter II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Socioeconomic status correlating to the level of academic achievement is a relatively new topic, and therefore there is not much research in this field. Joseph Jr. (2004) refers to the national center for education statistics reported in 2000, which found “Young people living in families with incomes in the lowest quintile were six times more likely than their counterparts in the top 20% to drop out of high school” (p. 133). The above statistic provides supports the theory that a child from a low SES background is much less likely to attend college, however it fails to break down and analyze what components of coming from a low SES family make a child less likely to prevail in education and seek high learning.

There is even less research that exists relating to the academic success of a child and their interpersonal communication with their legal custodian and rearing; however, from what research there is, it is clear that two forms of communication emerge and play a role in child development and specifically the values towards education. One of the most thorough pieces of literature on the topic comes from Kincheloe and Steinberg (2007), they provide an in depth analysis of several components of one’s SES or social class that effects their outlook on education, and more specifically offer both examples direct and indirect communication from caregiver to student relating to education. Examples of direct communication having consequences on academic achievement are also demonstrated in the works of Wagner (1972 & 2001) hooks (2000) and Archer, Hutchings and Ross, (2003).

Philosophical Assumptions

Humans are inherently social and are often shaped by their cultural foundation. “Culture as it is used here, refers to a socially constructed and historically transmitted pattern of symbols,
meanings, premises, and rules” (Geertz, p.89). Since the dawn of man the distinction of communication allowed man and man’s culture to prevail. Language was generated to ensure that culture persisted through the generations and so that man could communicate their experiences, ideologies and discoveries with fellow man and shape future generations to come. It is through these lived experiences and their subsequent communication that cultures are generated and social norms are perpetuated.

It is through the culture and the rearing of an individual that one develops their worldview; and it is through this lens that one perceives the world. That is, one’s perception, which is shaped by their cultural and behavioral experiences, becomes their own lived reality. Their truths are founded in past experiences and are limited by their worldview. In regards to the current research study, one’s rearing and the communication messages relayed to the individual concerning furthering their education, directly impacts their likelihood of seeking higher learning. Furthermore, the speech codes of the culture from which this individual developed, not only helped shape their views directly, but it also influenced the rearing they experienced at home and thus indirectly.

**Theoretical Foundations**

“A symbol is defined as a ‘vehicle for a conception’ and symbols are ‘tangible formulations of notions, abstractions from experience fixed in perceptible forms, concrete embodiment of ideas, attitudes, judgments, longings, or beliefs’” (Geertz, p. 91). From these conceived notions rules or social norms are generated, and it is these norms that construct acceptable behaviors. These constructs are particularly and more harshly enforced when in social settings. It is these implied norms that serve as the cultural codes of the community. “A cultural
code of speaking, then, consists of socially constructed and historically transmitted system of symbols and meanings pertaining to communication – for instance the symbols ‘Lithuanian’ or ‘communication’ and their attendant definitions; beliefs about spoken actions…” (Phillipsen, p.8). As this relates to the current research, it would be these cultural codes of speaking that dictate the communicated messages between parent(s) or legal guardian(s) and their offspring. More specifically the type of messages communicated regarding higher education.

As the data will show Speech Codes (Philipsen, 1992), directly influence the subjects and also shape the communication between subjects and their parent(s) or legal guardian(s). In some cultures the Speech Codes (Philipsen, 1975) generated a positive environment that encouraged one’s decision to seek higher education, while in other cultures subjects were alienated, tormented and looked down upon for stepping outside the norms dictated by the Speech Code (Philipsen, 1992), of that culture. It is also demonstrated in the data that speech codes can more indirectly shape one’s future educational endeavors.

Socio Economic Status and Social Class

Kincheloe & Steinberg (2007), discuss how prior research focuses on the correlation between academic achievement and socioeconomic status. Their concern being, that socioeconomic status serves as a rough estimate of social class and is too all encompassing of a term to provide insight into the underlying factors that so heavily influence academic aspirations. Consequently, by not identifying these components and by choosing to summarize them into a loosely defined broad term, American’s suffer the inability to rectify these issues and seek educational reform.

Priorities on Non-Educational Achievements
Wagner (2001) describes the four reasons why children are less likely to pursue higher education, one reason being, “A lack of parental aspiration related to the value of education and irrelevant curriculum not geared towards their needs.” (p. 185). Wagner (2001) goes on to describe the potential scenario of a child returning home, proud of their report card only to be told that their latest achievements will fail to put groceries on the table. Children from such homes are culturally trained to put a greater significance on where their next meal will come from, or caring for their siblings, than the grades they achieve in school. One may infer that if the child does not receive positive reinforcement for their accomplishments they will no longer aspire for such academic success.

