

EXPLORING THE COLLEGE-GOING SCRIPTS OF STUDENTS  
ENROLLED IN A RURAL EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL

A Dissertation  
by  
JAMES ANTHONY BROOKS

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APPROVED BY:

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Kelly Clark/Keefe, Ed.D.  
Chairperson, Dissertation Committee

---

Vachel Miller, Ed.D.  
Member, Dissertation Committee

---

Sally Atkins, Ed.D.  
Member, Dissertation Committee

---

Jim Killacky, Ed.D.  
Director, Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership

---

Edelma D. Huntley, Ph.D.  
Dean, Research and Graduate Studies

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## ABSTRACT

### EXPLORING THE COLLEGE-GOING SCRIPTS OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN A RURAL EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL (December 2011)

James Anthony Brooks, B.S., Appalachian State University

M.A., Appalachian State University

Chairperson: Kelly Clark/Keefe, Ed.D.

While much has been written about the characteristics and demographics of first-generation college students and about their problems and successes once in college, little has been written about the psychological transformation that first-generation college students undergo on their way to a university education. This qualitative case study explored how school-based narratives about college-going and family-based narratives about college-going interact in an Early College High School, particularly for first-generation college students. It explored how students with hybrid subjectivities perceive themselves within a social institution which has designated them as first-generation college students and sought to understand how these students negotiate multiple discourses and come to see themselves as college-going. Finally the study sought to discover ways in which educational leaders can improve the effectiveness of college readiness programs to better serve those under-represented in college.

The design for this case study was a focused ethnography in which data was collected through interviews, observations and document review of documents, particularly student

writing. The notion of scripts (Abelson, 1996; Bieber & Worley, 2006; Rubin & Berntsen, 2003; Steiner, 1990) was a central metaphor in this study. The school-based narratives and family-based narratives that the students of the Early College High School negotiate are scripts that reflect both the lives they may have lived and the lives that others envision for them.

The themes that surfaced this study were: 1) the way in which the small size of the Early College High School impacts student learning and relationships with teachers; 2) the metaphor of family that students and teachers use to describe their experience at this Early College High School; 3) the lack of academic preparation of the students admitted into the program; 4) the barriers that students face becoming ready for college; 5) the emerging identities of adolescents heretofore not destined for college; 6) the family narrative, or life script, reinforced at home; 7) and the institutional message of college-going enacted at the Early College High School.

The data and its interpretation and analysis have been represented as a script that integrates the discourses observed in this particular Early College High School and suggests ways in which students may become authors of their own life narratives. Implications from the findings involving policy and practice are presented, and suggestions for future research are offered.

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my parents who were my first teachers  
and to my students who continue to teach me each day.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction to the Study**

### **Introduction to the Issue**

**Background.** Most adolescents want and plan to attend college (Gibbons & Borders, 2010), perhaps reflecting the current national focus on college and career readiness. A 2011 study looked at national trends in education based on a survey of 1,000 public school teachers (grades 6-12), 2,002 public school students (grades 6-12), 580 parents of public school students (grades 6-12), and 301 business executives from Fortune 1000 companies. The study concurs that a growing number of students plan to attend a four-year college (MetLife, 2011). Seventy-five percent of middle school and high school students surveyed indicated that they plan to attend college, responding that a college education will be essential for finding employment in the future. Teachers in the same survey, however, said that only 63% of high school students will be prepared for college level work. A third of the students indicated that high schools are doing a “fair” or “poor” job of providing information about college matriculation.

The contradictions reflected in the research referenced above raises questions related to my professional interests as a high school teacher and my research interests as a doctoral student. What preparation will schools need to provide for these students to be successful in college? What discourses have influenced these students to attend college? For how many students will college-going be unfamiliar territory? How many will be the first in their families to have these aspirations? What support will schools offer these students to make their desire to go to college a viable option? Researchers Reid and Moore (2008) believe that

a major challenge for educational leaders in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a “strong understanding of the differences in backgrounds and beliefs of their students” (p. 240). Without this nuanced understanding of the changing school demographic, schools will be unable to effectively meet student needs.

**Current issues.** Current school reform, particularly “No Child Left Behind,” has focused on raising test scores. Raising the test scores of students does not mean that the students are prepared for college. Wimberly and Noeth (2004) note that preparation is dependent on a more complex set of variables. One contemporary initiative in the United States aimed at preparing students for college, particularly students often under-represented there, is the Early College High School Initiative which began in 2002 when the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation funded seven Early College High Schools across the United States as a way of blending secondary and post-secondary education. As Kirst (2004) points out, the transition from high school to college is where many students are lost. Early exposure to college and college-level work, a central aim of the Early College High School initiative, helps those who will be the first in their families to attend college to see themselves as succeeding there (Gullatt & Jan, 2003). More than 200 Early College High Schools were opened by 2009 (Berger, Adelman, & Cole, 2010), each of them small and autonomous (Edmunds, 2010b), each aimed at bridging the gap between secondary and post-secondary education. By 2011, there were 230 Early College High Schools in 28 states (Vargas & Miller, 2011). This initiative of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is led by Jobs for the Future, a nonprofit organization dedicated to creating a skilled workforce.

Early College High Schools have been designed to prepare students to attend college. There is intentionality around the size of the schools, the location, and admission into the

program. The schools are small by design; they are most often located on community college and university campuses; and the students admitted are typically those under-represented in college (Jobs for the Future, 2008). Because this is a relatively new initiative, little research exists about the effectiveness of Early College High Schools in preparing students for college outside of limited quantitative reporting done by those implementing or funding Early College High Schools. Consequently, the nuanced variables that might facilitate the transformation of students remain undocumented.

**Problem.** The way in which institutional structures challenge and support students who aspire to attend college should be examined by educational leaders to provide a more complete view of what makes the Early College High School experience unique. This study explores how participation in a college readiness program, like the Early College High School, interacts with other discourses to shape a student's perceptions about college and about themselves as college-goers. Examining the dominant discourse in such a program could reveal how it differs from the discourses found in traditional high school programs and consequently how the experience may or may not impact college-going. Because the Early College High School initiative is so intentional at reinforcing a strong message about college-going, I question to what extent students in an Early College High School may be able to imagine and articulate the many post-secondary opportunities available to them outside of the discourses to which they are exposed.

Merriam (1998) describes school as a lived experience where multiple realities are socially constructed by the individuals who make up the school. Given the varied subjectivities and discourses that make up a school, examining the experiences of students and teachers is necessary. Understanding how teachers and students make meaning of their

own lives within a school setting can best be achieved through an analysis of perceptions, processes, and relationships in a qualitative study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Ultimately I am interested in how the Early College High may dictate by virtue of its mission and practice how students make meaning around the issue of college-going.

Through this qualitative research study, I have sought to add a layer of depth to the discussion of Early College High Schools that does not currently exist in the literature. In the rush to prepare students for college, those who have initiated this movement toward restructuring schools may have overlooked the complexity of students negotiating multiple subjectivities, some of which may run counter to the mission of the program. Those who have designed, funded, and implemented Early College High Schools do not come from the same socioeconomic level or represent the same demographic population the schools are targeted toward, those underrepresented in college. These policymakers and leaders of the initiative, for example, may not have been the first in their families to attend college or may find it difficult to appreciate the hybrid subjectivities that those underrepresented in college bring to the Early College High School experience. While the intentions of programs like the Early College High School initiative are admirable, the spirit of such initiatives may not align with the complexity in their implementation.

**Significance.** An examination of the narratives that circulate in the Early College High Schools is necessary for educational leaders to more fully understand the phenomenon of college-going within that setting. This examination represents an intentional stepping back to create a complicated picture of a program that is beginning to serve as a model for American school reform. By troubling the phenomenon under study, I sought to challenge assumptions and raise issues that otherwise might have remained unaddressed. The timing

for this kind of scrutiny is relevant as the Early College High School initiative is gaining favor as a strategy for the reform of secondary education (Vargas & Miller, 2011). Before the initiative goes to scale across the country, educational leaders should examine the initiative more closely. Such scrutiny is complicated by the high profile funding the initiative receives; it is difficult for educational leaders to examine the specifics of a program that has such cache. As an educational leader, I believe that those at the implementation level of a program should have opportunities to voice ideas and concerns. In this study the varied voices of participants will illustrate the discourses that may complicate the picture, offering a more nuanced portrayal of this college readiness initiative than currently exists in the literature.

**Conceptual framework.** Because Early College High Schools target students underrepresented in college in the chapter that follows, I began by drawing upon existing research on first-generation college students, one of the broadest subgroups enrolled in Early College High Schools, to ground my study in the literature. I begin with a discussion of the origin and meaning behind the term, first-generation college student. I then turn to schema theory (Abelson, 1996; Bieber & Worley, 2006; Bohn & Berntsen, 2003; Rubin & Berntsen, 2008; Steiner, 1990; Wilkes, 1997) as a conceptual framework to introduce scripts as a metaphor for discussing narratives and discourses inherent in Early College High School programs and to examine how students might come to author their own scripts (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Pizzolato, 2003).

Other communication theories (Golden et al., 2002; Hecht, 1993; Hecht, Jackson & Ribeau, 2003; London, 1989, 1992, 1996; Orbe, 2004) establish a foundation upon which I will examine family-based narratives and school-based narratives. Similarly, sociological

theory (Bieber & Worley, 2006; Bourdieu, 1977, 1986, 1990, 1994; Horvat, 2000; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Walpole, 2003) provides a basis for discussing the ways in which perception affects how these discourses are negotiated. Finally I discuss how a deficit perspective rather than a resilience perspective (Anzul, Evans, King, & Tellier-Robinson, 2001; Carlan, 2001; Hamil-Luker & Uhlenberg, 2002; Keith, Byerly, Floerchinger, Pence, & Thornberg, 2006; Lucey, Melody & Walkerdine, 2003; Peterson, 1998; Valadez, 1993) dominates the discussion of first-generation college students and suggest that fostering a resilience perspective should be a goal of educational leaders and of the Early College High School initiative.

**Methodology.** This qualitative case study utilized a focus ethnographic (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004) methodology to collect data, particularly through interviews of the teachers, counselor and principal of the Early College High School, observations of classes, seminars, and daily school routines, and the review of documents, particularly student writing. This methodology allowed the researcher to gather from multiple sources to provide a richness and depth that might not have been possible otherwise.

### **Research Purposes**

**Research questions.** The purpose of this research study has been to examine both the implicit and explicit discourses that impact the college-going narratives of students enrolled in an Early College High School, particularly the narratives of those who will be the first in their families to attend college. I identified and described the discursive relationship of the Early College High School philosophy as it relates to college-going and juxtaposed that discourse with family narratives about college-going. The researcher challenged deficit models of representation of first-generation college

students by examining the notion of “hybridity,” a concept dealing with new forms of identity or viewing old forms in new ways (Lucey et al., 2003). Further, the study seeks to engage policymakers and educational leaders in policy discussions related to Early College High School goals.

**Research subjectivities.** I bring to this study both personal interest and intellectual intent. I am a first-generation college student, and as a high school teacher of 26 years, I have mentored students who were the first in their families to attend college in their transition from high school to college. My life script, and that of many of the students I have taught, has been shaped by multiple discourses and literacies. I want to explore how college-going is affected by the multiple discourses at play in the lives of students enrolled in an Early College High School.

**Implications.** I believe that this study could have significance not only for teachers and administrators of students enrolled in an Early College High School, but also for those who work with first-generation college students in any setting. The study has implications for institutions of higher education and local school systems which collaborate to create college readiness programs to prepare these students for college-going. The implications for educational policy and practice are outlined.

**Organization of the study.** The chapters that follow document the researcher’s experience in conducting this qualitative research study. Chapter 2 begins with a definition of what it means to be a first-generation college student and is followed by a review of the literature around this designation. The Early College High School initiative is then presented as a contemporary college readiness program aimed at meeting the needs of first-generation college students. A conceptual framework is also presented in

Chapter 2 offering life narratives, or scripts, as the context within which identity and discourse can be examined. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology employed in the research study. Chapter 4 is a presentation of the data utilizing the framework introduced in Chapter 2. The analysis of the data is the focus of Chapter 5, putting the data collected in the study into perspective and offering implications for the examination of current educational policy and practice. The Epilogue following Chapter 5 connects the data and its analysis to the researcher's personal and professional subjectivities.

## **Chapter Two: Conceptual and Subjective Contours**

This chapter begins by defining the term, first-generation college student, and outlines the literature associated with this academic designation. The conceptual framework for the study is presented, as well as the sociological theory that will frame the research questions.

### **Defining First-generation College Students**

There is a growing body of literature related to those students who will be the first in their families to attend college, due in large part to the increasing number of first-generation students matriculating at post-secondary institutions (Choy, 2001). The term has appeared in education literature for nearly 30 years, with sociologists Janet Billson and Margaret Terry (1982) being among the first to use the term in published literature. Billson and Terry define first-generation college students as those whose parents did not attend college. Prior to Billson and Terry, Adachi (1979) used the term in an unpublished manuscript in relation to criteria for admission into the Upward Bound program, the first of three federal programs for students commonly referred to as the TRIO programs. According to Billson and Terry (1982), Adachi coined the term and definition now used by the federal government. Later Choy (2001) offered a slightly different definition designating first-generation college students as those whose parents did not earn a baccalaureate degree.

In this study I use the term first-generation college student in its broader context to indicate the student whose parents did not earn a bachelor's degree, recognizing that

some believe that any familiarity with college carries cultural capital that may distinguish those students from their peers whose parents had no college experience. I find the term first-generation college student to be problematic. While acknowledging the importance of the scholarship around first-generation college students, I am unsettled by the classification of students simply based on their parents' level of schooling, a discomfort likely stemming from my own designation as a first-generation college student. I am also concerned about potential negativity connected to the labeling of students, particularly when those designations originate, not from choices the students have made or from their demonstrated strengths, but in the educational circumstances of their parents. Still, because the term has longevity and therefore carries several common and possibly under-examined meanings, I believe it is important to employ its use in this work that centers on the notion of scripts or everyday discourses, examining the ways in which hidden, assumptive, or different meanings behind the term might be considered.

The literature around first-generation college students provides the necessary foundation upon which the Early College High School Initiative is based, since the majority of the students targeted in the initiative will be the first in their families to attend college. Much of the literature on first-generation college students focuses on their demographic characteristics, their preparation for college, their expectations of college, and their transition from high school to college success (Terenzini, Pascarella, Pierson, & Wolniak, 2004).

**Characteristics.** Students whose parents did not attend college are widely reported as having unique characteristics that distinguish them from those students whose parents attended college (Ayala & Striplen, 2002). Many come from low-income homes

(Choy 2001; Levine & Associates, 1989) and are less prepared academically than their peers whose parents have attended college (Hsaio, 1992; Riehl, 1994; Thayer, 2000; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). Being the first in their families to attend college, they lack knowledge about college admission, financial aid, and degree requirements (Horn & Nunez, 2000; Thayer, 2000; Vargas, 2004). First-generation college students worry about failure and worry about having the finances to pay for college; they feel guilty about having the opportunity to attend college while their families are struggling financially (Bui, 2002). Survivor guilt is a barrier to their success and tends to create conflict (Piorkowski, 1983). Because they often must work or have family obligations, they are less involved with their college teachers and peers (Pascarella et al., 2004). Balancing responsibilities with home and their educational aspirations becomes a struggle (Schmidt, 2003). First generation college students are often placed into technical, vocational, or remedial programs that impede their progress toward college-going (Striplin, 1999). While they face many of the same anxieties and difficulties faced by any college student, first-generation college students also face additional cultural, social, and academic difficulties in the transition (London, 1989, 1992, 1996; Weis, 1985, 1992). London (1989), a key author on this college sub-population, asserts that “it is only when we see that mobility involves not just gain but loss...that we can begin to understand the attendant periods of confusion, conflict, isolation, and even anguish that first-generation students report” (p. 168). This study seeks to examine whether or not first-generation college students do indeed have these conflicting perceptions.

