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A Phenomenological Study of GED Graduates Meeting College Readiness Standards at a Community College

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Walden University

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Walden University

College of Education

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Kelley Jones

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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2015

Abstract

A Phenomenological Study of GED Graduates Meeting College Readiness

Requirements at a Community College

by

Kelley M. Jones

MA, Alabama A&M University, 2004

BS, Athens State University, 1999

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Higher Education

Walden University

November 2015

Abstract

This qualitative study was designed to understand the experiences of General Educational Development (GED) graduates enrolling into a community college. Research had not been conducted to explore the experiences of GED graduates completing the 2014 version of the exam and transitioning to college. Guided by Schlossberg's college transition theory and Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, this phenomenological study included 11 participants who described their experiences through written narratives and interviews. Participants described their experiences of being an adult education student while preparing for the exam, the steps within the GED test preparation they considered important to matriculation toward college enrollment, and their points of view of the enrollment experience into a community college. Data analysis included analytic induction and participatory analyses for discovering patterns and clarification of statements made by the participants. Narratives, interviews, and field notes were transcribed, member checked, and reviewed for interaction, continuity, and situation prior to coding. The realization of motivation, determination, and self-efficacy, established around supporting relationships assembled during the transition to college, were common experiences among these participants. A deeper understanding of these factors for adults matriculating through GED and into college hopefully instills awareness and sparks discussion for improvements in educational support services.

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Dedication

It is to God and His blessings of husband and family that I dedicate this dissertation.

Acknowledgments

Through this journey called life there has been an everlasting promise that God made, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5). This promise was first given to Moses who was facing a tremendous task of bringing the Hebrew people out of slavery. Moses was afraid and God spoke to him to not be afraid for he would not be alone, “I will be with you, I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Deuteronomy 31:6-8). He later told Joshua, “as I was with Moses, so I will be with you” (Joshua 1:5). I am not a Moses or Joshua by any means, but I do know the same God they served and I believe His promises are true today. He has brought me to this point and I have no doubt He was with me all the way and will continue to remain with me forever. I thank Him for this opportunity to serve.

God’s blessings come in many forms including family. One of those who helped me most through this journey was my strong, faithful, and loving husband. He was a huge encouragement. Thank you Mighty Man! My parents, kids, and grandchild were the continuous reminders to keep moving forward. Thank you for your love and support, I am very grateful and blessed to have each one of you.

It was absolutely no accident that the dissertation committee was made up of such dedicated professionals. Thank you to my dissertation chair, Dr. Myron Pope; my methodologist, Dr. Kurt Schoch; and the URR, Dr. Kathleen Foley-Peres and later replaced by Dr. Andrew Thomas for your patience, guidance, and encouragement. I truly feel honored to be working with each of you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The aim of a college education just may be among the initial thoughts many parents have for their children. However, since the birth of public education some of those children do not complete school for various reasons. As adults, non-completers may choose to return to school to gain literacy, a General Educational Development (GED) diploma, or a high school diploma. In choosing to start the challenge, these adults take a tremendous leap of faith. Overcoming obstacles to achieve personal goals takes a great deal of determination and commitment (Tuckett & Aldridge, 2011; Ziegler, Bain, Bell, McCallum, & Brian, 2002).

Education for returning adults should be accessible, relevant, and supportive. It is most likely that those returning are competing with high school graduates for employment. The high school graduate may not be facing the same barriers as the adult dealing with such things as family responsibilities, full time employment, and financial obligations (Witte, 1997; Zafft, Kallenbach, & Spohn, 2006). An adult seeking to improve employability through academic gain has the option of attending an adult education program in order to prepare for the GED exam.

In January 2014, the GED exam changed in that the academic difficulty increased and the delivery format went from paper/pencil to computer based. Employers requested GED graduates be college ready (GED Testing Service [GEDTS], 2013; Office of Vocational and Adult Education [OVAE], 2014) and in turn GED Testing Services responded with a revised exam. Adults, who were participating in the adult education program classes as this change occurred, experienced a change in preparation from the

2002 GED version of the exam to the 2014 GED version. The exam preparation now includes College and Career Readiness Standards (Pimentel, 2013) which are aligned with entry level college courses. These standards were recognized from the original Common Core Standards (2010) as related to skills that must be met in order to enter college or workforce training with the ability to succeed. The 2014 GED Exam version measures academic skill level in the areas of reading and language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies.

In comparison to high school completers, the 2014 GED graduate was required to demonstrate academic equivalency to that of a 12th grader plus nine additional months of academic skills (GEDTS, 2014). An adult returning to education after more than 4 or 5 years away would not have received the Common Core or College Readiness instruction provided to current high school completers. Preparation for the new exam may be considerably different than for previous GED graduates.

Adults completing the GED have an option to continue education. It is encouraged as employers offering higher wages demand skilled employees. Community colleges provide the accessibility for most of these adults who need to keep cost down, stay near home, and finish quickly due to current situations and obligations. It is then expected that community colleges have a number of students who have completed the GED and have either completed a certificate program or degree (Cohen, 2003).

Another expectation would be that a significant number of studies related to the GED student transition into college would be available. Few studies exist that provide insight to the lived experiences of GED graduates enrolling into a community college

(Canfield, 2013; Carpenter, 2011). Due to the promptness of this study, a previous qualitative study has not been conducted to better understand the transition of GED graduates completing the 2014 version of the exam and enrolling into a community college.

Background

The GED test was first developed in 1942 by the Department of Defense in cooperation with the American Council on Education. It was only available to the military services. In 1947, New York opened the test up to civilians. During World War II, three hundred thousand illiterate men were inducted into the United States Army and given a ninety day education to bring their skills to at least a fourth grade level. The methods, materials, and diagnostic techniques developed during this project were adopted by civilian education program throughout the United States. (Eyre & Pawloski, 2014). These versions of the exam measured academic skill level in the areas of reading, language and writing, mathematics, science, and social studies.

A high school diploma or a GED does not provide or guarantee an income above the poverty level in the current economy:

The fastest growing jobs in the country demand some education past high school. In fact, most employers report that a high school diploma is not sufficient preparation for working in their companies. In order to progress beyond entry level and low paying positions most employees will need to obtain postsecondary education or training at some point in their working life. (Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education [MBAE], 2006, p. 6).

Tuckett and Aldridge (2011) specified the economic impact of low wages on adult learners. The lower income has a direct impact on the decision to return for a GED or enroll into college for the first time:

One third of current and recent learners (34%) report this as the first learning they have done since leaving school. More than a quarter (29%) is returning to learning after more than three years. Nearly three quarters (73%) of current or recent learners said that they had done this for work or career reasons, including more than 80% of respondents aged 17-54. Over 80 percent of those aged 65 and over are learning for personal and leisure interest. (Tuckett & Aldridge, 2011, p. 11)

An adult returning or entering college for the first time may be seeking a higher education to meet personal career goals. However, with additional responsibilities such as financial commitments, dependents, or outside responsibilities the question is can the adult learner balance these responsibilities and learning? A report, published in 2013, where prospective adult students were interviewed found that a driving concern among the participants was affordability and making it work within an already busy life (Hagelskamp, Schleifer, & DiStasi, 2013).

In the United States, community colleges provide the most accessible avenue to higher education, particularly for those individuals who may be labeled at-risk, disadvantaged, or underprepared (Cohen, 2003; Joost, 2007). Few studies exist to establish whether GED recipients' transition successfully or complete community college. An individual working on academics in order to pass the GED exam would

typically benefit from specific education materials, self-paced learning, one-on-one assistance, or even grade level appropriate instruction (George-Ezzele, Zhang, & Douglas, 2006; Quigley, 2000). As the individual completes the GED and moves into college, those educational formats may be difficult to find and leave the individual struggling to be successful in college.

GED graduates who successfully transition into a community college and complete a degree have the potential to earn higher wages. The United States Department of Education reported the average earning for an individual with an associate degree could be \$15,000 to \$20,000 per year higher than that of a high school dropout. The diversity of training available within community colleges relates to the industrial standards within employable market areas (NCES, 2014).

Problem Statement

The GED test underwent a tremendous change in 2014. The equivalent grade level for the exam moved up to 12.9 from a prior 10.9. The test is now a computer-based exam, and the content standard increased the level of higher order thinking skills necessary to pass. The test is also to render two scores -- a pass/fail score and a college readiness score. The increase in performance level was established as a means to measure the level of academic skills the GED graduates should obtain in order to expedite employability (GEDTS, 2014).

Few studies exist that share the experience of the GED graduate moving into college based upon prior versions of the test (America's Promise Alliance, 2014; Hanover Research, 2014), in fact:

Postsecondary research has been conducted on retention, access, graduation and transfer within the community college setting; however, little information has been garnered from particular student populations. Although race, ethnicity, and gender have been increasing as the basis for research in higher education, little has been done to understand the unique population of the adult learner who has acquired a GED and desires to continue in higher education. (Carpenter, 2011, p. 41)

At this time, research has not been conducted to provide the experiences of the GED graduate completing the 2014 version of the exam and transitioning to college. The 2014 version of the exam contains objectives from the College and Career Readiness standards (CCR). Those standards are equivalent to an academic grade level of 12 plus nine months (12.9). An individual taking the new GED exam would receive a score in each academic area: mathematics, reading and language arts, science, and social studies. A score of 150 in each area would indicate the individual had successfully passed each area of the exam. However, for those individuals who receive a score of 170 or above in any of the four areas, a second indication will be made in the result report indicating the individual is college ready.

The participants of this study were asked to share their experience of GED completion and college enrollment. The narratives and interviews of individuals provided insight into the educational journey from the individual's points of view. Those participating may or may not have met the CCR level score of 170 or above in each area;

therefore, it will be interesting to see how the differences in scores impacted matriculation to college and placement into college level courses.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to provide a better understanding of the lived experiences of GED graduates passing the 2014 version of the GED exam and enrolling into a community college. The perception of these students regarding the transition is synonymous to understanding the needs, visions, goals, and success of those who navigated the transition. The students most likely to complete college have characteristics that include having a successful high school experience, coming from higher income families, having one or more parents who completed college, attending college immediately after high school, attending college full time, and having few responsibilities outside of college (Adelman, 1999, 2003; Bailey, Alfonso, Scott, & Leinback, 2005; Cabrera, Burkum, & LaNasa, 2005). Most of these characteristics do not describe the GED graduate (America's Promise Alliance, 2014; Hanover Research, 2014). In order to understand the experience of the GED student completing the 2014 version of the exam, it is essential to gain an understanding from the most straightforward standpoint. I interviewed GED participants and critically analyzed their lived experiences to provide this vital information.

Research Questions

The following research questions were explored:

1. What was the experience of the adult education student while preparing for the 2014 version of the GED exam?

2. What steps within the GED test preparation did recipients express as important to their matriculation toward college enrollment?
3. What is the GED recipients' point of view of the enrollment experience into a community college?

Theoretical Foundation/Conceptual Framework

The educational process of the participants' journey from high school stop out to GED and then to college enrollment can draw on theories from many disciplines, including psychology, economics, and education. A qualitative research study has the challenge of interpreting the experiences of research participants from personal stories and then determining if there are existing theories to support or explain the behavioral phenomenon (Stein & Mankowski, 2004). The conceptual framework from this study relied upon the educational processes of college transition theory and self-efficacy theory.

College transition theory, or transition theory, according to Schlossberg (2011) attempts to explain the complexity of a student's hope to enroll into college. The process involves longitudinal and interactive experiences intertwined with an individual's goals and accomplishments, learning opportunities, and intervention programs. The GED recipient's transition into college has been the topic of very few research studies. Therefore, the college transition theory as it pertains to the traditional student progressing from high school to college was the closest comparative available.

Self-efficacy theory began with Bandura's 1977 research and has been tested in many disciplines and fields of study. Self-efficacy is defined as the personal confidence that individuals have in their ability to exercise influence over events that have bearing on

their lives (Bandura, 1977). People will want to engage in tasks in which they feel the most confident or competent and avoid those in which they do not. This theory helped explain the particular judgments the participants have made during their educational journey.

Nature of the Study

Through this study, I sought an understanding of how the GED graduate perceived his or her own experiences of transition from stopping out of high school to enrolling into college provides the material in which to derive informative philosophical interpretations. I critically analyzed those interpretations that then rendered supported findings and recommendations to contribute to the educational profession's work with GED students.

After IRB approval, the participants were selected from GED graduates in the state of interest who have enrolled into a community college. A letter of invitation was mailed to each graduate with anticipation of participants that will meet the qualifications and commitment to complete the study. Qualifications included: not completing high school, successfully completing the 2014 version of the GED exam, successfully completing the initial college enrollment process which includes placement, and availability to complete the interview process.

An initial telephone conversation was conducted to introduce the participant to the study and establish an interview date. The participants were asked to bring a written story of their journey to college enrollment to the interview. I conducted the interview in an informal atmosphere at a local community college which they attend. Digital

recording was used so that I could observe and record participant reactions. The digital recording of each participant was transcribed, coded, and analyzed to find similarities, themes, and unique attributes. The transcriptions were shared with the participants, and their response to the transcription was recorded during a follow up interview by phone. It was my intention for the sharing of the transcription and member checking with the participant to bring enlightenment and create awareness for the individual of his or her own unique abilities and accomplishments. Member checking is a process in which the participant reviews their own transcription to ensure the validity of the transcript.

Definition of Terms

Adult education: The federal and state funded program that provides classes for basic academic skills, GED preparation, and English as a second language. The programs emphasize skills such as reading, writing, mathematics, English, language competency, basic computer skills, and problem solving (OVAE, 2013).

Adult learner: Someone who generally is 25 years or older, and has additional responsibilities such as family, career, military, or community, and is seeking a degree or other educational certification (University College, 2012).

College Career Readiness Standards: These standards outline the knowledge and skills that are to be mastered in order for a student to demonstrate readiness to enter college or a career (Pimentel, 2013).

GED: An acronym for General Educational Development. The GED is an exam with objectives in alignment with high school academic standards. Therefore, an individual who passes the GED has demonstrated the same knowledge and skill level of a high school graduate (GEDTS, 2014).

Stop out: To leave an educational institution for a period of time. Another common term is *drop out* (NCES, 2014).

Assumptions

Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was provided; therefore, it was assumed that each participant responded truthfully to the interview questions. Another assumption is that combining the request of an interview with that of written story of the participants' educational journey rendered a more insightful response.

The reality constructed by individuals interrelating with their social world needs a validity evaluation (Merriam, 2009). To further explain, meaning is embedded in a person's experiences, and meaning can be reconciled through the researcher's own discernments. Creswell (2013) indicated that the nature of reality can be different from individual to individual. The qualitative researcher is to understand that reality is what the individual believes that it is. Therefore, each individual interviewed may present their own version of reality as experienced from a particular phenomenon rendering multiple realities for the researcher to analyze.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study is the clarification of challenges in the transition from GED graduate to enrollment into a community college. The delimited population within

this study was those who complete the 2014 version of the GED exam and gained enrollment status in a community college despite their age, gender, race, or learning exceptionality. The study investigated the lived experiences of each participant. Interview questions were posed to encourage the retelling of personal experiences and thoughts in relation to the transition process and self-efficacy.