Wagner’s (1972) previous writings also touched on this phenomena. Wagner (1972) explained how “Too often parents make negative remarks about the school, the teacher, or the level of education, and the children of course mirror what they hear at home. Some parents can’t wait for their children to leave school for a job so that they can pay the bills” (p. 442). Other parents share similar sentiments and feel as though education beyond elementary is not significant, especially for the female’s.

They feel that such education is reserved for the wealthy and therefore is not applicable to the lives of their children. Similar to Wagner (1972) Kincheloe & Steinberg (2007) discuss how “Attributes that parents pass on to their offspring play a significant role in whether or not a student is able to achieve his or her academic potential in the United States” (p. 76). They go on to discuss how education is one of the most significant and accurate means of determining one’s SES as well as the education they pursue (p.76-77). As previously discussed, SES and education level achieved are interrelated and subsequently lead to one another; and as evidence shows the
messages communicated and values towards education that legal custodians instill, serve as predictive factors and key components in this equation.

**Culture of low SES Families**

“Where We Stand: Class Matters” by bell hooks is based on the premise that social class and economic status are socially predetermined castes that one is born into and she primarily focus on the black community and even more specifically one the black woman. Hooks (2000) uses anecdotes from her own life and experiences that were close to her, to generalize to the greater black community and pulls research and national statics to found her claims. She discusses how “Daddy believed a woman with too much education would never find a husband” (p. 20). She goes on to talk about how her mother also reinforced this stereotype and how she trained her and her sisters to be obedient and good homemakers. Hooks reflects on how deeply imbedded this train of thought was, and how in her teens years the only woman she respected were who lived alone, were educated but how they were regarded as “…women no man would desire-women who think”(p. 21). She also described how in grade school everyone participated in art class; but when it came time to choose classes art was reserved for those who could afford it, it was not sensible for her (p. 29). All of these sentiments were communicated to her from her parents and was instilled in them by their parents; it is an accepted cultural way of life. Hooks clearly rose above to break the cycle but it is clear that for many black women education inhibits their only chance of rising in the class system by marrying into a better one.

It is clear that in hooks life her family played a significant role in influencing one another’s views toward education and other aspects of her identity and the identity’s of her siblings. Sarangi (2006) states, “Family is conceptualized as a social institution that mediates the
individual and the social, with identifiable structures, functions, and hierarchies” (p. 403). This reinforces the concept that the messages communicated by the legal guardian(s) have such a profound influence on the child that they often aspire follow the same path as their guardian (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2007).

Hooks (2000) describes how her family’s view that education beyond grade school was not only pointless but can be detrimental to the advancement and economic success of a woman. This sentiment is based on cultural and social norms and learned family values. Harrison & Hatt (2009) provide evidentiary support for this phenomena. Their study though based in the United Kingdom yielded results that correlate to the experiences of bell hooks and replicated the results of other studies conducted within the United States. The replication of results increases the validity of the hypothesis presented in this paper (p. 354).

**Parental Involvement**

Current research has more concrete evidence of the correlation between parental involvement and academic aspirations. “…It has been noted that parents’ educational aspirations play a critical role in how adolescents come to view school as well as their occupational future” (Baharudin, Hong, Lim & Zulkefly, p. 145). It is also noted that parental involvement which, “…includes taking part in activities to support, encourage, assist, help, recognize, and contribute towards the child’s cognitive development” (p. 145) play a significant role in that child’s outlook towards continued education.

Baharudin, Hong, Lim & Zulkefly (2010) go on to explain that such involvement includes both the parent’s involvement in school related activities such as serving on boards or
the PTA and attending parent-teacher conferences as well as encouraging open communication regarding academic performance and aspirations in the home (p. 145).

Baharudin, Hong, Lim & Zulkefly (2010) reiterate the importance of direct communication surrounding education but also establish the significance of indirect communication. There are two primary means of indirect communication, through which a guardian influences the educational values of a child. A custodial guardians choice to place a de-emphasis on education whether by failure to discuss it at all or by setting it as a low priority, they are relaying to the child a clear message that education should not take precedence in their life.

Walker & Greenwood, (1994) associate academic difficulty in low SES to a less diverse vocabulary. The authors attribute the children’s difficulty with diction to their parental rearing which often involved less attention and communication than those of a higher SES. Even though Walker & Greenwood, (1994) specifically hone in on the diction of a student being a primary issue in the academic success of the student, they attribute the diminished vocabulary of the students to a lack of involvement of the parental body. Caldas & Banks (1999) provide yet another example of how the “family structure had a much stronger relationship with school achievement than either school socioeconomic status or school racial composition” (p. 91).

**Lack of Social Support**

Hovart, Weininger and Lareau (2003) focus on the social ties available to the parental units of different SES groups. They found that parental units of low SES groups had less of a support network available to them, which made them in turn less available to their children both in time and in guidance. They also found that low SES parents typically had fewer professionals in their networking group and the group is “organized predominantly among kinship lines.”
Therefore, low SES custodians have fewer persons to seek advice from on such matters and have no influencers or social expectations to encourage educational aspirations or personal growth (Philipsen 1973, p.151). In turn, the children of low SES families lack support or guidance from their immediate caregivers and do not have as many role models outside of the home to who have furthered themselves through education.