For those who will be the first in their families to attend college, the prospect of attending college can be daunting. First generation college students who have made the

successful entry into college have identified the steps that they believed were important in their eventual matriculation. According to Engle, Bereo and O'Brien (2006), the three greatest concerns of first-generation students are: 1) raising aspirations for college; 2) navigating the college admissions process; and 3) easing the initial transition to college. Because these students had at one time believed that college was not an option for them, Engle et al. (2006) contend that potential first-generation college students should be assisted in connecting college to job and career opportunities, getting information about college and how to pay for it, perceiving themselves as "college material," understanding that college is possible, and being persistent about college. Most students in the study of Engle and her colleagues (2006) identified that it was easier to get into college than to stay there. Students recommended the importance of being academically prepared for college, being acclimated to the college environment, involving their parents in their transition to college, and helping students manage the financial aspects of college.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Two interrelated theories come together to frame the conceptual and methodological tools used in this study: schema theory and communication theory of identity. These theories are further amplified by drawing upon sociological concepts that provide context and shape methodological choices.

**Schema theory.** Schema theory provides the broader framework for this study and establishes a vocabulary for discussing how knowledge is encoded symbolically to construct meaning (Wilkes, 1997) in the form of scripts. Scripts, as described and enacted in this study, are simple forms of schema (Abelson, 1996). Cultural schema, or cultural life scripts, are composed of cultural events common to individuals within a society or

culture, while personal schema, or life narratives, reflect the lived experience of individuals (Bieber & Worley, 2006; Rubin & Berntsen, 2003; Steiner, 1990). The life script constructed by an individual can be “intertwined with, even bound by, extant sociocultural schema and scripts” (Bieber & Worley, 2006, p. 1013). Life narratives are made up of “autobiographical memories that are selected by the individual to form a coherent personal narrative in the framework of a given cultural context” (Bohn & Berntsen, 2008, p. 1135). The concept of scripts provides a metaphor by which to articulate the family and institutional narratives that first-generation college students negotiate.

Across the literature focused on first-generation college students, the notion of discourse and the role that family, social, and personal narratives play in a student’s college-going behaviors are central yet rarely an explicit focus for researchers. The life scripts of first-generation college students may not have originally included the possibility of college-going since the script common to their experiences and that of their parents did not. The life scripts of first-generation college students are intertwined and impacted by a number of factors, or discourses, within a cultural context, which must be regarded: family, socio-economic status, race, and popular media, among others. This study will investigate to what extent one Early College High School may or may not be helping students to negotiate multiple discourses, to discover the cultural life scripts available to them, and to empower them to become the authors of their own life narratives.

**Communication theory of identity.** Another framework for understanding how the negotiation of discourse and the analysis of scripts point to the emerging sense of self

is communication theory of identity (Hecht, 1993). Communication theory of identity maintains that identity is “inherently a communication process and must be understood as a transaction in which messages and values are exchanged” (Hecht et al., 2003, p. 230). That exchange of messages and values is what I observed through the interaction of students and teachers at an Early College High School. According to communication theory of identity, identity is positioned in four frames of reference: 1) the personal frame, 2) the revelation of identity to others, 3) the relationship with others, and 4) shared group identity (Golden, Niles, & Hecht, 2002). Communication Theory of Identity can be useful in analyzing how individuals negotiate multiple identifications.

Students who are first-generation college students may also have other social, cultural or ethnic identifiers with which they identify more strongly (Orbe, 2004). These multiple frames of reference were important considerations when analyzing the interplay of school and family narratives observed and gathered through interviews with teachers and administrators and through the observation of students and an examination of their writing. The two specific discourses of family and socio-cultural discourse of schooling were of particular interest in this study. The theoretical contexts for these discursive points of reference are briefly introduced below.

**Self-authorship.** Baxter Magolda (2001) writes about the ability to become a self-author, to move from following a prescribed script to writing one’s own. Her model offers a way in which to understand how students move from absolute to contextual ways of knowing in order to develop self-authorship. According to Baxter Magolda there are three phases of development in this transformation: 1) The Crossroads, 2) Becoming the Author of One’s Own Life, and 3) Internal Foundations. Students move from needing

self-definition toward developing internal perspectives to ultimately making decisions based on those perspectives. In order to develop self-authorship, Baxter Magolda believes that students must make decisions where there are no prescribed solutions or be so uncomfortable in their present situation that they find new ways to remedy it.

Applying Baxter Magolda's model, this study examined how the Early College High School is equipping students to navigate this transformation. Are there opportunities for students to make decisions that do not have easy solutions? In what ways are these students becoming authors of their own scripts? Are there systems or structures related to the Early College High School setting that constrain self-authorship?

**Family discourse.** London (1989) provides a specific framework for examining the discourse of family that is useful in examining the way that family discourse affects the first-generation college student. London notes three modes of separation: binding, delegating, and expelling. Binding occurs when parents encourage dependence on the family. Independence becomes more difficult to obtain for the child. The delegating mode is when parents assign to their children the hopes and dreams they did not attain. While often seen as support, this assignment of hopes and dreams can create pressure for the child. Expelling is when children are encouraged to be independent. While independence is desirable, children can sometimes feel abandoned. London's framework was helpful in designing data collection tools for this research study and in analyzing the data collected. Noting the modes of separation reflected in data collected from teachers and students yielded more authentic results regarding the discourse of family and provided more insight into the transformation process toward self-authorship that Baxter Magolda (2001) outlines. The ways in which students wrote about their interaction with

their parents and grandparents regarding the issue of college-going reflected the subtle dynamics of family discourse.

**Social and cultural capital.** The concepts of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986, 1990, 1994) offer another way this study framed the self-perception of participants in regard to the interplay of discourses between family and school. Parents pass on to their children cultural and social capital in the form of attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). First-generation college students often lack the cultural capital to understand the demands of a college education when compared to students whose parents have college degrees (Astin & Osequera, 2004). Knowledge and social connections are often the same within a social class and are used to achieve the goals to which a person aspires, also called a habitus, “a web of perceptions and the possible and appropriate responses in a situation” (Walpole, 2003, p. 49). A person’s habitus is not static; it is subject to change due to new experiences, changes in environment, exposure to the habitus of another, or interaction with those possessing another habitus (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). Because the habitus of an individual can change as a result of choice, social mobility is possible (Horvat, 2000). It is the habitus of first-generation college students that must be explored to understand their emerging self-perceptions as college-goers. Even though a student’s life script might not have originally included college, the script can be rewritten to include college-going. It is the negotiation of “disjunctive moments” (Bieber & Worley, 2006, p. 1013) between the lives they live, the lives that they imagine and the lives that others (parents, teachers, social programs, educational institutions, etc.) imagine for them that this study seeks to examine.

**Top down, bottom up discourses.** As a researcher interested in discourse, it is important for me to consider that all discourses are shaped by previous discourse, are implicated in shaping future discourses, and are not value free; in other words, words are always already imbued with historical and political value. Part of the challenge and responsibility of any researcher, especially those who are exploring the experiences of historically underserved populations, is to work to expose and to challenge the assumptions that lie behind all too common or obvious phrases used to connote individuals and the complexities of their circumstances within a web of intersecting structures and power arrangements. The assumptions of educators and educational leaders about the students in their schools must be examined to determine their influence. The next two sections look at two common discourses that shape and are shaped by the characteristics and life circumstances of first-generation college students, each bringing implicit judgment and expectation.

**Deficit and resilience models.** Beyond the discursive influences with which students must contend are broader discursive and structural arrangements circling around the conceptualization of college-going. The vast majority of the literature dealing with the demographics and characteristics of first-generation college students is written from a deficit perspective, pointing out the ways in which first-generation college students differ from their counterparts whose parents attended college. Peterson (1998) asserts that it is important to conduct education research that does not emphasize “failure and deficit but rather highly successful practices” (p. 4). In their work with youth, Dimitriadis and Weis (2001) also rail against those who view youth in “debilitating, damaging, and profoundly unimaginative ways” (p. 239). Rather than dwelling on deficits, Anzul et al. (2001)

contend that we should take into account the strength of students and imagine possibilities.

There is emerging literature on the resilience of older adult students (Carlan, 2001; Hamil-Luker & Uhlenberg, 2002; Keith, Byerly, Floerchinger, Pence, & Thornberg, 2006) that focuses on the strengths and assets that these students bring to their college experience rather than the deficits. While this resilience model deals with the portrayal of adults in education, the same approach could be applied to the discussion of first-generation college students. One salient aspect of the resilience model of older adult college students is the multiple roles (Keith et al., 2006) they have played in their lives prior to college attendance. A similar model could be applied to first-generation college students utilizing the duality and hybridity they bring to college attendance as strengths.

An ethnographic study of the aspirations of non-traditional college students by Valadez (1993) rejects a deficit perspective and instead notes strengths that these students bring to their college experience. Like Valadez, researchers Lucey et al. (2003) point out that hybridity involves “crossing borders of social class, gender, and ethnicity, of negotiation between competing subjectivities as other spaces, other possibilities are opened up” (p. 286). It is through these border crossings that students negotiate meaning. While positioned to recognize individual strength, this emerging designation refers to multi-layer identities, unequal doubleness, which require negotiation (Bhabha, 1990) and may resist integration (Lucey et al., 2003). While it may appear that one aspect of a student’s identity receives rewards, it is often at the expense of other expressions of identity. First-generation college students who persist in college may reap the benefits of a college education while another competing subjectivity, like family, can be affected

adversely. These overlapping and competing perspectives offer a complexity worthy of study.

The motivation to attend school is another strength that first-generation college students demonstrate that would fit into a resilience perspective. Students who will be the first in their families to attend college are often more optimistic about obtaining advanced degrees, believing that they will be successful since they have successfully overcome obstacles on their way to college (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Those high expectations often contribute to the ability of first-generation college students to persevere in college (Murphy & Hicks, 2006).

In addition to the resilience related to overcoming obstacles, the decisions that first-generation college students and others under-represented in college have faced may also contribute to their resilience. Pizzolato (2003) has applied the Baxter Magolda (2001) model for self-authorship referenced earlier to the process of becoming a college student. Her findings suggest that those students typically under-represented in college are often more likely to make the transition into the contextual ways of knowing that Baxter Magolda (2001) presents more quickly than their peers because of the experiences that have challenged their ways of knowing and given them the opportunity to make independent decisions outside of those prescribed for them by others. The difficulties, disappointments, and hardships they have experienced allow these students to seek solutions without relying on traditional societal standards.

**College readiness.** While developing independence is important in negotiating discourses, there must be a balance of both autonomy and support. As noted by Murphy and Hicks (2006), “it is imperative that first-generation students receive appropriate

support in and out of the classroom in order to navigate successfully the educational pathway” (p. 2). First-generation college students value the support of college readiness programs in helping them navigate the college admissions process (Somers, Woodhouse, & Coffey, 2004). Engle et al. (2006) specify that college readiness programs should include: starting early and meeting often; taking the process step by step; finding out how to pay for college; getting families involved in the process; and making connections within the community. College readiness remains a national priority with the U. S. Department of Education (2000).

As discussed earlier and central to this study, one of the readiness programs available to some high school students across the United States is the Early College High School that seeks to “engage all students in a comprehensive support system that develops academic and social skills as well as the behaviors and conditions necessary for college completion” (Jobs for the Future, 2008, p.2). The Early College High School Initiative is built upon earlier dual enrollment programs in which high school students could earn college credit while still in high school. It is believed that if students can graduate with six or more college classes, college completion will be more likely (Adelman, 2006).

I contend that college-going and persistence once at college is dependent on a more complex set of variables than simply accruing college credits. In this study I hope to build upon the research of prior dual enrollment and accelerated programs by examining the levels of complexity that are not explicit in the quantitative studies on first-generation college students that dominate the literature. The idea behind accelerated learning is that challenge is a greater motivator than remediation, since remediation

carries a negative message of repeating something at which one has already failed (Hoffman & Bayerl, 2006). Early College High School philosophy encourages balance, offering academic support and fostering self-advocacy (Berger et al., 2010). I investigated how that balance is carried out in the day to day interactions between teachers, students, and administrators in a particular Early College High School.

The location of Early College High Schools is also an important tenet of this college readiness initiative. More than half of all Early College High Schools are situated on a college campus, based on the belief that providing a college environment to students will result in improved outcomes for students (Cavalluzzo, Corallo, & Jordan, 2002). The majority of Early College High Schools on college campuses are located on community college campuses. The open admission policies of community colleges are often viewed as promoting equality and providing typically underserved groups an opportunity for the acquisition of social capital and social mobility through an education (Cohen & Brawer, 1996; Grubb, 1989; Labaree, 1997). Others, however, believe that community colleges impede first-generation students' chances of being persistent at the university level by "cooling out" their aspirations for a four-year degree (Clark, 1960, 1980). It has also been reported that lowered aspirations and educational outcomes occur for students who transfer to a university from a community college (Grubb, 1991; Pascarella et al., 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Because the Early College High School featured in my case study is situated on a community college campus, I hoped to more fully understand how the setting affected the students enrolled there.

While preliminary studies show that the Early College High School Initiative has resulted in "improved attendance, reduced suspensions, and increased numbers of

students on track for college” (Edmunds, 2010a, p. 7), more research is needed to fully understand the factors that facilitated that success. The Early College High School Initiative is still relatively new, and it is noteworthy that nearly all of the research published on Early College High Schools is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation or partners in the Early College High School Initiative. Further study by researchers unaffiliated with the Early College High School initiative is merited.

### **Subjective Contours**

Historically subjectivity in research has been viewed as negative when referring to bias or the lack of objectivity. Glesne (2010) contends that subjectivity in qualitative research contributes to the quality of research “in terms of personal history and passion” (p. 152). By examining how a researcher’s autobiography and personal history connect with a research study, the researcher more fully understands why particular observations are made, why certain questions surface, why certain emotions arise during the study, how the research aligns with the researcher’s values, and why the research is important to the researcher.

Because stories have always been an integral way in which I have experienced and processed the world, I believe that centering the notion of internal and extrinsic discourses shaping first-generation students in Early College High Schools will provide needed insight into their notions of schooling. I have always been an observer of people, a mediator of conflict, and a facilitator of communication. I view myself as an intuitive person, able to read a situation, character, and motivation. I analyze relationships, making sense of the drama of my personal life and the dynamics of my classroom. I grew up intrigued by the stories of family members and found adventure in the stories of

literature; it is as if, like Ellis (2004), I have always been an ethnographer. Like many children, I grew up imitating, pretending, role playing, and storytelling. Saldaña (2008) maintains that these acts are the foundation of qualitative inquiry. I have incorporated these skills and interests into this qualitative research study.