Limitations

The research for this study is directed toward a specific population experiencing a specific phenomenon that occurred recently; therefore, the replication of this study could be accomplished. However, as time passes the experiences may or may not be the same, due to updates in the GED preparation classes in response to the new exam.

The population of participants that were invited to participate was limited to one state. The experiences of participants may differ in other regions of the nation.

Adult learners differ in personal life circumstances and prior educational experiences which impacts the transition from GED to college enrollment. The uniqueness of the participants in this study would not be easily replicated.

Significance

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to provide a better understanding of the lived experiences of GED graduates passing the 2014 version of the exam and enrolling into a community college. Returning and continued education for high school drop outs can be sporadic. Adults eligible to enroll into adult education programs to gain a GED often fail to enroll or complete this first milestone. Hanover Research (2014) reported the most commonly cited explanation for this trend was the

difficulty of balancing the responsibilities of a busy work and family schedule with the commitment to study time required to make educational progress.

In contrast, adult learners choosing to return to improve educational status often do so to improve economic status. When the student succeeds by gaining a GED and either an associate degree or certificate in a marketable skill, the opportunities for employment significantly increase. Therefore, the ability to move into a qualified workforce becomes a reality for that individual. A recent publication from Hanover Research (2014) describes the link between adult education and the workforce:

Adult education is driven by the needs of the workforce. The ability to find a better job is one of the primary motivators for students who enroll in adult education. Furthermore, developing a qualified workforce is also important to states and local employers. For that reason, a considerable number of institutions offering adult education work to connect their program to specific employment aim. (Hanover Research, 2014, p. 4)

Chapter 2 is a literature review that further explains previous research related to adults returning to basic education and college. The theories, methodology, and findings established by peer reviewed research build the foundation for this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

A nationwide change occurred as of January 2014, the recognized GED Exam used as the indicator for high school equivalency completion was purchased by a for-profit vendor. GEDTS continued to be the exam originator with the for-profit vendor acting as the delivery system for the computer based exam (GEDTS, 2014). Other vendors developed other versions of the high school equivalency diploma and marketed those versions to each state as well. Governing agencies of the GED Exam delivery and reporting within each state made a decision as to which test to offer as the official high school equivalency exam. The choice varies by state; however, the majority of states at the current time chose the 2014 GED Exam and this exam will be the reference for this study (OVAE, 2014).

The equivalent grade level for the new exam moved up to 12.9. The test is now a computer-based exam and the content standard increased the level of higher order thinking skills necessary to pass. The test also renders two scores: a pass/fail score and a college readiness score. The increase in performance level and score changes was promoted as a standard to produce college and career ready GED graduates as a strategy to expedite the level of employability (GEDTS, 2014). As I mentioned in Chapter 1, the standards for entry level employment is at a higher academic and technical skill level. A comparison of postsecondary admission rates of the GED recipients for the previous 2002 version of the exam and the 2014 version entering college has not been conducted.

At this time, research has not been conducted to provide the experiences of the 2014 GED graduate transitioning to college. Few researchers have shared the experience

of the GED graduate taking previous versions of the exam and moving into college (America's Promise Alliance, 2014; Hanover Research, 2014). A comment from the report "Don't Call Them Dropouts," is as follows:

While a high school diploma is only a starting line for adult success, it has become increasingly clear that it is crucial for taking the next step in college and career...what has been missing from much of the recent research is, however, is a vibrant portrait of people's experience.

(America's Promise Alliance, 2014, p. 7)

The participants of this study were asked to share their experience of completing the GED and college enrollment. The narratives and interviews of individuals provide insight of the educational journey from their points of view.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to provide a better understanding of the lived experiences of GED graduates passing the 2014 version of the exam and enrolling into a community college. Research indicates that the students most likely to complete college have characteristics that include having a successful high school experience, coming from higher income families, having one or more parents who completed college, attending college immediately after high school, attending college full time, and having little responsibilities outside of college (Adelman, 1999, 2003; Bailey, Alfonso, Scott, & Leinback, 2005; Cabrera, Burkum, & LaNasa, 2005). Most of these characteristics do not describe the GED graduate (America's Promise Alliance, 2014; Hanover Research, 2014). In order to understand the experience of the GED student, it is essential to gain an understanding from the most straightforward standpoint. I

interviewing and critically analyzed the lived experiences of individuals to provide this vital information.

Chapter 2 includes a review of the literature and confirms the small amount of research conducted in respect to GED graduates' college enrollment experiences. The search of a variety of databases and search engines was used to gather supporting literature. A conceptual framework is also provided to support the preliminary concepts of this research.

Literature Search Strategy

Databases used to conduct the literature search included Academic Search Premier, COABE Journal Archives EBSCO, ERIC, Educational Database, Digital Repositories, ProQuest, SAGE Collections, Walden University Database and Library, and the Wallace State Community College Library. Sources from the Internet included web pages of peer reviewed educational research organizations or agencies such as Alabama Community College System, Alabama Adult Education and Family Literacy Program, Alabama Department of Education, Alabama Department of Labor, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness at Columbia University Teacher College, GED Testing Service, National Reporting System, United States Department of Education, and the United States Department of Labor.

The keywords, acronyms, and phrases used in combination or alone to obtain the literature included *admissions, assessments for college placement, assessments for adult learner basic skills, adult learner, adult learner persistence, adult education, attitudinal barriers, acceleration of adult education, barriers, college enrollment, college readiness,*

college education, college and career readiness, college enrollment assessments, college admissions, completion rates for adult education students, completion rates for adult education enrolled into college, developmental education, dispositional barriers, early identification of at risk learners, education for adult learners, educational paths, educational trends for GED graduates, emotional barriers to learning, financial aid for GED graduates, first generation college students, GED, GED Exam objectives, GED student, history of GED exam, history of adult education, institutional barriers, interview strategies, low-income college student, measurement of adult learner progression, national reporting system levels in relation to adult education and college placement, persistence in relation to education, phenomenological research, remediation courses at the college level, self-efficacy, situational barriers, and transitional courses.

Theoretical Foundation

The conceptual framework for this study will rely upon the educational processes of college transition theory and self-efficacy theory. College transition theory, or transition theory, according to Schlossberg (2011), attempts to explain the complexity of a student's hope to enroll into college. Self-efficacy is defined as the personal confidence that individuals have in their ability to exercise influence over events that have bearing on their lives (Bandura, 1977). People will want to engage in tasks in which they feel the most confident or competent and avoid those in which they do not. This theory will help to explain the particular judgments the participants have made during their educational journey.

Schlossberg's transition model is based upon her fascination with transition in the event of geographical moves and changes related to work environment or responsibilities. She indicates three types of transitions: anticipated, unanticipated, and nonevent transitions. Anticipated transitions include major life events that are usually expected such as graduation, marriage, starting a new job, or retirement. Unanticipated transitions are those that may disrupt our lives such as a major surgery, a debilitating accident, a surprise promotion, or dismissal. Nonevent transitions are expected events that fail to occur such as not getting married, not getting the job, or not being able to afford retirement (Schlossberg, 2011). Transition to college can be a sudden change the student may not be prepared to undertake as described by Schlossberg here:

The way each transition alters an individual's relationships, routines, responsibilities, and even financial stability makes the process of transition a critical point. Transitioning takes time. Too often, an adult transitioning into college will not have enough time to process all the changes as they occur quickly upon arrival as a college student. Identifying the resources that the student can apply to make the transition a success is just as important as identifying where they are in the transition process and how much their life has been altered. (Schlossberg, 2011, p. 160)

Schlossberg's four "s" system is part of the transition model and is designed to help identify how successful an individual will be with transitions. Situation, self, supports, and strategies are the four s's within the system. A person's *situation* at the time of transition plays a major role in the ability to cope with the changes. An example of this

would be a single mom being offered a job out of town that would require her to relocate or to commute a long distance each day. Considerations are the ages of the children or child, daycare cost in the new location or quality of school system for school age children, and safety of the new location if relocation is the decision. The stress of the current life situation may render this transition to a new job as a more overwhelming event than if the job offer had been local.

A person's strength for coping with situations is the *self* of the transition system. Optimism, resilience, and the ability to find and use supporting resources can become the tools within each person that determines success during transition. A positive attitude followed up with words of encouragement from a teacher, coworker, spouse, or friend feeds the strength of that person trying to cope with transition. *Supports* make up that third s within the system and play a critical role in the well-being of the person in the midst of the transition. Support is not just derived from positive relationships which can lend encouragement, but also from support services and financial assistance. College students navigating through the financial aid process, enrollment, registration, and tutoring opportunities require the support of the student services department.

Strategy is the fourth s in the transition system referring to coping techniques. Some try to change the situation by brainstorming or taking action. Another strategy would be to reframe the situation by trying to see positive opportunities that have resulted from the changes. Yet another coping strategy is the reduction of stress through exercise or faith practices. The ability to be flexible and use several strategies has proven to be the key to the ability to cope with the transition (Schlossberg, 2011).

Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory refers to the individual belief concerning capabilities to learn or perform behaviors and sometimes change according to the level of difficulty of the task. Bandura's early research considered the behavior of individuals with the fear of snakes and their level of confidence when asked to look at, touch, or pick up a live snake in captivity (Bandura, 1977). Even though the individual understood or observed how to perform the task, the level of fear or anxiety trumped their ability to perform. Those who would not push past the fear were considered by Bandura to have low self-efficacy. Schunk (1989) argued that some school activities involve performance of learned behaviors, but much time is spent acquiring knowledge, skills, and strategies in order to perform as the level expected. Schunk's research attempted to distinguish between self-efficacy operations in settings involving learning and those requiring performance of previous learned behaviors. He found that during the teaching and learning process within a knowledge or skill area, the reinforcement of awareness of progression promotes the students' self-efficacy (Schunk, 1989). Teachers and software that provided feedback to let the student know when they had successfully completed a level or a task led to a stronger retention level and eagerness from the student to move to the next lesson.

Schunk (1989) indicated when appraising efficacy that learners weigh and combine such factors as perceptions of their ability, difficulty of the task, effort extended, external assistance received, number and pattern of successes and failure, perceived similarity to models, and persuader credibility. When students watch their peers perform

a task with success there is an opportunity for an internal measurement of efficacy, “if she/he can do it, I can too.”

One thought shared by Bandura (1977) pertaining to self-efficacy in relation to learning is that a sense of self-efficacy is valuable for motivation to learn and improve cognitive skills. Students differ in ability, cognitive skills, and attitude despite the level of instruction on any given day in the college classroom. The likeliness of a student to participate or even lead a learning activity may heavily depend upon their level of self-efficacy pertaining to task required to complete the activity. A student with low self-efficacy may be reserved and watch other students work through the activity before attempting it themselves. High self-efficacy students would probably be found jumping into the activity. Bandura made no mention of learning in relation to self-efficacy; however, his research in relation to performance is more suitable for this study. An adult moving from high school dropout, to obtaining a GED, and enrolling into college is pushing through each phase based upon the example of others. The examples set by their peers hopefully build a sense of capability and self-efficacy.

Adult learners face decisions and barriers in order to complete an academic degree. The decisions to begin a new learning program, then continue the program to make academic gain, and finally to continue learning--are all part of the journey. Barriers exist all along the educational path. Throughout the 23 years of working in the field of education, I have formed a personal motto pertaining to the opportunities for educational growth vs. the populations that take advantage of those opportunities. That motto is “education may be the key to opportunities and growth, but few unlock the door.”

The Institute for Higher Education Policy conducted a study to review college access opportunities for America's working poor (Davis & McSwain, 2007). The resolution for that study was based upon the following summary statement:

In our society, the greatest individual rewards – higher pay, more leisure time, better health, and an overall good quality of life – most often go to those who have received a college education. As a nation, we gain perhaps even more from that college education because of civic benefits such as higher rates of voting and volunteering, increased workforce productivity, and higher taxes contributed by college educated citizens. It is essential; therefore, that the working poor have the same opportunities to enter and complete as do other populations. (Davis & McSwain, 2007, p.7)

Considering this statement to be true, a deeper look at the obstacles that deter a college education is applicable. The college student population is made up of adults, either young, ages 18 to 24, or mature, ages 25 and above (Greenburg et al. 2012). An entire demographic smorgasbord of variables exists within this population. Walniak, Mayhew, and Engberg (2012) shared that across most studies of college persistence, students' precollege academic performance is a consistent and salient factor of college success. This literature review identifies the adult learner participating in adult education programs, discusses barriers for the adult learner, shares previous research related to adult learner persistence, and provides current trends in college enrollment for GED graduates.

Identifying the Adult Learner Participating in Adult Education

According to Comings (2007), adult students returning to education to complete a GED *choose* to participate in educational programs. This indicates that an adult has an active part to play in the decision of whether or not to further their education. American children are usually part of a regimented path from early childhood into their teens that guides them from one grade level to the next toward graduation. However, some teens choose to *stop out* of that regiment due to a variety of circumstances (Cross, 1982).

The adult learner population has been referred to as a challenged population (Greenburg, 2012). Challenged, as a term pertaining to an individual, indicates one who faces a number of barriers to moving forward in a direction of choice. Quigley (1997) identified the at-risk adult learner as, “The common characteristics within our learner population, the one that distinguishes it from the other populations in the educational spectrum, in that most of our students dropped out of school. Furthermore, most did so under unhappy circumstances.” (Quigley, 1997, p.2)

America’s Promise Alliance’s (2014) research report indicated that interrupted enrollment of high school resulted from instability in the young person’s life. Of those who stopped out of high school during the 2012-13 school year, the highest percentage were homeless, moved homes multiple times, changed schools multiple times, had one or more parents incarcerated, or were in foster care. This was not always the case; however, these life situations were indicated by the majority of the participants in the study of over 200 drop outs across the United States (America’s Promise Alliance, 2014).

As this high school dropout population ages, a conglomeration of working poor, non-working poor, and working non-poor emerges (Comings, J., Parrella, A., & Soricone.L., 2007). For the working poor and working non-poor, internal factors such as resilience, self-efficacy, and attitude toward school can deter progression toward a higher education (Comings, J., Parrella, A., & Soricone.L., 2007; Zeigler et al. 2002). Within all three categories external factors such as financial aid, family commitments, relationships, work load, transportation, lack of time, and outside responsibilities can hamper the decision to move forward.

Once a GED is obtained, the recipient has the choice of moving further in his/her education. College enrollment and/or job training are among those choices. Those who choose to go further along the college enrollment path are the focus of this study

Adult Learner Persistence

Who will stay and who will go was the focus of a study conducted by Greenburg et al. (2012). The study indicated the ability to determine who will stay as the measurement of persistence. Comings' definition of persistence was similar indicating that persistence can be comprised of two parts: intensity, being the hours of instruction vs. duration, as the amount of engagement in the instruction (Comings, 2007).