“…most children [of the working-class] felt from the age of eleven felt that there was no point in trying anymore” (Kerry, p. 25). This dramatic statement Kerry (1993) atones to socioeconomic position and more specifically social and family factors. Kerry (1993) describes one of the most important components of family factors as parental interest in the child’s development (p. 25).

On a more positive note, Wingard (2006) shows how the simple act of inquiring about one’s homework positively influences that child and their academic career (p. 577). While Baharudin, Hong, Lim & Zulkefly (2010), explain how “Educational attainment is perhaps the most imperative meter for measuring adolescents’ well-being. It is the marker for successful college/university enrollment, scholarship awards and future job success” (p. 144). One may than deduce, that by taking the time to help a child with their school studies, or just by simply asking them about their homework, they can positively affect their academic performance. Furthermore, by assisting in academic attainment one is bettering the odds to successfully apply and gain admittance into college.

In fact, Baharudin, Hong, Lim & Zulkefly (2010) go onto discuss how “…children from high aspiration families tend to be more successful regardless of socioeconomic status” (p. 145). This is a prolific find, and is something that should certainly be further researched. If the
government could prove to the general public and help institute parents spending more time and effort by simply making a point to ask about their child’s school and homework, the outcome could be extraordinary.

Argument for Further Research

As shown above there is numerous sources of evidence that family involvement, and more specifically parental or custodial communication regarding education with the student, plays a significant role in the academic aspiration and achievement of that child.

Other studies such as Robinson (2007), Alfred L. Joseph Jr. (2004) and Dugdale (1977), site other potential aspects as the primary disadvantage of the poverty stricken youth community. Robinson (2007) cites those entrusted to educate as a possible source of inequality and disadvantage. Robinson’s (2007) concern is that in poverty stricken student bodies it is harder for a teacher to measure their success and therefore to gain satisfaction from their job. Alfred L. Joseph Jr. (2004) attributes this phenomena to yet another component of low SES, and feels that it is “Because school funding is based on local property taxes, there is a direct relationship of the size of parents’ bank balances and the quality of their children’s education…” (p. 132).

Dugdale (1977) asserts nutrition as the primary aspect of poverty leading to poor academic performance. However, just as in the case of the Walker & Greenwood (1994) who felt that a less diverse or less developed vocabulary was to blame, they did attribute familial involvement as a contributing factor. Robinson (2007) claims a lack of measurability and pride for teachers in low SES communities there is the potential for parental involvement to impact this sentiment if those communities were to be more involved, and attend more student-teacher reviews for instance.
Alternatively, Alfred L. Joseph Jr. (2004) cites financial incapability’s of low SES communities and Dugdale (1977) who censures the nutrition of low SES backgrounds. Similar to Dugdale (1977), Philipsen (1992) found that “Teamstervillers [a term the author created to describe a specific cultural community] also locate on a scale of social worth the style of speaking they associate with neighborhood” (p. 33). To speak differently than the rest of your community would portray to them a sense of self worth that exceeds the worth and pride bestowed upon the community one came from. Unlike Dugdale (1977), Philipsen (1992) was able to find a link between the student’s diction and communication between parental unit and child. Philipsen (1992) states, ‘to become a man in Teamsterville requires that one learn a complex code of demeanor and deference, that one learns to occupy his place in the world but also one not reach too high…[and] A good Teamsterville mother schools her son in this code…” (p. 50).

Yet again, family involvement could influence the issues portrayed by Alfred L. Joseph Jr. (2004), Dugdale (1977), Philipsen (2000) and Philipsen (1992). For instance, taking just a few minutes a day to ask about homework as seen in the Wingard (2006) study, or Baharudin, Hong, Lim & Zulkefly show that despite one’s economical status family involvement in academics can prove to be a more powerful source and lead to a positive outcome and a child who aspires towards higher learning and academic success.

Taking into account the above alternate hypothesis for potential reasons why students of low SES homes (i.e. Poor nutrition, poorly funded schools etc,) it is clear that additional research is necessary to fully comprehend all the potential aspects of low SES that may play a role in influencing the education pursuits of said students. Furthermore, replicative studies of said future research would be necessary to corroborate the findings and increase validity.
Therefore, it is clear, that additional research needs to be conducted. Even in the case of Caldas (1999) who describes family structure as belonging to one of two groups. “Female-headed family structure: Students from single-parent, female-headed families [which] were coded as 1: others were coded as 0” (p. 93). By not defining ‘others’ the authors fail to capture results that could then be generalized to a greater population. By choosing not to separate patriarch-headed homes, from non-parental headed homes such as children raised by grandparents of foster families, it is impossible to determine what population is being examined. More importantly, it is difficult to determine whether or not parental communication between biological mother and child would have the same beneficial effect as paternal communication or the communication between a grandparent or other potential legal guardian and child.