As a 26 year veteran of the high school English classroom, I have continued to be engaged in story through the study of literature and drama. Literary and dramatic works that examine the human condition and explore identity formation are particularly compelling to me. Like Kerby (1991), I see narratives as an expression of how we understand the world, our experience, and ourselves. According to Saldaña (1999), my involvement with theatre as a veteran public school teacher and as an experienced director of community theatre and college theatre productions has prepared me for qualitative research work and affected the way in which I analyzed and represented the data generated in this research study.

Because I am the first person in my family to earn a college degree, I have firsthand knowledge of issues related to college-going for first-generation college students. That insight and experience have informed my work as a mentor and teacher of high school students who will be the first in their families to attend college and will inform this research study.

### **Research Questions**

While much has been written about the characteristics and demographics of first-generation college students and about their problems and successes once in college, little has been written about the psychological transformation that first-generation college students undergo on their way to a university education. Identity formation is a dynamic

process. Conquergood (1991) contends that identity is “more like a performance in progress than a postulate, premise or ordinary principle” (p. 185); consequently, it is important to consider the on-going, subtle dynamics at play in the lives of students who will be the first in their families to attend college.

This qualitative case study explored the contextual factors and discursive literacies that circulate in and around Early College High School programs which shape college-going scripts. I was interested in how school-based narratives about college-going and family-based narratives about college-going interact in an Early College High School, particularly for first-generation college students. I was also interested in how students with hybrid subjectivities perceive themselves within a social institution that has designated them as first-generation college students. It was my broader goal to understand how these students negotiate multiple discourses and come to see themselves as college-going. The study examined what Walkerdine (2003) refers to as the “intersection of narratives and discourses” (p. 247) and analyze how that process impacts the decision of students, particularly first-generation college students, to attend college. Finally I sought to discover ways in which educational leaders can improve the effectiveness of college readiness programs like the Early College High School to better serve those under-represented in college.

## **Chapter Three: Research Methods**

### **Description of Research Setting**

This qualitative research study was conducted at an Early College High School in the rural southeastern United States. The school is situated on the campus of a small community college in which students are dually enrolled in high school and community college courses. Upon completion of the five-year program, students receive both a high school diploma from the local school district and an associate's degree from the community college, two years of community college credit for transfer to a four year university. Students have elected to attend the Early College High School rather than one of the four traditional high schools in the district. Students were admitted through an application and interview process. Parent involvement was a key component in the admissions process. Parents were asked to attend an information session about the Early College High School program. They were also part of the interview process. Many of the students in the Early College High School were referred to the program by their middle school teachers or counselors who saw this program as one that would best fit their academic and social needs.

There are currently 117 students in grades nine and ten. Each year 60 new students are admitted. The staff consists of six teachers, one counselor, one data manager, and one principal. Additional staff will be added each year to accommodate enrollment. Because the Early College High School targets those often under-represented in college, 72% of the students come from families in which neither parent holds an

associate or bachelor's degree. According to the US Census (2010) only 11% of the adults in this rural, working class community have a bachelor's degree. Twenty-two percent of the students are minority, primarily African American (eight students) and Hispanic (34 students), which is significant since the demographic make up of the county in which the Early College High is located is only 6% minority. Sixty-two percent of the students receive free or reduced lunch, a federal indicator that over half the students come from homes of lower socio-economic status.

State testing results for this Early College High School indicate that the students performed above the district and state on state level end-of-course assessments in English I and Algebra I and just below the district in Physical Science; 100% were proficient in Algebra I. One hundred and twelve students met state and federal guidelines for designation as Economically Disadvantaged in state level testing passed end-of-course tests, performing considerably above the district (78%) and the state (71%). Males at the Early College High School performed only slightly better on state end-of-course tests, only out-performing females by 2%. This school is a hybrid model, both a high school and a community college. The students are also hybrid. Beyond being high school and community college students simultaneously, they come to the Early College High School from middle schools from four different parts of the school system with well-established school identities and loyalties in those districts.

The community college on which the Early College High School is located was established in 1965 and has been a longstanding educational institution in the community for job training and continuing education. Like the other community colleges in the state system, this community college has an open-admissions process. Anyone with a high

school diploma may take classes. Those without a high school diploma may earn a Graduate Equivalency Diploma (GED) at the community college in order to qualify for admission. Annual enrollment is around 3,500 students, including students who take classes at two satellite locations in adjacent counties. As with most community colleges, students attend this community college primarily to obtain an associate's degree or to be trained for a job; students view the community college as an economical way to complete a portion of a four year degree (Wells, 2008).

Over the past ten years the community college has become a more active presence in the local school system, offering dual enrollment classes for high school students through the Huskins Bill, a state mandate that encourages collaboration between high schools and community colleges. Through Huskins Bill course offerings high school students may take certain community college classes for no charge, except the cost of textbooks. A number of distance learning classes are offered through the community college in cyber-classrooms at each high school; other courses are available to students online. The latest partnership between the community college and the local school system is the Early College High School. Under the partnership agreement, the local school system staffs the Early College High School through state allotments for personnel, and the community college provides the facility for the program and college courses to students. The second floor of one academic building is dedicated as office and classroom space for the program.

### **Discussion of Type of Study and Why Appropriate**

It is appropriate that this research study be a qualitative study, because through it I sought to “interpret people’s constructions of reality and identify uniqueness and patterns

in their perspectives and behaviors” (Glesne, 2010, p. 19). Following traditional case study methodology, I immersed myself in the research setting, observing participant interactions and collecting data through observations, interviews and document review (Yin, 1994) in an effort to understand the complexities of discursive arrangements and personal narratives among students enrolled in an Early College High School, particularly first-generation college students. Case studies are appropriate for researchers seeking to understand a contemporary phenomenon in a real-life context over a period of time (Yin, 1994). In a case study the researcher creates descriptive data from which the reader can learn and draw conclusions (Creswell, 2007). This case study involved what Yin (1994) describes as “the collection of extensive qualitative data usually via interview, observation, and document analysis” (p. 12). The strength of the case study is the multiple sources of data used in the study.

Methods choices for developing the case were informed by what Jeffrey and Troman describe as a “compressed,” or focused, ethnography (2004), a “short period of intense ethnographic research in which researchers inhabit a research site” (p. 538). A focused ethnography is an appropriate design choice when examining a particular aspect of culture (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). A compressed ethnography is possible when the researcher has familiarity with the research setting and when the researcher enters the study with a plan for data collection that includes interviews rather than long-term observation (Kluwin, Morris, & Clifford, 2004). It is also essential that participants in a compressed ethnography are comfortable with the researcher (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). My immersion in the Early College High School was done with the purpose of examining a particular phenomenon related to discourse. Familiarity with the setting and

its student population allowed for a focused ethnographic design. The participants were comfortable with the presence of a researcher, since the school is often visited by education leaders wanting to observe an Early College High School.

### **Sampling Strategies**

In choosing a case for study, the researcher must first establish the criteria appropriate to the study (Merriam, 1998). For this study it was important that the researcher be able to observe a number of students who are the first in their families to attend college and are involved in a college readiness program. The Early College High School was a fitting choice for conducting this research study, since the researcher found the greatest concentration of first-generation college students there. The Early College High School was a particularly appropriate case for looking at college-going, because one of the founding tenets of the program is preparing students for college who are traditionally under-represented in college and university settings.

The participants for this case study were teachers, counselors, and administrators associated with a rural Early College High School in the southeastern United States, as well as their students who were observed through normal educational practice. The director of high school programs for the school system served as a gatekeeper (Hatch, 2002), establishing the researcher's entry into the research setting and helping to develop trust between the researcher and the participants involved in the study. The researcher worked closely with the principal to develop a schedule of visits for classroom observations and for on-site staff interviews. An initial presentation at a regularly scheduled faculty meeting introduced teachers in the Early College High School to the nature of this research study. All six teachers were invited to participate in the study.

The principal and teachers also assisted the researcher in collecting relevant documents for review including, but not limited to, student work related to the research questions.

### **Data Collection Techniques**

Data collection for this case study was accomplished through interviews, observations, and document review (Yin, 1994). In addition to written fieldnotes, the researcher audio-taped all interviews using Audacity® software in keeping with standard ethnographic fieldwork practice (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). The researcher transcribed all handwritten notes from observations, interviews, and journal entries, as well as audio-taped files. The transcription process allowed the researcher to become familiar with the data while it was being collected (Reissman, 1993). What follows is a more detailed description of the three primary data gathering techniques.

**Interviews.** One of the most important sources of information in a case study is the interview. The researcher developed a standard interview protocol and a series of open-ended questions to elicit responses from the teachers in the Early College High School; additional questions were developed for the principal interview. The interview questions were predicated on the theoretical and conceptual framework introduced in Chapter 2.

*Teachers.* Each of the six teachers and the guidance counselor in the Early College High School were invited to be interviewed; all chose to participate in the study. The interviews took place at the Early College High School before or after school or during each teacher's planning period when the teacher was not supervising students. The interviews lasted at least one hour. I was available for further dialogue if the participant wanted. Follow up interviews were conducted with the two teachers who led

students in seminar sessions related to college-going. The teacher interviews occurred concurrently with the classroom observations so that one method of data collection might inform the other. In addition to the six teachers and counselor who work directly with the students in the Early College High School, six community college instructors who have worked with the students in the Early College High School in college classes were invited to participate in interviews; one declined to participate citing limited experience with students in the Early College High School.

*Principal.* Informal conversations between the principal and myself were ongoing throughout the study. Additional questions were developed and used to interview the principal in a more formal structured setting which lasted approximately one hour. The principal interview took place before the site observations and the teacher interviews to provide context for those data collection activities.

**Observations.** The second traditional ethnographic technique of observation provided another primary source of information for this case study. The information obtained through observations at the Early College High School provided valuable context for understanding the research setting and the phenomenon of college-going narratives. Observations over a four week period in the spring semester included the everyday operations of the school, the interaction of students before and after school and between classes and the interaction of students and teachers in classrooms, particularly during seminars designed to discuss the issues around college-going. I developed a cooperative relationship with the teachers who led on-going student seminars since the topics of these seminars had direct relevance to the research study. Through the observation of students in seminar classes, the researcher was exposed to all students in

the Early College High School. During classroom observations the researcher was able to see more fully the intersection of school narrative and family narrative as teachers and students were engaged in discussion around college-going. I was a non-participant observer (Creswell, 2007); the researcher neither engaged with students nor teachers during the observations but instead focused on richly describing normal educational practices in this particular Early College High School in order to describe, understand, and explain (Tellis, 1997) how the students at this particular Early College High School negotiate discourses related to college-going scripts. I recorded both descriptive and analytic fieldnotes (Glesne, 2010) in a double-entry journal format (Appendix E).

**Document review.** The third source of data in the study was through the review of documents (Yin, 1994). Not only did documents provide contextual information, the documents served to validate or nullify data obtained in another manner. I collected and reviewed documents that articulated the school's mission and were representative of the Early College High School: the school website, the student handbook, class blogs, Early College High School planning documents, materials and communications between the school, and parents. In addition to these documents, over 150 pages of student work samples, journal entries around issues of college-going, were reviewed.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

**Initial coding.** The researcher performed a qualitative analysis of the patterns of codes found in the data and noted the themes and issues that emerged (Wengraf, 2001). To identify the emerging patterns and themes in the data, the researcher began by sorting the data, examining the data for relationships and contradictions, rereading the transcripts to confirm or refute the emerging relationships, recognizing the properties of the data,

identifying the general themes and ranking them for importance or discarding them, and reviewing individual components of the data for themes and reconciling how those themes could be incorporated into the broader themes (McCracken, 1988). To organize the data, I developed a codebook containing a description of each code used to sort and analyze the data, along with examples of those codes and themes.

Another method by which I analyzed the data for emerging themes in the initial coding process was through the notation and analysis of repetition, recurrence and forcefulness. Themes emerged through words or phrases repeated throughout the data. Similarly, there was a recurrence of ideas expressed in different words and phrases that were noted. The forcefulness by which something is shared may also speak to its importance and relevance (Owen, 1984). Ideas that are shared with particular emphasis, volume or inflection were noted using bold type, italics, or capital letters in written transcripts (Orbe, 2004).

Numerous themes emerged during the initial stage of data analysis and led to a better understanding of the major issues that this study examined. The themes that surfaced were: 1) the way in which the small size of the Early College High School impacts student learning and relationships with teachers; 2) the metaphor of family that students and teachers use to describe their experience at this Early College High School; 3) the lack of academic preparation of the students admitted into the program; 4) the barriers that students face becoming ready for college; 5) the emerging identities of adolescents heretofore not destined for college; 6) the family narrative, or life script, reinforced at home; 7) and the institutional message of college-going enacted at the Early College High School.

**In vivo coding.** The second phase of analysis employed in vivo coding practices. In vivo refers to the words of participants (Saldaña, 2010). During this stage of analysis, the concerns of the teachers and administrators of the Early College High School emerged through the analysis of interview data and given voice in their own words. The ways in which participants spoke about enacting the mission of the Early College High School were noted, and the frequency with which the concerns emerged revealed themes. The perspective of students was drawn from the statements of students in classes observed and through the review of journal entries. Capturing the voice of the students enrolled in the Early College High School was paramount to understanding their developing identities.

**Dramaturgical coding.** The final phase of coding involved treating the data that emerged during in vivo coding as a dramatic script and analyzing the text of interview transcripts and student writing as a dramaturge might analyze a dramatic script. Noting areas of conflict, establishing characterization, recognizing the narrative arcs, and discerning the metaphors and motifs that bind the stories together into a narrative were accomplished during this phase of data analysis (Saldaña, 2010). During this phase of coding I constructed composite characters, assembled scenes that illustrated the themes noted earlier, and juxtaposed those characters and scenes to offer a narrative constructed in the participants' own words.

**Reflexive journal.** It is important that I question my own interpretations and the consistency of my analysis and my analytical process throughout the research study. I kept a research journal, or reflexive journal (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993), in which I recorded the basis for my coding and my sources of inspiration from the

studies that I read. Writing down what makes me think that there could be a pattern of relationships between data codes was helpful. It was important to have an on-going internal conversation as the data was coded, asking why one code was assigned over another. This process of self-questioning, or reflexivity, yielded more authentic results (Gasson, 2003).

### **Consideration of Possible Ethical Issues**

This research study conformed to the ethical guidelines outlined by the American Psychological Association (APA) and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Appalachian State University. The study was reviewed by the IRB and exempted under the category of normal educational practices and settings. Documents are attached that were used in the IRB approval process. The Lay Summary (Appendix A) explains the nature of the research study and was used by the researcher to gain access to the research setting and to secure participants for the study. Because the study involved the interviewing of teachers, parents, and administrators, an Interviewee Consent form (Appendix B) is attached. Protocols were established for conducting these interviews to insure that they were systematic and fell within acceptable guidelines: Teacher Interview Protocol (Appendix C) and the Principal Interview Protocol (Appendix D). A protocol for conducting and recording the observations (Appendix E) insured the uniformity and the organizational structure of fieldnotes.