Comings (2007) and colleagues proposed the term persistence because adults can persist in learning through self-study or distance education when they stop attending program services, and sometimes return (although not necessarily the same one they dropped out of) to a program after a lapse in attendance.

Persistence is the continuous learning process that lasts until an adult student meets his or her education goals. Bandura (1977) points out increased persistence when the student recognized accomplishments at consistent intervals along the educational journey. In other words, self-efficacy built persistence. Comings (2007) indicates that persistence has a start and a stop while Quigley (1997) and Tinto (1975) did not indicate that as part of their research. Quigley stated that we need to go beyond participation theory and find a way to understand what our learners actually experience during the first three critical *dropout weeks*. His study defined these first few weeks of enrollment as the best time to measure predictors of who will stay and who will go.

The purpose of comparing theories of student persistence for both adult education and first year college students is to establish a relationship between the persistence required for success as an adult education student proceeds to college enrollment and beyond. According to McGillin (2003) no matter the at-risk category or level of education, students' ability to cope, or their *resiliency*, is the best barometer for success. Comings (1999) does not agree that the two levels of education can be compared in terms of persistence. He saw adult education as an intense curriculum that rendered the academic gain of one grade level within a few hundred hours of instruction. The high school equivalent of a full year of instruction or the college course credit or non-credit course focusing on one subject for a full semester was no comparison in his opinion. Despite the differences, they all agree that persistence is a factor among adult learners.

According to Tinto's address to the 1987 Fall Conference of the Maryland College Personnel Association, he reported that without assistance or encouragement, the

adult learner leaves not because they are unable to meet the demands of college enrollment, but because they have not been able to cope with the problems of making the transition to college. They often leave without giving themselves a chance to succeed. Difficulties arise when individual goals go unresolved over long periods of time. This lack of resolution or assistance to gain clarity undermines the student's ability to make decisions. Customarily this leads to stress and the inability to cope, which then leads to the student departure from education rather than persisting.

In further contrast, Beder (1991, p. 72) stated, "When motivation is strong, adults can be expected to overcome the barriers to participation that life imposes." Greenburg's study (2013) turned the focus from the obstacles to developing an understanding of the profiles of individuals who persist. In his words, *Who will stay and who will go* can be determined by age at enrollment, gender, English as a second language status, reading comprehension, previous participation, self-rating of reading habits, past or present receipt of WIC benefits, and two assessment results. This rather cumbersome and lengthy list of variables rendered findings that older adults persist longer in adult basic education classes than do their younger counterparts.

Cross (1982) and Beder (1991) attempted to separate the adult education students into two groups of participants and non-participants. Beder (1991) stated that participants are assumed to be *motivated* and non-participants are assumed to be *unmotivated*. Students who remained in a program until goals were obtained were considered persistent. Students who left the program by choice or due to unfavorable circumstances were measured as drop outs and non-persistent.

Ziegler, Bain, Bell, McCallum, and Brian (2002) indicated four dispositional barriers weigh heavily upon the adult learner when processing the decision of whether to stay or go. Those variables are attitudes toward school, self-efficacy, resilience, and attribution. Attitude toward school reflects a personal perspective of experiences positive or negative related to previous school participation or lack of participation. Self-efficacy is the belief in an individual ability to complete a task. Resilience was defined as the ability to cope with adversity and stress in order to complete a goal. Finally, attribution is the belief in the cause of success or failure.

Barriers to Continuing Education

Life events affect persistence in multifaceted ways. Cross (1982) suggested that adult learners must overcome three types of barriers in order to begin and remain in classes: situational, institutional, and dispositional. Situational barriers pertain to a status in life such as finance, family responsibility, work load, transportation, lack of time to study, and health. Institutional barriers include policies established by schools or programs that hinder enrollment or continuation of a student's education. Dispositional barriers address attitudes, personal values, and perceptions. Quigley took the same three barrier types into his study to determine which had the greatest bearing on a student's ability to remain in an adult education program. "Our learners often carry into our programs mixed emotions, many of which are negative, born of past schooling experiences. These may take up more space in their dispositional baggage than we usually want to acknowledge or are willing to explore." (Quigley, 1997, p. 2)

Disengaging and re-engaging with education results from a cluster of factors. Zaff and his staff shared in the America's Promise Alliance study of the experiences of young people who leave high school before graduation that navigating home, school, or neighborhood environments that are considered toxic pull students away from high school. Some of the two hundred participants expressed their support structure was insufficient to allow school or continued education to be an option. Homelessness, foster care, parents in jail, health issues, excessively violent behavior, and issues with authority were the results shared (America's Promise Alliance, 2014).

In contrast, not all individuals seeking a GED are living in desperate situations. Some wish to expedite the opportunity to enroll into college and chose the path of a GED in place of a high school diploma as that fast track. Others chose this pathway out of convenience due to demands of employment at an early age or gifted intelligence. Yet others are seeking a diploma that is necessary for college enrollment that their homeschool or foreign school did not provide. These individuals are not the norm for adult education programs; however, the success rate for continued education is much higher (Martin & Broadus, 2013).

Within Quigley's paper, *The First Three Weeks: A Critical Time for Motivation*, he refers to a study conducted by Cervero and Fitzpatrick (1990). The longitudinal study found that adults who were early *school-leavers* or drop outs had mixed feelings toward previous education. Findings indicated that drop outs participated in credit or non-credit adult education classes at a rate much lower than mainstream adults who had completed high school. Quigley used this to support the necessity for research based upon

dispositional barriers in relation to determining if an adult learner was considered to be at-risk of dropping out:

I now believe the gap in perception created by our school based experiences, when contrasted with those of our students, is a source of serious unseen, under researched problems. I think that if we can understand dispositional barriers better, if we can see the differences between our dispositions and theirs more clearly, we can become more effective at our tutoring, teaching, counseling, and retention (Cervero & Fitzpatrick, 1990, p. 3).

Quigley (1997) also found in continuous studies related to dispositional barriers that adults who dropped out of high school could view others as candidates to return to school, but when asked about themselves, had a different viewpoint and were not favorable of their own success to return to school or further their education. Seemingly the previous negative experience with learning carried over into adult decisions for some who did not complete high school. A question would be how to address dispositional barriers in order to encourage a continuation of learning for those who drop out of high school.

Comings went even further into the research of barriers in a three phase study to test intervention that might promote persistence (Comings et al., 1999). During the first phase, student interviews produced a theme of three types of negative forces: life demands, relationships, and poor self-determination. Life demands were described as very similar to the situational barriers mentioned by Cross (1982) and Quigley (1997) being transportation, work demands, family responsibilities, lack of time, age, fatigue,

and financial situations. Relationship barriers included family, friends, colleagues, and community or welfare workers who did not support the student's continuation of education. Poor self-determination included thinking negative thoughts, laziness, lack of confidence, and low self-esteem.

Tinto (1987) disagrees and reminds future researchers that personality attributes and prior experience matter. They have less to do with withdrawal than do the quality of individual academic and social experiences within the college with other members of the institution, faculty, staff and student. Tinto recognizes the barriers; however, he specifies that if the student chooses to move forward, there are cooperative actions the colleges can take to change the pattern of low persistence:

The completion of a college degree requires a considerable amount of effort and therefore commitment to the goal of college completion. Not all students possess that commitment. Their leaving whether forced or voluntary mirrors more their unwillingness to expend the effort required to attain the goal of college completion than does lack of ability to do so (Tinto, 1987, p. 4).

One of Quigley's (1997) studies involved 20 at-risk learners and a control group. An intake counselor was trained to look for body language and verbal cues that suggested dispositional barriers. The nonverbal cues included skepticism, hostility, hesitancy, and uncertainty. A second observation was conducted around week 2 of enrollment and if the same cues remained visible, the students was considered to be a potential at-risk student and referred to a second counselor. The second counselor would conduct a more in-depth

interview with the learner about past educational experiences. The Prior Schooling and Self-Perception Inventory was created and used for this lengthy interview (Quigley, 1997). Based upon the outcomes of all three of the special treatment groups retained students at a rate much higher than the control group. Therefore, Quigley suggested early identification and intervention is the key to aiding student persistence for at risk adult learners.

“If I knew how to enhance motivation, I would have done it 20 years ago. I only wish I had taken the time to question, to analyze, and to be more self-critical in ways that allowed for greater learner input” (Quigley & Kuhne, 1997, p. 9).. Quigley suggested in this study that the input from the adult learner themselves is the greatest resource in which to find the answers to what motives or blocks the learners progression in education. He indicated that three steps make for a simple and direct process for assisting the adult learner: (a) understand the time frame in which we must identify the at-risk learner, (b) identify an at-risk group upon which to focus energy, and (c) employ various groupings found to provide support for the at-risk learner

Above all he reiterates the researcher’s and program personnel’s attitude must be positive and focused on the learner’s individual goals and barriers. Just like Comings (2007), he suggested that retention data is not the key, but gaining an in-depth understanding of what makes up student persistence and feeding those mechanisms makes the greatest impact.

Support and early interaction seemed to be the key findings for all three theorists; however, providing the right kind of support appeared evident. In other words not just

passive support in the form of pamphlets, presentations, or blanket offerings, but rather personalized and ongoing support to address all three barrier types: situational, institutional, and dispositional.

College Enrollment after GED

Young students, ages sixteen to twenty four, normally follow a consistent path in regard to education. Most young students are mandated to attend school while adults *choose* to participate in further education at any level of re-entry (Comings 2007). The academic steps in place for the young student encourage progression toward postsecondary or job training. The young student choosing to stop progression in education increases the probability of becoming a statistic among the adult learner population (Engle, Bermeo, O'Brien, 2006).

McGivney (2004) indicated the learner's personal goals often become an ever changing target due to external and internal constraints and limitations. McGivney's final observation shared the statement of finding ways to improve completion of the adult learner journey is beneficial to both the institution and the individual:

It is not just an institutions interest to ensure that students successfully complete the right program of study; it is in the students' own interest. The cost to them of non-completion may be considerable; they may incur financial penalties for leaving courses prematurely and some may suffer from a sense of personal failure and inadequacy. The consequences, however, can be far worse for adults than for younger students: those aged over 30 have less time to start a program again and their circumstances

may in any case preclude that option. An even worse consequence is that those who feel that they failed in the education system the first time rounds can suffer a repeated sense of failure from which they may never recover. It is imperative therefore, that staff in all educational settings take swift action to determine the cause of non-attendance or no-completions of assignments and provide help and support for students who are experiencing difficulties (McGivney, 2004, p.45).

According to Pickard (2013) no matter what improvements institutions or individual programs make to promote retention, little change in results will be made. “The fact that adults face obstacles that will not allow attendance is a reality and there is little we can do to change it” (Pickard, 2013, p. 48). Pickard suggested that recognizing incremental success rather than waiting until completion or non-completion could provide celebratory events along the adult education journey and deter students from dropping out. Her research established the acknowledgement and accommodation perspective as a standard to draw the focus toward *pathways to persistence* (Porter et.al. 2005).

Wolniak, Mayhew, and Engberg (2012) provided a schematic to demonstrate the relationship between student learning and college persistence. An adapted replication of that schematic is provided here.

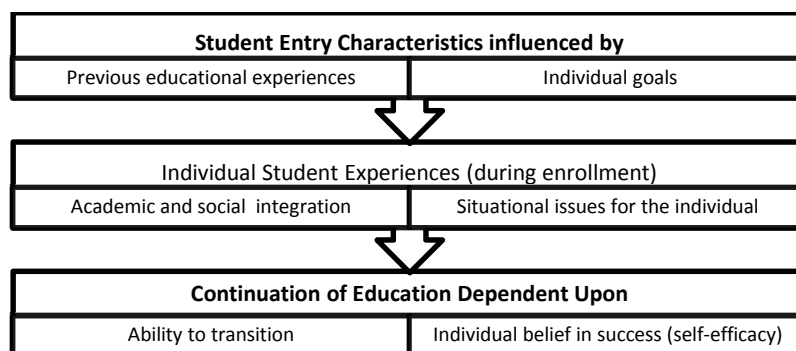


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Linking Learning to Persistence

Wolniak, Mayhew and Engberg's (2012) study found that students entering with high ACT scores, financial support, and one or more parents who completed a bachelor's degree were more likely to enroll in the second year of college. Students that did not have this same pre-enrollment status were more likely to discontinue enrollment. Miller and Murray (2012) suggested when advising underprepared students to first understand that similar risk factors exist. However, no matter the risk factor, a student's ability to cope is the best barometer for success. "Resilient students have the personal development and drive necessary to succeed. When supported by positive institutional experiences that strengthen their self-esteem and self-efficacy, these students overcome the negative effects attributed to at-risk factors" (McGillin, 2003, p. 48).

Summary

Identifying three types of barriers that exist for both adult education students and college students is significant. Those barriers are situational, institutional, and dispositional. Situational barriers are considered to be lack of support, work load, family obligations, academic under preparedness, financial limitations, age, cultural issues, and even health issues. Institutional barriers are the policies, procedures, access to financial

aid, scheduling, instructional quality, location, and lack of supportive programs offered within programs or colleges. Dispositional barriers include attitude, hostility, lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem, emotional limitations, fear, and sense of not belonging. With these barriers identified, the transition of the adult learner between adult education and college should include a variety of support.

The identification of mirrored studies and findings for the adult learner enrolled in either adult education or college was equally significant. The student's ability to transition into college was established as an important factor to continuation of education. A link is established between the adult education student and the college student. Each seems to find the same areas of support helpful in reaching their educational goals. Each presents similar barriers to education continuation. It is considered that the adult education student advancing to college after obtaining a GED would benefit from an institution with a better understanding of his or her unique barriers and goals.

An individual's belief of efficacy plays a key role in the self-regulation of motivation. A belief about what can be accomplished and what cannot is part of the self-efficacy process. Goals established by the individual depend upon these beliefs. It is prodigious to find out from the GED graduates who successfully enrolled into community college what role their beliefs in themselves played in the decisions to move forward in education.

Success within this study is indicated by individuals who complete the 2014 version of the GED exam and enroll into community college. Other studies gather quantitative and qualitative data related to college persistence beyond enrollment;

however, there are an extremely limited number of studies that gather the experience of the enrollment process pertaining to the GED graduate (Hanover, 2014). At this time no research has been found related to the experiences of the individuals who have passed the 2014 version of the GED exam. Quantitative data is currently being collected on the federal adult education and GED testing, state, and local adult education program level.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to provide a better understanding of the lived experiences of GED graduates passing the 2014 version of the exam and enrolling into a community college. The GED exam changed January 2014 to include content at the 12.9 grade level and a completely computer-based delivery format. The College and Career Readiness Standards make up the objectives of the exam. The indication for change was to prepare the GED graduate to meet the current workforce and college enrollment standards. This phenomenological study provides the stories of individuals who have experienced the test change and college enrollment.

Chapter 3 explains the research design, role of the researcher, and methodology associated with this study. The criterion of this phenomenological study is established as well as the detailed aspects of data analysis. I also identify each data relationship to the research questions.