It would also be beneficial to know how much involvement is necessary to have an impact, and what kind of involvement. For instance, in the case of assisting with homework as described by Wingard (2006), is the shear act or requiring homework to be completed and asking about it enough or does the parent need to sit with the child and tutor? In the case of Wagner (2001) and hooks (2000), it is clear that negative sentiments towards education gravely impact the child’s value of education. However, it is also clear from studies such as Hovart, Weininger and Lareau (2003), that by not making education a requirement or focus in the house the parent is in turn still communicating a lack of importance of pursuing learning. Thus, further research is necessary to determine how we can best combat this downward and cyclical phenomena and what we as a society need to do to help these kids progress and succeed.

Allen (2004) elaborates on the consequences of failing to reform and maintenance of such an archaic structure, “The educational system replicates the class structure and corporate system of capitalist societies. That is, schools prepare a labor force to assume the tasks
demanded by the corporations” (p. 112). Allen (2004) goes on to explain how schools considered to be of low SES teach tasks associated with manual labor, while schools with higher SES status encourage creative expression and challenge students to excel. One can infer that if a child is taught skills to maintain an assembly line and are presumed to immediately enter the workforce in a labor intensive field, that there is no need for higher education. On the contrary, students higher up in the ‘caste system’ are expected to continue on with their education. This is a social standard and without the parents of the low SES groups speaking up and demanding a better, more well rounded education, and teaching their children to want to excel and aspire academically this cycle will never be broken.

RQ1: How does the communication regarding education between legal guardian(s) and student(s) influence their decision to pursue higher education?

RQ2: What are other potential measures or influences that effect the student(s) decision to pursue higher education?
Chapter 3: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Scope of the Study

The purpose of this study will be to examine the effect of the messages relayed to the student from their legal guardians regarding higher education. Participants were recruited from a local community college, because they are prime candidates being of the right age, mixed background and familiarity with this type of interaction. Maricopa Community College was chosen for this research study because “[they are] proud and committed to serving a diverse population that is reflective of our community” (MCC, 2011, para. 1). In order to collect qualitative evidence in support of the research questions, the author will interview students selected based upon their willingness to participate and their availability. However, the author will attempt to maintain a balanced selection in regards to gender, age, race, and potential cultural affiliation (i.e. skaters, prepster, goths, etc).

The author has selected to utilize students from a community college in Maricopa County, Arizona. The author chose the Mesa Community College (MCC) due to its proximity and diverse student population. Additionally, MCC is known to attract a student population “…interested in an associate’s degree, a certificate in [a] field, transferring to a four-year university, or [students who] just want to take some classes for [their] own personal satisfaction, Mesa Community College has a program to suit [their] career goals.(MCC, 2011).”

The author arrived on campus and asked constituents on the MCC campus if they would be willing to participate in the study. Should students have any questions regarding the study they were encouraged to ask the author prior to participating.
Methodology of the Study

It was the decision of the author to conduct interviews for the purpose of gathering data because “This research method is remarkably adaptable to varied circumstances and settings” (Lindlof & Taylor, p.171). The intention of the author was to emulate the feeling of dialogue between friends during the interview to enhance the participant’s level of comfort. Lindlof & Taylor (2011) indicate that “Interviews are particularly well suited to understanding the social actor’s experience, knowledge, and worldviews” (p.173). It is through this understanding that the author intends to provide support for the study.

Research Design

Students were recruited to participate in the study while traveling on the MCC main campus. Upon agreeing to participate, the author will check the state issued identification (driver’s license) to verify that the participant is at least eighteen years of age. After confirming the subjects age to be 18 years of age or older, they will then be asked to complete a consent waiver [Appendix A]. The waiver will also brief the subject on what to expect and the types of questions that will be asked. Once consent form is completed, the author will provide the student with a demographic questionnaire [Appendix B] to collect data pertaining to ethnic and socioeconomic background, however, this brief survey will be specifically designed to allow the subject to retain ambiguity and decline to answer questions based on their level of comfort. Students will be individually assigned an identifying number, which will be used in place of their name to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. It is also the hope of the author that the implementation of these measures will afford the subject confidence in their ambiguity and subsequently provide an arena to produce open and honest qualitative data.
Following the completion of the demographic analysis survey, students will be directed to a more comfortable location, better suited for a private interaction. There are several suitable locations the author intends to utilize based on availability and the comfort of the student. The author will create an atmosphere where the subject will feel as comfortable as possible as all interview sessions [Appendix C] will be recorded and later transcribed for accuracy. By avoiding taking notes during the interview process the student(s) will feel an increased level of comfort, void of judgment(s).