Consent was obtained from the superintendent of the school district in which this Early College High School is located. The principal of the school concurred, granting approval as well. Because the school is regularly visited by educators wishing to learn more about the Early College High School initiative, my presence did not disrupt the

everyday operation of the school. Participation in the study posed no more than minimal risk of harm that someone would encounter in everyday life. Participants were involved in the study voluntarily. Their names and specific identifiers have been omitted or changed to protect their anonymity. Participants were given the opportunity to opt out of the study or opt out of any of the activities that were part of it at any time. Digital audio recordings were used to validate written field notes and remained in password-protected files on my laptop computer.

I had not had any prior interaction with any of the parents, teachers, or students at the Early College High School. While I am an adjunct instructor at the community college on which the Early College High School is situated, I currently only teach an online course that is unavailable to the students participating in this study.

It is important for me to equally respect the anonymity of all participants. For example, the specific responses of teachers in this study were not revealed to the principal. This study did not complicate institutional structure or put anyone at risk for sharing a dissenting viewpoint or perspective. Since I was not observing classes to evaluate teacher performance, it was imperative that I refrain from discussing issues of teacher effectiveness or curriculum delivery with the principal after the classroom observations.

I consider myself a social constructivist because of my belief that lived experience is socially constructed and affected by cultural experiences and because of my preference for working closely with participants to tackle open-ended questions (Creswell, 2007). I welcomed the opportunity to engage with teachers and administrators in the Early College High School in constructing knowledge around the college-going scripts of the

students enrolled there, particularly those students who will be the first in their families to go to college. More and more I am drawn to an advocacy perspective, as well, as I become more committed to working with those who have been marginalized in conventional research, particularly students. I see the school as a microcosm of society, and as such, like Huebner (1975), I believe it is the role of the educator to seek justice. I was careful, however, not to let my tendency to be an advocate for students to cause me to compromise the integrity of my research in this case study.

### **Monitoring and Use of Subjective Lens**

I brought to this research study my own experiences as a first-generation college student. Consequently it was important that I acknowledge this lens through which I might view this educational experience. This perspective gave me insight into the interactions I observed between teachers and students in the Early College High School and perspective into the experiences of the students who are enrolled there. In addition, I have taught high school students for 26 years, many of whom were the first in their families to attend college. My role as an advocate for those students naturally influenced the selection and implementation of my research topic. Similarly, five years ago I became a foster parent of a student who will be the first in his family to attend college. His educational experiences, aspirations, barriers, etc. are particularly clear to me. It would be naïve to think that this personal and emotional insight into the experiences of a first-generation college student would not have to be taken into consideration as I worked to monitor my subjective lens.

Another ethical consideration that is relevant to this research study is my role as an adjunct instructor at a community college. Since my research setting was an Early

College High School set on a community college campus, it was relevant that I acknowledge this perspective. While that role gave me valuable and timely insight into the research setting and provided context for my study, I worked to avoid making assumptions that were unsubstantiated by my observations and the data that was generated in the study.

I have had the opportunity to visit the campuses of two other Early College High School programs as an evaluator for a state education award. That experience afforded me the opportunity to interview students, teachers, parents and administrators about the Early College High School experience. Further, I have two former students who teach in Early College High Schools in other parts of the state. These connections have given me valuable context for my research study, but I could not assume that the Early College High Schools I have had experience with were necessarily comparable to the Early College High School with which I was working since one defining quality of Early College High Schools is their unique approach to curriculum delivery and innovation (Ongaga, 2010).

Finally, I see this research study as the nexus of my personal, academic, artistic, and social sensibilities. As such it is my goal is to be an artful scientist (Brady, 1991), who transgresses the “conventional boundaries and forms of social scientific writing” (Bochner & Ellis, 2003) in order to become the “conduit through which the agendas and stories of the informants are channeled” (Mienzakowski, 1995, p. 371). I want to be what Glesne (2006) calls “a curious learner who comes to learn from and with research participants” (p. 46).

## **Potential Validity Threats and Dealing with Those Threats**

I must guard against bias if the data collected is to be received as authentic. There are measures I can take to build credibility into the work. Through memo writing and triangulation, I addressed the issue of validity. I must have insight into whether what was observed, recorded and reported was validated by what is known about Early College High Schools and first-generation college students or if what I found stood alone as a unique portrayal that may tell another side of the story that is different but equally authentic. By recognizing the complexity of the issues surrounding first-generation college students and the complex dynamics at play in the Early College High School, I avoided oversimplifying the research problem and the results of the study (Maxwell, 1996).

**Memo writing.** While my experiences inform and enrich my research, it is wise to realize that I naturally carry bias and subjectivity into my work, as well. By exploring where my bias lies through careful examination and thoughtful reflection, I was less likely to allow it to interfere with my research. I realized that my observations were affected by both autobiographical and professional experiences that I brought to the process. Writing memos was one way I processed the research experience and challenged my preconceived notions and perceptions (Glesne, 2010). I treated memo writing as Dey (1993) suggests, as a “creative activity, relatively unencumbered by the rigors of logic and the requirements of corroborating evidence. Memos should be suggestive; they needn’t be conclusive” (p. 89). Memo writing served a method of recording unedited thoughts, premises, questions and concerns while remaining open to

insight and creative thought. Processing observations throughout the study kept me focused on my research questions and attuned to monitoring my subjective lens.

**Triangulation.** Triangulation offered another way in which I validated my data. I began to validate my data by comparing it to my own experiences as a first-generation college student and to the experiences of the first-generation college students I have taught. I also triangulated my data against the body of literature written on the experiences of first-generation college students as well as the limited body of literature on the Early College High School initiative. As a researcher, I reasoned through multiple perspectives not only for my own clarity, but so that I might better collect data without corruption. I also realized the value of sharing my research design with others in order to identify my blind spots (Maxwell, 1996); therefore, I welcomed the opportunity to discuss my work with colleagues, members of my doctoral cohort, and my dissertation committee. Another means of triangulation was through the feedback from the interview participants themselves. I asked if my participants saw the data in the same light that I see it in my analysis. This member checking (Scheibel, 1992) consisted of me presenting my interpretations of the data to participants in the study and asking if they agreed with how I coded and interpreted it.

### **Representation**

Before I head into the heart of what I found through employing the research design decisions and strategies for both learning from and guarding against subjective and ethical dimensions outlined above, I would like to bring readers into the specifics of my decisions about how best to represent what I grew to understand about the phenomenon under study.

Playwriting is gaining popularity as being well-suited to critical ethnographic research (Diamond & Mullen, 1999; Goldstein, 2002). The combination of theatre and social science research can be attributed to anthropologist Victor Turner, who first saw performing research as a means of expressing multiple realities, of making research interdisciplinary and as a way to give voice to those silenced (Leavy, 2009). In performance, those voices can be heard through character dialogue which allows the audience to see possibilities for change (Leavy, 2009). More and more researchers in education have experimented with a variety of literary genres (Barone, 2007), including theatre. Mienczakowski (1995) explains this trend in qualitative research. “What is taking place is not so much a blurring of the boundaries between social science, humanities and the arts, but a recognition that this blurring has been taking place for some time” (p. 364).

I have written up the fieldwork from this focused ethnography (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004) as a layered account, a “polyphonic narrative” (Mienczakowski, 1995, p. 365) that gives voice to the varied stories of my participants in an ethnodrama (Saldaña, 2003a). I have created vignettes that “phenomenologically reenact lived-experiences” (Norris, 2009, p. 34). I did not choose to represent my data in this alternate format for the sheer novelty of expression, but because as Saldaña (2003a) maintains, doing so allowed me to tell my participants’ stories in the most vivid and engaging way possible. Further, the notion of scripts (Abelson, 1996; Bieber & Worley, 2006; Rubin & Berntsen, 2003; Steiner, 1990) has been a central metaphor in this study. The school narratives and family narratives that the students of the Early College High School negotiate are scripts that reflect both the lives they may have lived and the lives that the Early College High

School envisions for them. I have chosen to offer the data and its interpretation and analysis as a script, as well, a script that integrates the discourses observed in this particular Early College High School and alludes to the way in which students may become authors of their own life narratives.

In keeping with the practice of verbatim theatre (Hammond & Steward, 2008; Paget, 1997), I have used the words of participants in order to give them voice; it is in a character's own words that reality can often be found (Smith, 1993). In using the "words, stories and advice" (Mienczakowski, 1995, p. 367) of first-generation college students, their teachers, and administrators, I have sought to provide a stage for their stories to be enacted beyond the way in which educational research is traditionally communicated, one in which the voices of students and educational practitioners who work with them daily are present (Tierney, 2004). Using the benchmark that Saldaña (2003a) suggests, I aim to create an "entertainingly informative experience for an audience, one that is aesthetically sound, intellectually rich, and emotionally evocative" (p. 220).

Initial coding analysis of the data collected in this study revealed that participants had shared conflicts, both internal and interpersonal related to their experiences in an Early College High School; conflict is paramount to dramatic writing (Goldstein, 2002). These conflicts represent the major themes in the data. In vivo coding pointed me to the components of the data which illustrated those themes, what Saldaña (2003a) calls "the juicy stuff" (p.184-185). Dramaturgical codes gave me insight into characterization, motivation, and conflict and apply them to the family narratives and institutional narratives that the students in the Early College High School were negotiating.

Not only did playwriting allow me as the researcher to tell a story from a variety of perspectives: teacher, student, and administrator, it provided a vehicle through which I was able to draw insight for the interpretation and analysis of the data and to become closer to the issues related to Early College High Schools and college-going. Dramatizing the data in this study was a way of more fully “sensing the other” (Conquergood, 1985, p. 3).

The vast amount of research *tells* rather than *shows* (Butler-Kisber, 2010). I aimed for my performance-based work to show my research findings in such a way that brings light to the complex dynamics at work in an Early College High School and expose the discourses that surround college-going that would be difficult to represent in an authentic way otherwise (Leavy, 2009). In presenting my work in this manner I align myself with researchers like Richardson (2000) who contend that alternate presentations of data may “indeed be the most valid and desirable representations, for they invite people in; they open spaces for thinking about the social that eludes us now” (p. 930). An early model for dramatizing research data is Saldaña’s *Finding My Place: The Brad Trilogy* (2001), a play derived from the research of Harry Wolcott and produced in collaboration between the researcher and the playwright. Later dramatizations of research data include works in which the researcher dramatizes the data independent of a playwright. Goldstein’s *Hong Kong, Canada* (2001) contains vignettes that illustrate the data in dramatic form. Representing my focused ethnography as an ethnodrama like these allowed the data to be shared apart from the traditional structures of academic discourse (Gray, Ivonoffski, & Sinding, 1996) and made the data more likely to engage

educational leaders, teachers, students, and families in dialogue around the issue of institutional structures and college-going.

In the chapter that follows, readers will encounter the script of the ethnodrama which draws heavily upon the data derived from the study to represent in written form what the researcher observed (Wolcott, 1994). The script in Chapter 4 will be followed by a more traditional analysis of the case study data in Chapter 5, as well as a discussion of the implications that the study has for further research.

**Chapter 4: *Our School*: A Dramatization of a Study Exploring the College-going  
Scripts in an Early College High School**

As the lights come up some of the actors are already on stage in a tableau. The seven high school teachers interviewed in the study are positioned stage right. Theirs is not only the dominate voice in this narrative but also in the everyday operation of the Early College High School, subsequently they occupy a greater amount of space on the stage. The principal and counselor are off-stage for now. The Early College High School students are represented by seven actors who for the moment are in the dark in the space not occupied by teachers on stage left. Because the family discourse has only been communicated in the data via students and teachers, the parents will be represented by off-stage voices.

Table 1. **Cast of Characters**

• Researcher and Interviewer: doctoral student and high school English teacher	
• Ms A.: 10 <sup>th</sup> grade English teacher	• Austin, 10 <sup>th</sup> grade student
• Mrs. B.: 9 <sup>th</sup> grade English teacher	• Hector, 10 <sup>th</sup> grade student
• Mr. C.: math teacher	• Iliana , 10 <sup>th</sup> grade student
• Mr. D.: science teacher	• Brittany, 10 <sup>th</sup> grade student
• Mr. E.: math teacher	• Brennan, 9 <sup>th</sup> grade student
• Mr. F.: social studies teacher	• Cody, 9 <sup>th</sup> grade student
• Mrs. G.: school counselor	• Gabby, 9 <sup>th</sup> grade student
• Mrs. H.: principal	• various parent voices

**Researcher** (*walking from the dark upstage area into the light down stage*)

This play is called *Our School*. I call it *Our School* as a nod to Thornton Wilder's play, *Our Town* (1960), in which the everyday occurrences in a small New England town are elevated to reflect larger life themes. The title is also a reference to the shared ownership and collaborative spirit that teachers and students in the school have expressed.

*Our School* is a case study of a small school in the rural southeastern United States drawn from what researchers, Jeffrey and Troman (2004) refer to as a focused ethnography. In some ways you will find *Our School* familiar. School is a familiar setting for all of us. We have all experienced school as students and popular media has continued to propagate images of what schooling is like in America. There are things, however, that set *Our School* apart.

While the school and the players remain anonymous, their expressions are in their own words. This portrayal of qualitative research data borrows from the tradition of *verbatim theatre* (Hammond & Steward, 2008; Paget, 1997) in which the voices of participants are honored above mine. Their words have been drawn from teacher interviews, classroom observations and school documents to create this ethnodrama and have been used verbatim. The characters will neither represent all the students across the country who attend Early College High Schools nor all the teachers who teach in them but will reflect the composite attitudes and perceptions of the teachers and students I came to know in *Our School*. This play is my version of many possible stories that could be told.

*Our School* is not a traditional school by most contemporary Western educational institution standards. We won't find desks in ordered rows, there's no football team, no Homecoming Court; there are only six teachers. *Our School* is situated on the campus of a community college where students are also concurrently enrolled. The students recruited to attend are those often under-represented on college campuses. Most of the students are first-generation college students, neither parent having earned a college degree.

Teachers are required to teach each day using methodologies that are prescribed by the funders of the Early College High School initiative<sup>1</sup>: collaborative group work, writing to learn, groups, questioning, classroom talk, and scaffolding. While some teachers in a traditional education setting might find this pedagogical structure restrictive, the teachers in *Our School* appear to find the structure supportive. As one teacher put it, “the teachers here can stress the importance of thinking more than they might in a traditional class; it's not just necessarily teaching them the content but teaching them to be thinkers.”

### **Researcher**

The students are coming in now...

*The seven students have backpacks or books. They change position arranging themselves into an informal tableau. As their names are called they indicate they are present and mime interaction.*

**Ms. A** (*calling roll*)

Hector...

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<sup>1</sup> Jobs for the Future prescribes specific methodologies in Early College High Schools receiving funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. These methods encourage collaboration and are intended to engage reluctant learners.

**Researcher**

Hector is the oldest of three children. His family came to this community seeking seasonal work in the apple orchards. Because Hector is an undocumented alien, the Early College High School is his only opportunity to attend college. Pending passage of the DREAM Act<sup>2</sup>, Hector's education will end with the associate's degree he can obtain through this high school program.

**Ms. A.** *(continues calling roll)*

Brittany...