Research Design and Rationale

Qualitative research is a naturalistic approach in that the researcher chooses to study things as they occur in their natural settings. A phenomenon has occurred and the affect it had on the participants is reported based upon real life experiences. My research is an attempt to provide a voice to those who have completed the 2014 GED exam and transitioned into the community college by completing enrollment. The following research questions were explored:

1. What was the experience of the adult education student while preparing for the 2014 version of the GED exam?

2. What steps within the GED test preparation did recipients express as important to their matriculation toward college enrollment?
3. What are the GED recipients' thoughts of the enrollment experience into a community college?

Understanding the student's experience is not only relevant to the issue, but critical in understanding what is needed by the student and the profession for developing programming that may be most effective. Very little research has provided postsecondary education with the experiences or preferences of this GED to college population. I chose phenomenology as the research method for this study as the method is designed to capture lived experiences of individuals.

Phenomenology and Narrative Analysis

Phenomenological research tends to look at data thematically to extract essences and essentials of participant meanings (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The what and how of the experience is focused upon by the researcher as they analyze the participant's responses derived from narratives, interviews, videos, letters, or correspondence. The responses are transcribed and recorded as part of the data collection process. Common themes that emerge from the transcribed or recorded data are considered items for consideration. An example being a sample of individuals interviewed after a recent plant shut down may all make a common statement during the interview referring to the fear of being unemployed. This fear of being unemployed would be considered as a common theme due to the repetition of this expression during the interviews. In a follow up interview, the same theme may immerge; therefore, giving

the theme validation. A common theme may have also been something the researcher records within the field notes, creating yet another validation. This common theme, once established, will become the essence of the experience of the individuals to explain the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

Narratology or narrative analysis is a part of this study. Each participant was asked to share the experience of obtaining the GED within a personal narrative. This narrative was shared with me prior to the face-to-face interview. Narratology extends the idea of text as part of the data collection process to include life history narratives, historical memoirs, personal narratives, family stories, graffiti, and creative nonfictions:

The biological turn in social science or the narratives turn in qualitative inquiry honors people's stories as data that can stand on their own as pure description of experience, worthy as narrative documentary of experience (the core of phenomenology) or analyzed for connections between the psychological, sociological, cultural, political, and dramatic dimensions of human experience (Patton, 2002, pp. 115-116).

In addition to the narrative, the participants participated in a face-to-face interview in a relaxed environment to discuss their experience of college enrollment. The interview process is considered a basic part of a phenomenological study; however, this interview is prefaced by the narrative which allowed me to derive an in-depth form of questions to guide the open interview format. In some studies the interviewer is not the researcher, but a member of the research team (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). In this particular study, I was both the interviewer and transcriber, thereby reducing compromising

influences with respect to the transcript quality. Davidson (2009) indicated the transcript is influenced by the researcher's outlook concerning the topic and by his or her assumptions in relation to the data. The researcher who is familiar with the phenomenon decides what to include or omit. Once the interviews were transcribed, a member check took place in which the participant reviews their own transcription to ensure the validity of the transcript.

Schutz and Luckman (1973), phenomenological researchers, became increasingly certain that an acceptable explanation to the basic methodological complications of the sciences of man could only be found in a detailed account of the irregular human composition. Phenomenology is concerned with a unified vision of the essences of a phenomenon. What presents itself as the reality according to the participant's experience with the phenomenon and what is shared as happening outside the phenomenon are considered by the researcher. Interpretation of the outside happening's relation to the phenomenon may or may not be part of the whole (Polkinghorne, 1989).

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher is to find understanding of the experiences of participants and determine if there is a connection to theory that may explain the behavioral phenomenon (Stein & Mankowski, 2004). Within that role, the qualitative researcher can choose to act as an observer, participant, or combination observer-participant. My role for this particular study is that of researcher, observer, and data analyst.

Schutz and Luckmann (1973) expressed their adamancy that the adequate solution to the basic methodological problems of the sciences of man could only be found in precise description of the peculiar human constitution. Their input is stated as, “What remained to be done was to apply the phenomenological method to the social world, the product of human symbolic action and material work” (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 19). Focusing the attention on the individual’s perception and how the experience was perceived relationally to the individual was their recommendation for strengthening the validity of a study. Phenomenology is concerned with the wholeness of the experience from each side, angle, and perspective until a common vision emerges and the essence of the phenomenon is revealed.

Avoiding Bias

It is critical to communicate that because of the position of the researcher, the researcher’s personal position on issues may play into the interpretation of the lived experiences. To minimize this influence, a variety of validation methods can be used on the part of the researcher including bracketing, reflexivity, and member checking.

Bracketing is explained by Ashworth (1999) as follows:

The procedure has the purpose of allowing the life world of the participant in the research to emerge in clarity so as to allow a study of some specific phenomenon within the life-world to be carried out. The researcher must suspend presupposition in order to enter the life-world... Two main categories of pre-supposition should be bracketed: those to do with the temptation to impose on the investigation of the life-world claims

emanating from objective science or other authoritative sources, and those to do with the imposition of criteria of validity arising outside the life-world itself. (pp. 708-709)

Bracketing requires the researcher to first review her or his own position regarding the phenomenon and situations of participants. The next step being continuous throughout the study is to separate, or bracket out, that recognized position during interpretation and analysis. In order to produce a clean position of the experience, the researcher reviews the process with consciousness, revisits the process repetitively as the data moves from evaluation into description.

Reflexivity is a component within bracketing as the researcher is conscious of the biases, values, and experiences they bring to the qualitative research study. Creswell (2013) identified two parts of reflexivity as the researcher first talks about their experiences with the phenomenon, and second, they discuss how past experiences shaped the interpretation, “Qualitative researchers today are much more self-disclosing about their qualitative writings than they were a few years ago. No longer is it acceptable to be the omniscient, distanced qualitative writer” (Creswell, 2013, p. 214). Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) wrote, “Researchers do not have to try to play God, writing as disembodied omniscient narrators claiming universal and atemporal general knowledge.” (p. 961). Personal reflection noted as significant to the readers understanding will be shared within the reporting of participant experiences. The test of validity for inclusion of these reflections is based upon bracketing and member checking.

Member checking is a method in which the participant is part of the transcription process. Once the narrative or interview is transcribed in preparation for coding, the researcher shares the transcript with the participant for review. This is a form of ensuring the trustworthiness of the transcripts by having the interviewees validate correctness, clarify any unclear issues, and indicate any topics or items that they feel should not be published. When participants request that certain segments from the scripts of their lives be removed, the request will be honored (Grundy, Pollon, & McGinn 2003; Kvale, 1996; Page, Samson, & Crocket 2000; Saldana, 1998).

Personal Experience

Another limitation of the study would be a bias due to my relation and personal experience. I graduated from high school, got married, and entered the world of work immediately. Ten years later, due to frustration with trying to pay bills with just above minimum wage jobs, I decided to go to college. As I was working two jobs and fulfilling the responsibilities of wife and mother while going to college, I quickly became overwhelmed. Pushing myself through college was a tremendous and gut wrenching experience. I understand and empathize with the GED student entering college who may be living a similar if not worse experience. In addition, I have had the privilege of working as an Adult Education Director for the past nine years. I have witnessed the struggles many of the students face. It is my decision to remain objective during the interview and data collection process. It is also my decision to conduct the follow up interview as an opportunity for the participant to review their input and dispel any bias that might be included in the transcription.

Methodology

This phenomenological study used criterion sampling in that the participants must have completed the GED exam with a passing score and enrolled into a community college. These criteria were necessary to answer the research questions posed related to the experience of individuals' matriculation from GED to college. Due to the time restraints of the 2014 version of the GED exam implementation in January 2014, the participants would not have a delay from GED completion to college enrollment.

The time factor does limit the population of individuals available for participation. As of October 2014, less than 200 people had passed the new 2014 GED Exam in the state of interest (Alabama Adult Education System for Accountability and Performance [AAESAP], 2014). Of those graduates, fewer than 25% enrolled into college. That population is expected to grow prior to the implementation of this research. The sample size for this phenomenological study is 10 representing at least 10% of the population.

Patton (2002) indicated that sample size was dependent upon the criteria of the study. When population size is limited, the sample size would probably be smaller, but not necessarily the same percentage of the whole as demonstrated in a study with a larger population available. Patton (2002) indicated the phenomenological rule of thumb was to assess 10 people. However, if the saturation was reached prior to assessing 10 people then fewer may be used. Creswell (2007, 2013) recommends the number be sufficient to provide information saturation. This concept proposes that additional participants would not offer significant additional information and no new information would emerge with input from additional participants. The final number of participants for this study turned

out to be 11. Criterion sampling was used and the point of research saturation was reached.

Adult Education Directors employed within the state were asked to mail out invitations to qualifying participants. I provided the invitations, blank mailing labels, envelopes, and stamps. Each partnering Adult Education Director obtained a mailing list of possible participants from the state database. The Adult Education Directors do have access to this statewide database to verify GED completion and college enrollment. This verification prior to mailing invitations was completed by the Adult Education Director at the correlating community college within the state of interest. The adult education program and college within which I am employed will not participate nor invite any participants.

Data Collection

Permission was first obtained from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (05-08-15-0111471). Participants for the study were selected using criterion sampling with the partnering Adult Education Directors making initial contact through a mailed invitation of participation. The letter included instructions for responding to me in order to show interest in participation by email or phone. The initial contact with me provided the possible participants with an overview of the study that included the length of time involved as well as the process of data collection. At that time, the possible participant could make the decision of whether or not to participate. Those who chose to participate were emailed an informed consent agreement. This informed consent provided the participants with the terms of the research study including my contact information.

Other initial information provided was an introduction to the study, procedures associated with participation, and procedures associated with the analysis. The consent form highlighted risk potential and benefits of the study, cost or compensation, the participants' rights, and a confidentiality assurance by me and my educational institution. Each participant was directed to read the informed consent form and ask any questions for clarification before signing the form indicating their willingness to participate in the study.

Once the consent form was signed electronically or on hard copy, the participant received an email with instructions for how to establish a participant email. Each participant was assigned an ID: P1 for participant number one, P2 for participant number two and so on through the succession of possible 10 or more participants. A Google email with the participant ID was then established for further electronic communication between the participant and me. The same ID was used during data collection, analysis, interpretation, and findings.

The first data to be collected was the narratives from each participant. The researcher initiated data collection with instructions for the narrative. The participant wrote retelling the story of how they returned to the adult education program to gain a GED and then how the decision was made to enroll into college. The instrument created for the narrative instruction is shared in the appendix. Each completed narrative was submitted to me for transcription. Transcribed narratives were reviewed for content, relevance, and understanding. Statements or terms used in the narrative that are unclear were brought up as part of the face-to-face interview for clarification.

A face-to-face interview became the second interaction with each participant. The location and time of the interview was decided upon through the previously established communication method. Locations were considered to be convenient to the participant and free of encumbrance from institutional settings or hindrances. As a means to understand the lived experiences of these participants, individual interviews were conducted using open ended semi-structured interview questions. The interview questions were developed by the researcher in an attempt to gain rich descriptions of the transition experience into the community college. The questions were developed to gather a better understanding of the role of self-efficacy in the individuals continued education decisions. Each interview was recorded and transcribed by me.

Interviews provided the participant an opportunity to verbalize the lived experience of returning to education and progressing to college enrollment. Liberty was allowed for the participant to share as much personal information related to the experience as deemed within the time frame and comfort zone of both the researcher and participant. The interview questions allowed the individual to provide situational details to lend to an understanding of the transition of the education experience. Once I recognized the reduction process had begun by recognizing repeated information from interviewee's responses the interview ended (Creswell, 2013).

Each participant was given the opportunity to review the transcribed narrative interview using member checking method. Corrections or eliminations of statement designated by the participant will be made prior to analysis. An eliminated statement will

be noted for coding purposes only and direct quotes from the eliminated statement will not be published.

Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis is the process of making meaning of information obtained from the participants. A phenomenological study seeks to find understanding of the impact of a particular phenomenon. Therefore, the data analysis plan for this study will follow phenomenological analysis and more specifically analytic induction along with participatory analysis. The combination of these analysis methods will provide the flexibility needed to explore interactively during the collection process and analysis.

Analytic induction is an analysis process that has evolved over time into a method with emphasis on discovering patterns of behavior, interactions, and perceptions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The original utilization of analytic induction was to produce a universal and causal hypothesis (Patton, 2002). It is the most modern and contemporary form of this type of analysis that will allow for common themes to emerge from both the narrative and interview.

Participatory analysis allows for the input from the participants to assist in review of transcription and clarification of statements. Patton described it as, “Participatory approach to qualitative inquiry includes working with non-researchers and non-evaluators not only in collecting data but also in analyzing data.” (Patton, 2002, p. 496). This study only utilized the member checking step found within participatory analysis. Each research question will draw input from the narrative, interview, and observation notes. The narrative will provide the bulk of the essence of the experience related to question

one, What was the experience of the adult education student while preparing for the 2014 version of the GED exam? It is the desire of this researcher to draw out the story of how the student chose to return to education and complete the exam rendering high school diploma equivalency.

The content of the narrative will provide the prompts for face-to-face interview with each participant. Interviews were semi-structured to bring in the clarification of any undefined statements within the narrative as well as guide conversation toward answering questions two and three. What steps within the GED test preparation did recipients express as important to their matriculation toward college enrollment? and what are the GED recipients' thoughts of the enrollment experience into a community college?

Transcription and Coding Procedures

Narrative research analysis was a component of this research. Creswell (2013) referred to the three-dimensional space approach of Clandinin and Connelly (2000) that includes the analysis of three elements: interaction, continuity, and situation. The chronological approach referred to by Denzin (1989) was considered but may be rather cumbersome due to the informality of writing used to form the narratives.

Once the narratives arrived, read each story for basic understanding. As a current Adult Education Director, the content of the narratives were understandable and rather easy to interpret being familiar with the terms and environments of most of the students. These particular students were not known to me on a personal basis in or outside of the classroom; however, their stories were similar to many of the students I have counseled.

Each narrative was typed into word processing software and then uploaded into Dedoose, qualitative analysis software. The typed document was printed and hand coded prior to coding with Dedoose. Codes were established based upon Creswell's (2013, p. 207) template for coding a phenomenological study. Significant statements will be highlighted and saved as excerpts. Meaning units were established in relation to the theoretical framework relating comments to transition and self-efficacy. The transitional codes were sub divided into barriers and encouragers while the self-efficacy divisions were positive or negative educational experiences.

The same codes were used for the interview transcripts. Hand coding as well as software coding process followed the same steps as utilized in the narrative analysis. In addition to coding, demographics were assigned to each narrative and labels were assigned for those in the software as descriptors. Analysis included relational coding and descriptor comparisons to determine if a theme was unique to a single demographic as well as verification of accuracy of coding using Dedoose analysis and data set present/absent charting system. This software system is designed to provide a report of codes that do not fit within the patterns developing during analysis or identify an excerpt that is not coded.