Once the author has obtained approximately twelve interviews, the author will cease gathering participants and begin the transcribing process. It was decided that twelve interviews would be a sufficient number considering MCC’s diverse student population, the time constraints of the study as well as the in-depth nature of the interviews. All interviews will be fully transcribed before the coding process is initiated. The coding mechanism was generated to assist in extracting data from the transcribed interviews. To improve efficiency and accuracy both the transcribed interviews and the coding instrument were uploaded into the Coding Analysis Toolkit a complimentary analysis provided by the University Center for Social and Urban Research. Human coding will still be a necessary component of this study however, the utilization of this program allows the coder to view the coding mechanism and classifications alongside the transcribed data for improved efficiency.

**Validity**

Construct validity can be assessed with either validity studies or through face validity and refers to the extent to which constructs of interest are accurately measured. The questions asked mirrored those of previous research studies with the same or a similar focus. This was done to
prevent problems with validity as well as to ensure that questions were not leading or double-
barreled. Additionally the use of the Coding Analysis Toolkit, will help to increase the accuracy of the coding mechanism, thus increasing the construct validity as well.

Because the sample size is relatively low, the external validity decreases because the sample may not be indicative of the general population. Nonetheless, it is the intention of the current author to compare the findings from the current study to those who have performed similar studies to identify a possible correlation and attempt to generalize the findings to larger population. Given more time and resources, future studies, should take into consideration other opportunities to increase validity such as a larger population.

**Ethics:**

The author will set in to place, multiple parameters to make certain that ethics are upheld. For instance, the author will be reviewing each candidate’s drivers license to make sure they are of legal consenting age. The author will also be fully informing all subjects on what their role will be, and will have them read and sign a consent waiver. Additionally the author will be assigning subjects identifying numbers to maintain anonymity. Lastly, the author will clearly communicate to each subject that, if at any point a question makes them uneasy they may decline to answer or terminate the interview.
Chapter IV: THE STUDY

Introduction

For the purpose of this study the author was able to obtain twelve subjects who completed a demographic survey as well as an in-person interview. The subjects included seven males and five females, ranging in age from eighteen to fifty-three. Four of the subjects identified themselves as Caucasian, two who identified as African American, three who identified themselves as being Hispanic/Latin American and three identified themselves as being Native American. The twelve subjects reported varying socioeconomic backgrounds based on the questions intended to better understand the SES demographic.

The survey questions were intended to ascertain demographic information as well as provide a minor glimpse into the data intended to measure the influence of the messages communicated between a student’s parent(s) or legal guardian(s). The interviews conducted were designed to provide more comprehensive qualitative data surrounding the messages communicated by one’s parent(s) or legal guardian(s).

Data Analysis

A total of twelve subjects completed the interview process. Eleven of the twelve subjects were enrolled at MCC, seven of which were males and the other five participants were females. The ages of the participants ranged from eighteen to fifty-three years of age. Seven of the participants fell in the range of eighteen to twenty, three of the participants fell into the twenty-one to twenty-four age group and two participants were thirty-plus. Four of the twelve participants listed their race as being Caucasian, three were Hispanic/Latino, three were Native American and the remaining two indicated they were African American.
Results of the Study

The following information outlines the data collected from the twelve individuals who participated in the study. For complete data information please refer to appendices B and C. The first candidate (Subject A-010) was a twenty-one to twenty-four year old Caucasian female who identified her family to be of an average middle class SES who did not struggle to provide food and shelter for the family. This individual reported that she was the first in her immediate family to seek higher education, however she did report that her younger male sibling was also now enrolled at the same community college. Subject A-010 reported that her parents were supportive both in general and specifically when it came to her and her siblings education. She also reported having an Uncle as a role model who attended college and a close group of peers who also sought out higher education.

Subject A-020 was reported to be a male between the ages of eighteen and twenty, who identified himself as African American. This individual reported data indicative of being from a lower SES family, at times having difficulty providing shelter and nourishment. This subject reported a low interest in education and a family that does not appear to have placed a priority on education. This individual seemed to place a higher priority on work and needing income immediately. This subject reported being raised in a single parent home and based off of necessity the parent was often absent due to long hours at multiple jobs. He did report having an older sister who at one point had a promising education rich future but due to pregnancy at a young age was unable to pursue that route. Whether based off of absence or a lack of concern it appears that this individuals parental unit and immediate community placed a low priority on education.
Subject A-030 reported to be a Hispanic/Latino female from a middle to upper-middle class family. The subject indicated feeling as though she was highly supported by her parents as well as her peers and community at large in regards to her academic achievements and pursuits. Her parents encouraged her to strive for good grades in order to attend college and took pride and ownership in her academic success. In addition to the support she received it appears that this individual also had several role models who sought additional education to look up to. She also reported that it was almost assumed that she would attend college and that this was the norm amongst members of her community. She explains, “Our parents all know each other and it was kind of expected that we would go [to college]…” (personal communication, October 28, 2011).