**Researcher**

Brittany lives with her grandmother. Her mother dropped out of high school and was not equipped to care for her. She sometimes sees her on the weekends. Her mother is more like a friend than a parent. Her mother talks about taking classes at the community college one day, but she hasn't followed through with that.

**Ms. A.** *(continues calling roll)*

Austin...

**Researcher**

Austin didn't want to come to the Early College High School at first. He missed his friends and would like to have played sports. His father insisted that he apply. Austin's father is a high school graduate; he has worked his way into a supervisory position at a local furniture factory.

**Ms. A.** *(continues calling roll)*

Cody...

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<sup>2</sup> The Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act) is proposed federal legislation that would allow students without legal status to pursue a college education.

**Researcher**

Cody always seems to be in trouble. His teachers wonder about his home life. His parents are uninvolved. Cody's middle school teacher thought the Early College High School would be a fresh start for him; they hoped he would escape some of the peer pressure he was dealing with at his old school. Mrs. B. taught Cody's parents. She had hopes that they would attend the community college, but she's nearly certain that they didn't.

**Ms. A.** *(continues calling roll)*

Gabby...

**Researcher**

Gabby is from a large family. She is often overshadowed at home by siblings needing more attention but has come to develop an identity at school as a strong student. Her teachers have taken a special interest in her. Gabby's mother dropped out of high school when she became pregnant. Her father finished high school and his struggled since to support his growing family.

**Ms. A.** *(continues calling roll)*

Iliana...

**Researcher**

Iliana's family are immigrants and have been fortunate to find work in the community. Her education is a high priority for her family; in fact they are resting many hopes in how education will give her a different life than they have had without any formal post-secondary education. Sometimes that puts a lot of pressure on her.

**Ms. A.** *(continues calling roll)*

Brennan...

**Researcher**

Brennan is the oldest of three children. His parents are hard working folks and want a better life for their son. They recently lost their jobs when a local textile factory closed. Without education and training his parents are struggling to find jobs. Brennan's father must complete his GED before he can take advantage of retraining through the community college.<sup>3</sup>

**Researcher**

The students in *Our School* come from middle schools across the district; for many it is a second chance at learning, a way to escape the labels they have been given. These labels represent the range of subjectivities (Orbe, 2004) with which the students must contend. *The students deliver these lines in a choral reading style, raising their heads to face the audience as they deliver their first line, labels that they have brought with them from middle school and from home, labels that other people have given them. The lights come up on each student as he or she speaks until the entire stage left area is lit.*

**students** *(alternating, a slight pause between each)*

goof-off... slacker... good for nothing... goody two-shoes... reserved... laid-back... procrastinator... goth... prep... redneck... lazy... underachiever... low... unmotivated... undisciplined... impulsive... nerd... gifted... shy... very, shy... athletic... gamer... bright... first-generation college student...

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<sup>3</sup> One aspect of the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is funding for the retraining of workers whose jobs have been lost to foreign competitors.

**Gabby** (*stepping forward*)

I took it wrong when my teacher said to me that this school would be perfect for me since I would be the first person in my family to go to college, first-generation college student? I thought she was insulting me.

*(On the backdrop the words they say fill the screen in various fonts, sizes and shapes.)*

Figure 1. Student labels.



*(The lights fade on students, leaving researcher in light.)*

**Researcher**

It's break time now. *(Students disperse to form a new tableau in silhouette; some on cell phones, some using laptops and those closest to center stage will be grouped around the teachers closest to them.)* The students will be using their I-pods or checking their e-mail accounts or updating their Facebook® pages. That's ok here. Students have unfiltered access to the Internet at *Our School*, unlike their friends at the traditional high schools in the system.

**Mrs. B.** *(to Researcher, moving toward him to offer additional information)*

School is the only place that many of these students have access to the Internet. *Our School* is sensitive to that. One father told me that he drives his daughter to the end of the driveway to access a neighbor's wireless Internet. *(moves back toward students who gather around her)*

**Researcher**

You'll also find that students will use this time to seek out teachers, like Mrs. B., with whom they have forged close relationships.

*The principal enters from stage right, well-dressed and confident. As she speaks the lights slowly dim on the teachers and students on stage. The principal takes center stage in a spotlight.*

**Researcher**

The principal of *Our School* began her career in education later in life after working in public relations and marketing, perhaps explaining her polish. Mrs. H. is well-dressed, the very model of professionalism. She became an educator after being a full time mother for a number of years. She is well-traveled and comes from a different socioeconomic background than perhaps all the students in *Our School*.

**Principal** (*in a well-prepared manner that suggests that she has had many opportunities to deliver this information before.*)

*Our School* provides a small learning community of students the opportunity to earn both a high school diploma and an associate degree at no cost to students and their families. It is a five year school which enrolls approximately 60 ninth graders each year. *Our School* is located on a community college campus where students are enrolled in both honors level high school and college courses.

Since 2002, the partner organizations of the Early College High School Initiative have started or redesigned more than 230 schools in 28 states and the District of Columbia. The schools are designed so that low-income youth, first-generation college goers, English language learners, students of color, and other young people

underrepresented in higher education can simultaneously earn a high school diploma and an associate's degree or up to two years of credit toward a bachelor's degree—tuition free.

Here in the building we have banners from schools, locally and Ivy League and military and there might be one from Texas up there. I went to the University of Texas at Austin; that's where I started. *(nervous laughter)* But you know, we think that's important; we have posters up. We have them looking at careers. We have them do self-assessments. Currently our sophomores are doing a special project on college-going that is built into their course of study; it's integrated as a project. Our freshmen have two mandatory college visits.

**Researcher** *(to audience)*

You may have some questions. I'll ask one on your behalf.

**Researcher** *(as audience member, raising hand to ask his question)*

Besides the college visits and research project about colleges, what does *Our School* do to emphasize college-going for these students?

**Principal**

I really believe that the professionals that work in this building take pride in what they do each day, and we're motivated by the mission here. We want very much to fulfill that. And yes, it is our employment and we do have a paycheck at the end of the month, but I believe that we go above and beyond; I know we go above and beyond and that comes from an intrinsic motivation to support the mission of the school and to see it through to the success that we believe that we can have.

*On the backdrop there is a collage of college banners, university mascots and logos.*

**Researcher** (*asking a question as an audience member again*)

I wonder why Bill Gates seems to be driving this initiative. Does the fact that he is wealthy and that his foundation is able to fund whatever initiatives he supports a good reason for him to be allowed to set America's education agenda?

**Principal** (*pauses, has no answer*)

*The lights dim and principal exits stage right*

**Researcher**

The teachers and students in *Our School* are relatively unfamiliar with the political and social implications of their school. The students sense that they are part of something new. For student who have had negative experiences with school, something new is appealing.

The students have applied to attend *Our School*. They were all interviewed as part of that selection process, not to select the brightest or the most promising but those who might fall through the cracks in traditional high schools. For many it was scary and intimidating.

*(The lights slowly come up on Austin. The Researcher assumes the role of interviewer and steps toward him.)*

**Austin**

The first question they asked me was...

**Interviewer**

What is your favorite book?

**Austin**

I said, *Enders Game* and they said,

**Interviewer**

I really like that book.

**Austin**

After that the interview went fine.

**Researcher**

Ironically, one of the major themes in the book is the dichotomy between children and adults and the conflict that rises from these power structures. In the novel, Andre Wiggin, known as Ender, is being recruited into a school, the Battle School. Valentine, Ender's sister, tells him that she doesn't think it is possible for him to define his own path.

**Austin** (*reading from the novel*)

“Welcome to the human race. Nobody controls his own life, Ender. The best you can do is choose to fill the roles given you by good people, by people who love you” (Card, 1985, p. 219).

**Researcher**

Austin's passage is significant since the Early College High School sets students on a path toward college. Some students are there because their parents or teachers think they should be. Like Ender, they had little choice in whether they would attend the Early College High School. By the end of the first year most report that they are glad to be there. Another part of the book deals with identity and bears some examination in relation to this study, as well.

**Austin** (*reading from the novel*)

“Perhaps it is impossible to wear an identity without becoming what you pretend to be”

(Card, 1985, p.231).

**Researcher**

For some of the students at the Early College High School the identity of hard working student or a student who is college bound is a new identity. It is the hope of the staff of the Early College High School that eventually that identity will become their own.

**Brittany** (*to audience*)

When I was being interviewed I was afraid I would say something wrong and that I wouldn't be good enough. I don't like to talk about me. I feel uncomfortable bragging on myself. (*to interviewer*) The only person that brags on me is my Nanna.

**Interviewer**

What would your Nanna say about you, Brittany?

**Hector**

I didn't realize how much I didn't know about myself. They asked so many questions about me. I was really nervous, and I was afraid I wouldn't get in.

**Gabby**

When I got interviewed I was scared, but then I felt comfortable talking to them because they were friendly. The interview made me feel important.

**Brennan**

Some of my family said I shouldn't go to this school. My brother said what if you don't get accepted. I wanted to apply because no one in my family has ever been to college and I wanted to achieve that for my family. My father nearly cried when I got my

acceptance letter. He said he always knew I could do it. I guess they just saw my inner self and saw that I had potential.

### **Researcher**

What these students don't know is that for every 70 openings at *Our School*, there were no more than 69 applicants. Besides those students who expressed interest on their own, middle school teachers and counselors recommended students for the program. The interview was merely a formality. Teachers anticipate a time when more students apply and when admission can be more selective.

Striplin (1999) points out that many students whose parents did not attend college are placed into technical or vocational programs that impede their progress toward college. The students at *Our School* are better positioned for college because of their placement in an Early College High School with its emphasis on college-going. This, however, is no guarantee of their success.

The faculty is discovering the barriers that students are dealing with that impede their progress toward college. Though they work to fulfill the school's mission each day, they are powerless to deal with what students are dealing with outside of school.

### **Ms. G.**

We try to do the best we can. I go to a lot of the homes. What those kids have to transition from leaving that home until they get here, are totally different environments, so, so different. They really have to make a change, mentally, emotionally, physically, from where they have come from to here.

### **Researcher**

Learning to negotiate these different environments can be difficult for students. Lucey, Melody, and Walkerdine (2003) call this negotiation, border crossing. Each day these students cross borders of socio-economic status and educational status; they live in two distinct worlds. These two settings are where two distinct scripts are being enacted, the family narrative and the institutional narrative, what Rubin and Berntsen (2003) call the personal and cultural script.

### **Iliana**

I'll be the first person in my family to go to college; that means a lot to my family.

### **Brennan**

I am the first in my family to go to college. Sometimes it's hard for them to understand. My cousins think I will be taking advantage of my family by them paying for school and me not working as soon.

### **Researcher**

Brennan's feelings of guilt are common among first-generation college students. Bui (2002) and Piorkowski (1983) report that it is difficult for first-generation college students to reconcile the conflict that their opportunities for college creates when the rest of their family is struggling financially.

### **Cody**

None of my family went to college. My dad says...

### **off-stage father voice**

Your mom and I didn't have that and we are happy. You don't need it either.

**Researcher**

This negative attitude toward college is but one type of family narratives that students in *Our School* hear at home. Another narrative is one of support. Yet another is ambivalence.

**Iliana**

My mom didn't go to college because she had two kids. I was raised to be myself no matter what. My mom tells me...

**off-stage mother's voice**

Shine with your own light, not someone else's.

**Cody**

I really don't have anyone to talk to at home. I really can't go on about some subjects because most of the time my family does not find it interesting. My mom dropped out of high school. She doesn't know how to help me with work. She's just there saying do what you want. She doesn't know how to support me.

**Iliana**

I guess you could say I have good support. My mom had a child at fifteen. She wants to see one of her kids do something good. It didn't work out for my brother. My older sister has already screwed up.

**Gabby**

My parents don't know what college is. They don't know how to support me.

**Researcher**

Gabby's situation is not unique. The work of Horn and Nunez (2000), Thayer (2000), and Vargas (2004) confirms that students whose parents did not attend college lack

knowledge about college admissions, financial aid, and degree requirements unlike some of their counterparts.

**Brennan**

My parents never went to college. They got married when my father was eighteen and my mother was sixteen. They want me to have the life I want and not what they had. In the present economy, they know I'll need college.

**Brittany**

My mom went to college late in life. She said she didn't get the college experience. She struggled for a long time. My sister tells me everyday that if she had this opportunity, she would run with it.

**Brennan**

Being the first in my family to go to college is really important; it means that I have broken the cycle. It makes me feel good to set a new standard. It's my dream and my family's dream too.

**Iliana**

My mom has six kids and goes to college online. She wants it to be easier for me than it was for her.

**Brittany**

My grandma said...

**off stage voice**

I failed that three times. Good luck. I don't think you can do it.

**Cody**

My mom told me...

**off-stage voice**

I don't want you to take this offensively, but maybe you aren't cut out for a university; maybe you should think smaller.

**Researcher**

Astin and Osequera (2004) and Lamont and Lareau (1988) tell us that the families of many students like the ones in *Our School* simply lack the cultural capital related to college-going to pass on to their children. *Our School* hopes to be able to provide that cultural capital through its ties to the community college. Some researchers, like Clark (1960, 1980) and Grubb (1989, 1991) however, question whether the community college has the institutional capital necessary to pass on to students for success. Students sometimes sense of what others have passed on to them.

**Cody**

I have the trouble maker side in me from my dad and the potential side in me from my mom.

**Researcher**

The students in *Our School* use the metaphor of family to describe their relationships with the faculty and their peers. This is particularly noteworthy since many of these students have had negative experiences with school in the past and since some come from homes with strained family relationships.

*(introducing staff members)*

This is Mr. F. He was in the Peace Corp, saw the world and brings that experience to his social studies class. He has just returned from a year in Africa before taking the job here at *Our School*. He is a father of three children of his own.

This is Ms. A. The students love her. It seems like they relate to the young teachers. She's cool, knows the music they listen to, the movies they see. She incorporates these things into her lessons. She is from another state and is learning about college opportunities in this state herself as she exposes her students to the opportunities available to them. This morning the faculty is celebrating Ms. A.'s engagement and upcoming wedding.

Deal and Peterson (1999) tell us that it is important to have organizational rituals that connect people and communicate the core values of an organization. These experiences create cohesion and strengthen the metaphor of family that pervades *Our School*. The students haven't arrived yet. They ride buses from all across the district, so school begins a little later each day and ends early enough for them to ride the bus home from the traditional high school they would have attended.

Transportation is a barrier for many of these students. Most are not old enough to drive to school. Their parents are unable to bring them because of work. Often they are unable to stay after school for tutoring or enrichment activities. Clubs must meet during the school day.

Mr. C. was hired to teach math earlier this year after teaching in England for the past year. He coaches cross country at another high school since *Our School* has no sports teams. His students are impressed that he ran a marathon this year.

Mrs. B. is the other English teacher. She works with ninth graders. She is nurturing, a mother figure in *Our School*. Her teaching experience includes an alternate school with a career focus and an arts magnet school. She has taught in both traditional

middle schools and high schools. She understands these students and they feel comfortable talking to her.

Mr. D. teaches science. His parents were first-generation college students, like many of the students he teaches.