Interpretation

Phenomenological description and interpretation rely upon themes that emerge from the data. Themes are critical in helping to make lived experiences or text form into a common meaning. Themes give order to research and writing by providing the framework for the experiential structures that make up the experience (vanManen, 1990).

The meanings that will result from horizontalization were then clustered into themes and subthemes in order to better describe the relational correlation to the conceptual framework.

The transition experience of the GED graduate into the community college was explained with *textural* description using the invariant constituents and themes and sub themes. These descriptions present a verification of each participant's own experience and describe images and accounts of the actual event of making the transition into a community college. The participant's descriptions are presented using his or her own words in order to relay the viewpoint of each participant.

A *structural* description was developed after defining a textural description for each participant. This process required a total immersion by the research into the data and working back and forth from a position of imaginative variation to verification. Moustakas explains this process, "...to seek possible meanings through the utilization of imagination, varying the frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, different positions, roles or functions" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97-98). This step allows the researcher to gain a stronger grasp of the verification based upon an in-depth understanding from varied research perspectives.

The final progressive step in the interpretation is to develop a *composite* description to present the essence of the phenomenon. The overall integration of the experiences of the individuals will be provided within the thematic structure. The descriptions of the essence of the transition experience for the GED completes who

decided to pursue a college education are anticipated to provide rich, and in-depth insight.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Procedures

This research study placed minimal risk upon the participants and measures were taken to protect confidentiality. I sought approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board due to this minimal risk (05-08-15-0111471). I completed the National Institutes of Health Office of Extramural Research training and obtained the certificate for protecting human research participants (Certificate #1621254). The appropriate safeguards and procedures are utilized throughout the study.

Credibility was established through triangulation and member checks of the transcribed data. Patton describes it as the following:

“The logic of triangulation as based on the premise that no single method ever adequately solved the problem of rival explanations. Because each method reveals different aspects of empirical reality, multiple methods of data collection and analysis provide more grist for the research mill”
(Patton, 2002, pp. 555-556).

Methods triangulation in particular was the choice for generating consistent finding from different data collection being narrative, interview, and field notes.

Member checking after the transcription of the narrative and interview provided yet another form of clarification and validity based upon the participants review and response to that review. This strategy further developed the transferability through rich, in-depth descriptions based upon the participants written, spoken, and eventually

reviewed responses. Statements were verified for accuracy prior to inclusion as an excerpt within the discussion of the experience of transition from GED graduate to college enrollment.

Summary

The phenomenological study was conducted in order to capture the lived experiences of GED graduates transitioning into a community college and meeting college readiness standards. These experiences gathered through narratives and interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed to find common themes. Transcripts were shared with participants to conduct member checking for accuracy, validity, and acceptance of content to be shared within the study. Any statement the participant indicates as *do not share*, was excluded from the excerpts within this dissertation. However, the statement was noted as such by the researcher as part of the coding and analysis process.

Participants were selected using criterion sampling and be given complete protection in relation to confidentiality of content shared within the study. The experience of gaining a GED is one that can often require a tremendous amount of courage. Enrolling into college is a step often expected of the high school graduate; however, the internal drive required for a GED graduate to enroll is on a different scale. The depth of understanding anticipated to come from this study has the potential to impact academic, institutional, and social agencies in relation to policy changes, support services, and advising strategies. The positive forces in relation to the transition of these successful experiences can be promoted for others who consider a GED and college just a dream.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to provide a better understanding of the lived experiences of GED graduates passing the 2014 version of the exam and enrolling into a community college. An in-depth understanding of the needs, visions, goals, and success pertaining to individuals who navigated their way through each level of education to reach a personal goal as told through the eyes of the individual was gathered through the data collection process of this study. Cabrera, Burkum, and LaNasa (2005) indicated that students most likely to complete college have characteristics that include having a successful educational experience and come from higher income families. Another study highlighted the factor of having one or more parents who completed college, attending college immediately after high school, attending college full time, and having few responsibilities outside of college (Adelman, 1999, 2003). The only matching factor with GED graduates to these indications is that of starting out with a successful educational experience. The participants in this study all shared within the interview or narrative an initial enjoyment of school and receiving positive feedback as a result of educational efforts. For reasons not completely related to bad choices or personal decision, their educational progression came to an abrupt halt. The narratives and interviews with these individuals tell the story.

The following research questions were explored:

- What was the experience of the adult education student while preparing for the 2014 version of the GED exam?

- What steps within the GED test preparation did recipients express as important to their matriculation toward college enrollment?
- What are the GED recipients' thoughts of the enrollment experience into a community college?

Chapter 4 provides the demographics, data collection process, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness for the data, the results, and summarizes answers to each research question. Characteristics of each participant found relevant to the understanding of the results will be shared as well as the details regarding coding procedures.

Demographics

This study included 11 participants residing in north, central, and southern regions of a state within the southeastern region of the United States. The gender and age range of this group were six females and five males ranging in age from 17 to 49. Four of the participants were African American and seven were Caucasian. Seven of the participants were not parents and four had one or more children. Eight of the participants were not married and three were married. Only two of the participants had a parent or parents who had attended college. Five of the participants had jobs while attending college. Six were attending college full time and not working outside the home. Two participants started their educational journey in a homeschool, eight were part of the public school systems in their area, and one was part of a magnet school system considered in the private education sector. All 11 participated after withdrawing from school enrolled into an Adult Education Program and all 11 enrolled into a local community college after GED graduation. The table below displays the demographic status of this participant group.

Table 2: *Demographic Table:*

Demographic	Number
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	5
Female	6
<i>Age Range</i>	
18-25	5
26-35	3
36-45	2
46-55	1
<i>High School Attended</i>	
Homeschool	2
Public	8
Private / Magnet	1
<i>Current Employment Status</i>	
Working full time	5
Working Part-time	2
Unemployed	4
<i>College Enrollment Status</i>	
Full Time (12 credit hours)	8
Part Time (<12 credit hours)	3
<i>Marital and Family Status</i>	
Married	3
Single	8
One or more Children	4
<i>Parents' Education</i>	
Completed some college	2
Completed a college degree	2
Completed high school	6
Dropped out of high school	5
Completed a GED	2

The relevance of these particular demographics to the study further support the research most recently completed by the America's Promise Alliance (2014). That study indicated individuals with little or no external support and responsibilities outside of education faced barriers that the high school graduate matriculating straight into college does not. The study further indicated that having a parent with education above a high

school diploma was a strong factor for an individual's educational progression beyond high school. The study related that the lack of support systems and the overwhelming scheduling required due to responsibilities outside of education almost always deterred the student from finishing either the GED or a college education. The individuals in my study were successful completing the GED and have recently within one full calendar year enrolled into a community college. Excerpts from their individual story do indicate the same barriers as mentioned in the America's Promise Alliance (2014) study. However, these individuals did succeed to initiate the next level of education beyond a GED and the elements of their individual success represent how this transition was possible.

The differences in age, race, and personal responsibilities outside of education of the participants made a diverse group allowing the ability to find differences and similarities across the demographic fields. Many of the statements made regarding the original and final outlook on education were the same across all demographics. In contrast, the challenges faced were very diverse and dependent upon economic status and outside responsibilities.

Data Collection

Permission was obtained from the Walden University Institutional Review Board to begin data collection. Initial contact made with potential participants was a cooperative effort with three local Adult Education Programs situated in the north, central and southern regions of the state. My invitations for participation were provided to each Adult Education Program Director. The invitation included instructions for responding to me to

initiate interest in participation by email or phone. This invitation was mailed out by the Adult Education Program Director and I was notified by email as to the date the invitations were mailed. Some of the Adult Education Directors hand delivered or emailed the invitations to potential participants that did not have established mailing addresses or email. A total of 79 invitations were either mailed out, emailed, or hand delivered.

Each participant made initial contact with me either by email or phone, including text message. The invitation gave directions to use these two methods for initial contact. It was surprising to see that no matter what the age, most of the participants chose to make initial contact by text message. Upon initial contact the participant was asked to share an email address in order to receive the consent form. Each participant received the consent form by email and 10 out of 11 responded with the words, "I consent," to signify agreement with the terms of participation. Only one participant signed the consent form instead of replying by email.

The consent provided the participant with the terms of the research study including my contact information. Each participant was assigned a number: P1 for participant number one, P2 for participant number two, and so on through the succession of 11 participants. The initial plan was to establish a Google email with the anonymous ID. However, the first three participants found this to be extremely cumbersome and preferred to just change the user name for their current email for the purpose of communicating with me. The decision was then made to allow the participant to use this preferred method for sending information via email. In another part of this initial data

collection, it was found that the participants, no matter the age, preferred to communicate with me by text message. Text messages would arrive unexpectedly from a potential or current participant to the phone number shared in the initial invitation. It was then established that the ID assigned would also be the identifying label for text messages both to and from me and the participant. This process was new to me but, the participants were familiar with how to establish this in their phones and did so without a problem. The same ID was used during data collection, analysis, interpretation, and in the findings.

The next step was to initiate data collection in the form of a narrative. A prompt was emailed to each participant to begin a narrative in which to tell their story of how they returned to the adult education program to gain a GED and then how the decision was made to enroll into college. Nine complete narratives were submitted to me by email. Two participants had extremely difficult schedules and very limited access to computers. In those two cases, the narrative questions became part of the interview and were noted as such for the analysis. The narratives were then transferred into a Microsoft Word document for analysis. Narratives and narrative related interview items were reviewed for content, relevance, and understanding. Statements or terms used in the narrative that were unclear became part of the interview questions to allow the participant to provide clarification.

An interview became the second interaction with each participant. The location and time of the interview was established through communication between me and the participant. Locations varied and were convenient to the participant and free of encumbrances or intrusion. Open ended semi-structured interview questions were used in

order to gain their personal experiences of transition to college. Each interview was recorded with a digital audio recorder and transcribed by me. Field notes were taken before, during, and after the interview. The field notes were included in the coding process and did not contradict the themes that emerged. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with nine of the participants. Two participants chose to do the interview by phone due to one being out of state and the other due to illness. The same recording, transcription, and field note process was conducted as with the face-to-face interviews.

The interview questions allowed the individual to provide situational details. Liberty was allowed for the participant to share as much personal information related to the experience as deemed within the time frame and comfort zone of both me and the participant. Both of these freedoms provided rich responses that lead to an understanding of the transition of the education experience.

Each participant was given the opportunity to review the transcribed narrative and interview using the member checking method. The completed transcription was emailed to each participant with the instructions to read over the attachment carefully and to alert me of any corrections or additional information they wanted to provide. Only two participants had corrections. Those corrections were both a one word correction due to my interpretation during the interview based upon the participant's accent when pronouncing a particular word. No participant requested that statements be omitted. The two corrected transcripts were emailed back to the participant for a second review and accepted. All 11 transcriptions were approved by their representing participant.

Data Analysis

Analytic induction and participatory analyses were outlined in Chapter 3 as the basic fundamental methods used for discovering patterns and clarification of statements made by the participants. Both were implemented and provided a stable format to build the foundation of the analysis. Initial patterns from the narratives were held for further interpretation until after the interviews were conducted and coded.

The narrative research analysis was based upon Creswell's (2013) three dimensional space approach. Each narrative was reviewed for three elements: interaction, continuity, and situation prior to coding. Most of the narratives were very short in comparison to the amount of information shared in just a few words. Six of the narratives were less than three paragraphs in length. Of the nine that were submitted by email, all were in a conversational writing tone. The elements of interaction, continuity, and situation were not present in all narratives; however, the interview gave the participant the opportunity to further clarify and expand upon the missing elements. Each of the three elements was clarified after the interviews were completed. This was noted during the analysis process in order to establish the difference between written and verbal interpretation.

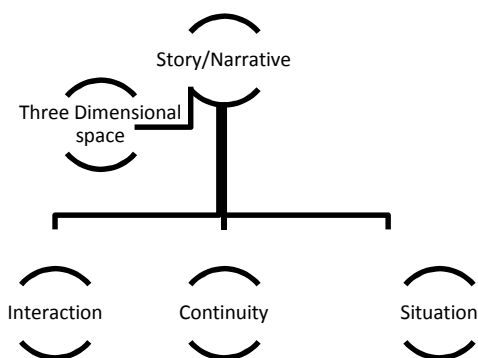


Figure 2: Creswell's template for coding a narrative study revised to show application to this study (Creswell, 2013, p. 207)

Interviews were transcribed, member checked, and used as the second piece of data for each participant. The third piece was my field notes. All three pieces were loaded as text documents into the Dedoose software chosen to assist with data analysis. Hand coding took place prior to uploading the documents into the Dedoose software. The software did provide a gap in the codes that was not visible during the hand coding process. The gap existed in topic area of challenges. These observations led to the revision of codes into classifications by topic and then the data went through the coding process a second and third time. The second pass rendered a much more cohesive look at the data in which themes began to emerge. The third pass fine-tuned those emerging themes into a formula that better defined the essence of the phenomenological experience.

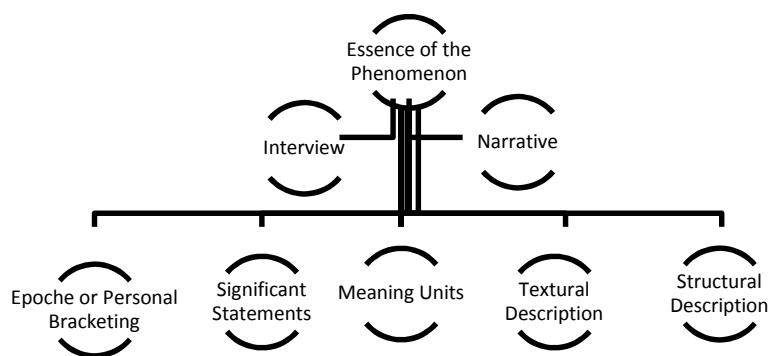


Figure 3: Creswell's template for coding a phenomenological study revised to show application to this study (Creswell, 2013, p. 207).

Codes developed and used during the analysis were a combination of both the narrative and phenomenological coding examples. In order to illustrate a better understanding, the chart for this study is interpreted by using a parent category and sub-category for each. The four parent categories were *2014 GED Exam*, *decision to continue education*, *self-efficacy*, and *transition*. *2014 GED Exam* was further broken into the individual's opinion of the test being difficult or easy and the score being dependent upon how questions were answered. Another category, *decision to continue education*, was further divided into motivational factors and sources of support. The *self-efficacy* category had five sub categories which included original disposition of education, influences and experiences, final disposition of education, self-determination, and the *me too* factor. The *me too* factor explains the reference from only two participants that indicated seeing someone else succeed in education and thought that could be me too. The last category was *transition* and it was divided into three sub categories which were challenges, fear, and institutional factors.