Subject A-040 identified as a Caucasian male currently fifty-three years of age. He identified as being of middle class SES and was currently going back to school after many years of working on his grandfather’s farm. This individual “…always wanted to go to school and …admired those who went to school, it just never worked out for [him] until now” (personal communication, October 28, 2011). He reported having a supportive family who placed some emphasis on school however it was inherent that he would work on the family farm and thus he was unable to attend college immediately after high school.

The fifth subject (Subject A-050) was an African American female between the ages of eighteen and twenty. She reported data consistent of being from a financially stable middle class family. Subject A-050 was scholastically successful in grade school but alleged that her parental unit was not particularly concerned with her academic performance or dreams as long as she helped out financially. Her mother recently enrolled in a Vocational School but is taking a semester off to take care of her grandmother. The girl’s father has been incarcerated for over a decade and played a minimal role in her rearing. This subject also reported little support from her
peers and the community, even being taunted for her academic achievements and quests. However she did look up to her boss who received her degree and seemed motivated to continue her pursuit of higher academic achievement.

Subject A-060 a female of Hispanic/Latino descent who reported being between the ages of eighteen and twenty and of lower SES. The subject reported having a supportive family and role models who encouraged her academic pursuits. However, she did report feeling as though her friends and community were not as enthusiastic in her quest for higher education. Subject A-060 stated that her “…parents are immigrants and they came here to give [her] brother [her] a better life. They wanted [them] to go to school to learn and become successful” (personal communication, October 28, 2011). Unlike her it does not appear as though her brother has the same aspirations.

The final subject (Subject A-070) interviewed was a Caucasian male between the ages of eighteen and twenty. The young man was in the process of reenrolling in the diesel mechanic program and reported being financially comfortable. Subject A-070 described having parents who were more concerned with his athletic endeavors but subsequently supported him academically knowing that he had to keep his grades up to be eligible to play sports. He reported having peers who did not place a high priority on academics and seemed unaware of how academic success was regarded by his community. This participant reported having teachers who allowed him to underachieve yet passed him for the sake of the school’s athletic program. This young man indicated that he did not have any role models who pursued higher education.

Data collected from the current study provided insights into the effect of messages communicated by one’s parent(s) or legal guardian(s) regarding higher education. However, it is
also clear that additional more in depth research will be need to provide conclusive support for the aforementioned hypothesis. The interviews with the twelve subjects did yield interesting results. For instance, out of the twelve subjects five of them reported feeling highly supported by their parent(s) or legal guardian(s) and reported encouraging communication in regards to their educational pursuits. All five students were currently enrolled in classes at Maricopa Community College.

**Theme I: Parental Support and External Motivators Influence on the Student**

Four of the twelve candidates reported feeling partial support from their parent(s) or legal guardian(s). Both of these students were also enrolled at Mesa Community College. In addition to the support they received from their parent(s) or legal guardian(s) these students also had other external motivators which may have possibly also helped to influence to their decision to seek higher education. For instance, Subject A-060 had a boss as a role model who she regarded as influential and motivational. This boss was a college graduate and may have swayed her decision to pursue higher education. Candidate –A070 displayed profound interest in extra-curricular activities in particular he seemed highly motivated by athletics. He was also motivated academically knowing that he had to keep his grades up in order to participate in sporting events. Additionally, playing football for a college team provides the opportunity for additional training and potentially scouting.

**Theme II: The Effects of Lack of Support or Adult Role Model(s)**

The last two candidates reported having little to no support from their parent(s) or legal guardian(s). Subject A-040 was just now enrolling in school at the age of fifty-three. He received little to no support and was never communicated messages of encouragement regarding his
aspirations to attend college. Some three decades after he graduated high school made a living as a farmer in the career chosen for him he decided to pursue his long awaited dream. Subject A-020 was not enrolled in school and was on campus to meet his girlfriend. Therefore, based on the data it appears that without support and or communication regarding higher education, youth will be less likely to enroll in higher learning institutions. It seems as though the exception to this generalization would be other external variables that may also play a role in this process. For instance, Kincheloe & Steinberg (2007), suggested that a primary influence on one’s decision on whether to seek higher learning is having adult role models to look up to.

**Summary of the Results**

**Discussion**

The data collected within this study illustrates themes that have been identified in the scholarly works reviewed in this study. For instance, the data gains support when applying Philipsen’s Speech Codes theory (1992) that without communicative support and encouragement from a parent(s) or legal guardian to seek further education, the likelihood of an individual doing so decreases. As Philipsen (1992) states

“Supportive/neutral refers to the degree in which each interlocutor is committed to providing positive evaluations of the other’s self. To engage in ‘communication,’ it is not necessary that one approve everything the other has done—the other’s actions – but that one approve the other qua unique and precious individual” (p. 74).