**Mr. D.** *(to researcher. moving toward researcher as he speaks)*

When I grew up, both of my parents were first-generation college goers, so I guess that makes me a second-generation college student. Education could not have been more celebrated and more promoted in my home. I would be hard-pressed to find another family where education was valued more than mine. My older sister was a math major, and she was really gifted in math, but what that looked like was that she was doing math homework every night. That is a person that is gifted in math, not struggling with it. I knew early on what it looked like to be gifted in math. It looked like hard work every night. She majored in math; she is a programmer. I don't think a lot of these kids have ever had models like that.

**Researcher**

Have you ever shared that story with your students, Mr. R?

**Mr. R.**

No. I guess I should.

**Researcher**

It appears that the math and science teachers at *Our School* are a little more detached from their students and interact with them mostly through course content, while the English teachers extend the work of the school counselor.

**Mr. C.**

That's something I hadn't thought about much until the past month or so. Next year I will certainly be spending the first couple of weeks working more on relationships and behaviors rather than on math.

**Researcher**

Mrs. G. is the guidance counselor. She is a first-generation college student and speaks of that openly when counseling students. She has just gotten to school. Gabby called; she had missed the bus and didn't have a ride to school. Mrs. G. has left school to pick her up. She paid Gabby's cell phone bill last month herself, because she knew it was her only link to the school.

**Researcher**

Because the school is small this kind of personal attention is possible. London (1989), however, suggests that dependence, or binding, can make independence more difficult.

**Mrs. G.** *(to Gabby as they walk in together)*

I did it, and you can do it too. It is possible and don't let anyone tell you that you can't go to college because you can. *(aside, to audience)* We are always focusing on college readiness skills. I meet with every sophomore student and their parent their tenth-grade year. That is something that we have initiated this year. It has really seemed to hit home for these students.

**Gabby** *(speaking to herself)*

Wow! I am already a sophomore, and Ms. G. is doing my plan for what we are going to do, which college track I am going to be on, associate's in arts, associate's in science, because we are already in college. We are here. We are doing it. *(Gabby exits stage left.)*

**Mrs. G.**

I think continuing to talk about college, meeting with them, talking about beyond community college and to transfer is a huge part of the talk we go through here.

**Researcher**

Mr. E. is the newest teacher on the staff at *Our School*. Teaching is a second career for him. He has an engineering background and became a math teacher after his contracting business declined in the present economy.

**Mr. E.**

The students here want to please you and work hard for you.

**Researcher**

And they did work hard for him. This year 100% of his students were proficient on the state Algebra I exam, an accomplishment few seasoned math teachers across the district could boast. He is humble and down to earth. The students are fascinated that he is also an auctioneer. The teachers here have a unique opportunity to build upon the relationships they develop with students and to capitalize on that relationship in the classroom.

**Austin** (*returns from stage left*)

I like the staff here. They are the best teachers I have ever had. Before I didn't see teachers as real. The teachers here are real people and are part of the family. I think we learn more because of that. Before, I wouldn't trust my teachers to tell them about my hardships. (*exits stage left*)

**Researcher**

You've met the principal already. She is away at a conference today.

*(The lights dim quickly and come up again to signal the passing of time.)*

**Researcher**

This is another day in our school. The students are making presentations about the colleges they have been researching and preparing for final exams.

**Iliana**

The teachers here baby us too much. I am ready for college classes.

**Mr. C.**

I had a conversation earlier this week with another teacher in which we were saying, our students still, a lot of our students still need a lot of progress in terms of approaching the classroom door as an opportunity and not in seeing teachers as the adversary, in the sense that "they make me do stuff that I otherwise wouldn't choose to do, and that if I do the things that I would chose to do I would get in trouble with that authority figure." We're still working with probably the majority of our students to get them to approach this as a collaborative process rather than as an adversarial process.

**Mrs. B.**

I suspect the majority of them have parents who view work that way, that their boss is their adversary and the boss makes them do stuff and they do what they are made to do rather than work is something where we are an organization that has a goal, and we are all contributing our part towards getting there.

**Austin**

I hated teachers before because they made me do work that I didn't like, and I back talked teachers like I did my parents. I have decided to respect my teachers because they are trying to make my life better. I see myself as my own obstacle.

**Researcher**

One might question how Austin came to identify himself as the problem. Perhaps this has been reinforced at home or at school or both.

**Mr. D.**

We talk a lot about college or university beyond the community college.

**All Teachers** (*in unison*)

Not *if* you go to college, but *when* you go to college.

**Mr. D.** (continues)

We want them to aspire, not just to get an associate's degree here, but to also take it further. They say they want to attend certain colleges sometimes for very naïve reasons. We have to really educate a lot of them with regard to not every university offers programs that they may be interested in. It is important to research them. I don't think they really understand how hard it is to get in to those programs.

**Ms. A.**

They literally don't know. All of the sudden, when we turn on that motivation, the students are like, "I not only want to go to college. I want to go to the best one."

**Mr. C.**

Both of my parents are college graduates, and also, my dad was a football coach who grew up in Mississippi, so he was a very big college sports fan. Between those two

things, I came from, at a very early age, an appreciation for colleges. The thing that I have picked up is that a lot of our students, and I assume this is true of their families, don't have any understanding at all of the distinctions between prestige of colleges and what different schools offer; the different specialties that they might have.

**Brennan**

I thought colleges were about all the same. I thought people just went to classes and went home or to their apartment. I didn't know that people lived on campus. The only people I know who went to college went to a community college and they didn't live there. If I go to college...

**All Teachers** (*in unison*)

Not *if* you go to college, but *when* you go to college.

**Mr. F.**

How many of these guys do you think are actually getting really prepared for college?

**Mr. C.**

They've got a long ways to go. Sometimes I think some of them just aren't college material, and I don't know what you can do about that, not everybody in this school is college material.

**All Teachers** (*in unison, except for Mr. C. and Mr. F.*)

Not *if* you go to college, but *when* you go to college.

**Mr. F.**

I just hope we are not giving them a false impression, just because they are coming here, we need to be ready for that because just because they come here and the intention is for them to get a two year degree, not everybody is even two degree material.

**All Teachers** (*in unison, except for Mr. H. and Mr. Z.*)

Not *if* you go to college, but *when* you go to college.

**Mr. C.**

We don't want to be just handing out two year degrees, not that we're handing them out; I mean, they still have to go through, to meet the requirements of the community college. It wouldn't look good if we are passing on to the community college for their fourth and fifth year, students who aren't capable of passing community college classes. college material.

**All Teachers** (*in unison, except for Mr. C. and Mr. F.*)

Not *if* you go to college, but *when* you go to college.

**Mr. F.**

We're new; it's hard to say what's going to happen. Are all these kids community college material? Are they four year college material? I don't know.

**Iliana**

My sister used to call home crying about how hard classes were. I think people overreact. College is not that hard. I thought it would be harder.

**Ms. A.**

I have a concern over the rigor in the community college courses. My English class is harder than their college classes. We expect more of them.

**Gabby**

I will come home to have my mother do my laundry. My cousins did that when they went to school.

**Researcher**

Ties to home are strong for first-generation college students. According to Schmidt (2003), they are more likely to attend a college closer to home or to commute to college.

The first-generation college student struggles to maintain their connections to home while aspiring to a college education.

**Gabby**

Will I ever find my place? I found a pack, small but mighty. They care for their own; they leave no one behind; they are family. Could I belong in such a pack as this? They care for me; they accept me; they will always have my back. I have finally found my place.

**Austin**

I found out what I wanted to be here and no one can stand in my way. I can be anything I set my mind to.

**Cody**

If you surround yourself with successful people, I think you will be more successful.

**Researcher**

Cody's instincts may be right. Researchers Lamont and Lareau (1988) believe that a person's habitus can be affected by the exposure to the habitus of others. Surrounding students with peers who have aspirations for college may have a positive effect.

**Gabby**

My life has been hard. I have been through a lot of hardships. In the end I want everything to come out okay.

**Brennan**

My uncle said a wise guy learns from his mistakes, a wiser man learns from someone else's mistakes.

**Mr. F.**

The teachers here say they are learning a lot about teaching. I learned more this year than I learned in all my years of teaching. It's the best teaching experience I have ever had.

*Austin (reading again from his novel)*

"We play by their rules long enough, and it becomes our game" (Card, 1985, p. 167).

**Hector**

We have a voice here. We can suggest something. At a regular high school they wouldn't listen to us.

**Cody**

I never even thought of college before I came here, but college doesn't seem like a big scary thing anymore.

**Researcher**

The students will soon learn that their principal has accepted a job at a school in another state and that Ms. A. will be relocating this summer after her wedding. She will help open another Early College High School on a university campus in a nearby city.

*(The principal and Ms. A. turn and exit upstage; the lights dim as they exit leaving the Researcher, Hector, and Brittany in the light.)*

**Hector**

We can't predict how our lives will be; we can only make choices that determine how our lives will be.

**Brittany**

I'm not ready for everything yet. I am ready for the next step.

**Hector**

My story's not over.

*(lights out)*

## Chapter 5: Analysis, Implications, and Further Research

### Analysis

This chapter contains analysis of the data collected in this focused ethnographic case study and further situates what was learned in the study within the context of the literature introduced in Chapter 2. This discussion returns to the research questions and the major themes that emerged from the analysis of the data and that informed the construction of the *Our School* script in Chapter 4. The analysis in this chapter relies on the researcher's experience as shared in the dramatic script shared in Chapter 4. The table below presents the research questions as they have evolved from the researcher's time in the field and connects them to the themes represented in the data (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Research Questions

1. What are the contextual factors that circulate in and around Early College High School programs that shape college-going scripts?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• shift in discourse in secondary education</li><li>• school reform models</li><li>• private funding for public education reform</li></ul>
2. How do school-based narratives about college-going and family-based narratives about college-going interact in an Early College High School?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• unified school message</li><li>• image management</li><li>• rigor and relationship</li><li>• small class size</li><li>• family narratives</li></ul>
3. How do students with hybrid subjectivities perceive themselves within a social institution that has designated them as first-generation college students?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• family metaphor</li><li>• school identity</li><li>• student identity</li><li>• resilience</li></ul>
4. How can educational leaders improve the effectiveness of college readiness programs, like the Early College High School, to better serve those under-represented in college?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• policy implications</li><li>• practice implications</li><li>• further research</li></ul>

**Research question one.** This research study was based on the notion that because of the dynamics of schooling, students encounter multiple forms of discourse at a time in their lives when identity formation is transpiring. The first research question this study posed was: *What are the contextual factors circulating in and around Early College High School programs that shape college-going scripts?* The Early College High School initiative has emerged as a response to the current shift in educational reform that seeks to address the issue of college readiness. It is noteworthy that significant funding of this model of public school reform is coming from private corporations and foundations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. How this affects the discourse around college-going remains unexamined in the literature.

The data analyzed in response to this research question focused primarily on documents and policies that defined the mission and operating procedures for Early College High Schools. The data revealed a strong set of guiding principles around the formation and implementation of Early College High Schools. The data also reflected the absence or still-forming set of ideas and principles about how, for example, this initiative conflates a longstanding set of boundaries between secondary and postsecondary education, between what it means to be a high school or college student, and between college-bound scripts and college-going scripts. It is important to understand these multiple and competing dynamics that exist for the students, faculty, and administration of those schools to fully understand the degree to which the Early College High School is affecting them.

**Research question two.** The second question posed in this research examined two of the major discourses with which students in the Early College High School must

contend: *How do school-based narratives about college-going and family-based narratives about college-going interact in an Early College High School?* The data revealed that the school-based narrative at this Early College High School is reinforced by a strong outward message of college-going, amplified through visual messages observed in the school. Academic rigor reinforces the college-going message. The relationships that students have formed with teachers in the Early College High School, due in some part to small class sizes, further solidify the weight of the college-going narrative. As students become closer to their teachers in the Early College High School, the institutional message is more easily transmitted. The data also revealed that the family-based narrative varied from strong support of college-going to a strong lack of support or apathy.

*Unified institutional message.* A unified institutional message about college-going pervades this Early College High School. All teachers spoke of talking to students about college in terms of *when* they go to college, not *if* they go to college. This message was confirmed during the observations and in the student journal entries that were reviewed. Yet privately in individual interviews, teachers shared skepticism about the ability of many of the students to attend a four year university. Some teachers believed that some students were just too far behind academically for that to be accomplished. There is a noteworthy paradox evident: helping students envision possibilities for their future while privately wondering if a college degree can indeed become a reality for them. The explicit message of the Early College High School may ultimately be weakened if and when it is undermined by the reality of the academic unpreparedness of

some first-generation college students (Hsaio, 1992; Riehl, 1994; Thayer, 2000; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991).

While the explicit message about going to college is strong and there is support for the school's mission among the faculty, students surprisingly remain relatively uninformed about college; as reported in the literature, misconceptions and lack of knowledge about college abound (Horn & Nunez, 2000; Thayer, 2000; Vargas, 2004). Brennan, for example, is surprised to learn on a recent college visit that students live on campus, since his only point of reference was the community college where students commute to school each day. Trips to a few local colleges and informal research projects on colleges and careers have begun to expose students to college life, but little more is happening to make college-going a reality for these students. There remains a fundamental need to actualize the institutional message about college-going by providing ways in which that message can be tailored to the needs of individual students. This actualization will only be possible by addressing the ways in which students in the Early College High School mitigate what Walkerdine (2003) would call the intersection of family narratives and school discourses, by recognizing the ways that their hybridity (Lucey et al., 2003) is at once an advantage and a hindrance, and by seeking to understand how students may ultimately be able to become authors of their own personal narratives (Pizzolato, 2003).

*Image management.* Outward signs that the school's focus is tied to college-going include college banners and recruitment posters that line the main hallway of the school. A cut out of a student in cap and gown stands just inside the door labeled "Attributes of a Future Ready Graduate." The life-size figure is labeled with qualities

which successful students at this school should have: strong team contributor, effective problem solver, creative/innovative thinker, proficient reader, critical thinker, curious researcher, relationship builder, knowledgeable global citizen, health-focused life-long learner, effective communicator, capable technology user, financially literate citizen, self-directed responsible worker, multi-lingual, literate consumer of media and skilled mathematician. These words are vastly different from the words students used to describe themselves and from the labels that teachers believed these students had been given.

When asked about plans for other things to strengthen this Early College High School program, the principal spoke at great length about other outward symbols related to college-going: her hope to have plaques on each teacher's door indicating their alma mater, college flags like Mr. D.'s university flag hanging in each classroom, and designated days for the faculty to wear college apparel from the school they attended. There is a strong focus on outward appearances and on invoking connections to colleges through mascots and logos.

While this attention to the extrinsic and explicit might appear to lack substance, Masiki (2011) argues that these outward symbols carry strong messages about the school's "academic visual identity" (p. 85). He believes that educational leaders would be wise to consider how visual identity can help reinforce values and themes by using those symbols to create ceremonies, rituals, and traditions within the school. This Early College High, for example, has a student painting of a wolf hanging in the school's entryway, depicting the school mascot. By displaying a student depiction of the wolf, the message of ownership and student involvement is communicated. The wolf itself is a

powerful symbol; sometimes wild and untamed, yet part of a pack. Capitalizing on that symbolism is important in creating school identity. The counselor in this Early College High School, Mrs. G., presents a Spirit of the Wolf award at the end of each school year incorporating a native American creed into the awards ceremony. Rituals like these strengthen the institutional message.