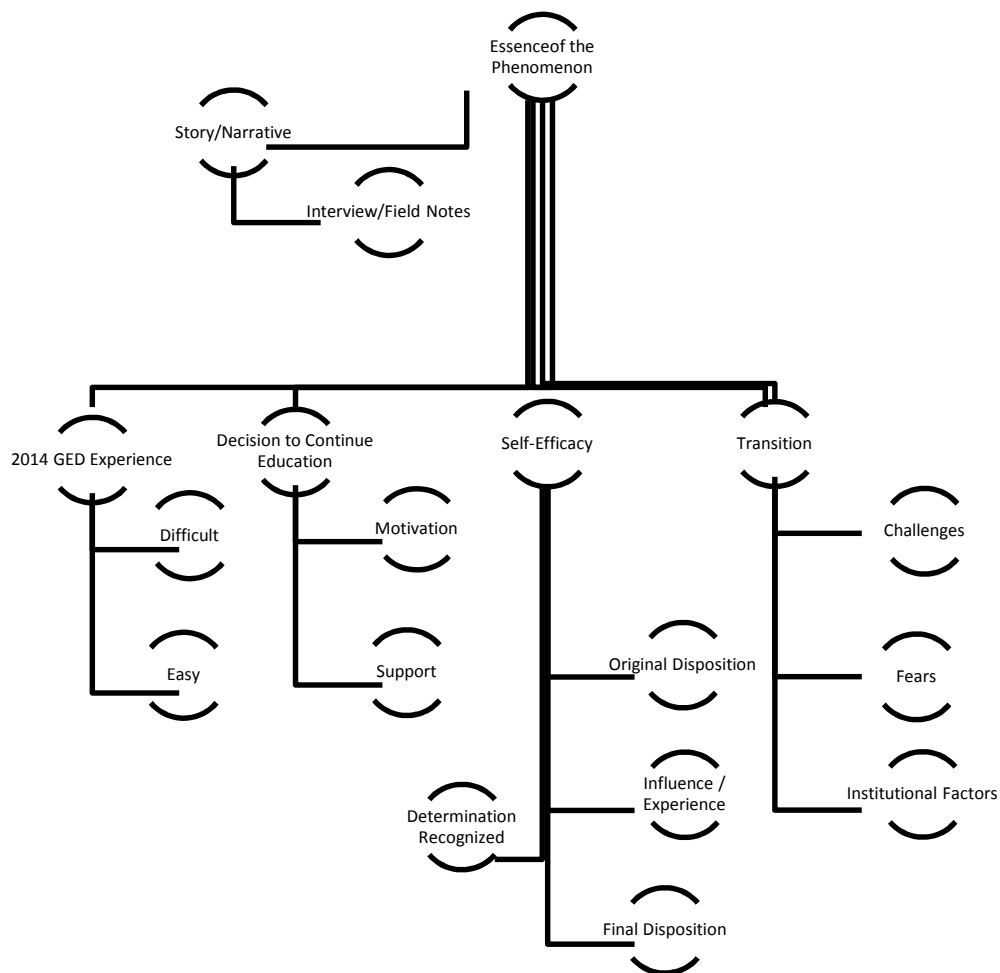


Figure 4: Parent-category and sub-category codes used in this study

Once the parent and sub category codes were established it was then a process of working back and forth from the data to the code categories. Inductive reasoning was used with each participant’s experience in order to capture the essence of their individual thoughts and perception. If the codes established provided the category that best described a particular excerpt it was used. However, if a code did not exist to truly capture the essence of the participant’s perspective a new code was added and

categorized accordingly. Based upon the patterns that began to emerge from each pass through the data, the answer became evident to remain with the four parent categories. The sub categories were revised prior to the final listing in the paragraph above; this was done in order to provide a better picture of the experiences.

One participant chose to expedite the matriculation from high school to college; therefore, the data provided regarding original educational experience was extremely different and noted during analysis. The participant chose to leave school after junior year of high school due to the fact that there was only one course remaining to be taken during senior year. The participant chose to withdraw from high school and get a GED within a couple of weeks in order to enroll into college sooner. This was the only major deviation from the group in that the student was accelerated in high school course work and made a choice to move forward into college enrollment by way of a GED instead of waiting for an academic school year to be completed.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility for this particular research study was established through triangulation of data and member checking. Each research data collection method revealed aspects of lived experiences according to the participant. The narrative, interview, and field notes provided three different data structures to analyze. All three rendered the same themes individually and collaboratively. Member checks were consistent in that each participant was given both the narrative and interview to read and review for correction in the same format. This process remained within the protocol established using the participant ID and communication procedures to maintain confidentiality. The member checking

process rendered a verification of understanding between the researcher and participant. Together these methods established data dependability.

Data was treated with the highest regard for confidentiality. Participants were reminded of the confidentiality factor before, during, and after the data collection and during member checking. The sharing of data remained within the confines of confidential email. Each participant had the opportunity to further clarify the narrative and the interview during member checking.

Transferability of the results from this study is dependent upon the timing and regional location of this phenomenon. The data was collected across a state in the southeastern region of the United States. Each participant had taken the 2014 version of the GED exam at a time when the curriculum available to support exam preparation was rather limited. Future research in relation to this study would find it beneficial to keep this in mind in regard to generalization of data.

Conformability of the data was established through follow up interview to clarify the narrative content and member checking. To further establish this element, bracketing and reflectivity became part of the field notes and provided an easy way to eliminate researcher bias during analysis. Each pass of data analysis also gave an opportunity to recognize insertions of bias within coding, charting, and interpretation.

Results

Experience with 2014 Version of the GED Exam

The first research question, what was the experience of the adult education student while preparing for the 2014 version of the GED exam? was answered by each

participant during the narrative phase of data collection. Any further clarification of the experience was provided during the interview. The majority considered the 2014 version of the GED exam to be difficult in that the scoring was very dependent upon how the questions were answered. Only three out of the 11 considered the test easier than anticipated. However, their comments indicated the easiness referred to the computer based testing format and not to the test content.

P2 and P8 had actually taken the 2002 version and the 2014 version of the GED Exam. Therefore, there was a comparison in the participants' minds.

P2: "The test was a whole lot harder than it was when I was 17."

P8: "I didn't really talk too much about the test itself that I took. I took the old test before the newer one, and it was easy and passed it all but the writing part. I am not very good at writing. That is something I had to work on. The new one was actually more difficult. In some cases, it was. I didn't like the social studies portion as they had it. I passed it on my first try, but how it was made and laid out, I didn't like it because I studied really hard and read a lot of history and then what happened when I took the test it was about people nobody really knows about. It was like reading was steering you in one direction. It is not like any of the books that you read. So you keep on and the whole thing was you just read what they had on the monitor and you just comprehend what they are giving you. So you answer the questions that way. The test was not really that hard it was just like how it was formatted."

P3 had only taken the 2014 version of the Exam and found it difficult in some sections and easy in others.

P3: "I cried when I saw that I passed it. I was so proud of myself because the test was so hard." I took it in section. I took the easiest first and I said in the story (narrative), Algebra...I was terrified of it. So I waited and took it. The test itself was pretty easy, easier than I thought. The science was a little tough because I almost ran out of time. But it is a lot of reading. It was a fairly decent test. It was easier than I thought it would be."

P4 found it difficult and had to take sections of the exam multiple times.

P4: "I failed the history twice, passed it the third time. The science I failed one time passed it the second time. The math I passed the first time by one or two points. Same thing with reading by one or two points. It was very difficult. The history was just passages that were so boring and long and reading them was difficult. I don't have the attention span to read long difficult things like that."

P10 had only taken the 2014 version of the exam. However, this participant had also been an accelerated high school student taking Advanced Placement courses related to engineering during high school and found the exam a challenge.

P10: "My GED teacher told me that it was going to get harder as the years go by and the longer I wait the larger of an educational gap I would have. So I went ahead and did the schooling and that really helped me to prepare for it. The classes help. The test is a lot different than actual high school

curriculum. It is a lot more in depth in some areas and there is a lot more critical thinking skill you have to apply to answer the questions. I was a straight 'A' student in AP classes before I had my medical issues. I was in engineering and psychology classes in high school. So this test was actually difficult, but the study materials from GED class helped. The science portion was difficult because you have to answer the questions in the way they want you to answer. I think it leans more toward the common core way of learning instead of the way I was taught in high school. I think that was the hardest part of the test since I had not learned that way. If you have learned that way since kindergarten then I guess it would be easier. But this transitioning phase of now it is more common core than it is just basic skills is what I think was the most difficult.”

The minority of students who found the test easy indicated the following in relation to the exam experience. Some found the pre-test offered by the GED Testing Service to be helpful. It was noted that of those who found the test somewhat easy were those who had most recently left high school or preferred the computer based testing to paper pencil testing methods.

P1: “Because the new GED test is on computer. I never had a problem with computers. All I had to learn was how they wanted sorted out on their end. How they wanted the answers and how they wanted you to respond. How they wanted you to go about in the test. It was not as bad as I thought it was going to be. To me it was much easier.”

P6: “The test was good. The pre-test that they gave in the classes were the most helpful. They were set up most like the test and I like that. I hate going into test blind which I would have been doing had I chosen not to take the class. It was similar to the ones in high school. Multiple choices and a couple had essays. Not a lot different or outside normal testing. The reading level was right at what I had experienced.”

P7: “OK, first of all it was not really a going back to school process for me because I was still in high school and dropped out and went straight to GED classes....It was pretty easy for me and they helped me {referring to GED instructors} learn what was coming on the test and how to answer in a particular way. They helped me to decide which section to take first and what to take last. The practice was easy and it was not that I had a whole lot to get ready it was another reason I came out of school to get my GED.”

Overall the exam was considered difficult in content and in how the examinees were expected to answer the questions in order to gain a passing score. Those who found it easy seemed to be computer literate and preferred the computer based testing format. In addition most of those who found it easy were the most recent high school students who had withdrawn from high school just a matter of weeks or months prior to taking the exam.

Decision to Continue Education

The second research question was answered during the interview process. “What steps within the GED test preparation did recipients express as important to their matriculation toward college enrollment?” Interview questions were overarching and open ended in order to allow the participant to expand upon their experience of moving from GED graduate to enrolling into a community college. Each had a different experience; however, the overarching theme emerged in that the initial decision to continue education was based upon a strong internal motivating factor. It is important to understand the motivation to return to education before viewing the steps within the GED test preparation that were helpful in matriculation.

Motivation

The participants who had children expressed the main reason they decided to go back to get the GED and enroll into college was because of their children. Wanting a better life for their children drove most of the participants to overcome challenges they had failed to overcome in prior educational settings. The better life motto was also evident for those who did not have children in that each saw education as a means to a better life for their family or themselves.

P1: “Because I always wanted to believe that my children would graduate even though I didn’t finish school, I kept pestering them to go on. You are going to finish school, you are going to college, even if you have to take a year off and work and get a job to see what it feels like to work

that is fine. But you are still going to go on and get some more education. Because I don't want y'all to experience the real world before it is time. It is not easy like you think it is. It is harder when you are a teenager even now there are certain things that are coming up now that are harder than it was for us. I always wanted them to have an education....

Basically my son was my motivation. He helped my confidence. On like certain days when my body would just shut down because I was doing so many hours and so many things, he would remind me of what I used to tell him. You are getting up and going to school, I don't care what you say. I used to look at him and think...OK now, who is the parent and who is the child? But I cannot argue with you because I did tell you all those things. So I got up and went on anyway. One time when my son was thinking about dropping out of high school. I don't know if I was like competing with him but we were like challenging each other. I know one year when I was like thinking about stopping my GED, he was still in high school. So I kept telling him I am going to beat you to finish, I am going to beat you. When he finished high school he just wanted to give up. I said, 'oh no! you are not giving up if I have to roll you across that stage in a wheelchair we going across that stage!' The more and more when I didn't get it with my GED I was so frustrated. He was like encouraging me, look Mom you are going to get it. I told him I knew I was but I

wanted it NOW! But it all worked out, we wound up getting it a year apart.”

P2: “Getting my GED has been a goal of mine for years. I regret not finishing school but was very determined to get my GED and further my education not only for myself but for my boys. I wanted to give my kids and myself a great life. So I knew it was my job and I wasn’t going to give up on it. My kids is the reason [*sic*] I went on to college. I don’t want them to ever have to struggle. I want them to have a great life and not go through any hard times like I did. I am sure anybody can relate to that. I just want to do what is best for my kids. I want to give them everything. I don’t want to have to struggle. I want a career not just a job.”

P3: “...after I got myself back together I knew I had to do something my job was ok but not very stable so I decided to start GED classes it was scary but I had to do it. I started college on May 28 I was terrified but it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be .I still have fear that I can't make it but when I look at my kids I know I have to I have to get a job that's better so I can support them

(tearfully) My kids. That is the reason I do any of it. When I passed here, the GED Examiner, as soon as I was done I was in tears. So as soon as I was done he just talked to me and told me we are going to take you over here and we are going to get you set up. He had me enrolled

so fast that I didn't even have time to hesitate, make excuses, it was just Whoosh! So I did not even have time to think that I couldn't do it or back out. That worked out good. Once I was enrolled, I just couldn't back out. It means my kids will have a better future and I will too."

P4: "I have a son and that why I went back to get my GED to begin with. A better career for my son. A more stable and reliable career for him."

P1: "Looking back at some of the things about my parents. My biological Mom. My grandmother had raised me until about 15 when I left home. My biological Mom did not get her GED. She dropped out in I think the eighth grade. My Dad, my biological father, I don't know how far he went. I think he dropped out in high school. Then looking at my aunts over the years. They finished high school but because of family obligations they kept dropping out of college. So I wanted to go back and at least complete it for that side of the family. My main focus was to show my family that I don't have to play the hand that life dealt me. I wanted more out of life. Being uncomfortable was not a option any longer."

Support from Adult Education Programs

The initial motivation to continue education with a GED and then college enrollment repetitively focused upon having a better life for all the participants. P10 saw that education was a 'means to an end'. In other words the GED was a step in the process just as community college in order to get to this 'better life' desired. The expressions of the participants indicated the most supportive element

during the GED preparation process was the GED instructor or the entire Adult Education Program. Nine out of the eleven indicated the Adult Education instructor or staff actually enrolled them into college or answered questions regarding enrollment that the college staff did not answer.

P1: “My GED teacher Mrs. Brown. She got me through all the obstacles and answered questions about things I didn’t understand or wasn’t sure about. It was all new to me and college was new to me. Actually going into the classes was like an experience I wasn’t sure about. What were they going to teach? What was going to happen? Things I was not sure about. She would tell me and I would go on.”

P8: “I had a lot of support from my GED teachers. They helped me and motivated me to keep going afterwards. That makes a difference.”

P3: “They (the teachers) are very different than when I went to high school. The teachers are more laid back and more willing to help. That is what surprised me was the willingness to help. They don’t want you to fail. They will go out of their way to help you. If more people in high school, teachers would do that, more people would pass. That is what made me quit was a teacher embarrassing me. To this day, I will never forget that teacher, I never will. But, the transition was easier than I thought. I was terrified but once I got into it, I am enjoying it.”