Other influential variables are also identifiable both in the data yielded from this study and other literary works previously mentioned. For example, students faced with the challenge of adhering to a specific culture or community or other hardships that potentially arise from poverty show a positive correlation with being less likely to pursue higher education. Philipsen (1992) found that many were reluctant to change their actions for fear of being alienated by “the
neighborhood” (p.35). It appears that there may be many influential factors that in combination exponentially affect the likelihood of a youth wanting to continue on to college.

Poverty-stricken youth such as subject A-060, had parents and other role models that stressed the importance of higher education, may have assisted in the subject overcoming the negative influences coming from not only “the neighborhood” (Philipsen, p.35) but also coming from a low SES family. One could infer that in the case of Subject A-060 the strength of the female subject’s relationship with her family and the subsequent influence of her parent(s) communication regarding the importance of higher education outweighed those of the greater community and her peers. In other words, according to Philipsen (1992) Subject A-060 most greatly identified with her parental unit and the positive role models in her life and based on the Speech Codes theory from “Teamsterville”(1992) she continued on with school, living out her parent’s ideals. Her parents immigrated here with the intent to give her and her brother a better life, she also had role models who illustrated and supported the opportunities for success that come from pursuing higher learning.

To further elaborate, Subject A-060 was able to overcome the Speech Codes of her culture and still maintain a presence within the community. She described being able to do this by limiting her discussions surrounding higher education to conversations with her parents and not drawing attention to the fact that she was deviating from the norm of her group. However, the subject reported that her brother was uncomfortable deviating from the norms of the community because as Philipsen (1992) states “[He was] part of the ‘everybody’ by being from ‘around here’” (p.40) and in an attempt to remain in the community he neglected to seek higher education or display any interest in doing so in the future.
Unfortunately, in regards to the male sibling of Subject A-060, it appears that the young man may have been more greatly influenced by the messages of his low SES community and peers (personal communication, October 31, 2011). Based on this same mechanism a wealthy child whose legal guardians fail to encourage and foster an environment supportive of one going to college may yield a child with no aspirations to seek out higher education. Both of these examples also illustrate the Teamsterville Theory (1992) of rising to the occasion or standards set by those one considers interpersonal network. Consequently, this want to belong can work both positively as shown with Subject A-060, or in a stifling manner where individuals limit themselves to better belong and to not exceed the norm.

**RQ1: Communication regarding education between legal guardian(s) and student**

Based on the data collected and literature reviewed, it appears as though the communication from a parent(s) or legal guardian(s) regarding higher education plays a significant role in whether the student will seek higher learning. In the case of Subjects A-020 and A-040 the communication messages they received regarding education seemed to impact their motivation to go to school. However Subject A-040, he eventually overcame the *Speech Codes* of his community and enrolled in school at the age of fifty-three. Conversely, Subjects A-010 and A-060 reported having positive messages communicated concerning ascertaining higher education. The remaining subjects seemed to be most heavily influenced by other variables which still supports the hypothesis that communication regarding higher education impacts ones decision to seek higher learning. This is evident in the fact that the messages these subjects received were moderate in frequency and unbiased in tone. In other words, it was not repetitively stated that one ought to go to school or that school should not be made a priority when food needed to be put on the table. For instance, Subject A-070’s parental unit seemed most
concerned with the subject continuing with his athletic achievements and their only concern with academics was that he maintain a grade point average to participate in extracurricular activities.

**RQ2: Measures or influences that effect the students decision to pursue higher education?**

Despite the small population of the study, the data extracted from both the survey and interview provided cast insight into other variables that potentially influenced ones decision to pursue higher education. It is the belief of the current author that it is more likely that there is not a single predictor of whether or not one will pursue higher learning, but rather a series of variables that have a compounding effect on the decision to pursue higher learning. For instance, it appears that the communication from parent(s) or guardian(s) to student can be outweighed by the *Speech Code* of the culture (Philipsen, 2007). Even though Subject A-060’s brother was not a subject, he is a prime example of the potential influence one’s culture has on their future aspirations. Another potential variable as described by (Philipsen, 1992) is the effect of having role models available outside of the parental unit that achieved and support the student’s desire for higher education. In the case of Subject A-050
Chapter V: SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSIONS

Study Limitations

There are some inherent limitations to a qualitative study especially one of this size. Due to ethics it is impossible to manipulate the variables the author intended to extrapolate data on and analyze. Secondly, due to the size of this study it is hard to extract enough data to positively confirm any theory or to be able to make generalizations based from these subjects to the general population. In addition, due to time constraints and the fact that there was no funding or other incentive permitted to conduct the study the author was limited to utilizing subjects based upon availability. As such this study was conducted on a local campus in Maricopa County, which may have influenced the data obtained. In other words, the subjects surveyed and interviewed may be the exception to the rule. When conducting interviews on campus there is an obvious increased likelihood that you will be mostly speaking with students, and therefore less likely to gain insight into the perspective of those who have decided not to pursue higher education. Fortunately, the author was able to speak to two candidates that offered some feedback from said perspective. Both Subject A-020, the African American male who happened to be visiting on campus that day, and Subject A-040 who had just recently made the decision to enroll in school after several decades of working on his family’s farm. This being said, the data collected does display many indicators present in the theories in the literary works cited herein, and demonstrates the need for further research.