*Rigor and relationship.* There is a concerted effort in this Early College High School to increase the rigor of instruction. Efforts to engage students are evident. Teachers are required to teach each day with methodologies that are part of staff development prescribed by the funders of the Early College initiative: collaborative group work, writing to learn, groups, questioning, classroom talk, and scaffolding (Vargas & Miller, 2011). These teaching protocols are intended to promote collaborative learning and engage students who are reluctant learners. Through collaborative learning it is believed that students are held more accountable for their learning because each student is expected to participate. While the methodologies are standardized, the teaching is not scripted. Teachers have the autonomy, particularly when dealing with content specifics, to make choices about the material they teach. As Mr. F. explained, teachers appear to find comfort in the structure, though the methods themselves may be no more effective than other teaching methods employed systematically within a school.

*Small school size.* The main difference I observed in this particular Early College High School and the traditional high schools these students would have attended in the district is the characteristically small size of the Early College High School. It stands to reason that the relationships that the students have with the teachers and counselor can be more easily facilitated in a small school. The school is located on a single floor in vacant

classroom space at a community college. The limited amount of space results in students congregating in classrooms between classes. Students can more easily engage with teachers and the school counselor. Students open up to teachers at the Early College High School in ways they have not in their larger traditional schools where teachers were more inaccessible. Austin expresses this change in relationship with teachers when he says, “Before I didn’t see teachers as real. I think we learn more because of that.” Students are beginning to see their teachers as partners in the enterprise of learning as Mr. C. hoped. In essence this is an indication that the school discourse is becoming internalized with students as their relationships with teachers become stronger. This binding, described by London (1989) earlier, may prove to make it more difficult for students to author their own life scripts but instead assume the script offered by the institutional narrative.

*Family narratives.* Once enrolled in the Early College High School, students must negotiate a set of strong family narratives alongside differently framed school discourses on the importance of higher education. Students come to the Early College High School with a wide spectrum of family narratives. Some parents, like Iliana’s, support the school’s message of college-going. Some parents demonstrate a strong opposition to the possibility of schooling beyond high school. Others display utter apathy and indifference which stems from a lack of knowledge about college, like Cody expressed about his mother. In many ways, teachers become surrogate families for many of the students when it comes to support for college. It is through the relationship with teachers that the students find support for college attendance and the knowledge they need to move toward that goal.

Even though parents are a part of the admissions process and ultimately must agree for their child to attend the Early College High School, parent support of students is not always reflected. This lack of support could be for a number of reasons. Often teachers and counselors in the middle school recommend many of the students for inclusion in the program, as was the case for Cody, and suggest that the Early College High School might be the only opportunity these students might have to receive a high school diploma, leaving parents out of the decision-making process altogether. Some parents, like Brittany's grandmother, see the opportunity for the student to receive a free associate's degree as desirable but have failed to buy in to the notion that a bachelor's degree will be possible for their child. Others, like Brennan's family, have embraced the opportunity fully and share "the dream" of higher education.

When the family narrative runs counter to the institutional narrative of the Early College High School, the student must reconcile the opposing narratives. As Mrs. G. explained, the students' transition from their home environment to the school setting is significant. "They really have to make a change, mentally, emotionally, physically from where they have come from," she said. Many of the family narratives are steeped in the negative school experiences that the parents have had in school, which was the case for Brittany's grandmother who had faced failure and warned Brittany to expect the same difficulties. Since many of the parents and grandparents were not successful in school or had conflicts with teachers, they are reluctant to interact with their child's teachers at the Early College High School. The faculty reports that many students see their parents more as friends than authority figures. These relationships provide challenges to the teachers and administrators at the Early College High School, yet this situation affords the staff an

opportunity to assume roles as authority figures in ways that may be easier because for some students those roles are unfilled. Teachers and administrators in Early College High Schools should be aware of that position of power they hold.

**Research question three.** The third research question turned to student self-perception: *How do students with hybrid subjectivities perceive themselves within a social institution that has designated them as first-generation college students?* The data revealed that students are wrestling with issues of identity as they work to define themselves as students in a unique educational institution where the discourse can often reflect a deficit perspective rather than one of resilience. The metaphor of family serves as a powerful tool in fostering a strong school identity, while at the same time blurring relationship boundaries between teachers and students.

*Multiple subjectivities.* Besides the family discourse they negotiate, students come to the Early College High School with multiple subjectivities. Heretofore, they have been defined by their race, their socio-economic standing, and their ability to conform to institutional expectations regarding their behavior and their schooling. Some students, like Austin, have come to see themselves and their behavior as obstacles to their learning. The socio-economic status of students in the Early College High School is more similar than in the traditional high schools these students would have attended, making that status less of a qualifier. Because the Early College High School population is more diverse than the schools these students came from, the students are exposed to a population who all must negotiate multiple subjectivities. Former distinctions of race and socio-economic status are no longer primary subjectivities at the Early College High School. The student body of the Early College High School is more culturally diverse

than the traditional high schools in this school system that the students would have attended. The faculty at this Early College High School lack any racial or cultural diversity. The small school atmosphere of the Early College High School has encouraged students to feel less like outsiders at school. Additionally they have formed more friendships outside their racial, socio-economic and cultural circles. By crossing these borders and negotiating these subjectivities, students find new possibilities (Lucey et al., 2003). They find that they have more in common with their classmates than they have differences. Race and socio-economic status have become less of an issue at the Early College High School; students have found common identity (Golden et al., 2002) in their potential for college-going and in their common difficulties in reaching that goal.

Many of the students who elect to attend the Early College High School have not successfully met the institutional expectations of traditional schooling. They carry labels with them that impede their academic and social progress. The designations and subjectivities that distinguish these students to others may not be the dominant way in which they see themselves (Orbe, 2004). Gabby did not define herself as a first-generation college student and thought she was being insulted when she was referred to in this way. Some students find coming to the Early College High School as an opportunity to forge a new identity among others with common subjectivities, particularly the desire to go to college when college might not have originally have been part of their personal narratives or life scripts.

*Accommodating and shifting identities.* Because the family narratives of some students are fragmented, unstable, and incoherent, the Early College High School has co-opted and, in some cases, supplanted the family narrative of many students by employing

the metaphor of family to create cohesion and acceptance of the school's discourse about success through higher education. In the absence of other metaphors or discourses that can frame the multiple, sometimes competing, narratives of home, school, and college-going, this metaphor is particularly powerful since it is tied to the close relationship that many of the students are beginning to form with the teachers and administrators of the Early College High School. The metaphor of family has become a means to mobilize students across racial and class lines, a vehicle for class passing. As a surrogate family, the Early College High School has become, for some students, their only means of hope, support, and advocacy related to their educational well-being and their academic futures. This phenomenon runs counter to conventional educational research that indicates that the teacher-student relationship becomes less personal during high school (Harter, Whitesell, & Kowalski, 1992). It should be noted that the data also suggests that by employing the metaphor of family, the teachers in this Early College High School were sometimes blurring the lines of traditional relationships between teacher and student. By supplanting the student's own family, the teachers at the Early College High School may unknowing be minimizing the importance of other family relationships in the students' lives.

*School identity.* At the same time that the Early College High School is causing many of the students to question the family narratives that have previously dominated their thinking, it is simultaneously forging a new identity for students. While these students bring multiple subjectivities to their Early College High School experience, the institutional structure helps students form a new identity as part of the Early College High School through its symbolic school mascot, the wolf. Students readily identify with

becoming part of the “pack” in the Early College High School. During this process of enculturation students shed prior school identities and allegiances connected to their former school districts to form a new identity (Golden et al., 2002) that includes a focus on academics. In his concept of cultural branding, Nadeau (2006) contends that individuals function at a higher rate when they are a part of a community that recognizes itself as a team. Whereas traditional high schools accomplish this sense of community through sports teams and clubs, Early College High Schools must find other ways since many Early College High Schools, this one among them, do not offer these traditional extracurricular activities. Gladwell (2002) found that groups of 150 people or less tend to work together more easily and with greater success, and individuals in those groups tend to be more reliant and devoted to one another. Early College High Schools can accomplish this reliance through a school mascot that smaller subgroups within the school can identify with and accept.

While there are overlapping and competitive narratives present, the school narrative at this Early College High School is the dominate one. Because the school setting represents stability, authority, and advocacy, the Early College High School should guard against drowning out all other narratives. The wide range of options available to students after high school should be available for students to choose. One dominate message from the school narrative was that college will give students a better life. This message needs to be tempered in such a way that it does not demean the lives of those who have been unable to attend college. While college will enhance the lives of these students and place them in a better position to compete in the job market, how the quality of life is defined is a bit more complex than this.

*Student identity.* New assumptions by the community and their peers that they are among the school system's brightest because they attend an Early College High School are difficult for students to reconcile. For those unfamiliar with the initiative, the term Early College High School seems to connote that students are already prepared for college-going. Students find it difficult to explain to their peers and members of the community how they fit into a school whose mission is university attendance when they are typically students under-represented in college. It is also difficult for students to reconcile the potential that others see in them and the arduous path they have ahead of them to achieve a college degree.

At the same time that they are being challenged with the rigors of higher academic expectations, they are still being treated, at times, like the middle school students they were before coming to the Early College High School. Cohort college classes with their high school peers at the community college meant to provide support have prevented students from experiencing authentic college classes. Their high school teachers work with them during seminar time to maintain deadlines for their college courses and to interact with the college instructors through online class discussion forums. Supervised study hall time is provided for students to complete assignments for college classes.

For students to fully integrate their new identity as part of their personal habitus (Walpole, 2003), or to become authors of their life scripts (Pizzolato, 2003), they will need to have more opportunities to be successful in increasingly challenging circumstances and in more independent and autonomous ways (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Ochroch and Dugan (1986) believe that students who are successful believe that they

have control over their lives, like Austin who says, “I can be anything I set my mind to.” For this Early College High School to help other students find the confidence that Austin voiced it may necessitate less monitoring and support from their high school teachers for the college classes in which the students are enrolled allowing greater self-efficacy. Iliana believes she is “ready for college” and expresses frustration at her lack of independence and autonomy. Brittany shares this concern when she asserts that she is “ready for the next step.”

*Resilience.* Overwhelmingly the Early College High School students observed and those whose writing was reviewed in this study reflect a notable strength and resilience. Many of the students voiced concerns similar to Gabby who said, “My life has been hard. I have been through a lot of hardships.” The students’ willingness to forego a traditional high school experience to attend the Early College High School suggests a greater likelihood that they may persevere in college. Murphy and Hicks (2006) report that the high expectations that first-generation college students have for themselves contributes to their success. The high expectations that are implied by their choice to attend the Early College High School, may contribute to the students’ ability to be successful in college, as well. Having dealt with many barriers to success so early in their lives and so early in their academic careers, these students may be better suited to deal with the difficulties that Valadez (1993) and Pascarella et al. (2004) note that first-generation college students face in the transition from high to college. Electing to attend the Early College High School is a bold first step in becoming what Baxter Magolda (2001) refers to as the authors of their own scripts.

Finally, this study has attempted to move the discussion of first-generation college students from a deficit perspective model toward the recognition of the hybrid nature of first-generation identity and has put forth a challenge to educational leaders to appreciate the complex literacies that first-generation college students bring to their college-going experience. The data suggests that the language of deficit is often an unintended, yet powerful, message to students, one that merits attention by those working with students in Early College High Schools. This study reinforced the notion that, like the script of a play, the life narratives of the Early College High School students are “works in progress” (Norris, 2009, p. 61), constantly under revision and review. The extent to which students have been or will be able to become author’s of their own life narratives may not be seen until they leave the Early College High School to continue their education at a college or university.

**Research question four.** The fourth and final research question in this study dealt with the implications of the data for educational leaders in the application of policy and practice within Early College High Schools and other college readiness programs: *How can educational leaders improve the effectiveness of college readiness programs, like the Early College High School, to better serve those under-represented in college?* The analysis of the data related to educational policy and practice for this question served as a useful way for framing the implications from this study that follow.

*Policy implications.* This research study challenges those who work with first-generation college students at all points in their educational journey to rethink the support systems available to students for college readiness, the transition issues that students face

as they move from high school to college, and the persistence of these students once they are in college.

Because the policies that have established and now govern programs like the Early College High School are new, they are naturally subject to revision, challenge, and change. Like researchers Reid and Moore (2008) point out, I have found that there are a limited amount of studies that provide meaningful recommendations to school counselors, teachers, principals, college professors, and policymakers to better prepare these students for success in college.

This research study provides a preliminary contextualized lens through which to consider the policies regarding the implementation of Early College High School programs, particularly those situated on a community college campus. Waivers made available to students in the Early College High that allow some of their high school classes to be replaced with college courses could be made available to other capable students not enrolled in an Early College High School. Funding for smaller schools and resources to lower class size in traditional high school settings could provide greater opportunities for individualized instruction differentiated to meet the needs of students with diverse needs. Smaller schools and smaller classes would also allow teachers and counselors greater opportunity to engage students in college and career counseling. The institutional message could be strengthened through additional opportunities to engage with university students and faculty as do their counterparts at the traditional high school who are a part of the Upward Bound program, a federal college readiness program for low income and first-generation college students who demonstrate an interest and aptitude for college.

Findings from this study suggest that public schools choosing to implement the Early College High School model may best serve students by addressing issues like recruiting students into the program, staffing the high school with the appropriate faculty, building the necessary relationships with the community college or university staff that will be part of the program and insuring that rigor is a part of both high school and college level classes.

Policy implications at the community college level involve training for community college instructors in the developmental differences in the high school students they now teach through the Early College High School program and the community college students they have taught. Finding ways to integrate the Early College High School students into campus life, academic and extracurricular, could be the focus of additional policy at the community college level.

Articulation agreements already exist between public universities and community colleges outlining course credits that will transfer from one institution to the other. This study helped me see the potential benefit of increased discussion around how community colleges and universities could work together to strengthen the preparation of under-represented populations. Programs, like Supporting Academic Goals for Education (SAGE), need to be better utilized to bridge the gap between the community college and university portions of a students' education. SAGE is funded by the US Department of Education and provides support services to increase the retention and graduation rates of first-generation college students and students with disabilities. While a small number of Early College High Schools have been formed on university campuses, more could be

done to connect Early College High School students to universities where they may eventually matriculate.

*Practice implications.* This study has challenged my teaching practice and strengthened my commitment to assist first-generation college students in their transition to college. Those who teach in an Early College High School can be involved in what Goldstein (2001) refers to as critical analysis of their practice to determine how they affect the college-going scripts of the students they have in their classrooms.

Teachers should examine the climate of their classrooms to determine if the levels of support and challenge are appropriate to contribute to a student's success in college. While the teaching protocols espoused by the Early College High School initiative are intended to make students active participants in their education, additional work must be done to prepare students for the academic challenges and the practice they will encounter in college. If students are to become adroit at meeting these challenges, their teachers must model advocacy. Teachers should be encouraged to share their stories about college. By sharing their stories of persistence and success in college, teachers can help students envision possibilities for their own lives.

Because the students in this Early College High School have come to view their teachers as family, it is imperative that teachers seek ways to capitalize on this relationship and utilize it to develop cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986, 1990, 1994). There is already disagreement among researchers over the community college's ability to provide the necessary institutional capital for students to be successful when they transfer to a university (Clark, 1960, 1980; Grubb, 1991; Pascarella et al., 1998; Pascarella & Terrenzini, 2005). The time spent at a community college has been viewed as a cooling

off period for some, a time when their college aspirations may actually be weakened.