P10: “My GED teacher most definitely was the most helpful. She was amazing! She helped me go through and said these are some options but if

you are looking toward this you will need these classes. She got out all the catalogs and course listings and helped me to understand how the degree plan worked.”

These participants indicated the information shared by the GED instructor was more personable and provided the most relative information for making decisions regarding college enrollment. In addition some of the instructors gave constant reminders to students who were ready to take the GED exam of college enrollment dates and deadlines so the student could plan to take their exam in time to meet those deadlines.

The Community College Enrollment Experience

The third research question related to the college enrollment experience. What are the GED recipients' thoughts of the enrollment experience into a community college? The participants elaborated on this experience during the interview process. Most indicated the enrollment process was easy and found a great deal of support completing the process. Among those participants who found support from the college staff lacking, each one mentioned reverting back to the GED Instructor for advising and guidance.

Once the participants started courses at the college, most found it a good experience and enjoyed the *more like high school* experience of educational objectives and deadlines. The participants also indicated the community college teachers were supportive and concerned about their success. Some of the participants indicated this was surprising in comparison to interaction with previous high school teachers. Those noting additional support from college instructors, also noted this encouragement dispelled fears

of failure that had been brought into the college experience. The excerpts shared here are from those who found the experience difficult in an effort to share what the other resources each participant sought out for assistance.

P1: “My experiences as a college student my first year was crazy. Because they had my whole schedule wrong. They are so unorganized professional. I basically had to stay on top of everything that I was trying to do or I would have fallen through the hoops. But even by me passing all of my Spring classes with a G.P.A. of 3.7. I still having started on none of my major classes but 1. Everything that was told to me before college is not what I endure when I first started. I never meet nor until this day know who my advisor is. But I do know it’s a lady. Ironic isn’t it. College is not for playing cat and mouse anymore. It’s a domino effect.

OK. Now during the enrollment into college it was frustrating! It would get me angry and make me want to get hostile. But it was not what I expected. I did not know there were certain requirements that I had to do. The requirements were kind of crazy. Because I was running around getting paperwork, paperwork, and paperwork that they needed that they already had. And then when I got in there it was like they had the schedule wrong. By the time they figured it out it was already the semester was already over. So it was like just forget it, we will just go ahead and go on with it. It was frustrating from the beginning.”

P5: “A lot of people coming in are older and know what they want to do. But for those that don’t know they just left high school or left high school because they wound up with a kid and they stop there and focus on their kid. In my case it would have been good if I would have had the opportunity to like have what high school has a career day or career exploration class. Career workforce type things that tell you what you need to work on and do. That would have helped me decide instead of just jumping into something like I had to do.”

P10: “One thing is to provide counselors that actually guide you. The college counselors said I could pick whatever I wanted. So went back to my GED teacher and sought her guidance. That made it difficult. I knew I needed to take the basic but my question was where do I go from there? The college counselors were telling me I could just do whatever I wanted. That was frustrating and confusing.”

P8: “Financially I needed financial help. They told me I had to wait so long and I didn’t get it so I had to pay for it out of pocket. This was a little stressful. In class, I tried to do a math class while I was finishing up my GED classes and the teacher kept telling us there were things in the book and on the syllabus that we needed to work on but then the teacher would say, ‘well you guys have already learned this so we are going to go on to this’. It was like...well you learned this in high school this is basic stuff. I didn’t learn it so I was always trying to play catch up

the entire semester. That happened again when I took English this year.

That is one difference. I guess it is different for people going from GED to college than from high school to college.”

College courses and the classroom experience with college instructors seemed to be an overall refreshing and good experience for these participants who had completed the 2014 version of the GED Exam. Only one indicated the difficulty with college courses was deadlines and that being due to their personal experience with home schooling environment with somewhat relaxed deadlines. That was an exception noted during the analysis and not found to be repeated by the other participants whether previously attending public, home school, or magnet school systems. Some of the excerpts regarding college classroom experiences are as follows.

P1: “It was a good experience. I did not have any bad experiences going to my courses. The course that I already had it was things I already knew. Like my math and physical science. I was not good in physical science in high school. Definitely since I dropped out and as far as I completed in high school I was already gone with my first baby. Once I got into college my mind was on another complete level. I was like Wow, look how far I came from where I started. I didn’t have no problem with my math or science or anything. It was kind of easy. That was the good thing about it. I did good in all my classes.”

P3: “They are very different than when I went to high school. The teachers are more laid back and more willing to help. That is what surprised me was the willingness to help. They don’t want you to fail. They will go out of their way to help you. If more people in high school, teachers would do that, more people would pass. That is what made me quit was a teacher embarrassing me. To this day, I will never forget that teacher, I never will. But, the transition was easier than I thought. I was terrified but once I got into it, I am enjoying it.”

P10: “The waiting for classes to start made me anxious. After the classes started my teachers were great. They laid out the whole semester and said this is what we are going to be doing and this is when it will be done. That made it so much better. We didn’t stick to it every day but it made me feel better knowing where we were headed and what was expected. I knew where we were going to wind up at the end of the semester. I actually enjoy it. I enjoy college. I also appreciate that my teachers recognize the effort of students that students attend classes. I had one say, ‘you have not missed a day of class and I have noticed that.’ It is nice because it is optional. It was nice and inspiring. Yea, I haven’t missed a day of class and I could miss a day and actually be okay but I am not going to. Like my math teacher would tell us what was going to be on the test but only during class. Instead of sending emails out and telling everyone you need to study this, this and this. He would tell us in class

this will be a bonus on the test and if you write a certain thing on the bottom you will get extra points. So that was inspiration to actually go to class. I really liked that. My English teacher didn't do it that much but she went over so much in class. In class she would go over your essays and you were able to make changes before you turned in your final paper. That was nice and they actually recognize we are trying and we are coming to class.”

The 2014 version of the GED exam was taken by all the participants in this study. The exam changes that occurred raised the performance level up to a 12.9 grade level equivalency. Content of the exam required participants to utilize critical thinking and problem solving skills in order to obtain a passing score. All the objectives from the exam are linked back to the College and Career Readiness Standards (Pimentel 2013) established as a means to prepare GED graduates for college level courses and/or more rigorous job training certificate programs. Out of the 11 participants ranging in age from 17 to 49 and ranging in the amount of time each had be out of high school only two had to take remediation or transitional learning courses upon enrolling into college. Of those two their remediation was only in one subject instead of both reading and mathematics. Nine of the participants enrolled into the community college and began college level courses.

Summary

The transition of the GED graduates into the community college varied and ranged from difficult to very easy among the participants. Meeting the college readiness

requirements after passing the 2014 version of the exam was similar among the participants and most of the participants were allowed to enroll into college level courses instead of remedial courses. Personal obligations outside of education were varied as was educational journeys prior to the point of enrollment into college. The in-depth understanding of these personal obligations and educational journeys is difficult to remove from the picture in order to make a general statement in regard to GED graduates meeting college readiness requirements. The educational journey becomes a big part of what the individual brings to the college classroom and eventually into a career. The experience and knowledge gained during the journey honed decisions, determination, and dispositions of each participant.

It was unanimous among the participants of starting out with a positive disposition toward education from a very early age and then something happened to change that disposition temporarily. It was also unanimous that the positive disposition had returned when the participant passed the 2014 version of the GED exam. The movement from positive, negative, and back to positive occurred during the individual journeys. They all took different journeys but landed at the same place, enrolled into a community college after completing a GED with a positive disposition toward education. The figure below is a graphic interpretation of this collective outlook in relation to negative educational experiences.

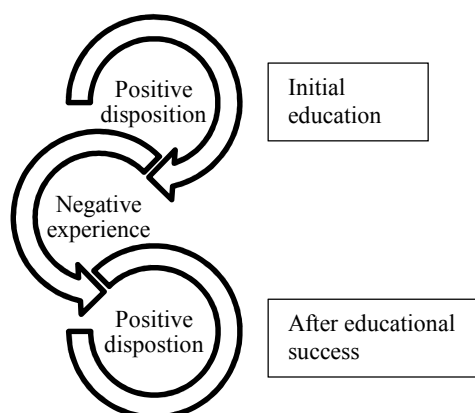


Figure 5: Outlook regarding education in relation to participant experiences

A personal or internal motivation for beginning education was the initial fuel for these particular participants. The more personal the reason to get a better education the more motivation the participant seemed to have in getting started and continuing that education. Once the educational journey began the participants began to realize there was a certain amount of determination required to keep going. The 11 participants used that determination in order to move forward from level to level.

Motivation and the realization of determination as the participants matriculated through their education seemed to be the internal fuel for successful transition from GED to college. The narratives and interviews both provided comments from the participants to support this statement. A product of this combination (motivation and determination) was the essence of their experiences. At the same time, when fear was at an all-time high at the beginning of the educational experience and then began to decrease as the participant progressed from one education level to the next. In contrast to the decrease in fear, the self-efficacy level for each participant was low at the beginning of the process and became significantly strengthened as the participant moved from level to level. Self-

efficacy and fear were measured on a scale of 0 to 3 based upon the comments made during the narrative and interview. Fear indicators were coded based upon the participant's comments indicating anxiety, stress, nervousness, or fear of failure. Self-efficacy comments included phrases that indicated the participant's level of confidence in completing or even attempting an academic level. The table below provides a visualization of this concept.

Table 3: Successful Educational Transition Factors

Internal/Personal Progression	Decision to start	Motivation	Fear	Self-Efficacy
Educational Progression	Level 1	Realization of Determination	High	Low
	Level 2		Begins to decrease	Begins To increase
	Level 3 to completion			
Goal Reached Successful Transition	Completion of Education	Success realized	Low	High

A formula that can further explain this concept is as follows with (M) representing motivation; (D) representing determination; (F) representing fear; and (SE) representing self-efficacy. $M+D$ during educational progression = $< F + > SE$. The participants did indicate the encouragement and interaction with GED or College Instructors played a significant role in educational progression. The interaction was etched into the memory and comments in relation to a particular class or subject.

Chapter 5 will further interpret how the recognition of the thread linking motivation, self-efficacy, and fear helped to develop a concept regarding the GED graduates transition with continued education. The interpretation of the findings will describe the extended understanding of the educational experiences of these participants

lead to a transitional success formula. These support and contrast to the literature review from Chapter 2 of this dissertation will also be discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to provide a better understanding of the lived experiences of GED graduates passing the 2014 version of the exam and meeting the college readiness requirements for enrolling into a community college. The participants in this study all started out enjoying school and receiving positive feedback as a result of educational efforts. However, for reasons not completely related to bad choices or personal decisions the educational progression came to an abrupt halt during their high school years. The journey of each participant's continuation of education is captured within this study.

The following research questions were answered through the narratives and interviews with each participant:

- What was the experience of the adult education student while preparing for the 2014 version of the GED exam?
- What steps within the GED test preparation did recipients express as important to their matriculation toward college enrollment?
- What are the GED recipients' thoughts of the enrollment experience into a community college?

The essence of the phenomenological experience of passing the 2014 version of the GED exam and enrolling into a community college was not as profoundly different as expected. The motivation to continue education came from a personal appeal for a better life. Somewhere along the journey the participants indicated a realization of determination that was fueled by wanting that better life for their children, family, or

themselves. That motivation, coupled with determination, pushed them through challenges the high school graduate entering college does not usually face. The overarching fear among this group was the fear of failure and the unknown. The majority indicated that having a better understanding of what is expected of them at each level of education dispels fear. The unanimous support for participants during their transition to college was their GED teacher who helped them balance their schedule and provided advising that related directly to the students' personal goals and outside responsibilities. All the participants indicated this factor was essential to their continuation of education.

Chapter 5 will interpret the findings, point out the limitations within the study, recommend further research options, and provide possible implications for social change. This particular study rendered both social and institutional change that could benefit future students moving from GED to college.

Interpretation of the Findings

Choosing to Continue Education and Persistence

The participants in this study all made an active and personal choice to return to education. This supports Comings' (2007) findings that students returning to education to complete a GED *choose* to participate in educational programs. The adult has an active and conscious part to play in the decision to further his/her education. The K-12 progression is a mandated matriculation from one grade level to the next. Upon completion of one grade level, the student is then mandated to continue education based upon truancy laws, other policies, or regulation in place within the school district. The

adult does not have a set of policies or truancy laws that dictate his/her continuation of education. A choice is made by the adult whether or not to continue education.

Greenburg et al. (2012) referred to the adult learner population as a population facing many challenges (p.23). He indicated this group faces a number of barriers when moving forward in a direction of choice. The participants' narratives and interviews provided support that this reference is accurate. The challenges to move forward for these participants included family responsibilities, health issues, institutional barriers, lack of transportation, and conflicting work schedules. Most worked a full time job requiring 40 or more hours per week of their time.

Ziegler et al. (2002) mentioned the attitude of a student was changed after failure. All of the participants in this study indicated a positive attitude toward education at the beginning of their school age years. Ten of the 11 participants in this study did have one or more negative experiences during high school or middle school. Eight of the 10 indicated a tremendous fear of repeating failure and that this did have a factor in their delayed decision to return to education. They eventually did return due to discontent with current personal situations and returned to a positive outlook on education as progression was made.

Once the participants enrolled into an adult education program, the level of engagement with instructors was unanimously repeated as important. This supports Comings's (2007) findings in that the level of student engagement with instructors determines persistence. Comings further indicated that a comparison of high school, adult education, and college classrooms could not be accurately compared. The participants'

comments made in the narrative regarding the Adult Education Program experience while preparing for the GED supported the truth of Comings' statement. The participants indicated the high school and college classrooms were similar while the Adult Education classroom provided individualized and specialized instruction.

The individualized instruction provided in the Adult Education classroom seemed to provide the interaction each participant remembered with the GED Instructor. Tinto (1987) and Beder (1991) both referred to the importance of encouragement and interaction within the classroom as significant to adult learner persistence. This study supports the importance of the instructor being the positive catalyst of interaction within the classroom as a means of supporting student progression.

Transition Factors: Challenges, Determination, and Self-Efficacy

The transition factors indicated by each participant supported Schlossberg's (2011) findings; she found that the transition to college for an adult happens so quickly they do not have time to process all the changes as they occur. Most of the participants indicated this was true. Five of the participants stated their enrollment process happened so fast they did not even have time to consider how everything was going to change in their life after becoming a college student.

Schlossberg (2011) also indicated the importance of identifying the resources used by successfully transitioning students. This proved to be vital in understanding the fuel for educational continuation for each participant. Overwhelmingly, the term, *determination*, appeared repeatedly. The next question was what sparked, fueled, or

ignited that determination; what turned it on to start with? Each participant indicated wanting a better life for family, children, or themselves.