Recommendations for Further Research

As previously stated, there is a strong need to continue to research the effects of the messages communicated by one’s parent(s) or legal guardian(s) surrounding higher education
and other influential variables related to one’s SES. Based off the evidence gathered in this study and the multiple literary works it appears that there are several variables that influences one's decision on whether or not to pursue higher education that may have a compounding effect.

It is the recommendation of this author that a longitudinal qualitative study be conducted where multiple variables can be measured over a length of time leading up to high school graduation. In any regard, it is evident that better understanding which variables appear to be most influential and thus which variables could potentially be manipulated yielding different results. In other words, future studies could reveal that by manipulating certain variables one could increase the likelihood of a low SES child seeking further education, thus breaking the cyclical relationship between low SES and minimal education.

Conclusions

The current research study set out to examine how the messages communicated by one’s parent(s) or legal guardian(s) surrounding higher education influence their educational journey. It was through the lens of Gerry Philipsen’s Speech Codes theory (1992) that the data was analyzed. The data gathered from participants yielded results that support RQ1: How does the communication regarding education between legal guardian(s) and student influence their decision to pursue higher education? While at the same time identifying variables that answer research question 2: What are other potential measures or influences that effect the students decision to pursue higher education? Further research could provide America’s youth with the intended freedom of American culture. The ramifications of such knowledge would mean that the youth today would no longer be oppressed by the stature of their parent(s) or legal guardian(s).
References


Harrison, N., & Hatt, S. (2009). Knowing the 'unknowns': investigating the students whose social class is not known at entry to higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 347-357.


APPENDIX A

Consent Waiver

I ____________________________, certify that I am of legal age (18 years of age,) and hereby agree to participate in this study. I fully understand what is being asked of me and that by signing this form I agree to release specified documents into the possession of those affiliated with the above research design. I also agree to answer all questions honestly and to the best of my ability. I further understand that I can decline to answer a question or end the interview at any time. I understand that there will be no compensation for this study.

***Please note that all information is regarded personal and confidential and no identifying information of any kind will be printed or published.

____________________________________ (print name)

____________________________________ (signature)    ___/____/_____ (date)
Appendix B – Interview Questions

Read verbatim: Please note that the information shared will be strictly confidential and under no circumstances will identifying information be revealed. You have the ability to decline answering any question that you may be uncomfortable with and you are free to end the interview at any time. Let’s begin:

Interview Questions

1. Are you currently enrolled in college?
   a. If so, what are you studying?
   b. If not, did you or would you ever consider enrolling?
   c. If still not why (i.e. finances, priorities, different aspirations)?
2. Do you feel as though your parents or legal guardian(s) encouraged you to pursue higher education?
3. Did either your parent(s) or legal guardian(s) pursue education beyond high school?
   a. If so what distinctions did they achieve? (i.e. associates, bachelors or certificate)
4. Were there other adult role models in your community who sought higher education?
   a. If so please ask participant to elaborate.
5. How is higher education regarded in your household?
6. Would you consider your middle school and high school teachers to be enthusiastic and supportive of your scholastic achievements?
7. Were there resources available to assist you in applying to college? (i.e. counselors, teachers who took a particular interest)
8. Was it ever difficult to motivate yourself to attend school?
   a. If so, what distractions or obstacles made it difficult?
9. How were honor students viewed by you?
   a. By your peers?
   b. By members of your community?
10. Did your parent(s) or legal guardian(s) help you with your homework or other school projects?
11. Did your parent(s) or legal guardians make completing school work a priority?
12. Did your closest peers seek higher education?
   a. Please explain why or why not?
13. Do you have any other family members close in age that have sought higher education?
14. Did your parent(s) or legal guardian(s) ever have a conversation with you regarding higher education?
15. Do you equate education with success?
   a. Please explain.
Read verbatim: Thank you for participating in the interview process. Please remember that all information shared with me will be kept confidential and your identity will not be released. Thank you again.
APPENDIX C
Demographic Survey

Please complete the survey to the best of your ability. Should a question arise please inquire with the interviewer.

1. I am currently ________ years of age.
   a. 18-20
   b. 21-24
   c. 25-30
   d. 30+

2. I would consider myself to be of ________________ descent.
   a. Caucasian
   b. African American
   c. Hispanic/Latino
   d. Native American
   e. Asian/Pacific Islander
   f. Other/Decline to state

3. I am of the______________gender.
   a. Male
   b. Female
   c. Decline to state