Without the additional cultural capital that staff members bring to the Early College High School program, students' aspirations for a college degree may be weakened.

Knowledge of the needs of first-generation college students will help educational leaders who are teaching in Early College High Schools and administrators who are leading them. Knowing the unique characteristics of these learners, viewing these students in ways that honor resilience rather than deficit, and using that knowledge when dealing with course planning, discipline issues, and support programs could prove helpful in implementing effective Early College High School programs.

The staffing of Early College High Schools is perhaps the greatest opportunity for impact on school climate that educational leaders can make. Purposeful hiring of staff who have the dispositions to work with this under-represented population is imperative. Attention to the race, socioeconomic background, and educational history of staff members would be useful to educational leaders wishing to provide models for students to emulate. Because Early College High Schools are small by design, there is no room for teachers who do not support the school's mission or who might become barriers to student success. Sensitivity to contextual factors like family narrative, race, and socioeconomic status might allow educational leaders to see beyond the labels often placed upon these students and capitalize instead on their resilience.

Another tenet of the Early College High School initiative is the advocacy of the Early College High School as a college readiness program. By modeling advocacy of the program, educational leaders could help students become advocates for their own learning, a quality often lacking in those students most under-represented in college.

For middle school students who are unmotivated academically and labeled as at-risk of dropping out of school, the Early College High School represents a second chance. For others who failed to connect to school, the small size of the school naturally assists students in building positive relationships with teachers who will be strong supporters.

**Limitations.** There were some limitations that, if resolved, would have enriched the study. Because this study was a focused ethnography (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004), a more fully realized ethnography over a longer period of time might naturally deepen the conversations around discourse in an Early College High School. Having direct access to students would have provided more authentic data on discourse and subjectivities. Further, the involvement of families in data collection through interviews and home visits would more fully reveal the dynamics of family narratives directly rather than depending on analyzing that narrative through the filter of students and teachers.

Because the Early College High School featured in this case study is only in its third year of operation, it is likely experiencing growing pains that might not appear in an Early College High School that has been in operation longer. Some of the things I observed and noted might naturally be different in a more established program. Throughout the study teachers and administrators voiced concerns that might be attributed to the growing pains of a developing program. Among these were: choosing community college courses comparable or exceeding the rigor of the Early College High School courses, identifying community college instructors best suited to teaching in the Early College High School, and finding the balance of challenge and support that would achieve the most results with students.

**Conceptual Framework.** The conceptual framework for this study provided a scaffold on which the examination of college-going scripts was possible. The concept of personal and cultural schema became a metaphor that not only informed the conceptualization of the research questions but informed methodology, representation of the data and its analysis. The conceptual framework served the study well and would likewise inform further research on college-going scripts and Early College High Schools.

### **Further Research**

This focused ethnographic case study examined the college-going scripts of first-generation college students enrolled in an Early College High School. In addition to further research that the researcher could continue to conduct using the data collected in this study, there are rich opportunities for subsequent study.

**Staffing.** The staffing of Early College High Schools is a practical concern that could be explored beyond this focused ethnographic case study. What are the implications of having the opportunity to staff a school with teachers and administrators whose background and experience might better support the mission of the Early College High School? Further research into how Early College High Schools across the country have capitalized on the strengths of teachers and administrators hired to work in them could yield insight that could assist those implementing this initiative. A quantitative survey of existing Early College High Schools could serve as an initial data collection tool to begin to gather data about deliberate staffing that might benefit new Early College High School programs under development and educational leaders who want to impact

the college readiness of students under-represented in college even in traditional high school settings.

**Professional development.** Additionally, the professional development used to train teachers in particular methodologies of instruction could become the focus of further research, examining ways in which classroom practice might yield the most success for first-generation college students enrolled in an Early College High School program, better preparing them for the rigors of college-level work. While the Early College High School initiative espouses particular pedagogical practices and offers them as essential protocols, no research exists that confirms that these methods are any more effective than others might be, particularly since these collaborative methods may run counter to more didactic teaching strategies that students may encounter later in community college and university classes.

**Collaborative models.** Another area of research implied by this study is the symbiotic relationship of the Early College High School and the community colleges on which they are housed. How can better collaboration and a unified institutional narrative contribute to student success and persistence in college? Because students in the Early College High School program are simultaneously high school and college students, both institutions must be attuned to their needs as hybrid students and find collaborative ways in which to further the school's mission and to a student's ability to persist in college. The lessons learned by education leaders at the high school and community college level related to the operation of Early College High Schools could have implications for the successful transition of students from traditional high schools to college, as well.

**Playbuilding.** Because this study relied more heavily upon the insights of teachers in the Early College High School through interviews and observations, a qualitative study that gives greater attention to student voice would be a natural follow-up. This study established the context for further study by providing insight into the research setting and into the discourses at play there. Additional research might be a fully realized arts-based study that engages the students in the Early College High School in playbuilding (Norris, 2009) around their experience as first-generation college students being prepared for college in an Early College High School. Through playbuilding, data is not collected in traditional ways, but generated through the interaction of researcher and participant (Norris, 2009). Improvisation would be the primary data collection tool, or means of generating data, and would help the researcher to better understand the experiences of the students involved in the study and could be a powerful form of inquiry (Norris, 2009; Rohd, 1998). Throughout the process storytelling would be the source of rich data. As Norris (2009) says, “Stories beget stories, and as conversations unfold there is a flood of information as one person’s account triggers memories in others” (p. 24).

My experience as a first-generation college student, a teacher of theatre, and an advocate for the first-generation college students I teach also leads me to autoethnographic inquiry as a methodology (Conrad, 2003; Ellis & Bochner, 2000) to discover how my story as a researcher is bound to that of my research participants. Further, my ethnographic observations would be channeled into autoethnographic monologues and dialogues that would help me make meaning of my stories as they become entwined with the stories of the first-generation student participants. In this way I would become the “epistemological and ontological nexus upon which the research

process turns” (Spry, 2001, p. 711). Such a study might yield insight into more effective research methods to draw out data from students involved in other educational research that have not been used to this point. An arts-based methodology with this population could serve as a hallmark for effective education research methodology.

**Documentary film.** A longitudinal study (Saldaña, 2003b) following a number of students and their families from acceptance into the Early College High School program to university graduation would also be useful in understanding the subtleties and complexities surrounding first-generation status and college-going. I would be interested in conducting such a qualitative study, particularly using documentary film as a data collection tool (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000). Presenting the data from such a longitudinal study through documentary film would give greater voice to these students and their families and more likely engage a broader audience in learning about this population and this college readiness program.

## Epilogue

*(The lights come up again on the stage. The Researcher, center stage, stands in the light.)*

### **Researcher**

I have lately taken to talking to myself, conversations that have engaged aspects of myself which have lately been rekindled, once quieted where dominant voices prevailed. On this empty stage I now stand joined by manifestations of myself that tie me to the stories of my participants.

*(The lights come up stage right on the Researcher at age 11, violin in hand, struggling to play "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star." He continues to play as the Researcher continues.)*

### **Researcher**

This is me in my first experience on a college campus, Saturday enrichment classes for the academically gifted at a local university. "How I wonder what you are." This early experience on a college campus bridged distinct school and family narratives for me. My father, who didn't have the opportunity to finish high school, not to mention attend college, had been teaching me to play the fiddle and here a university professor exposed me to the basics of the violin. It is possible to bridge these disparate worlds, I began to think.

*(The lights dim on the boy with the violin.)*

### **Researcher**

Later on the same college campus as a ninth grader, I sat in a campus theatre with my high school classmates watching a university theatre production of Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* (Frings, 1958).

*(The lights come up stage left on a young man seated and holding a playbill, rapt in the performance.)*

My plans to attend college were becoming more real to me, but I was discovering resistance in my family, particularly my grandmother.

**offstage voice of grandmother**

Your father can get you a good job at the plant; you don't need to go to college.

**Researcher**

I eventually found resolution with her resistance, seeing it as the same fear that Eliza Gant had when her son, Eugene, boarded the train to go off to college in Pulpit Hill in the play.

*(The lights dim on the young man.)*

**Researcher**

I did go to college, at that same university, in fact, earning both bachelor's and master's degrees there. My career as an English teacher in a rural high school gave me the opportunity to support other students in their transition from high school to college.

*(The lights come up on stage right again where the Researcher as Teacher is reading the poem, "Invictus," to his students.)*

**Researcher**

Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the Horror of the shade,  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll.  
I am the master of my fate:  
I am the captain of my soul (Henley, 1888).

*(The lights dim on the Teacher.)*

### **Researcher**

As a student once again, a doctoral student, I find myself conducting research...first-generation college students...college-going scripts...How do we come to author our own scripts? Am I really the master of my fate, the captain of my soul?

*(The lights come up on stage left revealing the Researcher as Student observing and taking notes in an Early College High School classroom. The voice of the Researcher as Student plays as an internal monologue.)*

### **Researcher as Student**

I know this scene; I have lived it. Do these students fear loss? Do they even anticipate it? Are they excited about the possibilities, fearful? What role models will they have for the lives they might imagine? What barriers will complicate their success? How will their families respond to their aspirations? Will their teachers and principals seek to understand their complicated journey?

*(The lights dim on the Researcher as Student.)*

### **Researcher**

My father's apprehensions about my education were short-lived and became a source of pride. He didn't live to see me earn my doctorate but gently nudged me to the end.

### **offstage father's voice**

When are you going to finish that degree?

### **Researcher**

When will I finish? Are complicated questions of identity ever fully answered, even as degrees are conferred, hopes realized, future possibilities born? Like Hector and Brittany said earlier, my story's not over, but I am ready for the next step.

*(Lights fade to black.)*

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A**

#### **Lay Summary**

I am a graduate student at Appalachian State University (ASU) pursuing a doctorate in Educational Leadership. I have taught English for the past twenty-five years at West Wilkes High School in Millers Creek, NC, where I began teaching after graduating from ASU in the spring of 1985. Having been the first in my family to attend college, I have been particularly interested in the needs of the college bound students that I have taught who will be the first in their families to attend college.

In this qualitative case study, I will explore the contextual factors and discursive literacies that circulate in and around Early College High School programs that shape college-going scripts? I am interested in how school-based narratives about college-going and family-based narratives about college-going interact in an Early College High School particularly for first-generation college students. I am also interested in how students with hybrid subjectivities perceive themselves within a social institution that has designated them as first-generation college students. Participants will have the opportunity to respond to the data I collect and my interpretation of it during the research process.

Throughout the study I will be recording my observations in journal entries and analytical memos. My final product will be a multi-layered account. Subsequently parts of the study may be submitted for publication or presented at academic conferences. The

privacy of participants will be protected throughout by maintaining anonymity of those involved in the study.

## Appendix B

### Interviewee Consent Form

I agree to participate as an interviewee in this research project titled *Exploring the College-Going Scripts of First-Generation College Students Enrolled in an Early College High School*. This case study will explore the contextual factors and discursive literacies that circulate in and around Early College High School programs and examine how students reconcile school-based narratives about college-going and family-based narratives about college-going. This research will take place during the spring and summer of 2011. I understand that my comments will be audio recorded, transcribed and used for a doctoral dissertation to be conducted by James Brooks, a doctoral student at Appalachian State University. The interview(s) will take place at the Wilkes Early College High School at a time agreeable to me when I am free from supervision of students. I understand that there are no foreseeable risks associated with my participation. I also know that this study may contribute to the body of literature related to the Early College High School Initiative and first-generation college students.

I give James Brooks ownership of the tapes and transcripts from the interview(s) he conducts with me and understand that the tapes and transcripts will be kept in the researcher's possession. I understand that information or quotations from the tapes and/or transcripts will be published as part of a doctoral dissertation and that the research may subsequently be published or presented at a conference. I understand I will receive no compensation for the interview.

I understand that the interview is voluntary and I can end it at any time without consequence. I also understand that if I have questions about this research project, I can call Dr. Kelly Clark/Keefe, Dissertation Chair at (828) 262- 7508, contact James Brooks, researcher, at (336) 984-0810 or contact Appalachian State University's Office of Research Protections at (828) 262-7981 or irb@appstate.edu.

I request that my name **not** be used in connection with tapes, transcripts, or publications resulting from this interview.

I request that my name **be used** in connection with tapes, transcripts, or publications resulting from this interview.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Interviewer (printed)  
(printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Interviewee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Interviewer

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Interviewee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date(s) of Interview(s)

## **Appendix C**

### **Teacher Interview Protocol**

Each teacher in the Early College High School willing to participate in the study will be interviewed. The interviews will take place at the Early College High School during each teacher's planning period. The researcher will be available for further dialogue if the participant wishes. The teacher interviews will occur concurrently with the observations so that one activity might naturally inform the other.

1. How do you think students at the Early College High School perceive themselves as learners? To what do you believe those perceptions be attributed?
2. Because the majority of your students come from homes in which neither parent attended college, how does the Early College High School curriculum and programming seek to contribute to students' perceptions of themselves as potential college goers?
3. To what extent are your students meeting the expectations of the Early College High School? Do you believe they will have the skills to be successful in college?
4. Describe any situations with students that illustrate their emerging self-perception as potential college students.

5. How would you change the Early College High School curriculum or programming to improve college-going opportunities for students who are generally under-represented in college?
  
6. What are the barriers that complicate your students' success? How does the Early College High School seek to assist students in dealing with those barriers?
  
7. What have you observed about the relationship of family and the students' perceptions of themselves as college-goers? What do they hear about college-going from home?
  
8. People are often viewed in many different ways by different people. What labels have your students been given and what effect do you think those labels have had on their self-perception?

## **Appendix D**

### **Principal Interview Protocol**

There will be on-going informal conversations between the researcher and the principal throughout the study. These questions will be used to interview the principal in a more formal structured interview. The principal interview will take place before the site observations and parent and teacher interviews to provide context for those research activities.

1. How would you describe the Early College High School?
2. How is the Early College High School different from a traditional high school?
3. What is unique in the design of this Early College High School?
4. Describe the recruitment and admissions process for this Early College High School.
5. Describe how the partnership works between the local school system and the community college.
6. Describe any support systems that are in place to develop academic and social skills that would benefit students as college goers.

7. In what ways do you and this school advocate for the Early College High School model of instruction?
  
8. What are the barriers to your students' success? How does the Early College High School seek to assist students in dealing with those barriers?
  
9. We are often viewed in many different ways by different people. What labels have your students been given and what effect do you think those labels have had on their self-perception?

## Appendix E

### Observation Protocol

Date:	Time:
Description of setting:	Participants:
Descriptive Notes	Observer Comments/Analytical Notes

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

James Anthony Brooks first attended Appalachian State University as an elementary student enrolled in an enrichment program for the academically gifted. He received his Bachelor of Science degree in English Education at Appalachian State in 1985, his Master of Arts in Leadership and Higher Education with a concentration in teaching English in 1997, and his Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership in 2011.

James has taught English at West Wilkes High School for the past twenty six years. He is a National Board Certified Teacher in Adolescent and Young Adult English Language Arts. He has been the recipient of numerous national, state, and regional awards for teaching.