Overwhelmingly, the essence of the phenomenon indicated the transition from GED to college was part of the bigger picture. McMillin (2003) indicated that no matter the at-risk level of the student, the best barometer for success is their ability to cope. The participants' dissatisfaction with life situations provided fuel to ignite determination despite the lack of support from inside or outside the educational arena. Each participant indicated that the motivation to return to education came from an internal decision based upon lack of contentment with current circumstances. Some of those circumstances were out of their control; however, the participant chose to control their own destiny and return to education. The transition for each one back to education was similar. At some point during the educational experience a realization of determination was made. This realization was a marker of success found during the current educational experience of moving from one academic level to the next. Motivation combined with determination played a significant part in persistence.

Bandura (1977) indicated that in order to increase persistence the student must recognize accomplishments along the educational journey. The participants in this study made comments to support Bandura's theory. In multiple comments, the participants expressed that the recognition of progression during the GED preparation classes and the acknowledgement of passing the GED exam were significant to them. The excitement in their expressions during the interview when sharing the accomplishment further supported the importance of recognized progression.

Self-efficacy in relation to learning was supported by additional comments from participants that provided a better understanding of the term and how it applied to their individual experiences. Participants indicated a factor of self-efficacy as one of the strategies for moving to the next educational level; however, it was not due to the observation of their peers. The *me too* factor associated with self-efficacy in this study was used to find out if the participants could visualize themselves as being successful at a particular educational level based upon seeing their peers being successful. The *me too* factor was not a popular factor among these participants. Five of the participants mentioned knowing of someone that was successful, but did not see themselves at that level until it actually occurred. The participants with children indicated they could visualize their children being successful in education, but did not see the same for themselves. Observation of successful peers was not as available to this population as that found in a high school classroom setting. The Adult Education Programs offers individualized instruction and while students are in the same classroom with other students working toward the same goal, many do not know what academic level their peers are working on at the current time. It does become obvious as their peers progress on to take the GED exam and complete the class. However, the participants in this study did not indicate they kept in contact or monitored the progression of fellow students.

In the narrative and/or interview, all of the participants indicated a positive disposition toward education during their early school years, then either an influence or a negative experience occurred that brought a halt to their education. That halt was temporary, lasting only a few months for three of the participants, while the other eight

were out of the educational realm for a number of years. Once the participants returned to education they all indicated a positive disposition returned.

Successful Transition from GED to Community College

At the beginning of the educational journey, the participants' level of fear was extremely high while the self-efficacy level was low. As their educational experiences continued and successes or completions of academic levels were gained, the two seemed to reverse roles: fear began to decrease and self-efficacy increased. Despite the frustration some had with college enrollment documentation, the participants did not allow fear to win. Each one rallied and relied upon what they had learned and the mere fact they had successfully completed their GED to plow through the paperwork and continue. They had successfully completed one level of education and were determined to get started in the next.

The fact that motivation and determination are internal factors and somewhat personal to the individual indicates there is a limit to the influence that can be made at the institutional level to improve these factors. Perhaps the inclusion of motivation and determination as topics of conversation with a college advisor would be a helpful start. Then during the first semester of college interaction with mentors, counselors, career coaches, success coaches, or whatever type of follow up is in place could continue to build personal awareness of the importance of motivation and determination as factors contributing to educational success.

Each participant indicated an individual level of interaction between the instructor and the student played a significant role in their decision to move forward. It

would be interesting to see if a smaller student-to-teacher ratio at the K-12 level would make a difference. With the smaller student-to-teacher classroom, activities could be carried out that provide opportunities for student to become aware of their own level of determination. The awareness of determination in operation by an individual could make a difference in their education and future career.

During the educational journey there are supporting elements that could be offered by the institutions. Many of the participants mentioned a counselor that was familiar with the GED graduate and his/her unique situations. There was also mention of the GED instructor as a strong support system during the transition to college. The fact that 10 out of the 11 participants repeated this idea indicates that this is a personnel position worth consideration in partnership with the community college enrollment process.

Cross (1982) and Quigley (1997) both conducted studies on the three main categories of barriers to student success. The three categories were supported by this study in that all participants mentioned at least one, if not all three, in the narrative or interview. The categories are situational, institutional, and dispositional. Situational barriers related to the current or previous circumstances and/or living situations of the participant seemed to be very important to the participants. Some used the dissatisfaction with their situation as fuel for motivation. The institutional barriers caused by policies, lack of support, or negative educational experiences were also a major portion of the participants' comments. Each had his/her own story with similar institutional barriers sprinkled throughout. The most significant comments that seemed to have the greatest

long term effect were negative classroom experiences and lack of support. The dispositional barriers were mentioned throughout the narratives and comments as to their individual attitudes toward education. The surprising results as mentioned in Chapter 4 are that all started their early education with a positive attitude. All at some point had a negative experience with education and all chose to continue or return to education at some point. When the participants returned to education the positive attitude returned as they progressed from level to level academically.

Quigley (1997) and Comings (2007) supported early intervention for students arriving to Adult Education Programs with multiple barriers. Support and intervention, provided by the GED Instructors and Adult Education Program Staff, proved to be in place according to the comments within the narratives and interviews. Each participant indicated that within the first week of classes or during orientation to the Adult Education Program, individualized plans of instruction, goal setting, and academic evaluations were conducted. Results were discussed individually with the participants to determine the best path to completion. According to the participants, this process made them feel at ease and answered many of their questions about how to move forward.

Pickard (2013) made an indication that no matter the improvements made at the institutional level, that those improvements would have little to no effect on student persistence due to barriers beyond the control of the institution. Comments made by the participants in this study did not support this study. Nine out of the 11 participants made a similar comment indicating the support, encouragement, and interaction with the institution was the only supporting factor in their educational journey. The GED

instructors, staff, and program activities played a significant part in their decision to continue education by enrolling into college. The unanimous positive attitude toward education among the participants indicated their recognition of the importance of the educational institution. An understanding of the need for policy and procedures was obvious from the participants' comments as most indicated the institutions in which they were enrolled provided most of the support needed to navigate through the policies and procedures.

Limitations of the Study

A specific population was the focus of this study. The experiences of this specific phenomenon occurred recently; therefore, in order to replicate this study the same specifications would need to be incorporated. Timing is a factor and would need to be indicated as such in any future studies as the GED preparation for the 2014 version of the exam may change and college enrollment requirements may also change.

The population of participants in this study was limited to one state. An expansion of the population for a replicated study would need to keep the same criteria for participation despite the region of the nation in order to maintain validity in comparison.

Recommendations

Participants defined their own motivators within this study. All participants chose to continue education because they wanted a better life. The vision of that better life included a better job, larger income, and better living facilities. When a student succeeds by gaining a GED and moves on to an associate degree or certificate in a marketable skill

the opportunities for employment significantly increase. The ability to move into a qualified workforce becomes a reality for that individual.

Balancing responsibilities of a busy work and family schedule with study time is required in order to make educational progress. Education had already been deferred for the participants of this study due to various reasons. It was important to each one that the current educational process moved substantially faster than that experienced in traditional high schools. The scheduling of courses at the college level was a concern due to work obligations. It would be interesting to determine the number of GED graduates making schedule changes in education or work in order to complete a degree. If that number indicates an institutional barrier with scheduling courses there may be some weight to the idea of offering more flexible scheduling for adult learners.

The importance of the GED teacher as the *stability of advising* for these GED graduates as they transitioned into and continued college courses was significant. The role/relationship between instructor and student could be further evaluated for this particular population to determine characteristics that build success. It was evident that the guidance from the GED teacher was considered to be the most persuasive, and that the most dependable according to the participant's perspective.

It would also be thought-provoking to find out the stories of those GED graduates who chose not to enroll into college. The number of participants eligible for this study was low. The number of GED graduates who chose not to enroll into college was high. Hanover's (2014) study indicated that less than 20% of GED graduates enroll into college. Most get a job or enroll into a job training program provided by the employer. A

research study could provide a better understanding of these graduates' decision not to continue education into college. It would then be interesting to find out if the decision not to continue was a temporary one or were they able to obtain employment with sustainable wages.

A final recommendation would be to conduct a qualitative follow up to this study at some point in the future. At the time, the curriculum for the 2014 version of the GED exam should be in all GED preparation classrooms as well as online. The test could be adapted or adjusted by that time. A follow up study would provide a better understanding of the long term affect this version of the exam has had on GED graduates matriculating into the community college.

Implications

The experiences of each participant provided an in-depth story of elements building to a successful transition within the realms of educational matriculation. Each participant indicated a motivating factor for returning to education as well as a realization of determination being utilized. As each entered the arena of education fear was high and self-efficacy was low. Upon each successful progression the fear decreased and the self-efficacy increased according to the comments made within the narratives and interviews. The realization of these factors lends some inclination as to what can be done to improve the educational progression portion related to successful educational transition.

Perhaps educational systems, K-12 and postsecondary, could implement a rigorous training opportunity for students to gain a better understanding of what a successful transition in education is made up of. A personal awareness of motivation,

determination, fear, and self-efficacy may help dispel some of the mystery related to educational matriculation. This would be especially helpful for those students without supporting family members who completed or even attended college.

GED students' educational progression can be further supported through institutional improvements. One such improvement would be to increase engagement and interaction between the student, teacher, and staff across all educational programs within an institution. This proved to be a strong contributor for the GED graduate in that they continuously reverted back to their GED Instructor for advising. The possibility of the Adult Education Program having a stronger partnership with the local Community College is essential in order to expedite the progression from GED graduate to college student.

Rewarding success is also a strong contributor in the educational process. Each participant mentioned that acknowledgement of progression helped to fuel determination. This is a direct link between external support, institutional interaction, and internal or personal contribution to educational progression. The individuals even recognized the reward process at the college course level was lacking and mentioned it would be appreciated if their efforts were recognized even for consecutive attendance.

Should these improvements lead to an increased number of GED graduates continuing education it just may have a direct impact on the employment and lifestyle for the individual. A GED graduate completing an associate degree has the potential to provide an employer with the necessary skills to perform a task assigned, as well as enhance the workplace. In turn, the employment contributes to that *better life* the high

school dropout was seeking at the beginning. That better life then provides the opportunity for the individual to contribute to social change within his/her home, community, and beyond. The ripple effect is endless once the support system is in place to encourage the continuation of education for this particular population.

Conclusion

As the researcher for this study, I was honored to meet and work with each participant. It was humbling to hear their experiences. As analysis of their stories began, a realization of the uniqueness of these individuals became a reality. Each story was not just a number or code on the page; it was a life and the life of a family that was unfolding for the better. Each participant made the choice to move forward, to not give up, and to do whatever was necessary to bring a better life into reality.

As a researcher and educator, it is life changing to see the relevance of interaction with students. All the participants indicated at some point the importance of a GED instructor, college counselor, financial aid staff, or college instructor making the simple recognition of their importance. Therefore, it is important to recognize accomplishments and spend time encouraging students at all levels of education. This is not time wasted on the behalf of the educator, it is time invested.

Some chose the GED path in order to move forward faster and skip their senior year; some had health issues that kept them from regular school attendance; while others were home schooled by an unaccredited program and required the GED as credible evidence of high school equivalency. Despite the reason for taking the GED, the same goal was in each participant's mind to complete the GED and keep learning. All of the

participants had a very positive outlook, or disposition, toward education during their early K-12 years. Something occurred that caused a halt to their traditional educational progression and the alternative route was chosen. Each participant indicated they still carried a positive outlook toward education and saw it as a vital and extremely important part of their lives.

“Life is hard and I am not ready for my kids to face what I did so I went back to school and I am not stopping until I finish.” This is one sentence that sums up the motivation and determination of those participants who were supporting a family. Educational systems working together to help make this finish line a reality to more individuals can make a difference.

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Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

You are invited to take part in a research study of GED graduates who have completed the 2014 version of the GED exam and enrolled into a community college. The researcher is inviting those who have passed the 2014 version of the GED exam AND completed enrollment into a community college to be in the study. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Kelley Jones, who is a Ph.D. student at Walden University.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to provide a better understanding of the lived experiences of individuals who have completed the 2014 version of the GED exam and enrolled into a community college in order to improve programs and support services.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Communicate with the researcher by email
- Share with the researcher a short narrative about your experience while preparing and taking the GED exam.
- Participate in a face-to-face interview that will be audio recorded to share your college enrollment experience.
- Review the summary (transcription) of the narrative and interview for accuracy

Estimated amount of time for this commitment of participation:

The narrative instructions will arrive to you by email and you will be given a week to respond. Writing the narrative should not take longer than an hour of your time. Spelling and punctuation are not being graded. The important factor is your story/response as a response to the question that will be included in the narrative instructions.

The face-to-face interview will be conducted as a location you choose and will take no longer than one hour. The interview will be recorded with a digital audio recorder so that responses may be transcribed and used as data for the study.

Here are some sample questions:

What was your motivation to continue your education?

Describe your college admissions experience.
What beliefs do you hold about yourself as you enrolled into college?

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

This study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study. No one at your community college will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

Being in this type of study involves some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as minor anxiety of participating in a face-to-face interview may be experienced. Being in this study would not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing.

This study has the potential of providing a better understanding of the transition of completing a GED and enrolling into a community college. This understanding could provide information to assist in determining program improvements and student support services for future students who may take this path to continued education.

Payment:

Upon completion of the face-to-face interview, the participant will receive a \$10 gas or transportation voucher to compensate for travel expenses.

Privacy:

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. Data will be kept secure by encrypted passwords and documents on any computer storage device. Any hard copies of documents will be secured in a combination locked cabinet. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

Contacts and Questions:

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via email at [REDACTED]. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is 612-312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is (05-08-15-0111471) and it expires on May 7, 2016.

Please print or save this consent form for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By replying to this email with the words, "I consent", I understand that I am agreeing to the terms described above.

Appendix C: Sample Letter of Cooperation from a Community Research Partner

Community Research Partner Name
Contact Information

Date

Dear Kelley Jones,

Based on my review of your research proposal, I give permission for you to conduct the study entitled A Phenomenological Study of GED Graduates Meeting College Readiness Requirements at a Community College within College of Education at Walden University.

We understand that our organization's responsibilities include distribute letters of invitation to potential participants. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the research team without permission from the Walden University IRB.

Sincerely,

Authorization Official
Contact Information

Appendix D: Narrative and Interview Questions

Narrative (Essay) Question emailed to participants:

Please submit a short narrative (story) on your personal feelings toward the transition experience of returning to education to complete your GED. What were your thoughts, goals, concerns, fears, ideas, etc.? What did you experience while preparing for the 2014 version of the GED exam? How did you balance personal responsibilities or overcome obstacles in order to pass the exam? As you were going through classes to prepare for the 2014 GED exam how did you feel about yourself and the progress you were making or not making?

Interview Questions:

1. The narrative you provided was (clear / or unclear) please help me by clarifying these statements. (any unclear statements would be read to the participant for clarification).
2. What motivated you to continue your education beyond the GED and enter community college?
3. What obstacles did you face prior to enrolling into college? During enrollment? And immediately after enrollment?
4. What support was most helpful in your transition to college?
5. Describe your feelings as you moved through your education?
6. What beliefs did you have about education prior to completing your GED? What beliefs do you have now after college enrollment?
7. What does education mean to you?